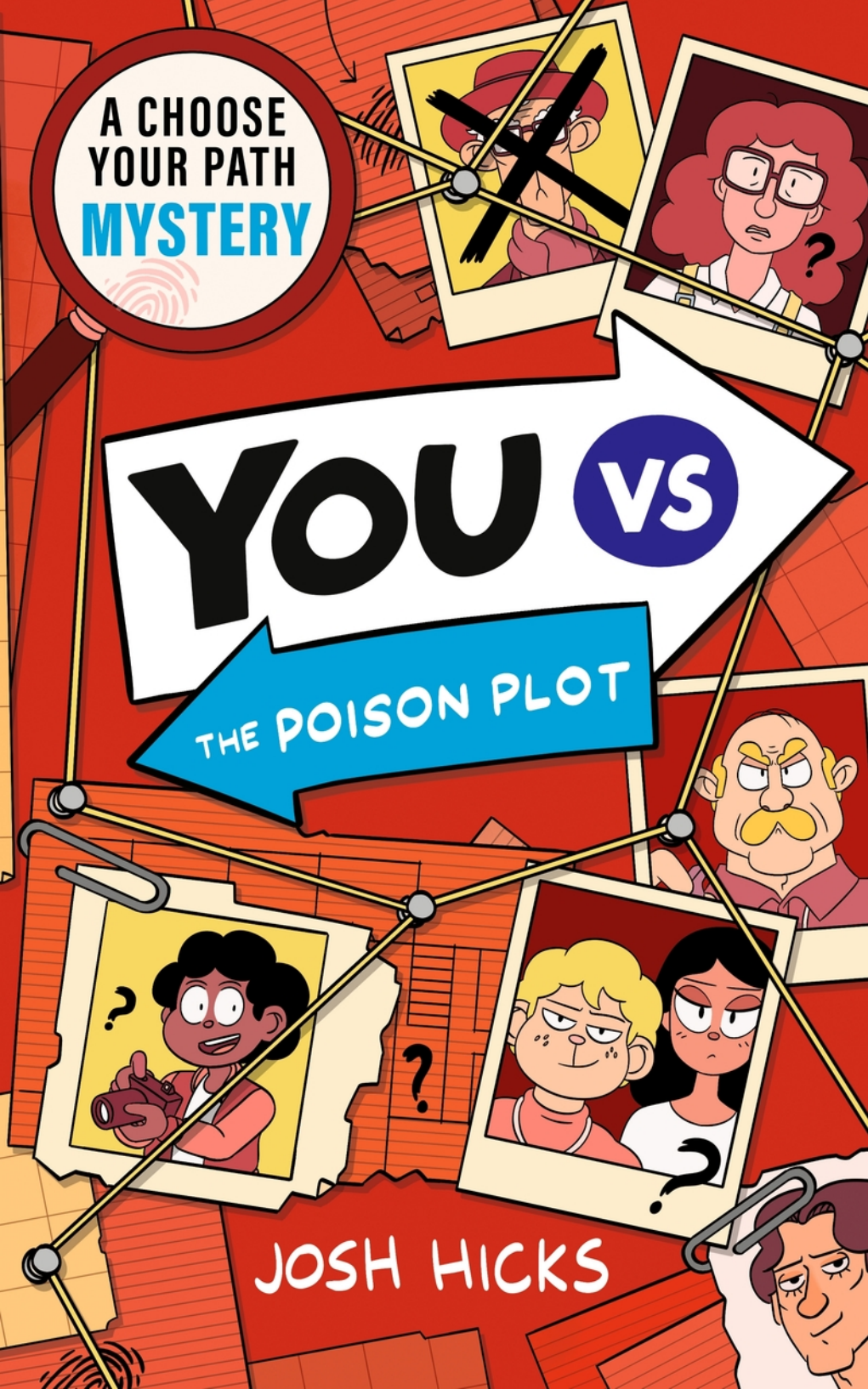
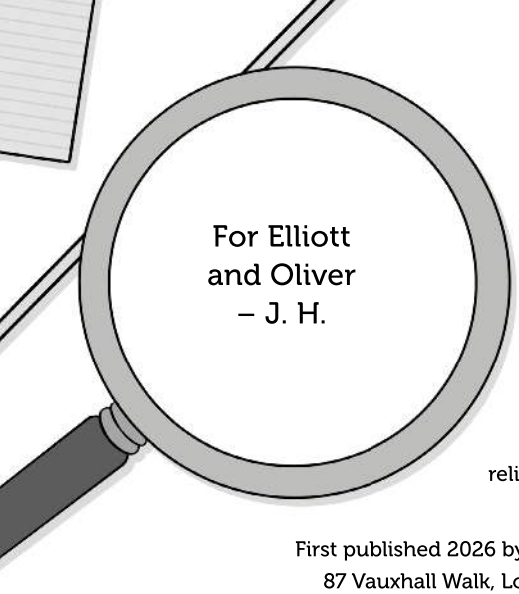

A CHOOSE YOUR PATH
MYSTERY
YOU VS
THE POISON PLOT
JOSH HICKS


YOU VS
THE POISON PLOT



For Elliott
and Oliver
– J. H.

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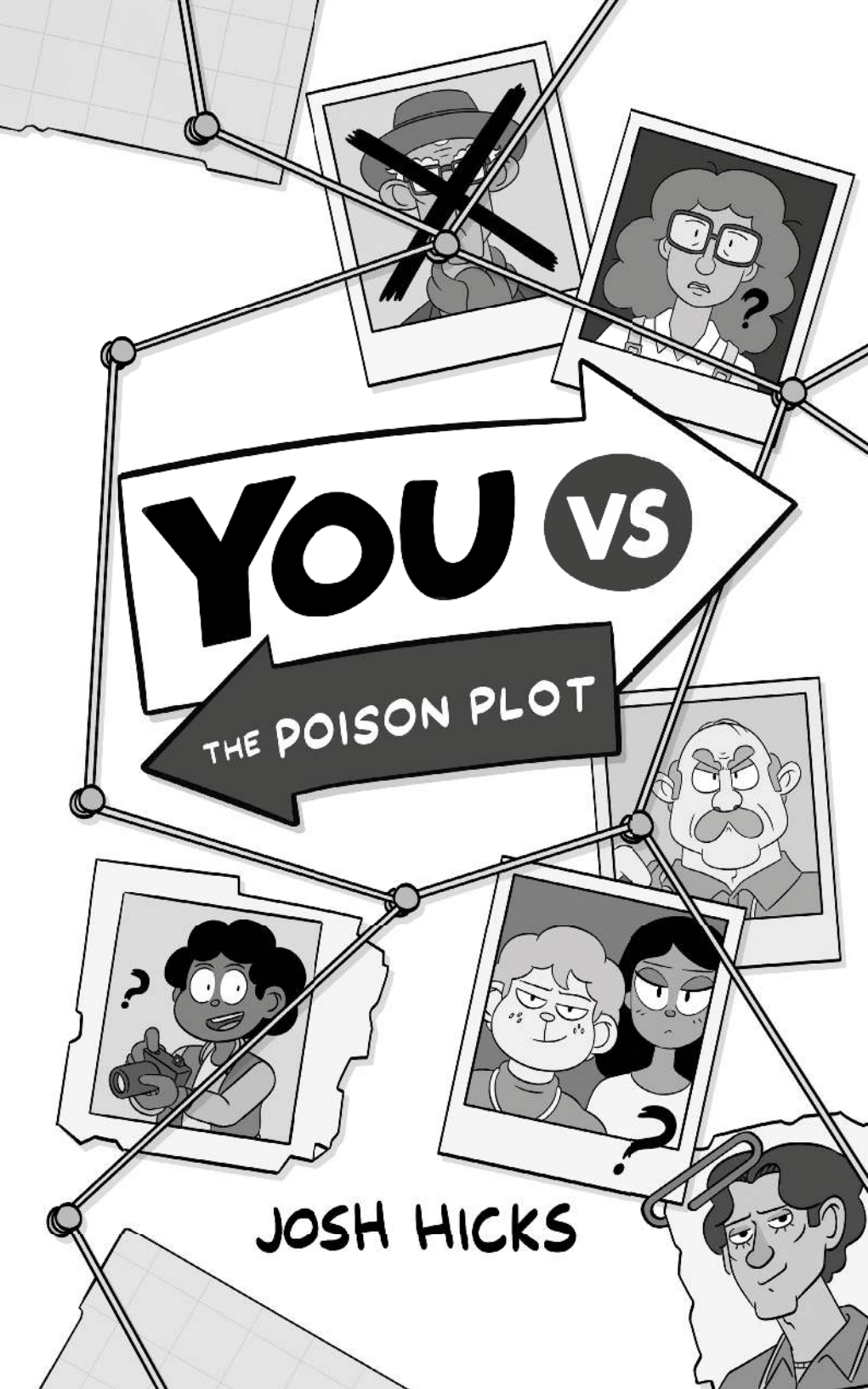
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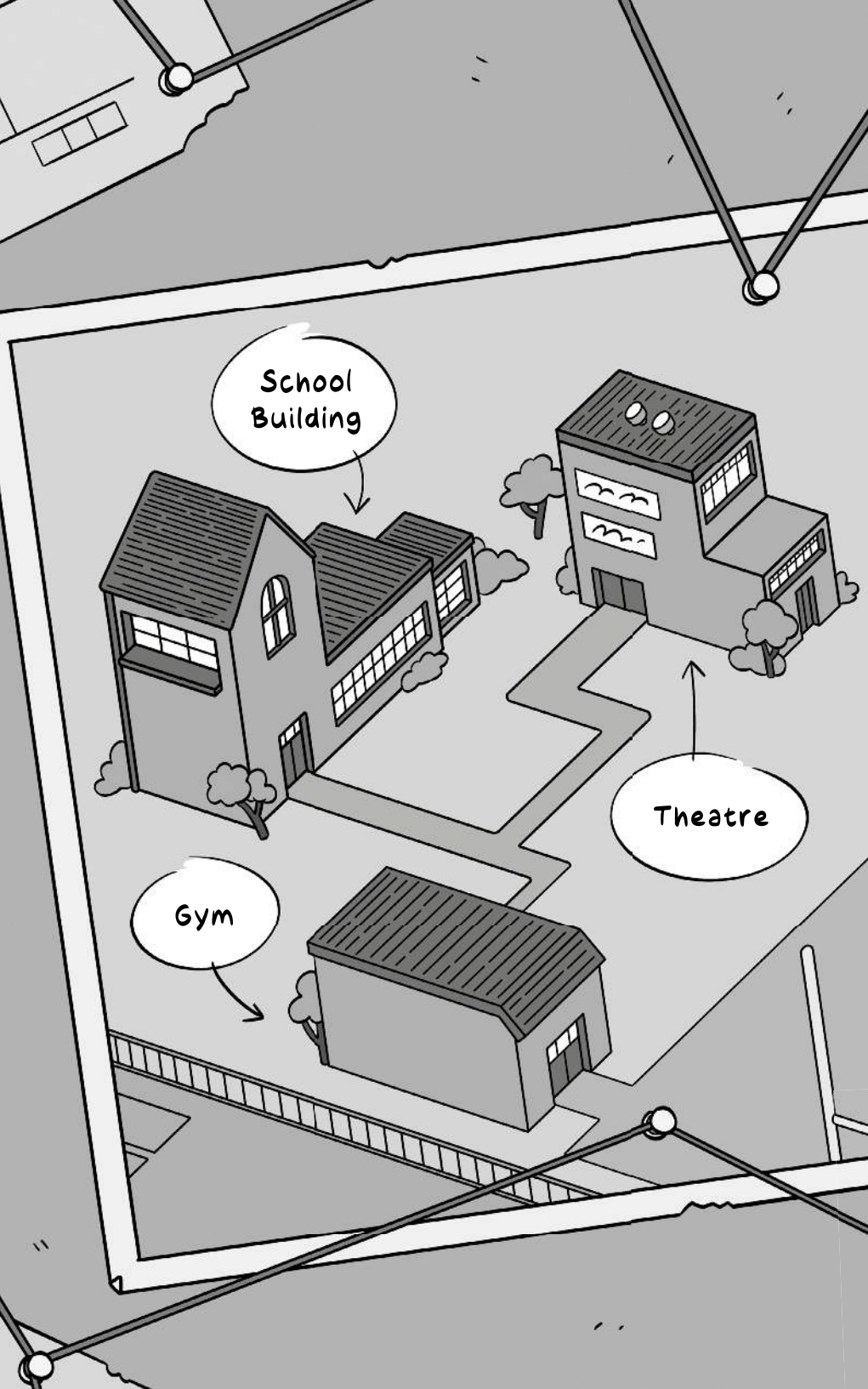


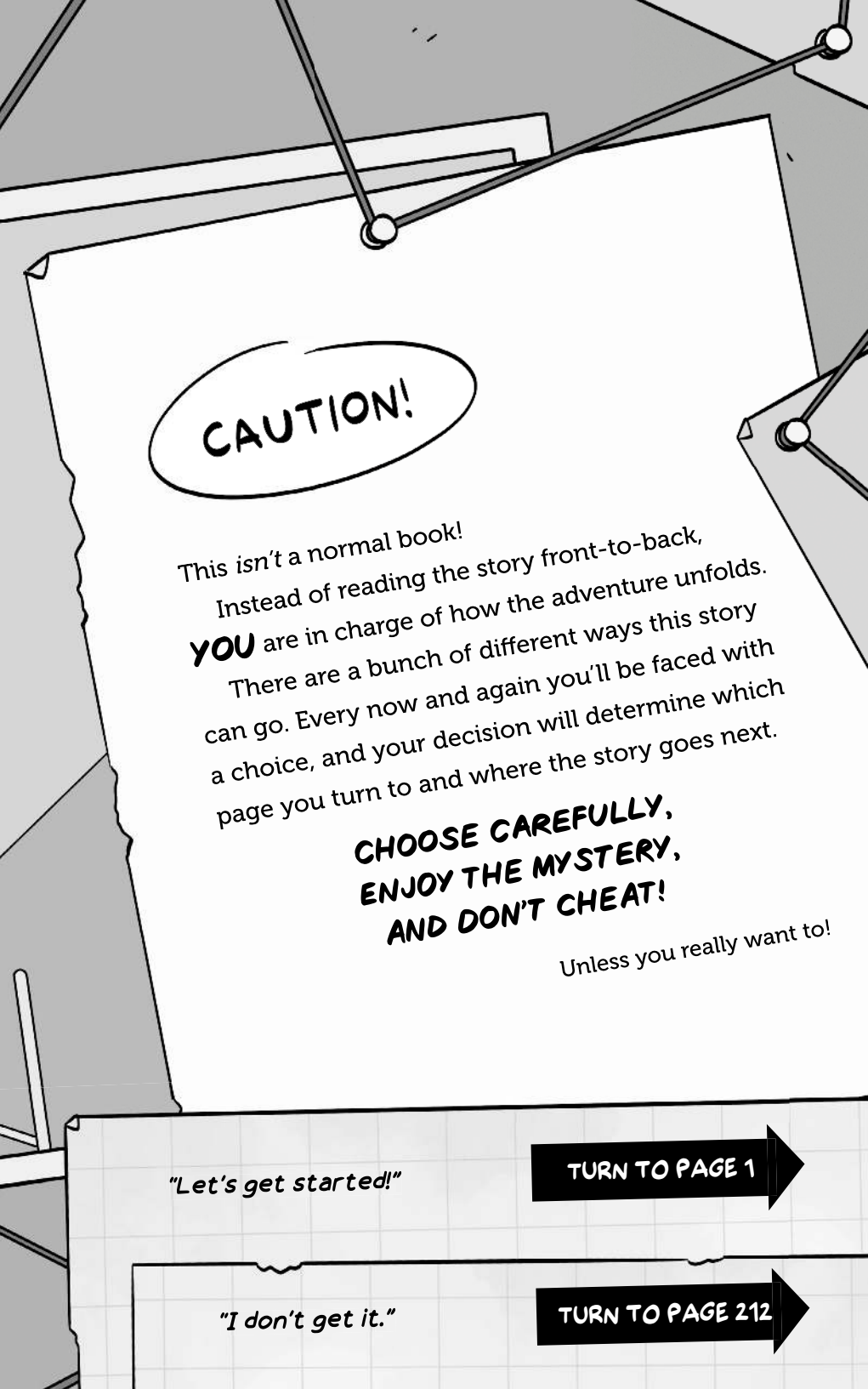




YOU VS
THE POISON PLOT
JOSH HICKS


PEOPLE OF INTEREST
ALLIE WRIGHT
MR ROSSO
TIA MOSS
MS LYNCH


LEVI GEORGE
MR EDMUNDS
BENNY PHOENIX


School Building
Theatre
Gym


CAUTION!
This isn't a normal book!
Instead of reading the story front-to-back,
YOU are in charge of how the adventure unfolds.
There are a bunch of different ways this story
can go. Every now and again you'll be faced with
a choice, and your decision will determine which
page you turn to and where the story goes next.
CHOOSE CAREFULLY,
ENJOY THE MYSTERY,
AND DON'T CHEAT!
Unless you really want to!
"Let's get started!"
TURN TO PAGE 1
"I don't get it."
TURN TO PAGE 212



"Now that's a scoop!"

Allie hands you back the letter, beaming. You've worked on loads of news stories together, but you haven't seen her this excited since she got to take photos of the local bakery in exchange for cake.

"Just when we've been looking for a big story, one falls into our lap!" She grins. "Well, into your locker, I suppose. What a lucky break!"

You read the letter again, finding it exciting, mysterious and vaguely insulting all at once.

Dear Journalists,

It is I, Mr Rosso – actor (and drama teacher) extraordinaire! I have urgent news. Meet me in the drama studio this afternoon, before the start of the annual talent show. I have the top-secret story of the century, and you are the only students in this school equipped to break it!

As I do not consider journalism a proper talent, you are also, conveniently, the only students with the time to spare.

I call upon you!!

R.

TURN TO PAGE 2

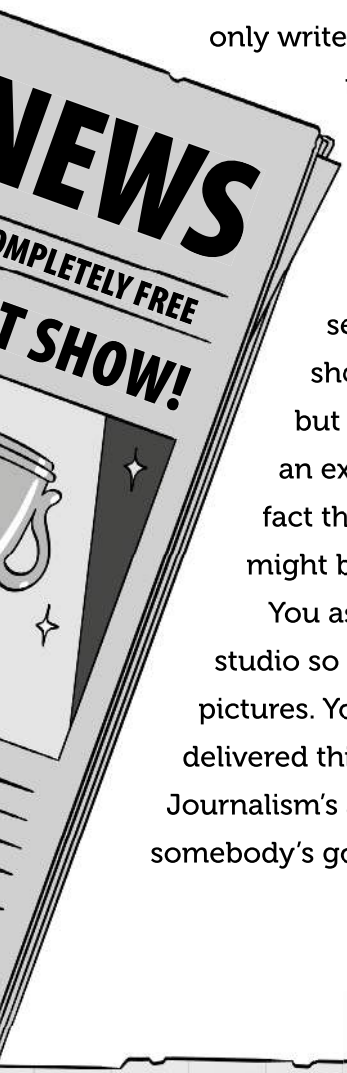
2

"I wonder what Rosso's urgent news could be? It's gotta be something to do with the show!" says Allie, her eyes wide. "D'you think we'll get to go backstage?! This could be our best story in months!"

As editor of the school newspaper – as well as its only writer, graphic designer and marketing manager – you have to admit that an exclusive scoop on the day of the biggest event of the year is too good an opportunity to pass up.

You're surprised that Allie suddenly seems to care so much about the talent show, though. It's a popular event, sure, but that's because it gives the performers an excuse to miss a few maths lessons. The fact that the whole school is forced to attend might be a factor, too.

You ask Allie to go ahead to the drama studio so that she can start taking some pictures. You'll meet her there as soon as you've delivered this week's issue. Journalism's a tough job, but somebody's gotta do it.






CONTINUE TO PAGE 3

You dash around the school, handing out newspapers to your captive audience of teachers and students. On your travels, you begin to hear rumours about the talent show. Apparently, former student, talent-show winner and current Hollywood heart-throb Benny Phoenix is this year's star judge!

There are murmurings that, as well as a brand new trophy, the winner will earn a walk-on part in Phoenix's next movie, *Galactic Pirates 3*. Allie's a huge Benny fan: so much so that your scathing review of *Galactic Pirates 2* turned into an argument that lasted days. Maybe *this* is why she's so excited about tonight's show.




Could Benny's appearance be Rosso's big scoop? It doesn't seem all that secret, especially as the janitor has started posting up fancy Benny Phoenix posters across the school. You grab a quick late lunch of Dinner Lady Maureen's cheeze 'n' beans special – extra cheeze, extra beans, minimal sprinkles of hair – and then head to the drama studio to meet with Mr Rosso.




TURN TO PAGE 4

4

Every year Mr Rosso holds last-minute talent-show rehearsals with his star pupils. You've never been given show-day access before, and you can't help but feel a little buzz of excitement as you approach the drama studio's door, ready to catch an early glimpse of the school's finest performers in action.

As you reach out to turn the handle, you are stopped in your tracks by a blood-curdling shriek. At first, you think the terrible wail coming from inside might be part of some sort of horror-themed performance piece, but the sounds of panic that follow suggest that something has gone very, very wrong indeed.




*"Something's wrong! I'd better check it out!"*

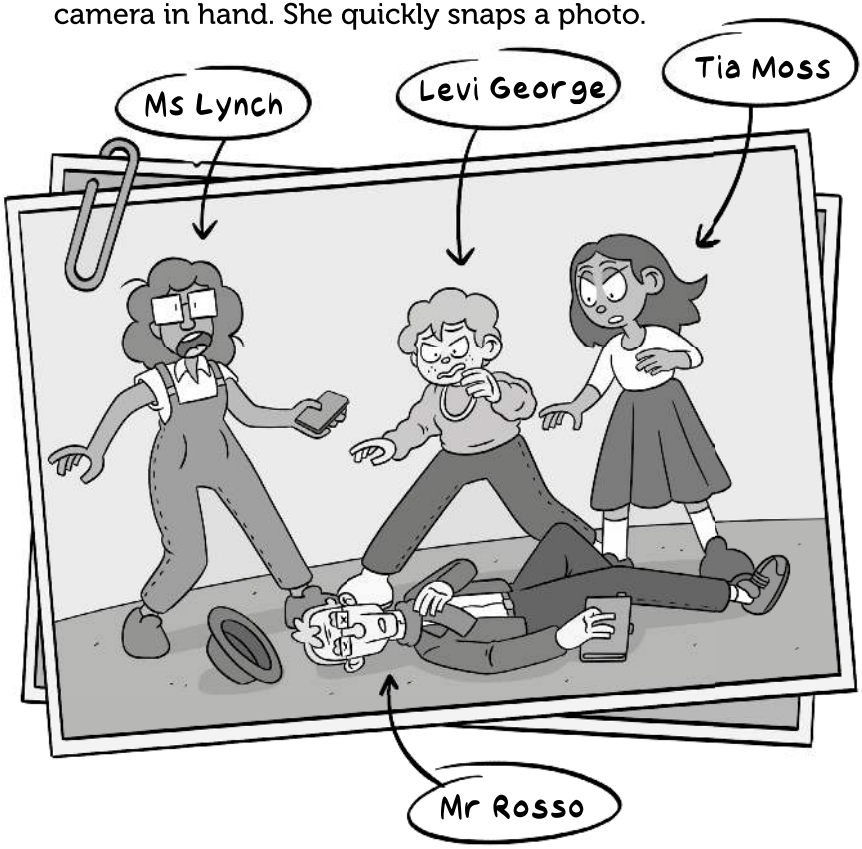
CONTINUE TO PAGE 5

*"Something's wrong! I'd better go home and pretend I didn't hear anything!"*

TURN TO PAGE 7

You burst into the drama studio. The first thing you see is Mr Rosso on the floor, seemingly unconscious. Or ... worse.

A huddle of people surround him. You recognise them all from around the school. Allie's here too, camera in hand. She quickly snaps a photo.



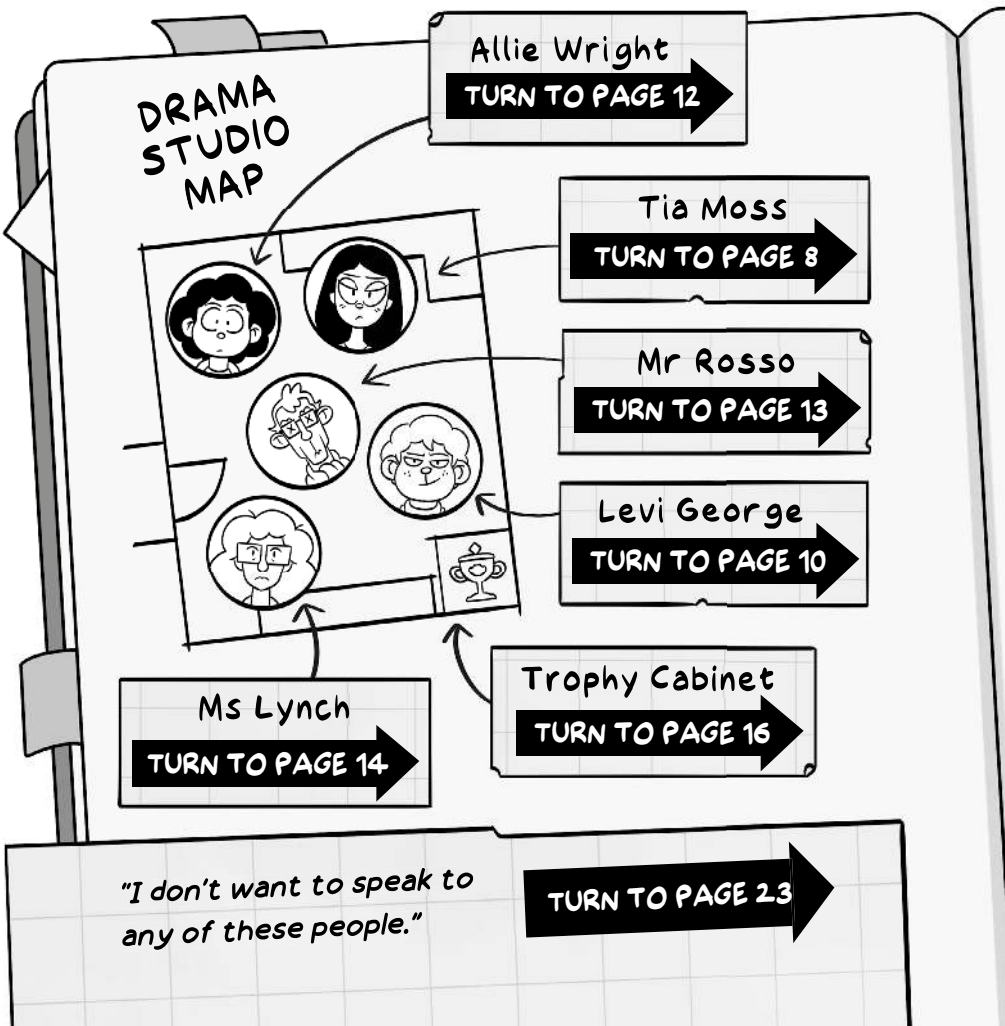

In all the panic, you try to stay cool. Ms Lynch – Mr Rosso's loyal teaching assistant – heads to one corner of the windowless classroom, pulls out a phone and starts calling for help.

TURN TO PAGE 6

6

Mr Rosso said he had a big news story, and while a drama teacher collapsing hours before the talent show is certainly front-page material, you can't help but feel disappointed that you won't find out what he was going to tell you. You wonder whether his breaking news could have something – or everything – to do with his current state.

Time for your journalist talents to shine. You grab your trusty notepad and turn to a blank page. It's time to get some answers. Who will you question?



That shriek is enough to make you want to hand in your journalism hat. You like reporting on the truth, but not if it gets you into situations where shrieking is involved.

You immediately spin on your heels and start walking home. As you hurry through the hallways, the school nurse sprints past you, and on the way back to your house you hear the distant sound of sirens.

The next day, you find out that some extremely weird stuff happened at the talent show, and you feel bad about chickening out. You feel even worse about letting the story of a lifetime slip away, but hey: you win some, you lose some. At least you got home in time to catch the Benny Phoenix movie marathon on TV.

You try not to think too hard about how you might have done things differently.



THE END

*"Wait. Maybe I should think about how I might have done things differently!"*

TURN TO PAGE 4



TIA MOSS
TALENT-SHOW STAR

Looks: Defensive.
Sounds: Annoyed.
Smells: Like grapefruit.

You make a beeline for Tia, winner of last year's talent show. Everybody in the school knows her. She'd never ordinarily give you a moment of her time, but maybe the shock of a potential tragedy will have softened her.

"What do you want?!" Tia barks as she spots you approaching, quickly evaporating any hopes you had for an easy conversation. "I feel bad that Mr Rosso collapsed during my scene and whatever," she says, waving a copy of a script around, "but I need to practise – especially if I'm gonna, like, *destroy* Levi and claim my prize!"

You turn to a clean page in your notepad and ask Tia for her version of events.

CONTINUE TO PAGE 9

"Fine. I'll break it down quickly." Tia sighs. "Me and Mr Rosso, we were just rehearsing a scene when he collapsed. It was, honestly, like, traumatic. I didn't even get to my big line.

"Now leave me alone so I can get back to this," she growls, pointing at her script. "Levi's a good singer or whatever, but he's not taking my talent-show crown. I *need* that role in *Galactic Pirates 3*. Do you know how big that'd be for my acting career?!

"Although," she continues, glancing at Mr Rosso on the floor, "maybe tonight's contest should be cancelled out of, like, sensitivity and stuff. As the reigning champion, I'd be entitled to the prize, right? That's how competitions work."

You're not really sure if that *is* how competitions work, but you're not about to get into a rules debate at the scene of a life-or-death incident.



TURN TO PAGE 17



LEVI GEORGE
UP-AND-COMING SINGER

Looks: Smug.
Sounds: Like an angel.
Smells: Like deodorant.

You usually see Levi serenading his mob of fans in the cafeteria or running around the school filming content for his video channel. This is a rare moment where he's doing neither. A perfect chance to ask some questions. As you approach, you notice that he's humming an upbeat tune.

You suggest that Levi doesn't seem too concerned about the teacher's collapse. His response is, understandably, one of outrage.

"What?! I care! I care a normal amount!" yells Levi, flustered. "I'm just hum–practising! I bet Rosso just got worked up and fainted or something. He was probably super stressed out, between coaching Tia and forcing me to sing his stupid old musical-theatre songs."



CONTINUE TO PAGE 11

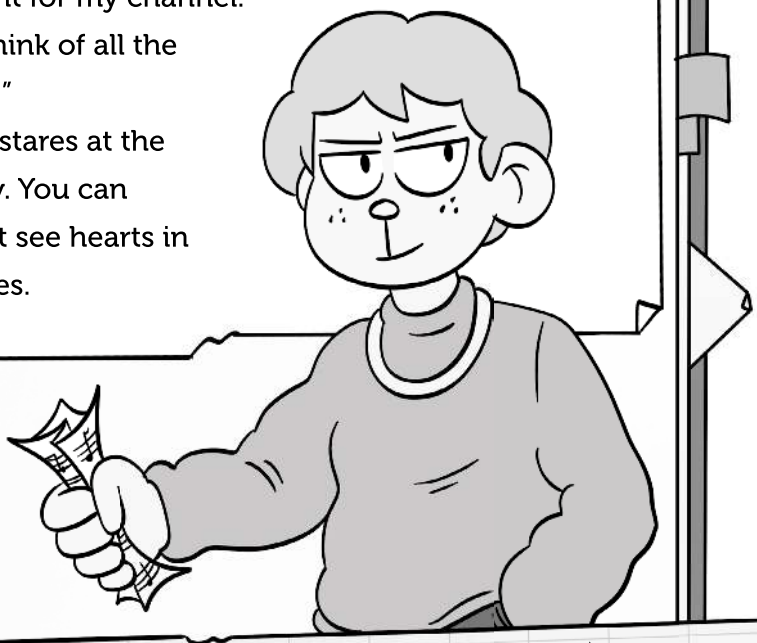
Levi pulls some sheet music from his pocket, and points at it aggressively.

"I mean, look at this dumb stuff. It's all about rain and rainbows and ... cats! Where's the beat? Where's the aura? Where's the vibe?! There's no way I'll win the big prize singing this!"

Prize? You didn't know Levi was so into the Galactic Pirates franchise.

"I don't care about being in some dumb space-bandit movie! I mean the trophy! DUH!" he shouts, gesturing at the cabinet. "The winner gets to take it home for the weekend. I could make some amazing content for my channel. Just think of all the likes..."

He stares at the trophy. You can almost see hearts in his eyes.



*Leave Levi and do some more investigating.*

TURN TO PAGE 17

12



ALLIE WRIGHT
PHOTOGRAPHER

Looks: Busy.
Sounds: Focused.
Smells: Like lens cleaner.

You walk over to Allie as she snaps a photo of Mr Rosso on the floor. You remind her that it's not considered good journalism to shoot close-ups of a person in critical condition.

"Sorry," she says, lowering her camera. "It's just ... I missed getting a photo of the incident itself. I was setting up my tripod for a big shot of Rosso and Tia rehearsing and I heard a shriek, looked over, and there he was, on the floor."

You ask if Rosso said anything about his big news before he collapsed.

"Nah, he wouldn't talk about the story without you here," says Allie. "He said it was too important, and that he's got a policy of 'not conversing with photographers'.

"Wait..." she ponders. "You don't think somebody wanted to stop Rosso from sharing his story, do you?"

*Leave Allie and do some more investigating.*

TURN TO PAGE 17

*"Did you take any other photos?"*

TURN TO PAGE 18



MR ROSSO
DRAMA TEACHER

Looks: Not great.
Sounds: Pretty quiet.
Smells: Sweaty.

You check on Mr Rosso. He's lying completely still. You guess you should maybe feel his neck for a pulse, but his signature purple scarf is in the way and you don't really want to disturb him. You can see that he's still breathing, just about. You also notice he's clutching a folder – maybe something he was rehearsing when he collapsed.

If Mr Rosso was sitting on some important secret information, it'd be a very unlucky coincidence if he collapsed just as he was about to share it.

You jot down the words "FOUL PLAY???" in your notepad.




*Leave Mr Rosso and do some more investigating.*

TURN TO PAGE 17

*"Maybe I should take a look at that folder."*

TURN TO PAGE 20



**MS LYNCH**
**TEACHING ASSISTANT**

Looks: Worried.
Sounds: Distressed.
Smells: Like passion fruit.

Ms Lynch wraps up her call and puts away her phone. You can see that she's rattled.

"I've c–called the school office. The emergency services are on their way."

Ms Lynch used to be a student at this school before getting a job here as a teaching assistant. She's a former talent-show contestant herself, and Mr Rosso's most loyal ally. You ask her if anything like this has ever happened before.

"N–no, I've never seen M–Mr Rosso collapse," Ms Lynch stammers. "Not even when the reviews came in for his hip–hop staging of *The Wind in the Willows*..." She trails off. "The world wasn't ready to see a toad move that way..."



CONTINUE TO PAGE 15

You ask Ms Lynch if she has any idea about what breaking news Mr Rosso wanted to share.

"News?" she asks, sounding puzzled. "I–I don't know anything about that. H–he came to school this morning and h–headed to the staff room to do some work, and I met him here with Tia and Levi b–before lunch," she says, clearly on the verge of tears.

"If he had big news, he's had all day to share it ... unless he was keeping it a secret..." she continues. "He did seem more ... excited than usual, I suppose, but I chalked that up to Benny Phoenix coming to the talent show tonight. Mr Rosso has been a big fan ever since me and Benny were students... Oh, it's all so horrible!"

She breaks off into heaving sobs. You feel that it's best to leave her alone for the moment.

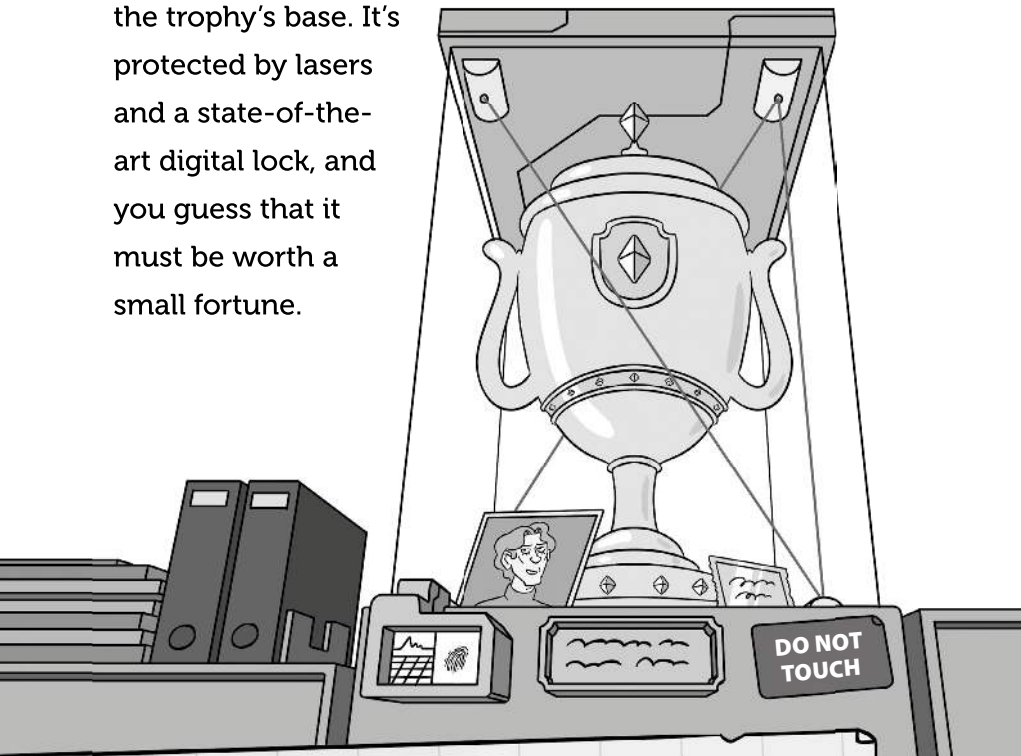


*Leave Ms Lynch and do some more investigating.*

TURN TO PAGE 17

16

You take a look at the big cabinet in the far corner of the room. It's heavy-duty. A solid metal frame with shatter-proof glass guards a glistening golden trophy. There are also some bits of paper in the cabinet, nestled up against the trophy's base. It's protected by lasers and a state-of-the-art digital lock, and you guess that it must be worth a small fortune.




*"What a nice, if weirdly lavish, trophy. Time to move on."*

CONTINUE TO PAGE 17

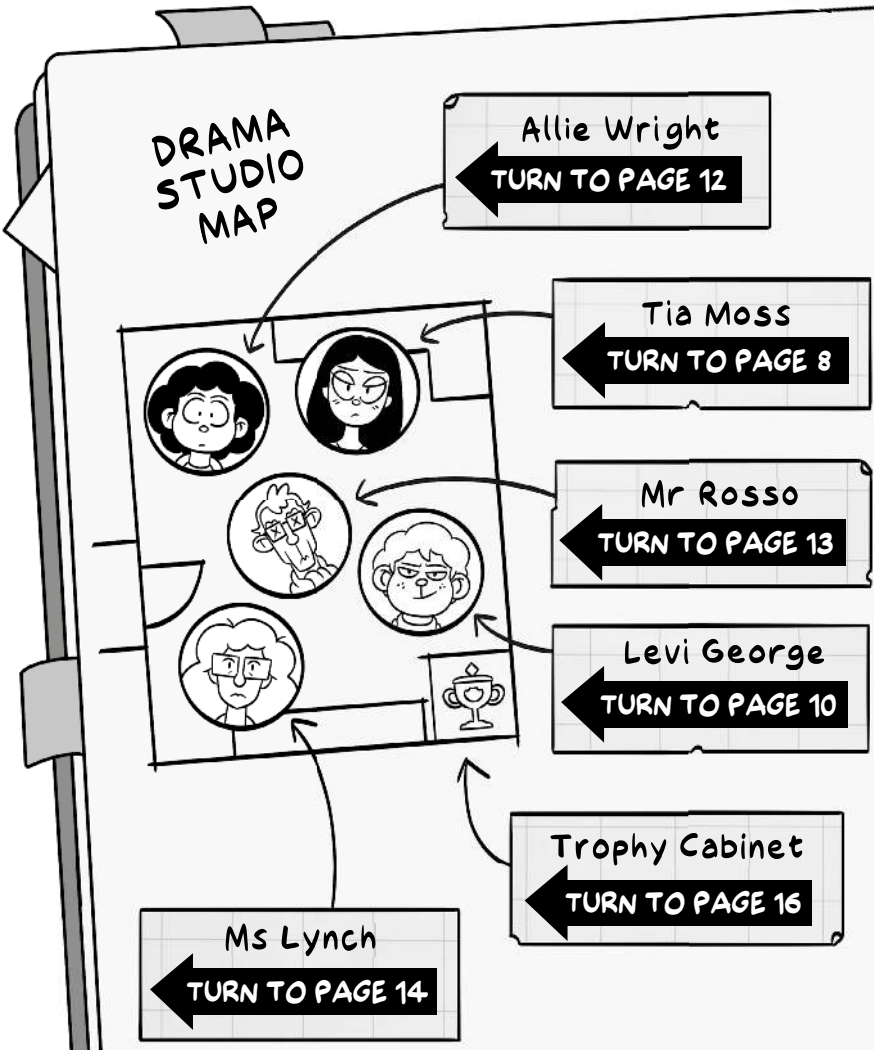
*"That DO NOT TOUCH sticker really makes me want to touch..."*

TURN TO PAGE 19

*"Let's take a closer look at what's inside this cabinet."*

TURN TO PAGE 22

You return to the centre of the studio. Who – or what – should you investigate next?




*"I think I'm done investigating here for now."*

TURN TO PAGE 23

18

"Sure!" says Allie, handing you her camera.

You scroll through the photos, hoping to find something relevant to the story.

"Oh, there might be a couple of personal ones in there," she says. "Sorry!"



*"Interesting. I'm gonna go do some more investigating."*

TURN TO PAGE 17

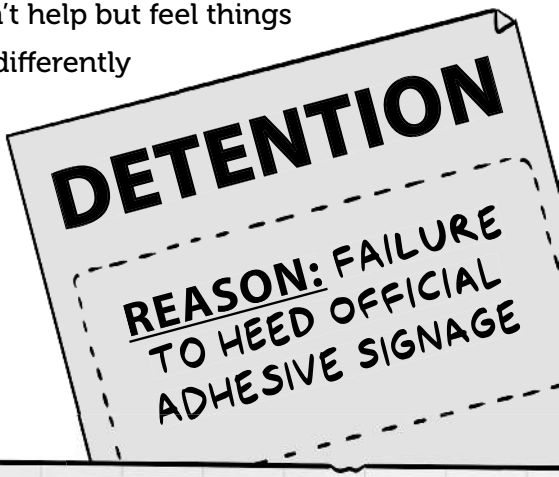



You ignore the DO NOT TOUCH sticker. As soon as your fingers brush the glass, metal shutters come down and an alarm sounds.

Before you can even think, the school's brand new Trophy Security Force (the janitor, but in a special hat) whisks you away to the principal's office. You try to explain that nobody with any degree of natural curiosity would be able to resist a big DO NOT TOUCH sticker, but the principal appears more concerned with the fact that one of his teachers has just collapsed.




You get immediate detention, and miss your chance at the big story. You can't help but feel things might have turned out differently if you'd just obeyed that sticker.




THE END

*"How would things have turned out if I'd just obeyed that sticker?"*

TURN TO PAGE 17

You prise the folder from Mr Rosso's sweaty hand and take a look. Inside is a script – probably something he was rehearsing with Tia, his star actor.

The whole thing is one drawn-out speech by some king ranting and raving about a long-lost brother and some dark secret or other. There are lots of "thou"s and "art"s. You've never really pictured Tia as a king before, but you guess that's what acting is all about.

There's another script page in the folder too, something completely different. No title, but it's watermarked with Mr Rosso's name, and seems to be a short scene involving some sort of space janitor. Odd.

INT. STARDECK B, NIGHT 3

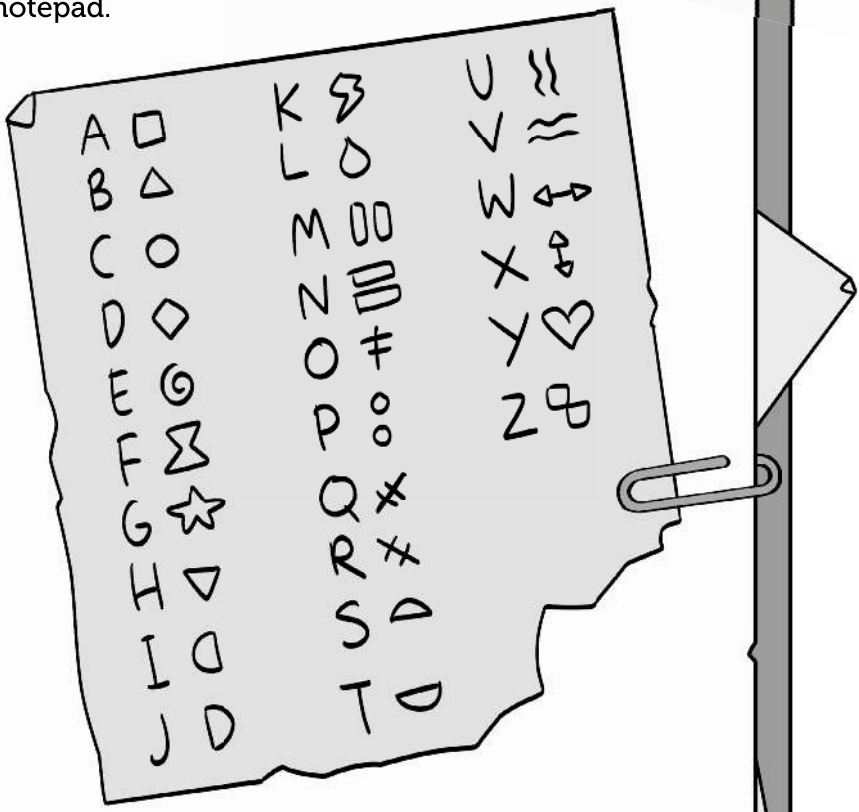
The SPACE JANITOR approaches a steaming pile of MYSTERIOUS SPACE GUNK. He SNIFFS THE AIR.

SPACE JANITOR
What manner of foul spacebeast would desecrate my floor in this way?

He dips a finger into the SPACE GUNK and RECOILS with disgust

CONTINUE TO PAGE 21

At the back of the folder sits a page from an old notepad.




You can't make head or tail of it. Maybe it's some sort of fancy theatre code for stage directions or something.

You stuff the yellowed paper into your notepad, making a mental note to come back to it later.

TURN TO PAGE 17

22

You move in to take a closer look at the trophy cabinet. A shiny metal plaque explains that the trophy was purchased for the school by Benny Phoenix himself, and that the winner of the talent show will get to take it home for the weekend before it goes back behind glass for another year.

You peer through the glass. Next to the trophy sits a golden voucher. The cabinet also contains a signed headshot of Benny Phoenix. What a prize.




*"That's enough of this trophy stuff for now."*

TURN TO PAGE 17

Allie bounds over as you're putting away your notepad.

"Hey! Check this out. I found it while I was running about taking photos." She reaches into her camera bag but is interrupted by the sound of the studio door slamming open. Again.

In the doorway stands Mr Edmunds, the PE teacher, flanked by police and paramedics. He doesn't look happy. "Nobody move!" Edmunds bellows. You're pretty sure everyone's paying attention, but he blows his whistle just in case. The paramedics swarm in and immediately begin checking on Mr Rosso.

"Careful of his scarf!" cries Ms Lynch. "H–he really loves that scarf..."



As the paramedics do their job, Edmunds blows his whistle once again. He loves doing that.

"Benny Phoenix is due to descend upon this school at any minute!" he growls, his moustache bristling. "And he will not be walking into a farce. I'll be working with the police to find out just what happened here ... and if there are any signs of mischief or foul play, I'll be sure to smoke the culprit out!

"We'll be calling each of you for questioning," he continues loudly. You notice that he doesn't really have an indoor voice. "Until we know exactly what happened here, everybody is a suspect."

He stares straight at you, a glint in his eye.

"Especially *you*."




*Make a run for it!*

CONTINUE TO PAGE 25

*"Me? What did I do?"*

TURN TO PAGE 26

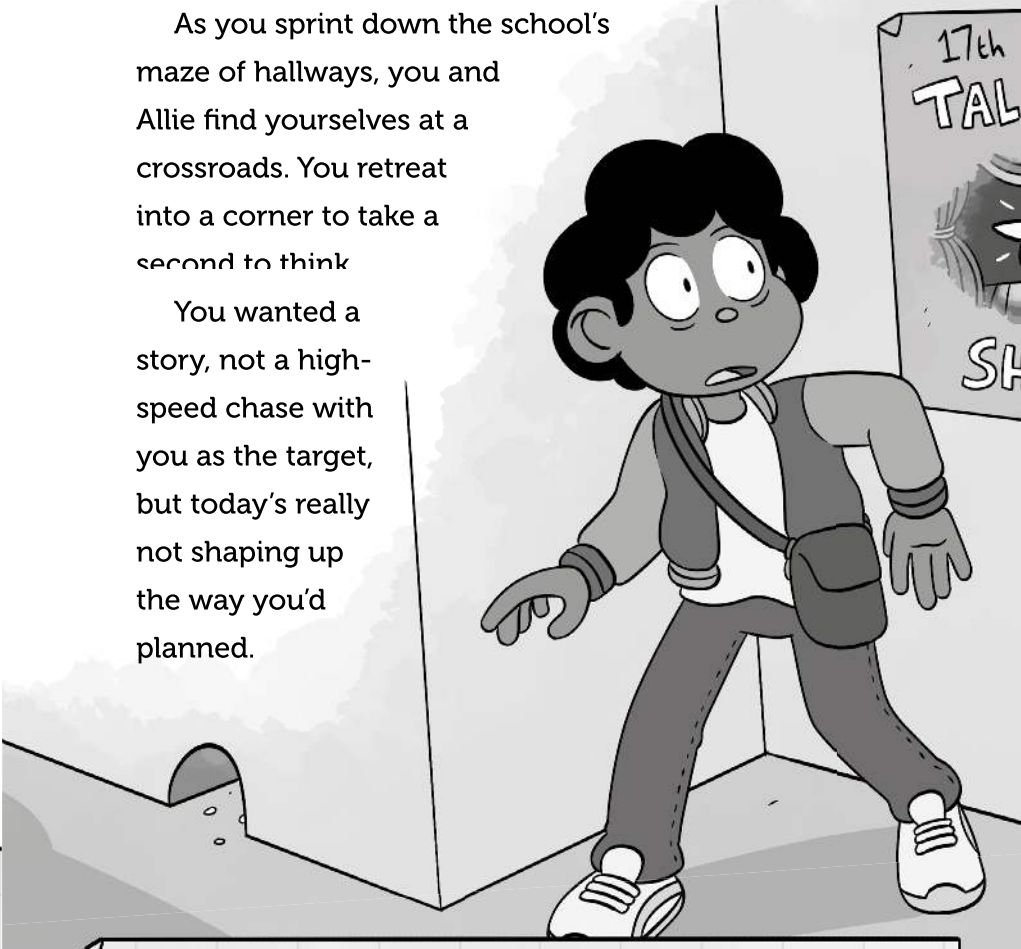
Edmunds's suspicion is enough to send a chill down your spine. It's certainly enough to send you running out of the drama classroom at high speed.

Allie follows, ever the loyal photographer. "I don't know that this makes us look less guilty!" Allie pants as she struggles to keep up.

She's probably right, but what's done is done. The police bound after you, hot on your tail.

As you sprint down the school's maze of hallways, you and Allie find yourselves at a crossroads. You retreat into a corner to take a second to think.

You wanted a story, not a high-speed chase with you as the target, but today's really not shaping up the way you'd planned.




TURN TO PAGE 33

26

You protest your innocence – you weren't even in the room when Rosso collapsed.



"But your accomplice was," Edmunds says. "A convenient story: a pair of journalists desperate for a gripping headline, and one just falls at their feet!"

"Are you accusing us?!" yells Allie. "We're only here because Rosso summoned us! We got a letter from him!"

"Ha, a likely story!" Edmunds points a thick sausage-y finger at her. "I know how petty and scheming you journalists can be. You've held a grudge against my PE department ever since you embarrassed yourself on that trampoline!"



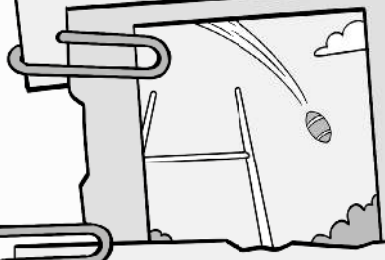
"That was ONE TIME!" Allie insists. "And the gym ceiling NEEDED fixing, anyway. If anything, I did you a favour!"

CONTINUE TO PAGE 27

Some of the less-than-flattering news stories that you've written about the PE department start to race through your mind.

# HOPPING MAD

## SACK RACE SACKED OFF OVER CHEATING SCANDAL



## RUGBY TEAM NEEDS TO TRY HARDER

## BUDGET BLOWN

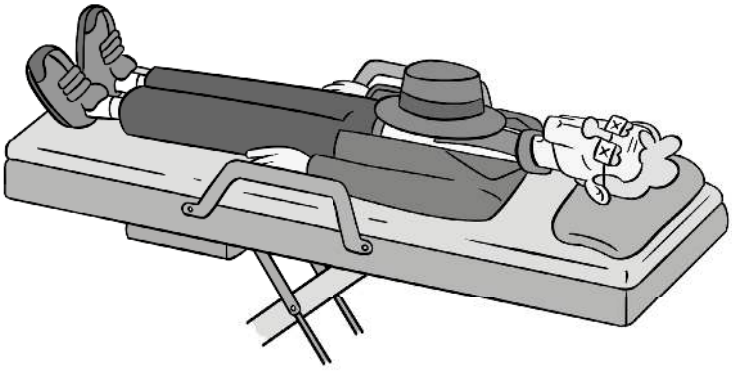
### PE DEPARTMENT'S EXTRAORDINARY WHISTLE SPEND REVEALED!

You don't want to admit that your anti-PE news agenda might have less to do with the department's failings and more to do with the fact that you've had nothing else to write about all year.

Either way, you start to feel that maybe – just maybe – Edmunds might have it in for you.

TURN TO PAGE 28

Edmunds turns his attention away from you as the police officers begin guiding witnesses out of the room and the paramedics finish checking on Mr Rosso. As they lift Rosso onto a stretcher and wheel him away, one of the paramedics whispers something to Mr Edmunds, who now seems to be letting off steam by doing ankle exercises.



"Poison?!" Edmunds yells. "Who would do such a thing?!" The PE teacher's lack of volume control is bad for libraries but good for nearby journalists, it turns out.

"We also found this in his jacket pocket," says another paramedic, revealing a small handwritten note.

Ms Lynch darts over to read it.

*"Let's get out of here while Edmunds is distracted."*

CONTINUE TO PAGE 29

*"Let's check that note."*

TURN TO PAGE 35

You and Allie creep out of the drama studio. As you gently close the door behind you, you hear Edmunds bellowing something about "the show", and how it "must go on". Who knew he had such respect for the theatre?

Down the hall, you spot Tia and Levi. Tia's arms are firmly crossed.

"I would have won. Obviously. And since I won last year, I should get the prize. Clearly!" she shouts.

"No way! *I* would have won! They should let me take a photo with the trophy at least!" yells Levi, arms flailing.

Allie steps in and tells them that it sounds as if the talent show will be going ahead after all.

"What?! Then I've gotta prepare! Urgently!" screams Tia. She sprints off in the direction of the school theatre.

"W–wait for me!" cries Levi, running behind her. His arms are still flailing.



TURN TO PAGE 30

# 30

You and Allie continue walking away from the drama studio.

"Edmunds is really out to get us," says Allie.

You both decide that the best way to clear your names is to figure out who poisoned Mr Rosso yourselves.

"We'll bring them to justice and get a great story out of it. Win-win!" She beams.

You remind Allie that a man is possibly in a critical condition.

"I mean, it's a sad win-win, sure. Okay, let's put our heads together. What do we definitely know?"




*"That Mr Rosso was poisoned and it was probably somebody in the room who did it."*

TURN TO PAGE 32

*"That Mr Rosso was poisoned and the culprit could be anybody on Earth."*

TURN TO PAGE 37

*"That the talent show is back on! I need to compete in the talent show!"*

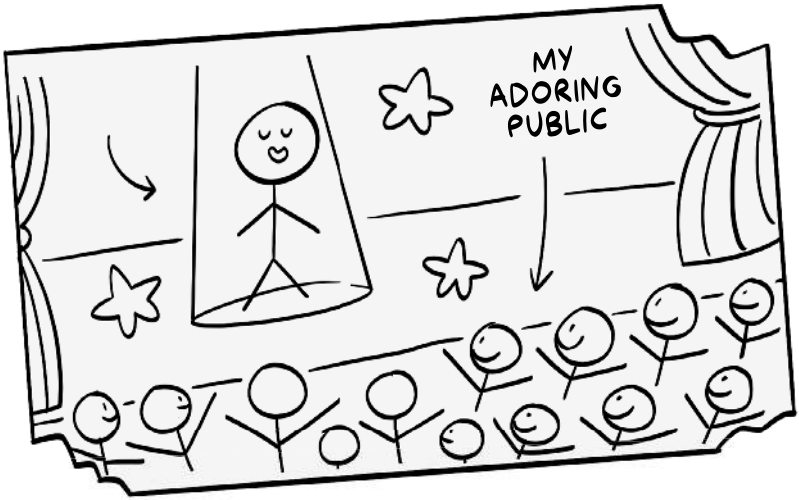
CONTINUE TO PAGE 31

Allie looks at you quizzically.

"Wait," she says. "You seriously want to compete in the talent show? What about solving this whole poisoning thing?"

You weigh it up. Sure, you're a journalist, dedicated to finding the truth, especially when that's also the way to clear your name. But you're also human, and the idea of an audience cheering as you blow them away with your talent is too much to pass up.

"What would you even do?" asks Allie.




*"I must channel my inner Rosso. I want to be an actor!"*

TURN TO PAGE 126

*"Music flows through me. I will sing my way to stardom!"*

TURN TO PAGE 130

*Say nothing. You want to be a mime.*

TURN TO PAGE 129

"That makes sense," says Allie. "I got there like thirty minutes before you, and nobody else left or came in during that time. I even remember Ms Lynch saying that Mr Rosso had been in there since after breakfast. Whoever poisoned Mr Rosso has to have been in the room."

The mystery is making your brain boil. You decide to approach the crime just like you would any other story. You flip through your notepad for inspiration and find a note you wrote on your very first day working on the newspaper.

**REMEMBER**

Every story needs 5 Ws!

1) WHO? 2) WHAT?

3) WHERE? 4) WHEN?

5) WHY?

*"Let's talk about the Who, What, Where, When and Why."*

TURN TO PAGE 42

*"Enough talk! Let's go hunt for clues!"*

TURN TO PAGE 43

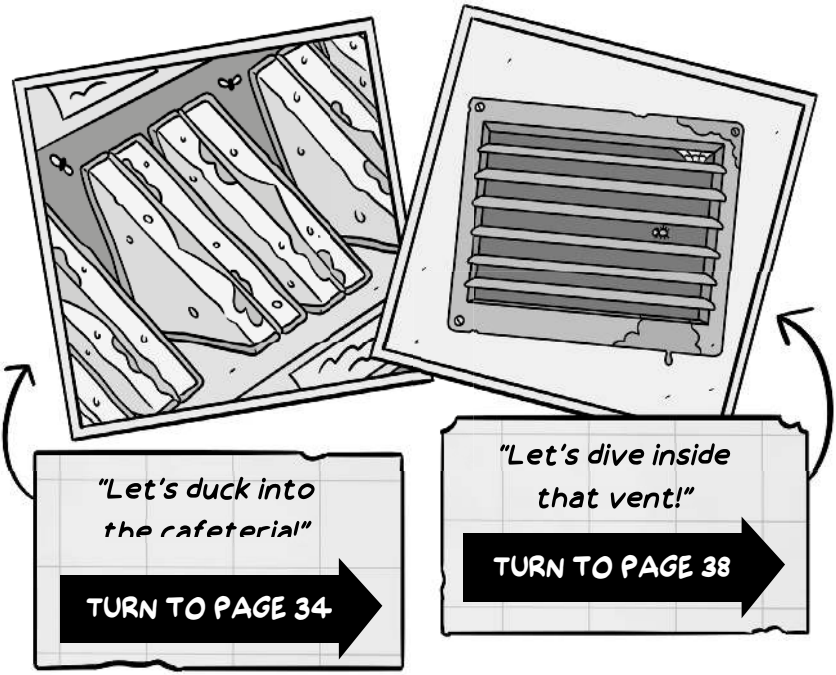
"We'll be sitting ducks out there," Allie points out. "We've gotta move before the police catch us. But where can we go?"

The school cafeteria lies further down the hall. You also spot a vent for the air-conditioning system nearby. Two people could fit inside. Probably. As you decide your next steps, you hear the crackle of radio static approaching.

"What's that? The paramedics are saying it's poison?" you hear one of the police officers say. "Roger that. We'll catch these kids, close this case and be home in time for supper."

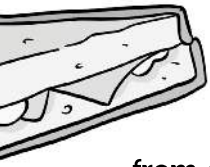
"Poison?" yelps Allie. "Mr Rosso was poisoned?!"

But you haven't got time to think about that now. The police are on your tail. You've got to act fast!

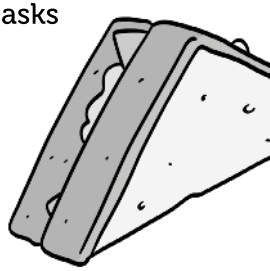





You and Allie rush into the school cafeteria. The only person there is Dinner Lady Maureen, who is closing up for the evening. Next to her sits a trolley full of sandwiches – probably the food for tonight's show.



"What are you kids doing here?" she asks gruffly, a sandwich in each hand.

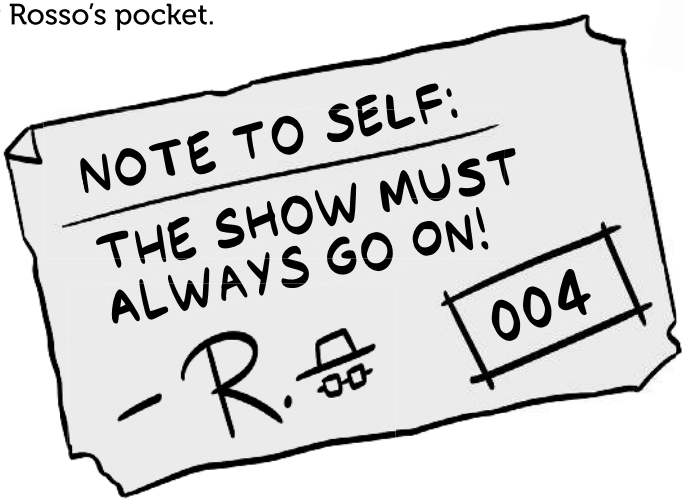


Before you can answer, a shout from one of the police officers down the hall answers her question. Luckily for you, Maureen's famous distrust of vegetables is matched only by her distrust of authority, and she quickly ushers you over to the trolley.

"The clink's no place for a child," she grumbles, cracking her tattooed knuckles. "You hide here. I'll deal with this."

TURN TO PAGE 36

You sneak a glance at the note that was found in Mr Rosso's pocket.




"Well, that settles it," says Edmunds. "We had our differences – sport and theatre being natural enemies, of course – but these may be the man's final wishes. Tonight's talent show will go ahead as planned!"

"B–but, is that really the best thing?" asks Ms Lynch. "Mr Rosso *was* the talent show!" She looks down. "I mean, is…"

Edmunds seems pretty hard-headed. You don't think Ms Lynch will win this argument.

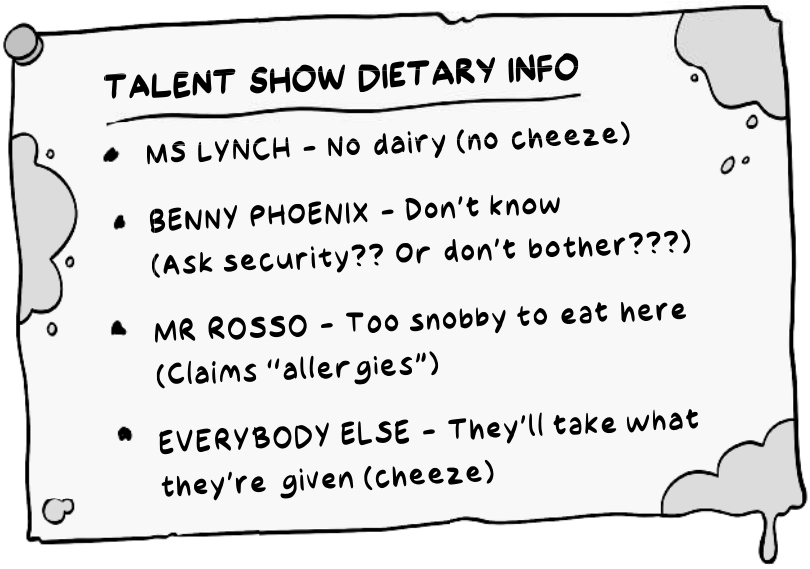
"Did you see the number at the bottom of that note?" Allie whispers to you. "I wonder what it means."

Before you can discuss the issue further, Edmunds blows his whistle, and a police officer ushers you out of the room and into the hallway.

TURN TO PAGE 30

You and Allie duck down behind the food trolley. Maureen tells the officers that she hasn't seen anybody in the area recently. If they know what's good for them, they won't push any further.

You spot a note pinned to the trolley.




By the time you've finished reading the list, Maureen's got rid of the officers and is approaching the trolley.

"The coast is clear," she tells you. "Those cops said Edmunds wants to go ahead with the talent show, so I've still gotta serve these sandwiches. Get a move on."

You think it's probably best to do what she says.

TURN TO PAGE 41