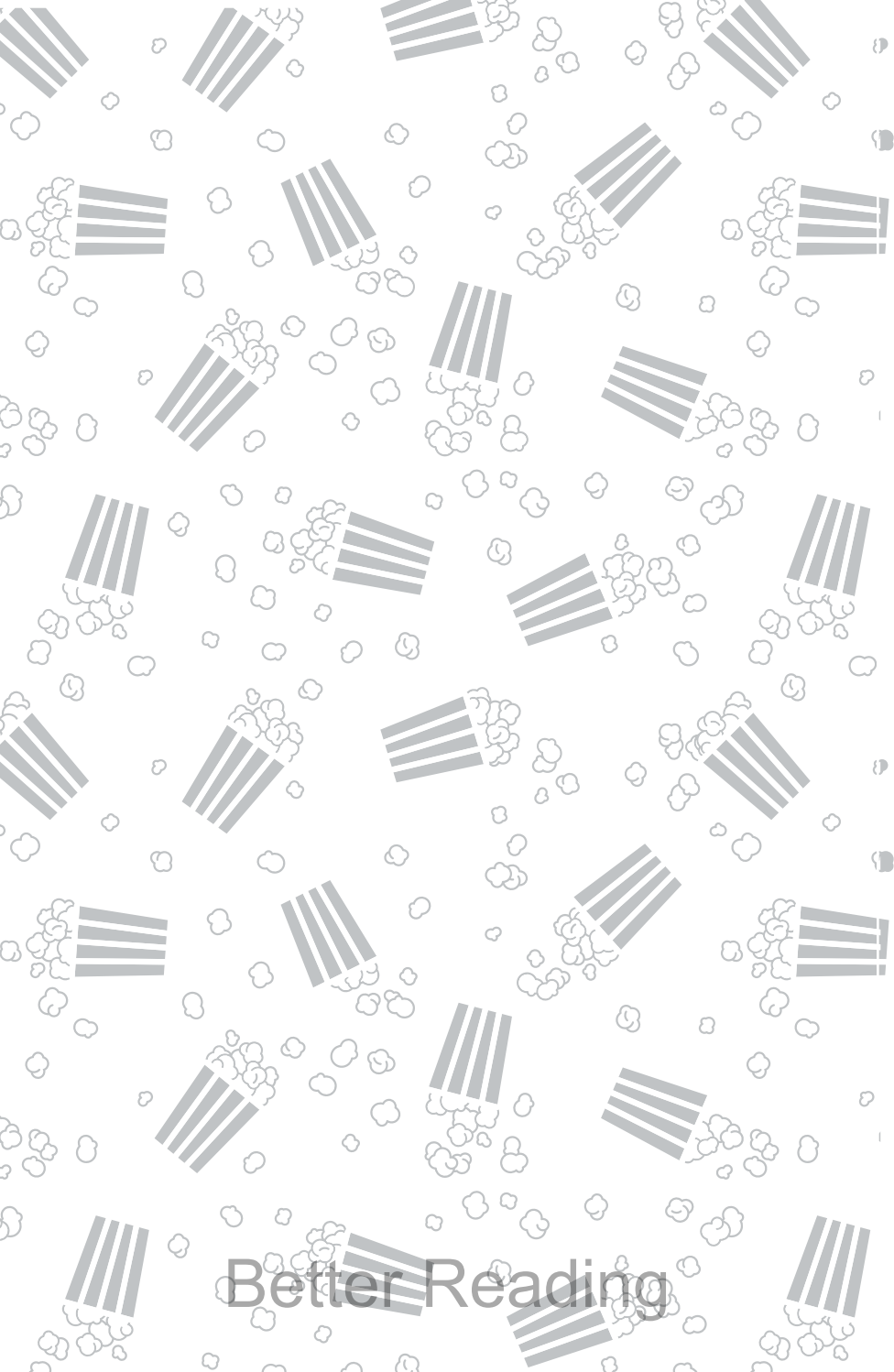


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**ROCK
STAR
DETECTIVES**

MURDER AT THE MOVIES

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ROCK STAR DETECTIVES

MURDER AT THE MOVIES

ADAM HILLS

*Illustrated by
Luna Valentine*



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

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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

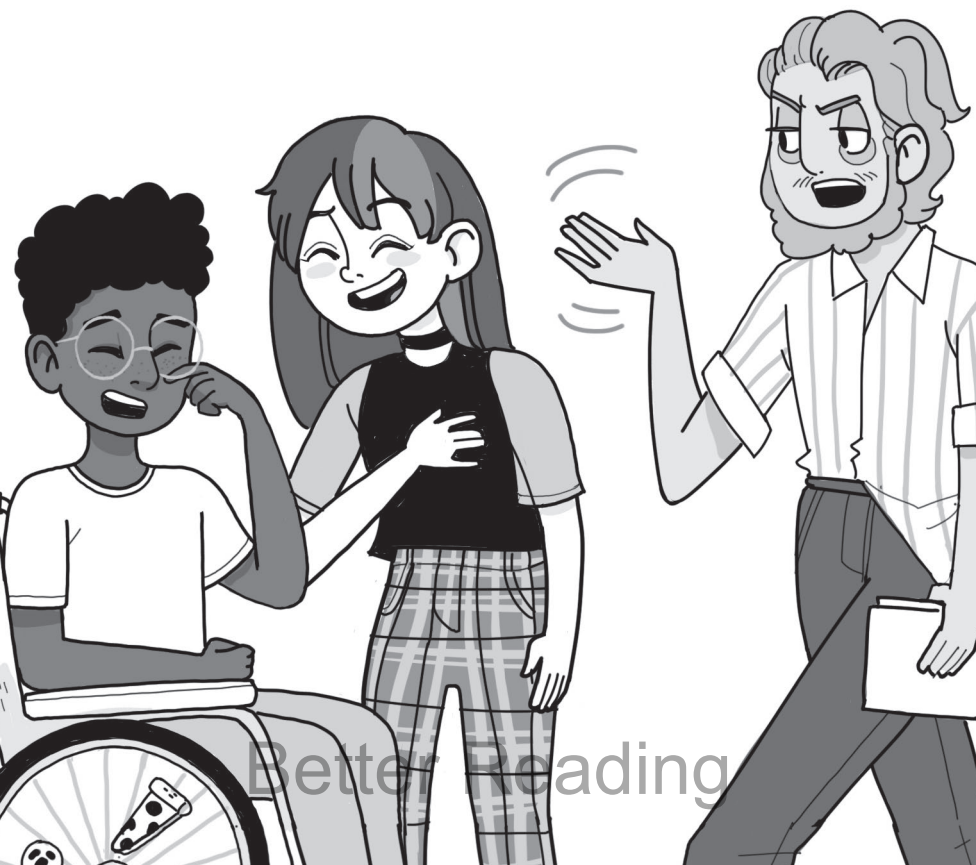


funfair,' said Charley, 'but instead of making you look taller or shorter, it makes you look grumpier.'

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!!!’



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.

‘You don’t mind if I record this, do you?’ she asked, placing a small tape recorder on the table between herself and Charley.

‘Not at all,’ replied Charley.

‘Do you mind if I film some of it?’ asked George.

‘Not at all,’ replied the journalist.

George focused his camera and hit record.

‘Great! So,’ chirped Angela, ‘how did you go from Charley the rockstar to Charley the movie star?’



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Charley flicked her fringe. Her now famous purple streak shifted then returned into place. She took a deep breath and began.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘after our last tour, we came up with a pitch for a movie. Loosely based on our own adventures.’

Charley shot George a glance, and he knew what it meant. The truth was that during Charley’s European tour, the two twelve-year-olds had become the main suspects in a series of international art heists. They had been forced to become detectives, solve the mystery and find the real culprit in order to save themselves. The police deemed the whole thing to be ‘a misunderstanding’ while Charley’s Mum called it ‘a total shambles’. Charley and George had turned the entire story into a film script – with a few changes, of course, to protect some of the people who had been involved.

‘We were in the middle of planning our US tour when the film studios picked up our script,’ Charley went on, ‘so we decided to postpone the tour till after the film’s release. We thought it might be pretty hard to focus on schoolwork, make a movie *and* do a tour all at the same time,’ she added, grinning.

George loved it when Charley used movie terms

like ‘came up with a pitch’ and ‘picked up our script’. Whenever she did, they both laughed internally at how much they sounded like a couple of screenwriters from Hollywood, California, rather than two thirteen-year-old students from Rokesbourne High School, north London.

‘Did you write the whole script yourselves?’ asked Angela.

‘Our friend Ruby was the main scriptwriter,’ said Charley. ‘But George and I also contributed.’

George thought that Angela was about to ask something else but she was interrupted by a knock on the door of Charley’s trailer.

‘Come in!’ called Charley.

The door swung open to reveal a man in his early forties with bleached-blond hair and a tanned craggy face.

‘Dude!’ he exclaimed in a Californian accent. ‘I heard about the accident on set. Are you OK?’

‘I’m fine, thanks,’ said Charley. ‘Not a hair out of place.’

‘If I’d have been there, I would have pushed you out of the way and taken the hit myself!’

George thought that was a bit extreme.

‘It’s OK, Chad,’ replied Charley calmly. ‘You’re

not my bodyguard.'

'I know,' replied Chad, 'but it's my job to take care of you on set!'

'I'm *fine*,' repeated Charley.

'OK, dude, if you say so,' said Chad, backing out of the trailer. 'But next time I'll be there to protect you. Wherever *you* go, *I* go.'

'You have an assistant?' asked Angela, returning to the interview.

'I think the technical term is "runner"?' said Charley, glancing back at George.

Ever since the idea of a film had been floated, George had become quite the student of movies. He had asked his dad for some classic comedies to watch and been struck by the number of names and jobs in the credits of each production: runner, grip, gaffer, best boy. ('What about best girl?!' Charley had demanded.)

'And why did you decide to make the movie in Australia?' asked Angela.

'Better weather, better beaches and we get to take a holiday!' Charley smiled. 'Australia was always top of my list of places to visit.'

'Plus,' added George, 'this was the only available studio. And our film needs to be finished by July.'

'Ah yes.' Angela nodded. 'The start of the summer

holidays. When every kid in North America finally has time to go and see a film. The studios all race to release their films around then. I believe this one is slated to hit cinemas on the ninth of July.’

George was impressed. This journalist had clearly done her homework.

‘So you mentioned your schoolwork. When *are* you guys fitting that in?’ asked Angela.

‘Our principal is allowing us to work remotely,’ said Charley. ‘Our teachers email us our lessons and we do the same work as the rest of our class, just at a different time of the day to them.’

There was another knock on the door, and this time Chad didn’t wait before opening it. ‘Dude,’ he said, ‘you’re needed on set in five minutes.’

‘Thanks, Chad,’ said Charley. ‘I’ll be there in a second.’

Chad finally noticed the journalist and the tape recorder and added, ‘Sorry, Mrs Dude.’

‘It’s OK,’ said Angela. ‘I only have one more question.’

Chad looked at his wrist, realized he wasn’t wearing a watch and tried to style it out as he shut the door.

‘What’s it like filming on the same lot as Jack Rayner? Have you met him? What’s he like?’

Jack Rayner was the biggest movie star on the planet, and his new production was being made in Sydney too, at the same studios as Charley and George's movie. His trailers (plural!) took up most of the car park, and there was a rumour that black screens had been placed over all the office windows nearby so that no one could see him as he walked around.

'We haven't met him yet,' said Charley, 'but we're hoping we might "accidentally" bump into him somewhere.'

Yet another knock interrupted the interview, and Charley cried, 'I'll be there in a minute, Chad!'

The door slowly opened to reveal the twenty-something with red hair who'd been on set earlier. The face of Ruby Sherring, their co-writer, poked itself into the trailer.

'Sorry to interrupt,' she said, 'but we really need to talk.'

'It's OK,' said Angela, switching off her tape recorder and rising to her feet. 'I've got enough for now. I'll schedule another interview for a week or so to see how things are panning out.'

As she left the trailer, Angela passed George her card. 'If you have any gossip worth reporting though, give me a call.'

George wondered what could possibly happen on a movie set that was worth reporting but placed the card in his pocket anyway.

Ruby entered as Angela left and waited until the door was shut before speaking.

‘We need to talk about the accident.’

‘I’m. Fine,’ said Charley for the third time.

‘I know,’ said Ruby in a lowered tone, ‘but I just overheard the lighting people talking. They think someone might have tampered with the cables shortly before the light fell.’

‘So?’ asked George hesitantly. As he met Charley’s eyes, he thought they both knew the answer.

Ruby seemed to be choosing her words carefully.

‘So it may not have been an accident.’



DAY 1 – 2.45 p.m.

The Rokesbourne Soundstage, Fox Studios, SYDNEY

Charley felt weird. Uneasy. Out of sorts. She was in the familiar surroundings of Rokesbourne High School in London, and yet not really. Miss Honor Fairburn’s entire classroom had been recreated in a building in Sydney that resembled an aircraft hangar. Since Rokesbourne was a school that was a little chipped and peeling round the edges, Charley now stood before an intentionally wobbly door with a purposely cracked window in it, and peered into the ‘classroom’ at her ‘schoolmates’.

There was Vanessa Devine (Charley’s rival), Dexter



Keaton (practising his magic tricks), and Miss Fairburn at the head of the class. Of course each of these characters was being played by actors. 'Vanessa' was Poppy Clementine, 'Dexter' was Jude Romero, and 'Miss Fairburn' was a lovely lady by the name of Elise Kirkpatrick.



Charley looked to her sidekick for comfort, but even he wasn't who he appeared to be. Sitting in the wheelchair to Charley's right was Marley McAllister, the Australian actor who had been cast in the role of George. Charley had wanted George to play the role himself, but George wasn't confident enough to audition, and Charley wasn't persuasive enough to change his mind.



'Don't you find any of this weird?' Charley asked her co-star.

'Nope. It's my job,' was his curt reply.

Charley had found most of the experience odd so far. Firstly she had flown halfway round the world from an English winter to an Australian summer, only



to find herself pretending to be in a European autumn. This was fine for the indoor scenes, but next week's diary contained a scene set in an outdoor cafe in Rome, in which George was meant to be wearing his favourite warm coat. The most recent forecast for that day said the temperature would be thirty-nine degrees.

How can anywhere be thirty-nine degrees in January? thought Charley.

The second thing Charley found disconcerting was that the film was being shot out of order. Apparently most films did this, but it meant Charley had no idea where they were in the story.

Thankfully the director, Curtis Ridley, had decided to film Charley's concert scenes first. This meant she could get used to being in front of the camera, while doing what she was best at – singing to an audience. Those scenes were when Charley felt most comfortable – on stage, belting out her own songs to a roomful of people. Curtis had even advertised for actual fans to be in the crowd rather than extras, so their love for Charley was real.

Charley wasn't sure if Curtis was a kindly uncle, a scruffy genius or a grumpy old man. Maybe he was all three.

'My apologies for what happened this morning,'

said Curtis, approaching Charley and Marley. (Even their names didn't sound right together.) 'I'm glad you're both OK after the, uh, accident.'

Ever since returning to set, Charley had noticed a strange tension. Was it because the falling light had shaken everyone up? Or had other people heard the rumour that it had been tampered with?

'If it was my decision, I'd send you home for the day,' said the director with a grumble and a frown, 'but the studio execs demanded that we keep filming. They're worried that we won't get this film released in time for the holidays. And when *they're* stressed, *I'm* stressed.'

Curtis indicated the classroom. 'I thought it best to film somewhere else for the afternoon, hence the change of scenery.'

Charley thought Curtis had the air of a man who would rather be anywhere else right now, and she wondered why anyone would do a job they so clearly disliked.

'All right,' he grouched, 'so this is the scene where you enter the classroom after hearing about the first art theft. Don't be too panicked, just confused. Any questions?'

Charley really wanted to say yes, but she shook her head instead.

‘Good! Now let’s see if we can get through this scene without any more interruptions.’

Charley watched as Curtis returned to his director’s chair and put on his headphones. Beside him George watched intently.

‘Looks like someone woke up on the wrong side of the world,’ whispered Charley to Marley, hoping for a response.

Nothing.

‘I heard that!’ shouted Curtis, somehow grumpier than before.

Charley looked up and noticed the microphone above her head and remembered that Curtis’s headphones picked up everything that went into that mike. ‘Sorry,’ she whispered into the microphone.

‘Cameras rolling,’ shouted Curtis, ignoring Charley’s apology, ‘and . . . action!’

Charley tried to focus and imagine it was George beside her, and not Marley dressed as George. Tried to imagine she was back at Rokesbourne High School. Tried to act.

Charley and Marley entered the room and sidled towards their desks. The script called for Vanessa (played by Poppy) to give them sass, but instead Poppy stared open-mouthed at the doorway through

which Charley and Marley had just stepped. Her eyes widened, her jaw dropped and she exclaimed ‘Oh. My. God!’

Charley turned and almost said the same thing. There, in all his glory, was the biggest movie star on the planet – Jack Rayner.



George hadn’t even noticed Jack Rayner walk on set, let alone make his way into a scene.

‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Rayner said casually, flashing that world-famous smile, ‘were you filming something?’

They weren’t filming any more. There was a mixture of squeals, gasps and a few ‘no ways’ thrown in as every person on set forgot they were meant to be making a movie.

‘Cut!!’ yelled Curtis, as if anyone was still listening to him.

Rayner beamed, clearly knowing he had the full attention of everyone within a fifty-metre radius. ‘So, you must be the famous Charley P.’

George could see Charley was trying not to scream.
Jack Rayner knew who she was!

‘I’m a big fan of your music.’

Jack Rayner was a big fan of her music!

‘Thank you so much!’ gushed Charley. ‘I love your

movies.’

‘I know,’ said Rayner with a smirk. ‘Everybody does.’

Charley’s ‘classmates’ laughed but remained glued to their chairs. No one seemed to know whether to approach the star or not.

‘And you must be the famous George,’ Rayner continued, now turning to Marley.

‘Actually,’ responded Marley confidently, ‘I’m Marley McAllister. I play the *character* of George.’ Marley stood up from the wheelchair and reached out to shake Jack Rayner’s hand.

‘Oh,’ said Rayner, turning to face the room, ‘so where’s this George



I've read so much about?'

Marley's smile slipped ever so slightly, as George raised his hand and said, 'Here, sir.'

'You don't need to call me "sir"; I'm not your teacher,' said Rayner with a grin. He nodded to Elise, dressed for the part of Miss Fairburn, and added, 'I think *she* is.'

There were laughs again, and George made his way slowly towards the set.

'Why aren't *you* in the movie?' quizzed Rayner.

'Oh,' said George quietly, 'I don't think I'm ready to be in front of a camera just yet. I've only been on stage once, and that was at school.'

'George wants to be a comedian,' added Charley.

'Plenty of great comedians are also actors,' said Rayner encouragingly, 'and it's never too soon to start. Maybe one day you could be like me – the biggest star on the planet!'

He turned to face the class again, then said, 'Although technically stars are in space, not on planets. Isn't that right, Miss Fairburn?'

Elise blushed a little. Rayner's audience was enthralled and so was George. Jack Rayner was indeed the biggest star on the planet (regardless of where a star should be found), and yet he had made the time to

visit the set of another movie. More than that, he had heard Charley's music, read about George, and even knew the name of one of the supporting characters.

'I heard there was a bit of an accident this morning,' continued Rayner to Charley. 'I just wanted to check you were all OK.'

'We're fine,' said Charley, 'but thank you.'

'Movie sets can be dangerous places,' said Rayner. 'I've got scars everywhere. That's what happens when you do your own stunts. Check this one out!'

Rayner lifted his shirt to reveal a huge scar across his rippling abs. George thought he saw Elise's knees buckle slightly.

'Well, I'm sure your director wants you all to get back to it,' said the megastar, 'so I won't hold you up any longer. But first –' Rayner left a dramatic pause – 'who wants a selfie?'

The set erupted into chaos. Every cast member left their position and ran to find their phone. Curtis realized no more work would be done that day and shouted, 'That's a wrap for the week, everyone! Enjoy your weekends – see you Monday!'

He stormed off set in what could only be described as 'a huff', saying loudly, 'This is what happens when you work with children.'