



*The  
Paradise Heights*

**CRAFT STORE  
STITCH-UP**

**KATE SOLLY**





# CHAPTER ONE

They were going to be on time today. Fleck just knew it. She finally had a system. Sam's school uniform and Norah's kinder clothes had been laid out the night before. They were both awake and eating breakfast. Sam's hair was brushed. Alice was also awake and painting herself with toast fingers in her highchair. Library bags were packed and she had even remembered to clean both the lunch boxes.

It was when she was tying Norah's hair into two neat plaits that things started to go wrong.

'I can't find my other shoe,' said Sam.

'I'm sure it's there. We laid it out, remember?'

'It's not here.'

'It's not a shoe.' This was Norah chiming in.

'Check under the couch.'

'Nope.'

'Are you sure it's not there? Did you check all around?'

'Yep.'

'It's not a shoe.' Norah again.

'Well, did you move it?'

‘Nope.’

‘Well, where can it be?’

‘Are you cross, Mummy?’

‘No. No, I’m not cross. I’m just confused. Why did the shoe decide to go off on a holiday by itself?’

‘You’re funny, Mummy.’

‘Okay, Norah, that’s your hair done. I’m going to put the lunches together. Sam, you keep looking for your shoe.’

*‘It’s not a shoe!’*

Fleck began loading the two lunch boxes with sandwiches and snacks. The fruit bowl was bare, despite having been full yesterday, but Fleck had a backup plan: she reached into the pantry, took out a Vita-Weat box and shook out two mandarins.

Norah’s eyes lit up at the sight of the two pieces of fruit. ‘I want a mandy!’

‘No, Norah. We need these for kinder and school. You can have one for your fruit break.’

‘I want a mandy NOW!’

‘These are the only ones left. They need to go in the lunch boxes.’

‘You go to the fruit shop.’

‘There’s no time. I’ll get some more later, but we have to go to school soon.’ Why was she having this conversation? Why was she negotiating fruit shortages with a three-year-old?

Alice, sitting happily in the highchair, made a noise that could only mean one thing.

‘Sounds like it’s nappy-change time for you, young lady!’

Fleck had just finished applying the nappy cream when she heard a colossal crash from the family room. She quickly placed Alice in the cot for safekeeping and rushed to the scene of the crime. It wasn’t as bad as it had sounded. Sam, while vigorously searching for his lost shoe, had

toppled a basket of clean washing over the floor. Matthew's business shirts and Alice's bunny-rugs lay unfurled across the floorboards. It was a mess, but that wasn't the main problem.

*'Norah!'*

A picture of innocence, the small child sat primly at the table in her favourite Batman t-shirt. She gazed back at her mother with her enormous brown eyes, blinked her impossibly long lashes and continued to clumsily peel one of the mandarins. 'I'm hungry,' she said, stone-faced.

'No.' Fleck lifted Norah out of her chair and placed her at her original place at the table in front of her half-finished breakfast. 'If you're hungry, you can finish your toast.'

'NOOOOOOO!' Norah stormed out of the room.

Fleck gazed forlornly at the half-peeled mandarin. There was already a small bite mark in one of the segments. Now what was she going to pack for fruit break? Did she have time to cut carrot sticks? Norah wouldn't eat them, but at least Fleck would look like she'd made an effort.

'Mummy!' Sam said. 'I still can't find my shoe! It isn't anywhere!'

Fleck opened the fridge and peered into the veggie drawer. 'Just keep looking.'

The carrots in the fridge were pretty sad. But what if she finished peeling the mandarin and broke it up? She could put the unbitten segments in one of those little containers from the plastics cupboard. Done!

She was on her hands and knees digging into the back of the cupboard when it struck her: things were a little too quiet. All she could hear was Alice babbling and giggling in the next room. Where was Norah?

'I can't go to school with no shoes on!' Sam stood in her path, bouncing from foot to foot.

Fleck stepped quickly around him. 'Hold on a minute.'

Norah and Alice were sitting side by side in Alice's cot. Alice's skin was white as snow. She gazed haughtily up at her mother like some tiny French aristocrat while Norah *continued to apply zinc cream to her chubby arms and legs*. Norah, meanwhile, had at some point liberated her plaits from their restraints. She doggedly persisted in her costume design pursuits beneath a frenzied halo of red hair.

'Norah!'

Norah shot her a defiant glare. 'Alice is Mr Freeze.'

Fleck cocked an eyebrow. 'Naughty step.'

They were already running behind. Three minutes on the naughty step for Norah would throw them out even more, but it had to be done.

Alice, who had been enjoying her stint as the Crown Prince of Chilblains, did not take kindly to the warm face washer. Fleck soon discovered that lotions designed to repel moisture were near impossible to wash off. It was 8.49am. Fleck hunted for a long-sleeved onesie in the laundry, the nappy bag and the upstairs chest of drawers, then zipped Alice's still mostly white limbs into it. Nobody needed to know.

Sam stood at the door, looking to be near tears. 'I don't have any more places to look. I can't find my shoe!'

Fleck looked at her son. Something clicked into place. 'It's not a shoe,' she murmured under her breath.

'What?'

'Hang on a minute, Sam.' With Alice on her hip, Fleck strode across to the step where Norah was perched. She crouched down to look her in the eye, ignoring the loud popping sound her left knee made.

'Norah, where is Sam's shoe?'

'You can't talk to me. I'm on the naughty step.'

'Is it not a shoe?'

'Not. A. Shoe,' Norah repeated emphatically.

‘Then what is it?’

‘Batmobile.’

‘Batmobile?’

Norah gave a firm nod. Fleck stood up and walked to the toy box. Inside it was Sam’s shoe. Inside Sam’s shoe was Batman, looking coolly impressed with himself in his new black leather vehicle.

It was 8.58am – well past time to go.



Technically, having a coffee at George’s Kitchen was supposed to be her reward for a successfully executed school run. Fleck often set up systems of reminders and rewards to coax her brain to focus on boring things. But it didn’t always work. On mornings like today, when they’d stumbled in after the bell with Sam before dropping Norah off late at kinder, her hair in a messy bun, Fleck still went to the cafe. The thing was, she *needed* the coffee more on the mornings when she’d failed. And it all came down to how she defined success, really. Were all three children alive? Yes? Were they naked? No? Job done. Strong latte, please.

George was busy with some takeaway orders as Fleck slipped into the cafe and set Alice’s capsule down at her favourite corner table. While she waited, she got out her exercise book, in which she’d been nutting out her morning routine. Fleck carried an exercise book around with her for to-do lists and meal plans and drafts of notes and random thoughts. She called it her ‘everything book’. She examined her nightly to-do list now. Having clothes laid out the night before had worked well, but next time she should put the shoes out of reach. And the zinc cream out of reach. And the rare lunch-box items out of reach.

George placed Fleck’s coffee on the table. ‘I’ve got one for you.’

‘Ooh! What is it?’

‘There are four countries in the world that have only one vowel. Can you name them all?’

‘Ooh, that’s a tough one,’ Fleck said. Then, ‘Chad!’

‘Chad is one. Can you name the rest?’

‘Give me a minute.’

She flipped the page over and started scratching out answers to the riddle. This was far more interesting than the morning routine. As she scoured her memory, made lists and turned the problem around in her head, she felt her brain slip into that sweet spot. This was a good puzzle.

If there was one thing that Fleck Parker loved, it was a puzzle to solve. She wasn’t fussy. Sometimes it was the codebreaker in the Sunday paper. Sometimes it was the Friday cryptic. Sometimes she even pulled out a maths textbook and brushed up on logarithmic functions. But it was never the word finds or sudokus, or the one where you had to guess the song from all the little sound bites. Okay, maybe she *was* fussy.

‘This is hard,’ Fleck announced. George had returned to the counter and was making his own morning coffee. ‘Niue has only four letters but three of them are vowels!’

‘Niue’s not a country!’

A new knot of patrons arrived. George always maintained that making himself a coffee was like a rain dance for attracting customers. As he took their orders, Fleck continued to play with the problem. She stayed away from South America. They all seemed to have vowel-heavy names. Was it some obscure Caribbean country like Saint Kitts and Nevis? She’d be in trouble if it was.

‘Egypt!’ Fleck exclaimed.

‘Egypt is another,’ George said as he passed a tray of takeaway cups to a portly man in a suit.

Alice stirred in her capsule but slept on. Fleck continued to

scribble in the margin of the page. ‘Does “Czech” count? As in “Czech Republic”?’

‘Have you ever heard anyone call that country “Czech” by itself? No. Czech Republic does not count. I think it’s Czechia now anyway.’

‘Ugh.’ This was hard. It was delicious, but it was hard. Of course, her phone was right there. She could easily just google a list of the world’s countries. But she didn’t want to. She knew she could solve this herself, even if it took some time. But she would take a break from it for now. She stored it carefully away in her mind to play with later. Then she grabbed the newspaper from another table.

This was definitely the best table in the small cafe. In this seat, with her back to the wall, Fleck could chat to George and easily look out both windows. On her right was busy Highett Road, with its trucks, buses and occasional tram, and straight ahead was the smaller Peppercorn Street – with its collection of shops, their racks out on the footpath – which real estate agents loved to describe as having a ‘village feel’.

Fleck flipped forward to the puzzles page of the paper. She snapped a photo of the crosswords and brainteasers to look at later. They weren’t the supreme Friday crossword, but they were still worth a look. Sometimes she would get obsessed with a particular type – acrostics or nonograms, say – and spend every spare moment on it until she had completely mastered the form, after which it was too easy and she became sick of it. Then she would abandon it entirely for a new obsession.

It was like her brain was constantly itching for the perfect problem to solve, when her brain clicked into rhythm. She became completely absorbed, investigating, turning things over. The perfect problem was rare, but it was *wonderful*.

She flipped back to the front of the paper and started reading the news. The second wave of takeaway orders dwindled away. Fleck was now the only customer in the cafe.

‘Quiz?’ George called.

‘Quiz!’ Fleck rifled through the pages to find today’s twenty-five questions.

Doing the quiz was another rain dance for making customers arrive, but today they managed to make it through the one-point and two-point sections without interruption. Fleck was preparing to read out the first of the three-point questions (‘Which Australian capital city was once known as Palmerston?’) when George narrowed his eyes and squinted across the road – the big road, that was – at the new cafe.

‘What is their story?’ he muttered. He strode out from behind the counter to get a better look through the window. Fleck followed his gaze.

‘Five staff on and zero customers. Look: there are five! And they’ve had a full roster since seven! Who puts all their staff on that early? I do not understand their logic.’

It was true. The cafe across Highett Road was bustling, but not with customers. Staff in aprons straightened signs, dusted counters and paced around empty tables. Meanwhile, Fleck knew the answer to the question. It was Darwin.

George shook his head slowly. ‘They are a textbook case on how not to run a cafe. I really feel like I should go over and give them some advice. And they should have gone with a different name. “Espresso 312”? Not very creative!’

‘Well, the other cafe is *too* creative.’ Fleck gestured at the large cafe on the other side of Peppercorn Street. ‘It’s like they went through a multi-step process to arrive at “dangermouse”. Step one – find an obscure nostalgic reference. Step two – make it all one word. Step three – remove any capital letters. Step four – open your brand-new edgy cafe.’

George chuckled and shook his head. ‘Yes, because opening a cafe is

definitely that simple. I'm going to think up some new names for them. Stay tuned.' He walked back to take a tray of croissants off the counter and slotted them into the display fridge. He shot another look at the cafe across the road as he straightened. 'But look at them! I definitely want to give those new guys some advice. It's driving me crazy watching them make such simple mistakes.'

Fleck laughed. 'Don't give them advice! They're the competition! You're too nice, George.' Palmerston changed its name to Darwin in – when was it? 1911? 1912? – after Federation, anyway. It was when the Northern Territory was transferred to the Commonwealth. Before that, it was all part of South Australia. They needed to get back to the quiz so that she could show off.

George smiled. 'I'm not stressed about their competition just yet. Yesterday they didn't open until ten. And they left their deliveries just sitting there on the doorstep for almost an hour! That's very unprofessional.'

George put his hands on his hips. He was a large man with a neatly trimmed beard. His black hair was not yet turning grey, even though he must have been in his fifties. 'You'd think, with that many people on, they could get someone to fix that graffiti. That's been there all week!' He gestured to the side of the cafe where a large tag in a dull purple scrawl defaced the bricks. 'I'm going to call the council on them. You can't leave graffiti up. You have to nip it in the butt.'

*Bud*, Fleck thought. *You nip things in the bud. Like flowers on a basil plant.* Fleck only ever corrected people's grammar in her mind. This was the best policy for maintaining friendships. Anyway, 'nip in the butt' was funnier. She pictured George in his apron, with massive lobster claws instead of arms, chasing a hapless graffiti artist who was covering his backside in fear.

The bell jangled. More customers! Fleck sighed. No more quiz

today. At least they'd made it through most of the questions. Plus, it was time she got going. She packed up her things and carried her cup over to the counter. George rang up her purchase.

Fleck tapped her card on the side of the reader. It beeped. 'Cyprus!' she exclaimed.

George beamed. 'Cyprus,' he confirmed. 'I'll see you soon.'