

Chapter One

Alan Little stood at the edge of the shadows, looking at the brightly lit stage that stretched across the far wall of the TV studio. He ran through his lines in his head one more time, glancing down at his script to make sure he had everything right. Out on the set, his fellow cast members, Charlotte Rakowski and Brenda Sims, had taken their places in the middle of the stage, ready to begin their scene.

“Rolling in eight!” shouted Robert, their studio manager. Alan looked over and saw the large friendly man step up between the cameras, the silver and gray of his headset standing out against his dark brown face and black hair. “In six!” he continued. As the count progressed, he held up his hand and ticked off the numbers with his fingers, pointing over to the girls when he reached zero.

It was all part of a routine that Alan knew well. All part of another day on the set of *What Do You Think You’re Doing?*, the television show they made together. Alan had been a cast member for almost four years, and at age fifteen - well, *almost* fifteen - he was now the oldest boy. It was a modest little comedy show, one that appeared on one of the lesser known cable networks. In fact, the cable company in their Ohio hometown didn’t even carry it, so their show only appeared locally when the TV station where they worked ran it early on Sunday mornings. With that little exposure, working on the show didn’t bring the cast members any kind of special treatment or glamorous lifestyles, but it still beat any

other part-time job Alan could wish for. Besides, he could always hope that someday it would lead him to bigger and better things.

As Alan waited for his cue, he saw Paul Morris walk into view from the other side of the stage. Paul was a veteran actor who played all the adult male characters on the show – as well as one or two of the female characters. He had spent many years in Hollywood, even appearing in a few big-budget movies, but had then returned to Ohio to enjoy what he called a partial retirement. Alan liked Paul and was glad to have such an experienced actor to learn from, but he couldn't understand why anyone would leave a Hollywood career. He was sure that *he* would never walk away from the big time once he finally made it.

He was never going to make the big time, though, if he didn't keep his mind on his current job. The scene had gone on while his thoughts were distracting him, and now it was almost time for him to go onstage. He glanced down at the script again to make sure he knew what his cue was.

“Charlie, you've got to get with the program,” Paul was saying. He was playing the part of the show's producer, a character that was modeled after their real producer, and he spoke with an exaggerated version of their producer's New York accent. “It's time to renegotiate our contract with the network, so we've got to make it look like we need more money. Everything's got to look cheap.”

“You mean cheaper than usual?” Charlotte asked.

Paul gave his best producer's scowl. "You know what I'm talking about," he said. "Just make it look like we've had to cut back on expenses. Maybe you could act like we had to stop bringing in a studio audience to watch the show."

"We never had a studio audience to begin with!" said Charlotte. Alan looked over at the TV monitor in time to see a shot of the stage sitting in the empty studio. The fact that they were only pretending to perform for a live audience was a gag they used frequently.

"Yeah!" Brenda chipped in. Alan smiled, knowing from the script that it was time for one of Brenda's trademark rambling speeches. "You don't know how hard it is to come in here and imagine a studio audience every week," she continued. "I mean, I have to pretend that my mom's here, and my dad's here, and my aunt and uncle from Cleveland, and all the neighbors on my street, except not those bratty kids who live down on the corner, because there's no way I would ever want them to see me..."

"I think we get the idea, Brenda," said Charlotte, cutting Brenda off.

"Well, if now we're pretending we *don't* have an audience," Brenda asked, "what are all those people supposed to do?"

That was Alan's cue. He tossed his script aside and hurried onto the set, just as the scene required. Unfortunately, his big entrance went wrong almost

immediately. The end of his foot caught on the step leading up to the stage, and he tumbled into the scene instead of running into it.

“Cut!” yelled Robert. “Alan, are you all right?” He stepped onto the stage and reached Alan’s side just as Alan was sitting up. “Man, you’ve got to watch that step there.”

“I’m okay,” said Alan, trying to laugh off the accident. “The stage attacked me,” he added with a smile.

“Oh, sure,” Charlotte teased. “We all know you just wanted to make a bigger entrance.”

“Did it work?” Alan joked in reply.

“Keep it up and you’ll be the star of the blooper reel this year,” said Brenda.

“Cool!” said Alan. “I can’t wait.”

“If everything’s okay here,” said Robert, “the control room would like to try that again. Can y’all get back to your places?”

Alan scrambled to his feet and went back offstage. It wasn’t the best start to his workday, but at least he’d been able to joke about it. Tripping and stumbling had become a regular part of his life over the past few months, ever since his feet went through a sudden growth spurt. He still wasn’t used to them being as long as they were, which meant he often forgot to lift them up high enough to make it over things. Supposedly the rest of his body would catch up and he’d get used to his

new proportions, but he had no idea how long that would take. If he was still having trouble by the time he became a big Hollywood star, maybe he could persuade his production crews to design sets that he wouldn't trip over. As he waited for his cue again, he made a mental note to look into that idea when the time came.

By the time Sydney Myerson-Walsh was due at the studio, the morning shoot on the main stage was over. The stagehands were busy preparing the school cafeteria set for the afternoon. Sydney arrived from the makeup room just in time to see the crew bringing out several large buckets and pouring their disgusting contents into the troughs along the cafeteria line. By the end of the day, most of the cast would be doused, sprayed or otherwise covered with one or more of the concoctions in the course of their scenes. It was one of the show's most popular gags. Sydney had been horrified before her first cafeteria scene three years earlier, and she still didn't like them. The stuff always smelled terrible, and it usually left little crumbs in her hair no matter how hard she tried to wash them out. At least they were paid extra for days when they were glopped, although in Sydney's eyes that didn't do much to make up for the experience.

Robert the studio manager looked up as Sydney reached the set. "Hey, girlfriend!" he called out in his usual friendly tone.

“Hey, Robert!” she replied cheerfully. “Everything going okay today?”

“Aw, you kids always give me trouble, but I’m keeping everybody in line,” said Robert, winking at her as he did. “You know, my wife was asking about you again the other day. She was saying, ‘When is that pretty little girl you work with going to come in and let me braid her hair?’”

Sydney smiled. Robert’s wife was a hairdresser who specialized in styles for African-American women. According to Robert, she had been talking about braiding Sydney’s hair since they met at the last Christmas party. Sydney liked the idea - she had toyed with the notion of having braids or even dreadlocks from time to time - but the realities of her job stood in the way. “You know the answer to that,” she told Robert. “I’ll do it once I’m not getting food thrown at me all the time.” Maintaining her plain relaxed hairstyle was difficult enough already.

Robert looked at the list on his clipboard and shook his head. “I don’t see that happening any time soon,” he replied. “I’ll just have to tell her you’re making a sacrifice in the name of art.”

Sydney smiled again, but before she could say anything more, she was interrupted by a series of loud screeches. She turned and saw Benito, one of the stagehands, come running up to the set. Slung over Benito’s shoulder in a fireman’s carry was Danny Hoffman, one of Sydney’s fellow cast members. No,

wait. It was *Daniel Hoffman*, as he'd announced loudly to everyone at the last script read-through.

“Put me down!” Daniel shouted, pounding his arms against Benito's back. His face was almost red enough to hide the freckles that covered it. Obviously, the two were enjoying themselves. It was a game they played regularly.

“I told you,” said Benito, “we have to test the stew and make sure it's slimy enough. I figure we can just dunk your head in there...”

“Noooo!” Daniel shouted, his cry quickly turning to laughter. He thumped on Benito's back a few more times before the burly stagehand put him down.

Sydney turned away, not wanting the others to see her grin. Sometimes it was hard to believe Daniel was almost the same age that she was, and not just because he was short for a thirteen-year-old. She didn't want to encourage any more of his hijinks by letting him know they amused her.

“Hey Daniel,” said Robert. “What'd you do with the twins?”

“We're over here!” shouted another voice. Sydney looked over and saw “the twins,” Jason Marlow and Jason Chang, walking toward her. They weren't really twins, of course. Everyone called them that because they were both named Jason and because they looked completely different. The joke seemed to have taken on a life of its own around the set. First Jason Chang went through a growth spurt that had put him a head taller than Jason Marlow. Then more recently he

became the victim of his older sister's failed hair dye experiment, which had turned his normally straight black hair a rusty orange, much closer to Jason Marlow's red hair. Naturally, there had been plenty of jokes about it written into the show.

Following behind the two Jasons was the newest member of the cast, eleven-year-old Mary Donohue. Emma Grainger, the actress who played most of the adult female characters on the show, arrived on the set last, since it had taken her a while to change into her comically severe Lunch Lady costume. According to the shooting script, Charlotte and Alan would be arriving later, although neither of them would have any food thrown at them. Being an older member of the cast had its advantages.

“All right, people!” said Robert. “We've got a full schedule this afternoon, so let's get started!”

The studio door opened again as Jana the wardrobe coordinator and Jennifer the makeup artist walked in. They were both carrying large stacks of towels. Sydney sighed and glanced through her script again. It looked like she had a long afternoon ahead.

Jason Marlow slipped into the lounge next to the dressing rooms. He was waiting to see if the other boys wanted to go hang out somewhere, but Daniel was

busy chasing people around and attacking them with the bits of food that he pulled out of his hair. Making a retreat until the game was over seemed like a sensible idea.

Charlotte and Brenda were already in the lounge, trying to decide whether they wanted to do anything that night. It was always a bit of a surprise to see the two girls after a full day on the set. When they were performing, it was easy to forget that both girls were several years older than he was. Once the day was over, they quickly returned to looking more their real ages. Charlotte covered her youthful elf-like face with a pair of stylishly old-fashioned glasses and jewelry that went into piercings she had through her right eyebrow and the left side of her nose. Brenda had shed the makeup and fancy clothes her onstage alter ego always wore, preferring a pair of worn jeans and a t-shirt with a picture of some famous old writer on it.

Before Jason could even make it over to a chair, he heard a voice with a familiar New York accent behind him. “So, I hope you all survived without me today.”

Jason turned and smiled as their producer, Owen Pernell, walked into the lounge. Normally, Owen was on the set whenever they were, watching the scenes as they were taped and talking to the kids when the cameras weren’t rolling. This day, however, he had been missing. It was good to see him at last.

“Hey, Owen!” said Charlotte. “Where have you been?”

“Busy, I’m afraid,” Owen replied. He ran a hand through his graying hair.

“Are the rest of the kids still here?”

“I think so,” said Brenda.

“If Daniel hasn’t chased them away yet,” Jason added.

At that moment, Ruth Liebman, their director, popped her head through the lounge doorway. “Are they still here, Owen?” she asked.

“I think they’re all still in the dressing rooms,” Owen told her. “Could you run back there and hurry them up? They’ve got to get with the program.”

Ruth nodded and left quickly. Jason didn’t like the grim look on her face or the tension in Owen’s voice.

“Is there something wrong?” Brenda asked. Apparently Jason wasn’t the only one who had noticed the signs of trouble.

Owen turned back to them and frowned for a moment before answering. “I suppose I can tell you first,” he replied. “The reason you didn’t see me is that I’ve been on the phone with the network the whole time.”

“Is there something wrong with the shows we just did?” Charlotte asked. In the past, the network had sometimes asked them to change a scene or two in an episode. Owen had never looked this serious when that had happened before, though. Jason had a sinking feeling this was worse.

“No, no, the last shows were fine,” Owen assured them. “There’s a problem at the network. They’ve just had a management change, and the new vice president of programming wants to review their entire lineup. He’s put a freeze on all acquisitions until that’s done.”

“What does that mean?” Jason asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“It means,” said Owen, “that after we finish the shows we’re working on, we won’t be making any more. Not for a while, at least. Maybe not ever.”