



A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

I love a clever mystery, one with real clues that readers can try and puzzle out too. And I also love our cool and sparky sleuthing companion, Alice Jones! Admittedly her annoying sidekick, Kevin, is back for another adventure too – but that just adds to the fun. Thanks, Sarah Rubin: I never guessed the solution – again!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham', with a stylized, flowing script.

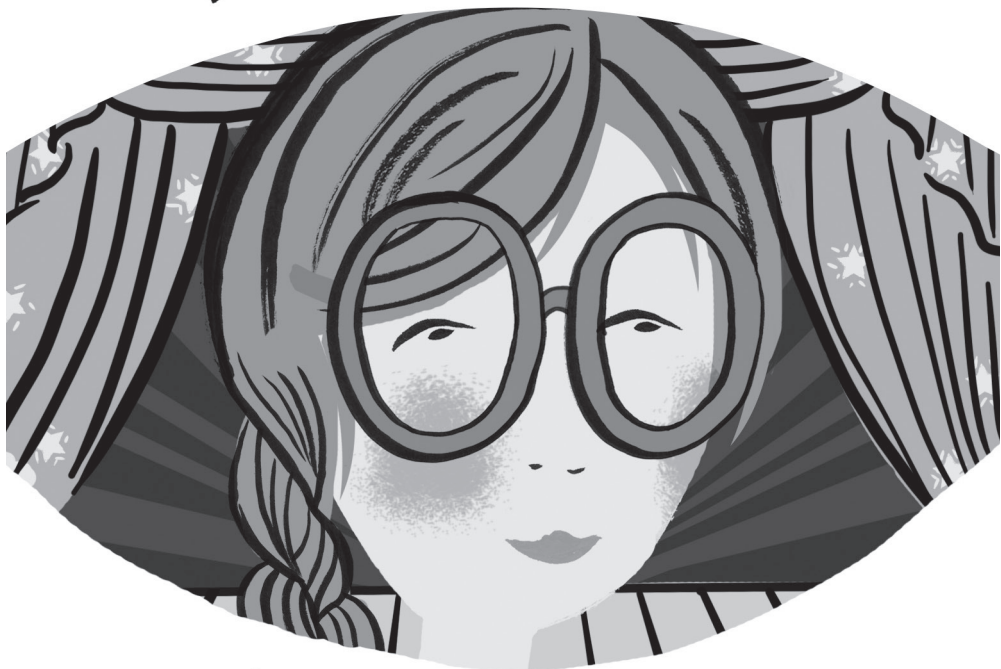
BARRY CUNNINGHAM

Publisher

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Alice Jones

THE GHOST LIGHT



S A R A H R U B I N

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*For Mark Puglisi, Dan Mills, Frank Bachman
and Casey Rush – four fabulous directors
who inspired my love of theatre.*

CHAPTER



'I can't believe this is really happening. I'm going to meet Matthew Strange,' Kevin said for the tenth time in as many minutes.

'Yep,' I said, again.

We were sitting in the empty auditorium of the Beryl Theatre watching rehearsals for *The Curse of the Casterfields*. My twin sister Della stood onstage in an old-fashioned maid's uniform helping her co-star Vivian pretend to get dressed for a ball. Della and my mom had both come up to Philly from New York to put on the play and save the Beryl, and now that it was February break they'd roped me into helping too.

'How can you not be more excited? Matthew Strange is in a show with your sister. *The Matthew Strange*. Agent Zero. Jordan Severe. He's only the best action star ever.

And we get to meet him.’ Kevin’s voice rose to an excited squeak.

‘I thought you said you were going to be cool?’

‘I’m cool,’ Kevin said quickly.

I turned and stared at him with both my eyebrows raised.

He flashed me his most angelic smile. ‘I’m the coolest person you know.’

I snorted and started to reply, but the show’s director turned in his seat and glared at me, as if I’d been the one making all the noise. Frank Vallance wore his scowl the way he wore his scarf, with flair. I glanced at Kevin but he was doing his best impression of cherubic innocence. There was no point blaming anything on him.

I shrank down in my seat and closed my mouth. Frank held the glare for a minute, making sure I’d learnt my lesson. Then he gave a satisfied nod and turned back to watching the rehearsal.

‘You always get me in trouble,’ I whispered.

‘Shhh,’ Kevin said, halo still firmly in place. ‘I’m trying to watch the show.’

The set reminded me of an old-style doll’s house, the kind where the front swung open revealing a cross section of the house inside. Each ‘room’ was separated by a thin partition of wood and some clever lighting. Downstairs, a large entry hall and study. Upstairs, a bedroom and balcony. A staircase painted to look like mahogany

connected the two levels.

‘No,’ Vivian Rollins – the show’s leading lady – enunciated, holding up her hand as Della offered her a string of pearls. ‘Tonight I will wear diamonds.’

Della’s eyes went wide as she played her part. ‘Diamonds? But, my lady, what of the curse?’

Vivian sniffed and tossed her hair. ‘I am the daughter of Lord Casterfield. I will not be cowed by such foolishness.’

I rolled my eyes. *The Curse* was over-dramatic even by theatre standards.

Della gave a small curtsy and took the pearls to a safe that stood next to the bed like a night table. She mimed turning a dial and pulled the door open. It stuck slightly, but Della didn’t let it show on her face. My sister is a total pro. Then she put the pearls inside and pulled out a large diamond necklace.

‘Check out that rock.’ Kevin half whistled at the sight of it. ‘How much do you think that would be worth?’

‘It isn’t real,’ I said.

‘But what if it was?’

Frank glared at us again and I snapped my mouth shut.

Della fastened the necklace around Vivian’s neck, careful not to block the audience’s view.

Then there was silence. A long, awkward silence.

‘That was your cue, Matthew,’ Frank said, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

The upstage left door popped open and Matthew

Strange stuck his head through the gap. 'Sorry, sorry. Was I late?'

'Matthew, are you sure you don't want someone backstage to cue you in? Pete would be more than happy to—'

'No, no. I'm just a cast member like everyone else. I don't need any special treatment.' Matthew flashed his trademark smile, so white it was almost blinding. 'Just one more take. I'll get it.'

Della and Vivian traded concerned looks and Frank made a face like he'd swallowed a lemon. I wondered if Matthew Strange realized he wouldn't get any do-overs on opening night. Kevin just sat there, grinning.

'All right,' said Frank wearily. 'Let's take it again from the pearls.'

Matthew waved happily at Frank and then caught sight of me in the audience. 'Annie!' he called. 'Be a dear and get me an apple water. I'm parched.'

He didn't wait for a response, just ducked through the door and shut it behind him. I sank a little lower in my seat.

The actors went back to their places, and played the scene again. Della offered the pearls and Vivian demanded the diamonds instead. This time, Matthew made his cue, coming in through the front door of the set as Della did her bit with the safe. Or she tried to, but the door was sticking again. Frank scribbled a note, probably a reminder to get Pete – the Beryl's stage manager – to oil

the door.

'Woah, Numbers.' Kevin stared at me, his eyes wide. 'Matthew Strange just *spoke* to you.'

'Did he?' I asked. The last time I checked my name was Alice, not Annie.

'Well, aren't you going to get him his drink?'

I snorted. If Matthew Strange thought I was there to be his personal assistant, he had another thing coming. Besides, if I got the water now, it would be warm by the time they stopped rehearsing. Matthew Strange preferred his apple water chilled.

'What's apple water, anyway?'

I turned to tell Kevin to keep quiet, and that's when Della screamed.

'Look out!'

It wasn't the scream so much as my sister breaking character that made my blood run cold. She'd only do that for a life-or-death emergency.

Matthew Strange dived to the side like a hero in one of his action movies. Time slowed and I watched open-mouthed as the fake wooden safe came loose, tipping over the edge of the set and hurtling down.

The safe missed the movie star's head by centimetres and slammed into his shoulder, driving him into the floor with a sickening thud. Della stood on the edge of the set above him, her face completely bloodless, her hand raised as if she was still holding on to the safe's door.

'Come on,' I said to Kevin, as I jumped over the seat in front of me and ran around the edge of the orchestra pit. Using my hand as a lever, I swung myself on to the stage, and then hauled Kevin up after me. Frank was just a few steps behind us and I helped him up too.

'Matthew! Matthew!' Vivian wailed above us.

Pearls littered the stage and I almost slipped trying to get to where Matthew lay in a heap on the floor. I skidded and came to a stop by his head, my heart thudding with relief when I saw he was still breathing.

Up close Matthew Strange was just as handsome as he looked onscreen. It was eerie, like he was too perfect to be real. As I watched, though, an unhealthy greyness dulled his dark skin. That must have been the pain. His right arm bent out from his shoulder at an angle that made my stomach turn.

Kevin knelt beside Matthew Strange, his star-struck expression replaced with one of calm assessment. Matthew's eyes flashed open and he tried to sit up, yelping with pain.

'My face,' he cried. 'Is my face OK?'

Kevin pushed him back gently.

'What do you think you're doing?' Frank snapped.

'It's OK,' I said. 'His mom's an ER nurse. He knows what he's doing.'

Frank glared at me again, but there wasn't much force to it. 'Fine. Don't let him move. I'll go call 911. And Linda.'

Frank shuddered. I didn't blame him. Linda Beharry was the president of the Save the Beryl campaign. She would *not* be happy if Matthew Strange was seriously injured. He was the show's biggest draw.

'This is just perfect,' Frank groaned as he strode offstage. 'Losing an actor during tech week. As if things weren't bad enough already.'

On the level above us, Vivian was still wailing like a banshee, her screams getting louder the longer no one asked her what was wrong. She hadn't been anywhere near the safe, though, so I wasn't worried about her. Della, on the other hand, had.

'You got this?' I asked Kevin.

He looked up at me and nodded once. He was already pulling off his flannel shirt to make a sling for Matthew's injured arm. Matthew didn't move, just lay there gingerly exploring his face with his uninjured hand, searching for any injury to his striking good looks.

I took the steps two at a time. They were more rickety than they looked. Pete's paint job added depth and shadow and made them look solid from the audience, but they were really just flimsy plywood slats that bounced slightly underfoot.

'Della,' I said once I got to the top. 'You OK?'

That was the last straw for Vivian. She screamed one more time, and then fainted, coincidentally landing across the bed. I ignored her.