

LET'S GO, GIRLS

‘Crap! I totally forgot to pack sun cream!’ My best friend Holly panics through a mouthful of Cool Original Doritos, sunglasses sliding down her nose.

I squint at the gloomy clouds through the window of the train and wave goodbye to stinky old Greysworth, which is shrinking further and further into the distance.

‘Holly. Look around. It’s October. I don’t think you’ll need your factor fifty.’

‘It’s not a real holiday without the *smell* of sunblock though, is it?!’

‘Well . . . we could just pretend that we’re on some chic city break. And that we’ve packed trunks filled with vintage fur coats and Dr Zhivago hats . . .’ I glaze over, imagining that the rows of patio gardens and abandoned trampolines whizzing by are actually snow-covered pine trees.

I mean, really, it's not like we're about to catch a plane to some wild bender in Magaluf or set sail on a once-in-a-lifetime, all-expenses-paid trip around the Caribbean, like the ones you can win on daytime telly competitions.

Nope.

It's way cooler than that.

Me and Holly have blagged ourselves half term at the Skegton-On-Sea Book Festival!

It's one of the biggest book festivals in the country; authors and journalists and TV presenters flock from all over to be there. Tickets *always* sell out within the first hour of going on sale because the festival has such high-profile guests.

I found that out the hard way, staring in disbelief as the SOLD OUT message flashed on my phone screen in the middle of a French lesson.

'*Ça va, Paige?*' Monique, the class *assistante*, asked as she knelt beside the bubble-gum encrusted desk, watching me groan in despair. I mean, it was all *her* fault. If she hadn't picked on me to join her in some cringey role play *à la pharmacie*, then I'd have snagged tickets for me and Holly before it was too late, rather than wasted precious moments of my life making up a French word for Strepsils. (Turns out it's just *strepsiles*, by the way.)

We had been so prepared. The events programme had been announced weeks ahead of tickets going on sale and as soon as we heard that our all-time favourite (and most dreamy) hot shot author-illustrator, Johnny Hoxton, was flying in to do a talk and promote his brand new book, we knew we had to be there – front and centre.

Tickets for the whole week cost one hundred pounds. That's right, one *hundred* pounds. One hundred and *one pound fifty* if you count the booking fee. Think of the millions of Freddo Frogs and penny sweets you could blow that on.

We both work part-time at Bennett's Bookshop, and signed up for all the extra hours we could get just so we had enough money for those tickets. We unpacked crates of heavy new books before college. We vacuumed the shop after the last dawdlers had left the building and we even missed Gracie Partridge's rainy birthday BBQ just so that we earned double pay on the bank holiday weekend. But all for nothing.

After we lost out on tickets, we were gutted for approximately an hour and a half, until lunch break that same day. But as we slumped on blue wheelie chairs in the common room, I had an idea.

'We *will* get there, Holly.'

‘How do you mean?’ She gasped as she burned the roof of her mouth on a baked-bean panini (one of our school canteen’s delicacies).

‘Think about it: we are Bookshop Girls! Books are what we *do*! If we can’t get into the festival as fans, then we’ll get in there as *booksellers*. As industry *insiders*.’

She nodded, eyes wide and cheeks stuffed like a hamster, before swallowing a hot lump of cheesy beans dramatically. ‘Maybe Tony knows somebody at the festival who could sort us out . . .’

It turned out that our grumpy bookshop boss *did* know the woman who coordinates SBF (as those in the know call it). They ‘went way back’ according to Tony, who shifted uncomfortably and adjusted his glasses as we begged him to put our names forward. He *ummed* and *ahhed* at first. Warned us that it’s a lot of hard work. Really full on. It’s not like Greysworth. He said he wasn’t sure it was a good idea, seeing as both of us are still under eighteen. There might not be someone on hand to supervise us. He didn’t know if we’d cope.

I reminded him that we’re beyond capable and very mature for our age *and* that I was told by my orthodontist that I only have to wear my retainer three nights a

week, which technically makes me a WOMAN, and he squirmed and said he'd see what he could do and the rest is history.

We'll be manning a bookstall, selling the relevant novels to festival bookworms and setting up stock to be signed by big-shot writers. It's basically like we're being PAID to go on a BFF HOL and SELL A FEW BOOKS! GET IN!

We've never actually been on holiday together before. Well, not if you don't count the residential trip to Milton Keynes Outdoor Adventure Centre in Year Six. That was different. We didn't really *want* to spend a week building rafts while teachers wore jeans and hoodies, masquerading as Normal Human Beings. What's so great about building a *raft* anyway? This will be way better. Our first holiday. Just the two of us. Not a sick bucket in sight.

'I wonder what our festival boss will be like . . .' Holly opens another bag of train sweets.

'Tony didn't give much away. Let's just hope she loves spontaneous karaoke without the actual backing tracks and celeb spotting as much as we do.'

'Oh, I have something for you to add to The List,' my partner in crime announces, making grabby movements with her fingers for me to pass her my sketchbook.

I pop the clasp on my new-old suitcase.

I bought it in a charity shop especially for this holiday. It's a vintage powder blue hat box with a rubber handle. I cleaned the outside of it with a face wipe. The inside is made of fabric so there wasn't much I could do there but spritz a bit of perfume around and hope it didn't make my clothes smell like the manky old cuddly toys in Save the Children.

My sketchbook is squashed inside the case. It's not a coursework book for school. It's a moleskine one. A5 size. Dog eared. And it's filled with scribbles and notes. It's got a few bits of life drawing from the Posers class we go to, but mostly, really, it's a bit like a diary, but with more pictures than words. I draw customers from Bennett's. I draw wiggly outlines of what I imagine fictional characters from books to look like. It's got clippings from magazines and newspapers and quotes that I like and there are things like sketches of my brother, Elliot, when he'd fallen asleep in front of the telly.

It's the closest thing I have to a diary. I tried writing diaries when I was younger but would lose interest after a couple of days. It's safe to say there wasn't much going on in my life besides winning the occasional raffle in assembly. (The prize was a bumper pack of multi-coloured Sharpies,

so I'm not knocking that at all.) If I was still in Year Six this sketchbook would have a little padlock on it to keep it secret. I don't really show it to anyone. Only Holly is allowed to see inside and, well, that's mainly because she just brazenly walked into my bedroom, opened it up and helped herself to my private thoughts. It's too late to keep anything from her now.

The List is scrawled inside. Holly's tongue juts out in concentration as she adds to The List with a Bennett's Bookshop Biro.

Find out if Tony and our festival boss were romantically involved.

Ew. My best friend is such a creep sometimes. One of the many reasons we're inseparable.

The rest of The List is things we want to see/eat/Instagram while we're on this holiday. It is constantly edited and expanded. What started off as a fun to-do has turned into this huge epic saga.

Here's a few things we've included so far:

Get as many selfies with famous people in the background as poss.

Target: At LEAST 20.

Win the jackpot on the 2p machines.

Self-explanatory really. It's a seaside town. Surely there will be amusements. Surely *somebody* has to win on those penny pushers. Right?

Sample chips from every chippie in town.

Rate them out of ten. We are chip connoisseurs. We KNOW the best chippie in Greysworth is Billy's Fish Bar on the market square. Now that we're exploring a new town, and a seaside town at that, we must find the finest chips. Judged on saltiness, sogginess, tastiness. We'll find the best in Skegton.

Learn to love mushy peas.

This is Holly's entry and she refuses to remove it from the list despite the fact that I've told her NO ten thousand times. No way. I'm not on board with that. Way too green and way too gross.

Smash the patriarchy.

This is just on my daily to-do list so it should go without saying but it feels good to tick something you know you'll do anyway. Like *get up* or *brush teeth*. Zero tolerance for crusty male privilege? Tick.

We take it in turns to play *Guess What Song I'm Lip Syncing To* and Holly wins because I can't resist doing Britney every time and as everybody knows it's scientifically impossible to do Britney without the head movements. She fist-clenches along to some mystery power ballad as I pull her headphones out.

'We are now approaching Skegton-On-Sea. Doors will open on the left-hand side. Please ensure you collect all of your belongings before leaving the train.'

'We're here!' I jump out of my seat and we frantically shove the evidence of our chocolate feast into the little flappy bin.

We stretch our legs on the platform and take it all in. It feels like we've just walked onto the set of *The Railway Children*. It's so quaint and old-fashioned. The only clue that we're not actually about to run along the tracks with Bobby, Phyllis and Peter is the big orange vending machine and the discarded McDonald's paper bag that glides along in the breeze.

'Breathe! Breathe it in!' Holly inhales dramatically. 'That seaside air!'

I copy her. I close my eyes and let the cold wind batter my cheeks. Picture myself as a Disney mermaid, all scales

and shell-boobs, washed up on a big rock and doing the best hair flick of all time.

‘Right. Yes. Yeah. Thirty crates should be arriving later today. We need access to the cafe tent . . .’ A woman speaks into a phone and walks straight towards us.

Holly looks at me for an explanation and I shrug.

Still fully involved with the convo on her phone, this woman stops before us, flashes a smile and holds out her hand, as if for me to shake.

‘Right, okay, thank you. Do not be late.’ She ends the call and grabs my hand. ‘I’m Penny. Head of Ops at Skegton Book Fest. I take it you’re Paige and Holly from Bennett’s Bookshop in Greysworth?’

She talks without breathing and it throws me. I stumble over my words. ‘Yes. Oh hi. Yes, I’m Paige.’

‘And I’m Holly. Thanks for having us.’

‘Not at all. Thanks for helping out.’

This is when I notice that she has one of those earpiece thingies in her ear. It’s attached to a microphone that clips around her neck, like she’s performing at the Brit Awards or something.

‘There is so much to do. Follow me, this way, I’ll show you to your accommodation.’

So *she’s* our festival boss.

‘She doesn’t strike me as someone who’ll be up for karaoke with us, Hol,’ I whisper.

‘Well, that hands-free mic begs to differ! It’s official: I’m making it my mission to have a go on that thing before we’re back at this station.’

I snort and double step to keep up, lugging my hat box after me.

SEA VIEW LODGE

The festival is happening in the grounds of this really grand hotel called . . . The Grand Hotel. We checked it out on Google. It looks out onto the seafront and has big fancy gardens with coiffed hedges and stone statues of women with ice-cream-scoop boobs. It's the kind of place a girl on *Don't Tell the Bride* would dream of tying the knot, despite the fact that her groom will inevitably plan to do the deed underwater in some grotty leisure-centre pool.

We won't be staying there. The budget didn't stretch that far, so our accommodation is apparently just a black pudding's throw from where we'll be working.

While Penny marches at least ten paces ahead of us and sighs, explaining that 'We neeeeeeed at least twice the number of chairs,' to some poor idiot on the phone, we

anticipate what the Sea View Lodge holds in store for us.

‘Maybe it’ll be some hip minimalist Airbnb with Scandinavian furniture and a host called Claus . . .’ I suggest.

‘Yes! He’ll wear a jumper slung over his shoulders and drink tiny espressos!’

As dark clouds loom above, we get our first real glimpse of Skegton-On-Sea. We pass a couple of decent-looking charity shops, a chippie that smells like HEAVEN and about twelve different tattoo and piercing studios.

Holly squeezes my arm and even though she’s still wearing sunglasses I know that her eyes are bulging with excitement. ‘*Matching tattoos!*’ she hisses.

I laugh it off, already dreading the thought of needles and appearing on some future late-night TV show about inky regrets.

‘Look, Hol! It’s the sea! *The sea!*’ I squeal. Icy, choppy evidence that we’re miles away from crappy old Greysworth.

‘The sea.’ Holly takes a deep breath. ‘Watery home to old nappies, empty cans of Fanta . . . and the necklace from *Titanic* . . .’ She sighs. ‘Ain’t she a beaut!’

Penny has her call on speaker phone and holds it to her mouth. She makes demands in very clipped sentences.

‘Deliveries at the back. Three pallets by two thirty AT THE VERY LATEST. All trestle tables out of storage asap.’ She looks like those contestants on *The Apprentice* who never hold a phone to their ear like normal people. I tried it once – the speakerphone, limp wrist, casual chat thing. Backfired. My mum asked if my tummy was feeling better or if things were still ‘explosive’ at the precise moment that a group of sixth-formers joined me in the bus shelter.

As Holly and I take our billionth selfie of the day – this one different to all the others because SEA – I hear Penny wrap up her phone call.

‘This is it, girls. Here we are.’

Penny’s hair is short and grey. It picks up in the sea breeze and stands on end. She frown-smiles. Y’know a frown-smile; it’s the kind that you usually only see from PE teachers or dinner ladies. I silently pray that Penny doesn’t prove to be as sadistic as one of those pole-vaulting, cauliflower-cheese-vending monsters. She leads us up a gravel path towards Sea View Lodge.

Not a Claus or a tiny coffee in sight.

It smells like air fresheners and has clashing floral wallpaper and carpets. I’m going to Instagram the *mothballs* out of this place.

Holly and I are sharing a twin room. Chintzy, floral bedspreads and a vase of artificial flowers. There's an en-suite and a wall-mounted telly. The height of sophistication. We've got a mini bar containing one tepid can of Pepsi. Oh, and a tiny mirror with a handy plug for straighteners and a pine desk with Sea View Lodge stationery in the top drawer.

Our room is at the back of the building. A twitch of the net curtain gives fantastic views of the car park tarmac. There are only a few cars out there now but Penny warns us that the place will be rammed tomorrow when the festival kicks off.

'I'll give you girls some time to freshen up and get changed into these.' She hands over a couple of bright red T-shirts that say BOOK FESTIVAL STAFF on the back. 'Meet you by the box office in about half an hour?'

Her phone rings and she waves goodbye to us before picking up with a 'Yes?'

As soon as Penny closes the door behind her, Holly kicks off her sandals (yes, really, sandals in winter because HOLIDAY) and leaps onto her bed.

'We're not *actually* going to jump up and down on the beds like this is a bad road-trip movie from the noughties,

are we?’ I question, slipping out of my shoes, all too ready to pounce.

‘We *have* to jump up and down on the beds or it’s bad luck!’ Holly sings as she scrambles on top of the nylon bedspread.

TOTEBAG OF DOOM

We Google Map our way to the festival. It's only a short walk but I spend most of it hoping that one of the huge seagulls ahead doesn't swoop down and peck me to death. The bright red book-fest T-shirt means I could be easily mistaken for a bag of Walker's ready-salted crisps. I pull my leopard-print coat tighter around my chest to protect myself.

'Oh my God, look at this place!' Holly grins.

We find the cluster of marquees and tents that have popped up in the grounds of the hotel. Blokes in polo shirts and cargo trousers with pencils behind their ears load cables and tables and bits of stage out of white vans. Penny explains that as the festival opens today we'll be getting to work straightaway as she gives us a quick tour of the place, always a few paces ahead so we have

to practically run to keep up with her. There are three different venues within the grounds. One is a thing called a Spiegeltent. It's all shiny and old fashioned, with wood panels and mirrors and stained glass. Folded chairs have been set out in a semi-circle. Penny tells us that there's going to be a spoken-word performance taking place in there later and Holly's face lights up. (She's been writing her own poems since she got all loved up with Official Boyfriend, Jamie. She puts on this weird voice to recite them. Doesn't really sound like her. It's funny. And hugely impressive, I'm not gonna lie.) Then there's the Main Stage tent. When we stick our heads around the door to this place I'm amazed: it's like Doctor Who's Tardis or a Narnian wardrobe or something. From the outside it just kind of looks like a circus tent without all the fun stripes, but inside it's massive.

'It feels like a proper theatre.' Holly smiles. 'Like the one at home.'

She's talking about the Albany in Greysworth, the place we've spent every Christmas of our lives watching X Factor rejects do panto.

'C'mon, girls, there's more to see this way . . .' Penny tears us away from the stage and shows us the cafe tent. They have muffins and salted caramel brownies and posh

crisps and baristas wearing black trousers that definitely double up as school uniform during term time. Holly gives me a not-so-subtle nudge as we pass a couple of lads stocking bottles of organic apple juice into the big fridges. Two nudge-worthy boys in less than two hours of being here. That already beats the sixteen-year average of Greysworth sightings.

Not that I'm *bothered*.

It's clear to me that romance is just a big fat waste of time. Like shaving your legs in winter or sitting non-calculator Maths exams. Useless. Pointless.

What I learnt from art-school wannabe Blaine Henderson – or He-who-shall-not-be-named (which is what I'd refer to him as, if I actually wasted precious breath on speaking about him) – is that I really nearly fudged up EVERYTHING by getting sucked into his swirling vortex of dreaminess. It almost cost us the whole campaign to save Bennett's from closing, and he just turned out to be a massive let-down.

I can't let that happen again. So I'm steering well clear of romance.

It's kind of hard to block it out when Holly and Jamie have been an actual Facebook-official BF and GF couple for three months now. They post selfies with cute snapchat

filters that make them look like loved-up squirrels. They had a day trip to London and walked around Covent Garden holding hands. I swear, I did not hear the end of how Holly's bag got jammed in the underground train doors as they closed and Jamie managed to prise them open and saved the day because he's such a hero and his arms are so strong since he's started working part-time as a lifeguard at the Kingsthorpe Leisure Centre.

Aside from those two, sticking to my romance-free rule isn't *that* hard in Greysworth. It has an extremely low population of Boys To Fancy, which means that I don't have a queue of hunky lads lining up to save me from being dragged along a train track in the Big Smoke.

I avert my eyes from the apple-juice boys and perv on the lemon and poppy seed muffins instead. Safer. More reliable. Who needs lads when you can have cake?

'Now *this*,' Penny waves her clipboard towards a building that looks a bit like a big greenhouse, 'this will be your home for the next few days.'

There's a blue neon sign above the double doors. THE BOOKSHOP TENT.

It's way bigger than I expected it to be. The ground is bumpy and uneven, but that's just because it's carpet rolled over soggy grass. The shelves are already set up but

our job for the day is to unpack all of the books and put them on display.

I think we're going to *love* it here.

'Girls, these are for you.' Penny hands us festival programmes.

We thank her and open them up as if it's the first time we've seen them. As if we *didn't* spend a lunchtime in the sixth-form common room printing them out then highlighting the events we wanted to make in order of preference.

'And this bag contains all you'll need for the rest of the week.'

It's humungous. So heavy it just about pulls my puny arm out of its socket. A canvas totebag filled with Book Fest Essentials.

'The cashbox is in here. I need one or both of you to bring this back to the box office every night once we close the shop, okay?'

There are card machines and rolls of receipt paper and spare Biro's and Sharpies for signings and this old-fashioned carbon paper in case one of those card machines doesn't work because apparently the signal can be dodgy in this area.

I hope Holly remembers all of the important stuff

Penny is telling us, because even though I'm trying my hardest to pay close attention, I'm buzzing. I'm way too excited to actually be here. It's like we're being left to run our very own bookshop. Just me and Holly. It's a dream come true! I've always wanted my own shop. When I was younger, my favourite game was 'shops'. I'd force my little brother to be my one and only customer, and he'd have to pretend to pay for my Beanie Babies or Sylvanians with those big plastic coins. He'd get pretty restless and ask if he could put his toys in my shop and buy them. I'd say no, because it was My Shop and I didn't sell Playmobil.

Obviously, this is much cooler. Not only do we practically have our own shop, but, like, it's at one of the coolest, biggest book festivals in the country. With actual literary legends. SO much more exciting than what we're used to, and hey, even THAT can be pretty cool as it turns out.

Breathe, Paige. Calm down.

'Now, I'll be around if you need me. If there's anything at all you're not sure about, please let me know. I'll have my walkie-talkie on me at all times, and yours is in there, just as I've explained.'

What? We actually have walkie-talkies? And she's already explained that to us? Wow, I really haven't been paying attention at all.

Penny's phone rings and she dashes towards the door, only answering with a, 'YES, I'M LISTENING.'

Holly turns to me and we squeal. We're here!

I gasp. Literally gasp when I see it.

'Holly, LOOK!'

I'm on my knees, delving into a crate of Johnny Hoxton's *Rock'n'Roll Sketchbook*! This is the book we've been waiting for and it's here, in my hands, four whole days – that's ninety-six hours – ahead of official publication date!

Johnny Hoxton is a legend. He's famous for being in an iconic indie band – all long, floppy hair and pouts. They split up a few years ago and this is his first ever book. I suppose that makes him a celebrity author. The kind of guy that my colleague at Bennett's, Adam, would roll his eyes at as if to say, 'Typical.' Whatever, Adam, it's not like the manic-pixie, big fringe and glasses girls he crushes on are anything out of the ordinary. And the thing is, Johnny Hoxton is an amazing artist. I wish I could draw like him. I flick through the pages of his work. I want to know what kind of ink he uses.

'Oh, Paige. It's beautiful.' Holly kneels beside me and takes a copy of the book, turning it over in her hands like it's a lump of solid gold.

'This has made my day.' I clutch the hardback to my

chest, barely able to open it, the anticipation is too much.

'This is what we came for!' She mock-cries happy tears. Come again – maybe she's not faking it. Her eyes are wet. 'I could die a happy woman right in this moment, Paige Turner.'

'Um, HELLO? I think you're forgetting something pretty maje, Holly.' I blink in disbelief. 'He's going to be *in here*, in this very tent, breathing the same air as us, so please make sure you survive until then.'

The cover of Johnny's book is a life-sized portrait of his face. So gorgeous. Holly holds it up in front of her face so that it looks like she's Johnny Hoxton from the neck up, and that she's, well, Holly from the neck down.

'Paige Turner,' she puts on a gravelly voice from behind the book, 'it's such a pleasure to meet you at last . . .'

'Oh, J-Ho,' I play along, 'please believe me when I say, the pleasure's all mine!'

Holly makes muffled air-kissy sounds from behind the blurb and I blow kisses her way when all of a sudden:

'Oh, helloooooo!'

Our obsessive fan-girling is interrupted by somebody entering the tent, carrying a trestle table.

Caught in the act, Holly jumps to her feet and throws the book to the ground. I shudder and hold my copy

close to my bosom. I always knew I was the more loyal fan between the two of us.


‘I’m Tim,’ the stranger continues, puffing out his cheeks under the strain of the table until we try to help him, and shuffle it into position. ‘You must be the Greysworth girls! Well, it’s nice to meet you.’

He shakes my hand and I always try so hard to make sure I have a good strong handshake. It probably doesn’t even matter in real life what your handshake is like unless you’re a contestant on *Dragons’ Den* or something, but I’m a self-conscious shaker. So I squeeze a bit as I do it.

As Holly introduces herself, I have a look at Tim. He’s tall and bounces on his knees as he walks. He’s a grown man, probably in his forties. He has hair the colour of wet sand, tied into a long ponytail that falls between his shoulder blades, which jut out in his red festival T-shirt. He tells us this is his twelfth Skegton Festival, and that he works in the local bookshop in town with Penny.

He hums a tune to fill the brief silence and taps the trestle top with his long, sinewy fingers. ‘Well, this’ll be your desk, and I’ll bring you another one in for the signings.’

‘Will the signings be in here?’ I ask, way too excited at the prospect of actual famous authors being in the same room as me.



‘Ooooh yes!’ says Tim, raising his eyebrows. ‘We use the Main Stage tent for some of the very big names, but most authors are happy to work in here after an event.’

As he leaves the room, Holly holds the Johnny Hoxton book in front of her face, so that it looks like his face is her face again. ‘Just think,’ I hear the muffled excitement from her hidden face, ‘I will be RIGHT HERE, SIGNING!’

BOOK FEST REALNESS

Day One of Book Festival Life and well, it's harder work than I thought it would be.

For a start, no one told me there'd be *Maths* involved. That's enough for me to back right out of any situation. Enough for me to pack my belongings into a hanky on a stick and whistle as I trot off into the sunset.

It's never been my strong point. And in the festival bookshop there's no computer to tell me how much change I need to give. We only have this ancient metal cash box and have to work it out for ourselves.

Prior to this, I have only ever used the calculator on my phone to split the bill at Wagamama's. Now I'm tapping furiously on the screen every time somebody approaches the desk with a stack of freshly signed books, all selling for various prices.

I get this prickly feeling of dread every time a customer tells me they have the extra ten pence *if that helps*. It never helps. I only just scraped that Maths GCSE and every time I fumble over twenty-pence pieces in the cash box, I can see Mr Evans' snarky know-all face, the kind that only a Maths teacher can have, saying, '*See, you do need Maths in everyday life.*'

Luckily Holly's here to help, just like she was when we started big school, and I needed her to actually count the coins out of my denim Hello Kitty purse to pay for a jacket potato in the school canteen.

The two of us decide to take a quick, much needed break while the shop tent is quiet for the first time all afternoon. Everybody seems to have filed inside the Main Stage tent to watch a panel of writers talk about frontline journalism, whatever that is. I put my feet up on a spare chair, delving my arm inside a can of Sour Cream & Chive Pringles, which initially I always hate. They're a gross flavour and they stink like old knickers but once you pop you can't stop and you actually can't taste or smell anything any more either, so here I am, gobbling them up like there's no tomorrow.

Like there's no tomorrow and no Ross Kemp lookalike about to burst into the room, soaking wet from the downpour . . .

‘Hello!’ Holly stands, dusting her salty hands on her black tights. ‘Can I help?’

‘Hello, ladies.’ The wet, bald man shuffles his shoes on the door mat. He’s wearing a black suit and has a wire poking out of his collar and into his ear. ‘I’m Lady Rockwell’s bodyguard, Reggie.’

REGGIE?!

A BODYGUARD?!

LADY ROCKWELL?!

Before I can even mouth, ‘*But who the hell is Lady Rockwell?*’ Holly nods and beams.

‘Great,’ she says, like she actually knows what he’s talking about or something.

‘Shall I bring her this way?’ he asks, chewing gum as he talks. ‘She’s in the car outside and is keen to have a look around before her first event tomorrow afternoon.’

‘Sure.’ Holly smiles.

As soon as Reggie dashes out of the tent and towards the mysterious car, Holly shuffles through event programmes and paperbacks, searching for clues. ‘*Which one is Lady Rockwell?*!’ she hisses.

‘I have no idea! I thought you knew!’ I panic, wiggling my arm out of the Pringles tube.

The name doesn’t ring a bell.

‘Here she is!’ Holly unfolds the festival brochure and points to a page titled *Fifty Years of Bodice Ripping* with Lady Minnie Rockwell.

Okay, so she’s a romance novelist.

‘LOL! Wonder why Penny booked her.’ I chuckle. ‘Maybe Tony’s not the only one who gets her hot under the collar!’

I jump out of my Pringle-dust-coated skin when I see her. She looks mad.

She’s old. I don’t mean teacher-old, I mean *old*-old. Like she-must-be-in-her-nineties-old. That’s not what makes her look mad. I can feel my mum tutting at me for that even being a suggestion. That’s not what I’m saying. It’s what she’s wearing that makes her look so . . . nutty.

She moves towards the bookshop tent tentatively, shuffling a bit like ET when he’s in baby Drew Barrymore’s clothes. Her bodyguard holds a pink umbrella above her head, while his own bald scalp is splattered with huge, heavy raindrops.

Her entire ensemble is pink. Pink pink pink.

Pink like Barbie pink.

Before I know it she’s inside our book tent and is carrying this little dog around in her pink, manicured claws. It’s blond. I’ve never thought of an animal being blond or

brunette or anything as human as this one. It's so well groomed that it puts the entire cast of *Love Island* to shame.

Dame or *Lady* or *Queen* or whatever kind of Rockwell she is, she is large, but not tall. She makes our bookshop tent feel minute all of a sudden. Her perfume fills the air – and it's the proper stuff, rather than the celebrity fragrance they push on you at the Superdrug counter. She smells expensive.

A pink pill box hat with pink flowers sits still on top of her peroxide-dyed mass of grandma curls. Pale, glittery blue eye-shadow all the way up to her thin, drawn-on eyebrows. Black eyeliner. Thin fuchsia lips. Her rubbery neck is dripping in pearls and diamonds that look so shiny I can't tell if they're actual real posh ones or the kind I used to cut out of the Argos catalogue to make mood boards for my home-made Barbie outfits. To be honest, she does look a bit like something eight-year-old Paige would have dreamt up.

Holly and I watch. Take it all in. Gulp, and swallow our crisps hard. She's like nothing I've ever seen before.