PAGES & CO.

TILLY AND THE BOOKWANDERERS



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The view from the gate of a fairground

Matilda Pages pushed open the door of Pages & Co. and breathed in deeply, taking in the familiar scent of just-blown-out candles, dark chocolate and, of course, books. For a second she forgot that she was splattered with muddy water and simply relished the week's holiday that stretched out in front of her like the view from the gate of a fairground. But the bubble of calm popped as the damp seeped through her tights, making her shiver, and she marched through the door connecting the bookshop to the narrow house she lived in with her grandparents. She let the door crash behind her, tossed her school bag on the table – accidentally sending a pile of potatoes

flying – and flopped dramatically into a chair.

She paused, waiting for her grandmother to react, and when Grandma finally turned, Tilly flung her head theatrically on to her arms on the table.

'Happy half-term, Tilly,' Grandma said, looking around in confusion. 'What on earth is the matter? And why are you taking it out on the potatoes?'

Tilly blushed and sheepishly started picking them up.

'And you're soaking – it's not still raining, is it?' Grandma said, peering out of the kitchen window. She gave her granddaughter's head an affectionate rub as Tilly kneeled to rescue a stray potato that had rolled into the cat basket. Tilly sighed and leaned against Grandma's legs.

'Grace went through a puddle on her bike and it splashed all over me.'

'Surely she didn't do it on purpose?' Grandma asked gently.

Tilly harrumphed in disagreement.

'Aren't you two as thick as thieves?' Grandma said.

'That was before, when we were just little. She has new friends now,' Tilly said. 'She got on to the netball team, and only wants to be with those girls now. She sits with Ammara and Poppy every day.'

'Have I met Ammara and Poppy?' Grandma asked.

'No, they went to St Enid's, and they stick together all the time.'

'Well, why don't you invite some of them round during the holiday?' Grandma suggested. 'Get to know each other?'

'I don't think they'd come,' Tilly said uncertainly. 'They're always whispering and giggling about something when I try to talk to them.'

'They might surprise you. You don't know if you don't ask,' Grandma said. 'Be brave, Matilda. Be brave, be—'

'Be brave, be curious, be kind,' Tilly interrupted. 'I know.'

'It's what we always used to tell your mum growing up,' Grandma said.

'I just think being brave comes more naturally to

some people than others,' Tilly said.

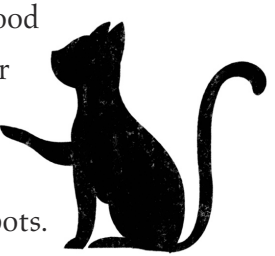
'Often it's the things that don't come naturally to us that are the most important,' Grandma said. 'Now, why don't you take off that wet uniform and have a shower? I'll make you a hot chocolate to celebrate the start of the holidays.'



Twenty minutes later Tilly was clean and dry, wearing her own clothes, and carrying two mugs of hot chocolate covered in whipped cream, one for her and one for her grandad. She pushed the kitchen door open with her back and reversed into the bookshop. Pages & Co. was Tilly's favourite place in the world. From outside, on the busy north London high street, it looked like an entirely normal bookshop, but once inside it didn't quite make sense how everything fitted inside its ordinary walls.

The shop was made up of five floors of corners and cubbyholes, sofas and squashy armchairs, and a labyrinth of bookshelves heading off in different

directions. A spiral staircase danced up one wall, and painted wooden ladders stretched up into difficult-to-reach corners. Tall arched windows made it feel a little like a church when the light spilled in and dust motes danced in the air. When it was good weather the sun pooled on the floor and the bookshop cat – named *Alice* for her curious nature – could often be found dozing in the warmest spots. During the summer the big fireplace behind the till was filled to bursting with fresh flowers, but as it was October a fire was roaring there.



Tilly had never been very far outside London, but she felt like a seasoned traveller within the pages of books: she had raced across the rooftops of Paris, learned to ride a broomstick and seen the Northern Lights from the deck of a ship. She had explored wonderlands and secret gardens with girls curious and contrary. She found books that led to long debates with Grandad over crumpets dripping with butter, and discovered stories that she read again and again until



they shone far more brightly than the endless tests at school. She found friendships that seemed free of the complicated social rules at school. Tilly sometimes felt like there had been a lesson where friendship had been explained, but she'd been off poorly and had never quite been able to catch up.

Grandad was behind the till, sorting through books that customers had ordered, matching receipts to titles and stacking them neatly, ready for collection. Tilly deposited the second mug of hot chocolate on the till, managing to avoid spilling most of it.

'Happy holidays, Tilly!' he said, clinking mugs with her. Grandad drank deeply and pretended, as he always did, that he didn't know he had whipped cream on his top lip. 'Got much homework?'

'I have to read a book I've never read before,' Tilly said, straight-faced.

'Goodness, sweetheart,' Grandad said with a grin. 'You'd better crack on with that immediately, if you even have a hope of finishing in a week.'

Tilly giggled as she stuck a finger in her whipped

cream, thinking of the pile of five books she had stacked next to her bed for her holiday reading.

'Ms Webber did say that after the holidays we'd be starting a project about our favourite characters from books, and that if we wanted to get a head start on that we should think about who ours were. Who would you pick?'

'What a question,' Grandad said, licking the cream from his lip. 'I must admit my gut instinct is pulling me towards Sherlock Holmes, but I'll have to have a proper think and get back to you with my official answer. Now, other than your particularly arduous workload, what else do you have planned for the week? Is Grace coming over?'

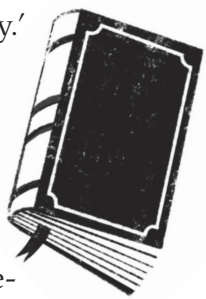
'I don't know why you and Grandma keep asking me about Grace,' Tilly said.

'Do we?' Grandad said, surprised. 'Well, I thought she was your best friend?'

'I don't have a best friend,' Tilly said firmly. 'I've realised there isn't anyone who's best-friend material at school.'

'And what exactly makes someone best-friend material?' Grandad asked.

'Someone who sticks by you; someone who never gets bored of talking to you. Someone who's adventurous, and clever, and brave, and funny . . .' Tilly said, checking her criteria off on her fingers. 'Someone like Anne Shirley or Alice from Wonderland – those are *my* favourite characters, incidentally.' With very few exceptions Tilly found that she much preferred the company of characters in her books to most of the people she knew in real life.



'I'm not sure best friends are a one-size-fits-all sort of situation, Tilly,' Grandad said carefully. 'Sometimes a person who becomes a friend is the least likely person you'd expect. Friends should bring out the best in you, not be the same as you. I'm sure you're someone's perfect fit.'

Tilly tried to imagine herself as the perfect fit for a potential best friend. But when she thought about herself too directly she felt sort of fuzzy round the

edges, like a photograph that was blurred, and when she compared herself to the characters she met in books their ink and paper felt more real than her bones and skin.

'And, for now, you've always got me,' Grandad continued. 'If you're in the market for an elderly best friend with whiskers and a bookshop.'

'Exactly,' Tilly said, trying to erase all thoughts of hypothetical best friends from her mind. 'I don't need anyone who doesn't live in Pages & Co.'