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Opening extract from

Rebecca's Rules

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SATURDAY ☺

Well, I was right about the party distracting me from my Paperboy-related misery. It was so completely ridiculous that it has blocked all other thoughts from my head. I think I'd better write about it straight away because if I don't I'll start thinking I imagined the whole thing. I really don't know why we went now. Even my own family couldn't believe I was going. When I was getting ready, my mum came in.

'Okay, forgive me if I've missed something here,' she said. 'But don't you hate Vanessa or whatever her name is?'

'Well,' I said, putting on my best strappy shoes. 'Sort of. A bit.'

'So why exactly are you going to her party then?' said Mum. 'And don't say because it'll be terrible and you want to see how bad it is, because that's not really a good thing.'

'But it will! It'll be funny,' I said. 'I mean, it'll be so ridiculous, and she's so awful ...'

'So essentially, Rebecca, you're going to the party of a girl you don't like just to laugh at it?' said Mum. 'That isn't very nice.' She sounded a bit like Alice, which was quite worrying.

'Mum, it's Vanessa!' I said. 'She doesn't like any of us

either, and she invited us anyway! She just wants people to cheer for her.'

'Hmmm,' said Mum in a disapproving sort of way. So much for her trying to cheer me up. She doesn't seem bothered about my traumas now. My dad's even worse, though. He's forgotten all about them. The other day he asked me, totally cheerfully, if I'd heard from 'that nice kid who used to collect the paper money' recently. He hadn't even noticed my anguish! My parents are as bad as each other. Sometimes I think they just don't care about me at all.

In the end Mum gave me a lift down to the school gates this afternoon, where we'd been told to wait for the bus that was taking us to Vanessa's 'Big Birthday Bash'. She wanted to get out of the car and wait until the bus turned up, but luckily I managed to persuade her not to. I have seen my mother try to be cool and chat with a gang of girls my age, and it is hideously embarrassing.

So anyway, she drove off THANK GOD and there we all were standing at the side of the road. As Alice said, as we shivered in our party frocks, 'I'm not really sure how this happened.'

I looked around at the rest of our class, all of whom looked

equally bemused. 'Neither am I,' I said.

'I think Vanessa's hypnotised us all,' said Cass gloomily. 'I have no idea why I'm here.'

All our reasons for going didn't seem very important when we were standing there with bare legs in the freezing cold.

'I think this might be a bit of a disaster,' said Alice. And as it turned out, it kind of was, especially for poor old Alice, as you will see.

But, actually, the bus journey itself was quite fun. The entire class was there (even sneery Karen Rodgers, who has been a bit subdued since her sidekick/minion Alison told her to shut up at the Battle of the Bands last year) so it was a bit like being on a school tour (though not an impressive one like Paperboy's ski lodge adventure). And Vanessa (or rather, the people from the telly programme – there's no way Vanessa went to any trouble herself) had decorated the bus with balloons and a big banner that said 'Vanessa's Big Birthday Bash!'

Soon everyone, even Karen, was singing along to Jessie's iPod, which we'd plugged into the bus's sound system. Some of the music was kind of cheesy but it didn't matter. We were all just messing around. It was actually like a mini-party – most of us had brought drinks (no booze, of course, though as

Cass said later, if anything could make us turn to drink, it'd be Vanessa) and bags of crisps and stuff. Emma produced a giant bag of Percy Pigs and I ate so many I started to feel a bit funny.

Jessie is going to audition for the school musical and she did some very funny actions to all the songs. Ellie joined in, although she doesn't want to perform in the musical; she wants to work on the costumes. She is quite dramatic herself, though. Perhaps this is because her mother is very melodramatic as well as hippy-ish (let us never forget that Ellie's real name is Galadriel after the elf queen from the *Lord of the Rings*), so Ellie has spent her entire life living with someone who is always sweeping out of rooms in flowing cloaks and things. Seriously. Her mum has a cloak. I've seen it. It's made out of velvet and has stars embroidered all over it.

So anyway, it was all good fun. And I had managed to swipe Rachel's lipstick (she will KILL me if she discovers I've taken it, especially as she hasn't figured out yet that I've discovered where she hides her make-up bag. She keeps putting it in different places so I can't get at it. She is a very suspicious person). Alice put on the lipstick when we were on a smooth bit of road (she didn't dare try it until we got on the motorway in case the bus zoomed around a corner and she got lipstick all

over her face) and it looked lovely. It is a magical colour that suits everyone. I gave a few more people a go as well, just to be nice. I'm sure Rachel wouldn't mind. It was all lots of fun, anyway.

'You know, maybe we can just stay and have our own party on this bus,' said Cass. 'I bet we'd have a better time.'

She was probably right. But after a while, we were out in the countryside, and the bus turned into a giant set of gates and drove up a very long drive to an absolutely ginormous house. Well, a castle really – it turns out it was called Ashford Towers and it's mostly used for very posh weddings.

The bus pulled up at the very impressive entrance and we all got out and stared at the castle wondering what on earth we'd got ourselves into. Then a tall, skinny, very stressed-looking woman in a tight black dress and a phone headset thing came out of the gigantic front door along with another camera crew. They all looked miserable. I was just thinking that the stressed woman seemed strangely familiar when Alice said, 'Wasn't she the TV woman who was with Vanessa at the Battle of the Bands?' And she was. She looked a bit older though, which isn't really surprising when you remember that she's been spending a lot of time with Vanessa recently. That would age

anyone by about fifty years.

'Oh, you're all here,' she said. 'Great. I was beginning to get a bit worried.' We all started moving towards the door but she said, 'Wait!' and we all froze. 'You can't go in yet. Vanessa will be arriving soon and we want everyone outside when she gets here. Stay there and I'll get the others.'

'Others?' said Ellie. 'I didn't think Vanessa actually had any friends, apart from Caroline, of course.'

'Maybe she's paid people to pretend,' said Cass.

And when a bunch of girls and boys came out of the house and paraded down the steps, I thought Cass might be right. The girls were all orange and wearing loads of make-up and had perfectly straight glossy hair and tiny little party dresses and really high heels. And the boys were all orange too, although their hair was gelled.

'Who on earth are they?' said Alice.

'Right,' said the woman in the black dress whose name, I remembered, was Sarah. 'Okay, Vanessa's class from St Dominic's, can you line up on either side of the drive? And the kids from ... is it the music class?'

'Music, dance, and theatre,' said one girl, tossing her shiny, shiny hair.

We all looked at each other in surprise. How did we not know Vanessa went to a music class? And dance and theatre too, of course. Surely if she was in a class like that she'd have been boasting about it constantly.

'Yes,' said Sarah. 'Okay, you lot come up the front, near the steps. Yes, that's perfect. Hang on a sec ...' She paused and then spoke into the headset. 'Yeah, they're all ready.' She turned back to us. 'Right, everyone, Vanessa is on her way.'

The camera crew bustled around, getting into their places. Then, in the distance, we heard a rumbling sound. Someone shouted 'Action'. And this giant pink tank came rumbling up the drive, with someone with absolutely huge hair peering out the top. It was Vanessa. As the tank got nearer, she stuck more of herself out of the hole and started waving regally at us. She was wearing a sparkly gold and pink dress with a ginormous frilly flower at the neck.

'Oh. My. God,' said Cass.

We all stood and stared in silence as the tank came up to the steps, where the shiny orange people were jumping around and cheering. Then, over the cheering, we heard a familiar shriek.

'No, no, NOOO!'

It was Vanessa. 'They didn't cheer!' she screeched. 'They're all meant to be cheering and they didn't! Just the ones at the steps were cheering!'

'Okay, okay,' said Sarah in a soothing sort of voice, like she was talking to a maniac who had to be kept calm in case she went on a killing spree. Which I suppose she was. 'We'll do it again. Okay, everyone from St Dominic's, this time I want you to all cheer and jump up and down when Vanessa comes down. Okay?'

We all just stared at her. A few people mumbled, 'Okay ...'

'Right,' said Sarah. 'Let's get the tank back to the bottom of the drive and reshoot.'

The tank rumbled off. Cass, Alice and I stared at each other.

'I'm not cheering for that goon,' said Cass.

'What do you think will happen if we don't?' I asked. 'Maybe Vanessa will turn the tank on us. I wouldn't put it past her.'

'I don't care,' said Alice, bravely. 'One of my great-grand-dads was shot for standing up to the Nazis! If he can do that, we can stand up to Vanessa.'

'Well, when you put it like that ...' I said.

'Alice,' said Cass, 'I don't think you can really compare

standing up to Vanessa to standing up to Hitler.'

'I know,' said Alice. 'That's my point. If he was brave enough to stand up to fascism, we can do this little thing. Who's with me?'

It was very inspiring, to be honest. I crossed my arms and clamped my mouth shut so it would be very obvious that I wasn't cheering.

'But maybe,' said Ellie, who was next to us, 'if we don't cheer they'll keep making us do it again and again until we give in. And I'm freezing. To be perfectly honest, I will do anything to get indoors.'

'Oh,' said Cass.

Ellie was right, it was very cold. The tank was coming back up the drive again, and as it approached Jessie and Ellie and Emma started going 'Whoo hoo!' in a sort of sarcastic way. Alice kept her mouth shut and folded her arms. Cass and I decided to compromise and clapped very, very slowly. I hope Alice's great-granddad wasn't looking down on us from heaven in disgust at our cowardice.

Luckily, enough people were cheering to please Princess Vanessa, and when she got to the steps she waved and cried, 'Hi, everyone! Great to see you all!' as if she hadn't just seen

us all two minutes earlier when she'd been screaming at us like a psychopath. A sparkly pink ladder was produced and Vanessa got out of the tank and climbed down it. Her dress was very tiny and glittery, and she was wearing gold shoes with red soles. She went up the steps and all the glossy music and theatre people started squealing and jumping around and hugging her.

'Hey, where's Caroline?' said Cass, which was a good question. We thought Caroline was Vanessa's best friend, but now she was nowhere to be seen.

'Wait,' said Emma. 'There she is, look! Behind that orange girl in the black dress.'

Caroline was at the back of the crowd of music and theatre people. She was just standing there while Vanessa hugged and squealed at the others.

We all felt a bit sorry for her, to be honest. Her devotion to Vanessa is annoying, but the least she deserved was to be, like, acknowledged at Vanessa's stupid party. She was wearing a very nice dress, but she looked a bit uncomfortable. She certainly wasn't shrieking as much as the others. Suddenly Vanessa grabbed her and gave her a giant hug. From a distance, it was hard to tell whether it was a real hug or whether she was just

doing it for the camera. I'd like to think Vanessa appreciates Caroline, even though both of them are pretty irritating.

Then Sarah appeared and told us all to go into the main hall. Vanessa and her mysterious new friends led the way and strutted into the building as the rest of us followed behind (not strutting).

The hall was a big room panelled in wood with a small stage at one end between two sweeping flights of stairs. There were giant pink bean bags in the corners.

'This is actually not as fancy as I expected,' said Cass. 'I thought there'd be, like, a throne, or something.'

Then, suddenly, Vanessa was up on the stage with a microphone in her hand. It wasn't an ordinary microphone, though, like the ones we use at gigs. It was bright pink and sparkly and it wasn't attached to a lead and an amplifier.

'Hi, everyone!' Her voice boomed from the speakers on each side of the stage thing. 'Thank you SO much for coming! It means so much to me!'

'It means so much to me to be on telly, more like,' muttered Cass. 'Like she cares whether any of us came or not. We're just here to yell and make the room look full.'

'Ssssh,' said Ellie. 'If we talk over her, she'll have another

tantrum and do it again and we'll be here all day.'

'Good point,' said Cass.

'At least we're indoors,' said Emma. 'And warm. Which is better than ten minutes ago.'

Then we all shut up because Vanessa had obviously noticed that people were talking. She looked like she could be on the verge of another fit of rage, and none of us wanted that.

'I just want to say,' she said, 'that you're all very welcome to my big … birthday … bash!'

And then we all did shriek because about a million shiny pink balloons suddenly fell down on top of our heads. None of us had looked up at the ceiling when we came in because we were so busy wondering about Vanessa and her mysterious new friends, so we hadn't noticed the balloons up there.

'There is a LOT of pink at this party already,' said Cass, fighting her way through some balloons.

'And we haven't even got to the pony yet,' I said.

'That pony had better turn up,' said Cass, 'or I'm going to be very disappointed.'

Terrible cheesy music started to play, and all Vanessa's new friends started whooping and dancing around. I looked at Cass and Alice.

'This is going to be a very long day,' said Alice.

'Ooh, look!' said Ellie. 'Food! And drinks!'

Waiters in pink uniforms were moving through the crowd, carrying trays. Some were filled with glasses of fizzy drinks, others with lots of delicious-looking canapé things. We grabbed some Cokes and – yes! Mini-burgers! – and watched the crowd. Some girls from our class were dancing, but most were just standing around wondering what to do. All the cameras were on Vanessa's new chums, though. They were laughing and throwing their hair around and high-fiving each other.

'They don't look real,' said Alice. 'I mean, they're like characters from *Laurel Canyon* or something.'

'They can't live in our neck of the woods,' I said. 'We'd have noticed them by now.'

'Yeah, because one of them would have hit us in the face with her ginormous shiny mane,' said Cass. 'They're flicking their hair around so much they'll put someone's eye out.'

'In fairness,' said Emma, chomping on a mini-burger, 'the food is pretty good.'

Emma was right. We sat in a corner on one of the giant pink beanbags and stuffed our faces and talked. It was quite fun for a while.

'You know, even though the music's pretty awful,' I said, 'this isn't so bad. I mean, there's mini-burgers, and bean-bags …'

'And dancing goons,' said Cass, pointing at the glossy gang, who were pouting at the cameras. 'Speaking of goons, where's Vanessa?'

She was nowhere to be seen. Poor Caroline was dancing slightly awkwardly next to all the hair-flickers, but there was no sign of her ruler. Then the music stopped.

'Ooh, maybe the pony's coming!' said Cass. There was a trumpeting sound, and the two big doors at the end of the hall opened (some more cameras were already directed in that direction). Loads of smoky dry ice floated out the doorway, lit by pink spotlights. I have to admit, I did hope the pony was about to appear.

Then a booming voice cried, 'All hail Princess Vanessa!' And suddenly Vanessa appeared in the doorway. She had changed into a long flowing sparkly dress like something Alice's Barbie had when we were little (I never had a Barbie because my mother didn't believe in them. She thought Barbie was a bad role model for little girls. And after seeing Vanessa today, I had to admit for the first time that she might have had a

point). As if the Barbie dress wasn't mad enough, she was also wearing a crown.

'Oh my GOD,' said Cass. 'Are we expected to, I dunno, bow down and worship her now?'

'I certainly hope not,' I said.

'Well, I'm not doing it even if we are,' said Alice. 'I'd rather die.'

'I don't think you're going to have to choose between death and worshipping Vanessa,' I said. Although really, if Vanessa had her own way, I'm pretty sure she'd love to shoot anyone who didn't do whatever she wanted.

Vanessa was waving regally to the crowd, most of whom were just gawping at her. The dancing goons, of course, were cheering and whooping and jumping up and down. I bet they have no voices left tomorrow.

'Come!' cried Vanessa. 'Come and join the revels at my fairytale ball!' And she turned around and swept into the next room, her flowing skirt fluttering after her.

'Her WHAT?' said Cass.

'Has she actually gone mad?' said Emma. 'I think she has. This is great.'

We all followed the rest of the guests into the next room.

And I have to admit, I was impressed. It was a giant old-fashioned ballroom, with big old gold-framed mirrors on the walls, and there were little twinkling lights everywhere. The lights were all pink and purple and people were throwing glitter down from a sort of balcony thing high up above the entrance so the light was all sparkly. There was a band at one end of the room playing swirly classical music.

'Wow,' said Alice.

'Okay,' said Cass. 'This is kind of cool. Ooh, look, I think there's actually a throne over there!'

Then Vanessa popped up on yet another podium/stage thing with a microphone on it (there seemed to be one in every room) and said, 'Let the fairytale princes sweep you away!' And then, as romantic music started to play, we realised there were all these strange boys in posh suits standing around the room. They started coming up to people and asking them to dance. As the cameras rolled, one of the fairytale princes whispered something in Karen Rodgers's ear, and a moment later she was whirling around the dance floor.

'Oh my God,' said Alice. 'Has she … hired people to dance with our class?'

'I hope none of them come near us,' I said.

‘This is like when you go to a pantomime and someone comes off the stage into the audience and tries to get people to join in,’ said Cass. ‘In other words, my worst nightmare. Can we hide somewhere?’

Luckily, in all the dry ice and pink sparkly glitter, it was easy for me, Cass, Alice, Jessie, Ellie and Emma to sneak back into the hall. Everyone else was in the ballroom so it was nice and peaceful out there. We kicked our way through the balloons and over to a pile of beanbags. But when we reached the bags there, to our surprise, was a girl we’d never seen before. She was lying on a beanbag eating a mini-burger.

‘Oh, hello,’ she said, sitting up.

‘Um, hello,’ said Alice. ‘Why aren’t you in the ballroom?’

‘I think I’ve done my duty for one day,’ said the girl.

‘What do you mean?’ said Ellie.

The girl looked at us. ‘Are you good friends of Vanessa?’

None of us said anything. We didn’t want to tell the truth, in case this girl was one of Vanessa’s best mates or her cousin, or something.

‘I’ll take that as a no,’ said the girl. She had a round, friendly face and glossy black hair with a very nice sleek fringe, the sort of fringe I wish I could have but never can because of my

stupid weird half-wavy hair. 'Well, I'm not a friend of Vanessa either. I'm in her dancing and theatre class. Or at least, the class she joined a month ago. She came along to learn how to do a special dance for this crazy party, and she got a bunch of people from the class to come along to the party to dance around in front of the cameras.'

We all stared at each other. So that's where the shiny orange people had come from.

'So why aren't you, well, dancing around in front of the cameras?' asked Alice.

'Hmmm,' said the girl. 'It's not really my sort of thing. I mean, I like dancing, obviously, otherwise I wouldn't be in the class, but not … well, not dancing at a mad stranger's party, pretending I'm her best mate. No offence,' she added quickly, 'if you are her best mates.'

'We're not,' said Cass firmly. 'I'm Cass, by the way.'

'I'm Jane,' said the girl.

'So none of those dancing people are Vanessa's friends?' I asked.

'I doubt it,' said Jane. 'She's only been going to the class for about a month. She said she wanted all of us to come to her party cos she wanted there to be – these are her words, not mine

– at least a few people who looked good in front of the camera.'

We all stared at each other.

'Well!' said Alice.

'Just when you thought she couldn't get any worse,' said Cass.

'If it's any consolation, I don't think she was including me in that group,' said Jane. 'I just don't think she had the nerve to tell me to go away. Although,' she added, 'I think she might have wanted me in there as the token Asian girl. You know, to make everything look glamorous and multicultural and stuff.'

'That does sound like the sort of thing Vanessa would do,' agreed Cass.

'I should probably warn you, she's got us all to do something really terrible later,' said Jane. 'I can't tell you, though, because it's top secret and if it got out that anyone knew, she'd probably have me shot.'

'I knew it,' said Alice.

Even though we were all horrified by Vanessa's awfulness, it was kind of fun sitting out there. The whole thing was so weird and unlike our normal daily life that I had totally forgotten to think about Paperboy. It was like the olden days before my heart was broken and I became a miserable shell of

a girl. We were all just laughing and messing about. Maybe if we had a crazy big party every day – or even every week – I'd feel like me and Cass and Alice were properly close again.

Jane was really cool. It turns out that she's from Glasnevin, like Vanessa, and she's known Vanessa since she was tiny (the rest of us have only had to put up with Vanessa for the last year and almost-a-half, but poor Jane has had fourteen years of her). Vanessa's mum and Jane's mum are friends, which is how Mrs Finn found out about the dancing and theatre and whatever-it-is class.

'I started going there in September,' said Jane. 'But I think I'll give it up after this term and find another class. It's awful. It's not like I thought it would be. Everyone's like Vanessa – well, maybe not as mad. But they're all very ... showbizzy. I mean, you've seen what they're like.'

We all thought of the squealing, glossy gang in the next room, tossing their shiny shiny hair all over the place. Cass shuddered.

'So why did you join the class in the first place?' asked Ellie.

Jane sighed. 'Well, I like dancing. I used to go to ballet when I was little. And I like acting,' she said. 'But ... I dunno. The class isn't fun. Everyone's just obsessed with being famous.'

'Like Vanessa,' I said. 'Once she decided to apply to be on 'My Big Birthday Bash' she got even worse than she used to be.'

'Especially worse to you,' said Emma. And she told Jane how Vanessa had decided I was almost a celebrity because my mum wrote that book, and how Vanessa and tried to use me to get on 'My Big Birthday Bash'.

'And then we played at the Battle of the Bands and Bex fell off her drum stool and we didn't win, so Vanessa decided we'd done it on purpose and had a huge mental tantrum in front of the producers and everyone,' said Cass. 'But they loved it and that's why they chose her to be on the show. The more deranged the better, apparently.'

'Wow,' said Jane. 'I remember Mrs Finn telling my mum that Vanessa had taken them to some sort of concert and the producers had been really impressed, but she didn't mention why ...'

'What are her parents like, anyway?' asked Ellie. 'We've never actually seen them. Are they as mad as her? I mean, how did she turn out like this?'

But before Jane could answer, the door to the main ballroom opened and Sarah, the 'Big Birthday Bash' producer, slipped out and closed it behind her. Then she saw us lolling around on

the beanbags and strode over to us. She didn't look happy.

'Girls!' she said. 'What are you doing out here? Everyone's meant to be in there dancing with the fairytale princes.' She looked more closely at me, Cass and Alice. 'Aren't you the girls who were in that band?'

'Um, yes,' said Alice.

'Ah,' said Sarah. 'I don't suppose you'd like to get on stage later and, y'know, play a few songs with the band Vanessa's hired?'

'We certainly would not,' said Cass.

'Sorry,' said Alice. 'It's just ... we haven't practised anything. And, um, well, we don't want to.' Which, for Alice, is pretty blunt.

Sarah sighed. 'That's okay,' she said and, for a moment, I felt sorry for her. Imagine if your job meant travelling the world, looking for evil spoiled brats and then going to their mad birthday parties. It must be awful.

'Anyway,' said Sarah. 'I'm afraid you're all going to have to come in to the ballroom. We can't have any of the guests wandering around the house. It's an insurance thing.'

'We won't wander,' said Jane. 'We can just stay here.'

And we all nodded. Sarah sighed again.

'Sorry girls,' she said. 'It's the rule. Anyway,' she added more

brightly, 'it'll be fun in there! You can dance with a fairytale prince!'

We just stared at her. I think she knew we were not the sort of girls who would find it fun to dance with someone who was being paid to be a fairytale prince. But she was right that we didn't have a choice. So we all got up and trooped across to the ballroom.

'By the way, is there going to be a pink pony?' said Cass. 'I've been looking forward to it.'

'You're getting obsessed with it, Cass,' said Alice.

'It's a pink pony! Vanessa's been going on about it for months! I just want to see it at last,' said Cass.

'A pony? Oh, yes,' said Sarah distractedly, looking at something on her clipboard. 'It'll be around later.'

'Well that's something,' said Cass. 'I suppose.'

A lot more happened after that but just thinking about it is exhausting. I am going to have to go to bed. Maybe it will all seem less mental in the morning.

SUNDAY ☼

I am writing this in bed, still knackered after yesterday's party.

I don't know how all those celebrities who go out every night do it – especially the ones who drink a lot. I am a total wreck after just one day of serious partying AND of course there was no booze. I couldn't sleep in properly because my annoying family got up at the crack of dawn (nine o'clock) and because they have no consideration for others they went stomping about the house and put on the radio really loudly.

I tried to get my mother to bring me up some breakfast in bed, but she, of course, has no sympathy for my tired and emotional state.

'Well, you know what I think,' she said, when she eventually came upstairs in response to my plaintive cries for help. 'I think it was ridiculous to go in the first place.'

Though, because she is not a total monster, she was horrified to hear about what happened to poor Alice. But I haven't got to that yet. I'd better continue the terrible tale.

So yes, anyway, when we all went back into the ballroom, the party was in full swing. Everyone was whirling around the dancefloor, some with the princes, some with ordinary guests. The classical music had stopped and another band was playing chart hits. We tried to hide near the door in case any of the

princes dragged us up on the dance floor. In fairness, plenty of our classmates seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was still glitter in the air, but Vanessa herself was nowhere to be seen. We grabbed some Cokes from a passing fairytale prince, who had apparently been relegated to drink-serving duty, and stayed in the background. It got a bit boring after a while because the music was too loud to talk properly. Then suddenly the music stopped and a man's deep voice boomed over the sound system.

'Everybody,' roared the mysterious voice, 'I want you all to give it up for Miss ... Vanessa ... Finn!'

'Oops,' said Jane. 'I've got to go. See you later.' And she disappeared into the crowd.

There was a blinding flash of light and a burst of smoke and Vanessa appeared on the podium, striking a dramatic pose. The glossy gang and the fairytale princes all started clapping and cheering (as did some of our class, who really should have known better). Then a fairytale prince walked up to each side of Vanessa and took her hand. As the band kicked into a brand new song, she strutted down from the podium and the glossy goons – and Jane – formed a group around her. And then we realised that the song was about Vanessa herself, and

she and the goons (and Jane) were performing an elaborate dance routine to it!

I can't even describe how awful the song was. Bits of it were kind of spoken instead of sung and it went something like this:

Ah ... ah ... Vanessa!

Ah ... ah ... Vanessa!

Glamorous

Fabulous

A diva

Supreme

She's the girl the boys all want

And the girls all want to be

'That is the biggest lie I've ever heard in my life,' said Cass.

'Well, maybe boys do all want her,' said Alice. 'We've never asked any.'

'They may,' said Cass, 'though I can't understand why. But I bet there isn't a single girl on earth who actually wants to be her.'

'I dunno,' said Ellie. 'Look at Karen Rodgers.'

We looked over at Karen, who was still with the same fairytale prince who'd whisked her away earlier. She was gazing at Vanessa in awe and sort of shimmying along.

'Poor Jane,' said Alice. 'This must be the terrible surprise she couldn't tell us about.'

'She's very good,' I said. 'Jane, I mean. You'd never know how she was feeling inside.' She was doing the dance perfectly, smiling perkily all the while, even though we knew she didn't want to be there. Vanessa wasn't doing as much dancing as the others – she was mostly striking poses while the rest of the goons danced around her – but she did perform some quite complicated moves and I had to admit that she had a good sense of timing (as a drummer, I notice these things). Which didn't make up for the fact that the whole thing was completely ridiculous and terrible.

'This is the worst song ever,' said Cass. 'I wonder who wrote it?'

'Maybe she wrote it herself?' said Jessie. 'The lyrics, I mean.'

The song was still going on. It just got worse.

Ah ... ah ... Vanessa! Ah ... ah ... Vanessa!
She's a princess
She's a queen
She's an empress too
Everybody clap your hands
At Vanessa's birthday do

‘How can she be a princess, a queen and an empress?’ asked Ellie. ‘That doesn’t even make sense!’

‘I know,’ said Cass. ‘And what is she meant to be the queen and the empress and the princess of? Not our class, I hope.’

The whole thing was terrible, but it was also sort of mesmerising. In fact, Alice and I climbed onto some chairs and stood on them so we could get a better view of the horrible sight.

At last the song ended, with all the dancers stretching their arms out to Vanessa while she posed triumphantly in the centre. Even more glitter fell from the ceiling then, which I would like to think is the only reason why everyone shrieked, and they weren’t screaming with joy and admiration. Vanessa leapt gracefully back up on the podium in her sparkly heels (I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again – for someone who generally wears very awkward footwear she is very nimble) and grabbed yet another microphone.

‘Thank you, everyone!’ she cried, as if we’d all been whooping and cheering and stamping our feet with joy. ‘In a few minutes, I’m going to show how grateful I am to all of you for coming by singing a very special new song with this amazing band. But now it’s time for a very special part of today’s

fabulous celebrations – the birthday cake!'

The door from the hall opened, some cameras moved in that direction, and something very peculiar came in.

'Oh my God,' said Cass, gleefully. 'It's here!'

It was the pony. It had clearly once been white (or grey, as white horses are mysteriously called. I don't know why), but now it was bright pink, apart from its mane, which was still pale silvery grey. It was surprisingly large – I mean, it wasn't a little cute Shetland pony. To be honest, I'd have thought it was a plain old horse. Anyway, it didn't look very happy, understandably enough. It was attached to a little pink cart on which was a giant tower of bright pink cupcakes. Everyone gasped.

'You know,' said Cass, who had got up on the chair next to me. 'In a way, this is just as insanely brilliant as I hoped it was going to be, but in another ... well, I dunno. The pony looks a bit cross. I hope it's okay.'

'Maybe it'll bite Vanessa,' said Ellie hopefully.

And actually, that's almost what happened. Some men came over and unhitched the cart from the pony as the cameras pointed at Vanessa, who was skipping over to pet it (the pony, not the cart). They moved the cart to the side and pulled down

some glittering covers over the wheels so it looked like a fancy table. Lots of camera flashes started going off as people tried to take photos. The pony looked crosser and crosser and then, when Vanessa flung her arms around its neck so the camera crew could get a close up, it just lost its temper (who could blame it?) and sort of reared up. Vanessa shrieked and fell back, but unfortunately (for her, not for us – we found this all very entertaining) she fell right back into the cart/table. Which meant she fell right back into the giant pile of cupcakes, which tumbled to the ground along with Vanessa herself.

It was madness. Vanessa was lying there on a pile of squashed cakes, covered in more of the cakes, shrieking all the while and kicking her legs about. Meanwhile, the pony had made a bid for freedom and was trotting across the room at a scarily fast pace.

'Oh my God,' said Cass. 'It's heading our way! Come on!'

She jumped off her chair, and so did I, but it was like Alice was frozen. She just stood there, petrified, staring at the pony.

'Come on, Alice!' I shouted. And then she jumped. But she was in such a panic she didn't land properly. Instead, she sort of fell off the chair and crashed onto the ground.

Everyone screamed, including me, but Alice herself didn't. She just lay there looking very white and scared.

'Oh my God,' I said in horror. 'She's dead!'

'No I'm not,' said Alice, feebly. 'But ... ow! OW! I think ... ow ... I think something's happened to my wrist.' She tried to sit up as Sarah the producer pushed her way through the crowd (the pony, by the way, had been captured and taken out by its keepers. It looked very pleased with itself.). The cameras, I noticed, were still focused on Vanessa, who was trying to stand up but kept slipping on the cupcakes.

'Oh God, this is all we need,' muttered Sarah. 'No, don't move!' she said to Alice. 'We'll have to get an ambulance.'

'I don't think I need an ambulance,' said Alice. 'I mean, it's just my wrist.'

'Better safe than sorry,' said Sarah. 'I'll get the first-aid team anyway.' She helped Alice get up and sit in the chair she'd just fallen off.

By this stage, Vanessa was upright. She didn't seem to have hurt herself (probably because the cakes broke her fall). But she was, of course, in a rage. Sarah's assistant stayed with us as Sarah moved back to the camera crew. 'Keep shooting!' she cried. 'Vanessa, can you tell us how you're feeling?'

'How do you think I'm feeling!' screamed Vanessa, stamping a sparkly foot. She went on roaring at the camera while

her minion Caroline nervously tried to tell her that everything wasn't that bad. I'm glad that she now knows the awfulness of falling over embarrassingly in public, after the fuss she made when I did it.

But I wasn't thinking about that at the time. I was just thinking about poor Alice. The first aider had checked her out and agreed that there didn't seem to be anything seriously wrong but that she should go to hospital straight away. So she was taken off in one of the crew's fancy jeep things to hospital while the rest of us just sat there.

'Do you think she'll be okay?' asked Cass, nervously.

'Well, they did say it was just her wrist,' I said. But still, that's bad enough. She did look very pale and stunned.

The party didn't last long after that. I think the TV people just wanted to get lots of footage of Vanessa going mad. The band didn't bother playing. The caterers brought out more trays of food so we all just hung around for an hour or so eating it and talking. Jane had found us after Alice was taken away and apologised for what she'd just taken part in.

'I had no choice,' she said. 'But you should know that I did want to get sick throughout.'

'So did we,' said Cass.

'I nearly did,' I said.

We exchanged numbers with Jane and promised to text her to tell her how Alice is. She suggested meeting up with her and her best friend from school some time, which would be cool. Then Sarah took up a microphone.

'Thanks so much, everyone, for coming to Vanessa's big birthday bash.'

'If you put this on TV, I'll sue!' shrieked Vanessa in the background.

Sarah turned to her and whispered, but loudly enough for the mike to pick it up, 'You can't, Vanessa, it's all in the contract.' She turned back to all of us. 'I have to remind you all that you can't post any photos or video from tonight online until after the show airs. That's all part of the agreement you and your parents signed. Anyway, the buses have arrived to take home the girls from St Dominic's and the theatre class. Have a good evening.'

We all started filing out of the house. As we did, the camera crew started coming around to people and asking them to tell them what we thought of the party.

'Ooh,' said Cass. 'I hope they come up to us.'

And then they did.