

nickelodeon.

THAT GIRL
Lay Lay

FREESTYLIN' AT THE FAIR

BY RHIANNON RICHARDSON

ILLUSTRATED BY DEANDRA HODGE

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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◆◆◆ CHAPTER 1 ◆◆◆

HARPER AND I WERE ON the edge of our seats. As Ms. Ortega's first class of the day, we would be the first to hear the decision about the upcoming Woodlawn Middle School Fair. After a week and four days of nonstop rain and thunderstorms, we would find out whether the fair would be indoors this year—for the first time *ever*.

Don't get me wrong—rain is important! I knew the flowers were going to be on point now that they'd had something to sip on. But I did not want the

fair to get rained out . . . or, I guess, rained in. The fair is one of the best events of the year. Students get to make the booths, and there's always a bomb performance on opening night to kick off the weekend.

This year, I'll be performing at the fair as That Girl Lay Lay! I love that I can still be myself when I walk the school halls, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't excited to show my friends and classmates what I'm all about onstage. That's why this year has to be perfect . . . and outside!

"How is she so calm?" Harper whispered. She seemed just as anxious as I felt.

Harper and I had met up with our besties Akila, Riley, and Giana at our lockers before coming to class. *Everyone* was on edge, waiting to hear the fate of the fair. No doubt our friends were currently checking their phones every few seconds for our promised update text.

"I don't know, but she's gonna have to spill soon because I cannot take this," I huffed. I fanned myself dramatically with my language arts homework. "For once the bell for class to start can't ring soon enough."

Ms. Ortega was at her desk, reading and sipping on an iced coffee. When the bell finally rang, the room went quiet. Usually, Ms. Ortega gives us some time to finish talking and then she'll ring her gong to call our attention. But today, she froze with her mallet midair when she realized she already had all eyes on her.

“Well, good morning!”

She stood up and moved to the center of the room.

“How are we today, class?”

She looked at each of us, her rose-tinted smile warm and inviting.

“Honestly, I'm not doing so great, Ms. Ortega,” someone said behind me.

I, along with everyone else, started to turn around. I caught Harper rolling her eyes and knew exactly who it was that had called out.

Terrell was slouched at his desk, limp and acting dramatic.

“Well, what's got you down, Terrell?” Ms. Ortega asked. She rested a hand on her hip.

Terrell sat up, folding his hands like he was about

to beg or pray. “Ms. Ortega, I am so stressed! I have got to know . . . Will the fair be inside or outside this year?”

We all snapped our attention back to the front of the room. For once, Terrell’s goofiness was about to get us somewhere.

Ms. Ortega relaxed a little, and her smile grew three sizes.

“Well, Terrell, that is a good question—”

“Please tell us!” someone else called out.

That unleashed a wave of whining and pleading, giving Ms. Ortega an excuse to use her gong after all.

The gentle ring brought us all back to focus.

“Okay, okay. I’m not going to torture you any longer. I know how important the fair is to everyone. And as faculty chair of the student council, it’s important to me, too. That’s why I’ve decided that the fair will be . . . outside!”

“Whoooo!” I cheered along with the rest of the class. Harper and I high-fived, and when Sofia Montalvo held her hand out from the desk behind me, I high-fived her, too!

“Of course, we don’t know what the weather will be like on the actual day,” Ms. Ortega explained. “But after all that rain, the forecast for the coming days looks like clear skies. So it’s safe to plan for the fair to be outdoors.”

“This is gonna be great!” Sofia squealed.

“It is!” Ms. Ortega agreed. “It’s especially important since we’re hoping for a big turnout this year.”

“Don’t we want a big turnout every year?” Harper asked.

“Yes, but this year Woodlawn Middle School is donating all the proceeds from the fair to save the Woodlawn Food Bank,” Ms. Ortega admitted, some of the excitement leaving her tone.

Even though everyone got a little caught up in the news, Ms. Ortega’s words had my attention.

“Wait a minute. Why does the food bank have to be saved?” I asked.

“Oh, I know, I know!” Sofia’s voice was practically in my ear as she leaned forward. I glanced back to see her arm raised, hand flapping in the air.

Ms. Ortega nodded at her to share with us.

“During the storms, a tree fell on the food bank. The whole roof caved in!”

A few people in class gasped.

“What?!”

“Oh my gosh!”

“Was anyone hurt?”

Ms. Ortega used her gong once more. Once we were quiet, she set the record straight and explained that the building had been closed. No one was inside when the tree fell. But the roof really *had* caved in, so the food bank had to move to a temporary space.

I tried to picture it: a whole tree falling on top of a building, crushing the roof. The thought gave me chills.

“They’re operating out of Woodlawn Baptist Church until they can raise the money for repairs. With the fair right around the corner, the student council decided this would be the perfect cause to donate to,” Ms. Ortega explained. “So all of you will be helping the food bank with your booths for the fair. And you can sign up to volunteer with the

food bank as well. They could use the extra help right now, and the school has agreed to lead groups of students on Wednesday afternoons since those are early-release days.”

I looked over to find Harper already looking at me. We nodded, silently agreeing to volunteer. We’d have to get Riley, Akila, and Giana on board, too. Now I was even more excited about the fair. Between me and my girls, I knew our booth was going to be amazing . . . whatever it turned out to be!



By third-period theater class, word had gotten around about the fair. As Akila and I made our way to Ms. Duncan’s room after math class, I caught bits and pieces of conversations up and down the hall. Sofia was talking to another girl about a Broadway trivia game for their booth, and I overheard some of the kids from Giana’s STEM club whispering about a ring toss game.

I couldn’t wait to reunite with my girls so we

could get brainstorming. Akila and I slid into our seats at the same table as Giana, Riley, and Harper. I opened my mouth to speak, but I heard Riley's voice instead.

"You don't have to say it, Lay Lay," she said. "Harper already told us about signing up for volunteering—"

"Okay, but did you pick—"

"The same slot as you guys?" Giana asked. "Yes, girl, chill."

She laughed.

"Okay, okay," I said, throwing my hands up. "There's nothing wrong with making sure we're all on the same page. Speaking of which, we need to figure out what we're doing for our booth!"

"Lay Lay's right," Giana said. "We have two weeks before the fair."

"And I wanna win the secret competition," Akila added, twirling her pencil.

"What secret competition?" Riley asked as she pulled out her notebook.

"I think Reggie was talking about it in computer science," Giana said.

“Every year, there’s a secret competition for the best booth,” Akila explained. “Whichever booth collects the most tickets at the end is the winner.”

“That has us written all over it,” I said with full confidence. Between the five of us, we could bring any bomb idea to life.

“Lay Lay.” Harper laughed a little. “We don’t even know what we’re doing yet. How do you know we’re going to win?”

“Confidence is key,” I told her, spitting straight facts. “I’m manifesting a fun booth that raises a lot of money and is so fire it’s the best at the whole fair. No cap.”

“I can hop on that,” Akila said, backing me up.

“Me too!” Giana, Harper, and Riley agreed one by one.

Before we could all dive into a full-blown brainstorm, Ms. Duncan pulled our attention to her.

“I know with today’s news about the fair that we’re all excited and inspired,” she said. “I love that energy! I promise you’ll have time to work on your booths for the fair. I’ll even give you time in

class to use some of the theater department materials. But that time is not right now. Okay?”

She stopped at the front of the room and grabbed a stack of worksheets. As Ms. Duncan passed out the papers, it was clear that our brainstorm session was officially on hold.