

Bestselling author of the Georgia Nicolson series

Louise  
Rennison

A MIDSUMMER  
TIGHTS  
DREAM

more (boy snogging)

misadventures  
of Tallulah Casey



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Louise  
Rennison



HarperCollins Children's Books

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# CHAPTER 1

## Back on the showbiz express



**P**erforming Arts College, here I come again! Hold on to your tights!! Because I am holding on to mine, I can tell you. Which makes it difficult to go to the loo, but that is the price of fame!!! And fame is my game!

Once more I am chugging back to Dother Hall. Or ‘the theatre of dreams’ as Sidone Beaver, the principal, calls it. I am truly on the showbiz express of life.

Well, the stopping train to Skipleigh. The Entertainment Capital of the North. Or home of the West Riding Otter, as some not showbiz people call it. I don’t think they mean that only a big fat otter lives in the town, although you never know!

Hooray and chug-a-lug-a-doo-dah!!!

I feel like shouting out to the heavens. I think I will. I can now because the grumpy woman with the stick got off at the last stop. Oh the Northern folk with their jolly Northern ways. She was so grumpy about her gammy leg. She said the stick had worn down on one side so that she fell over on strong winds. I didn’t ask her any of this, she just told me. But hey-nony-no, as Shakespeare said, I am going to pull down the window and shout out loud:

“The name is, Tallulah. Tallulah Casey!!!! And I’m back. I’m moving up! Moving on up! Nothing can stop me! Yes, I used to be shy and gangly with nobbly knees and no sticky-out bits. No corks. I was corkerless. I didn’t even wear a corker holder. But now even my corks are on the move!!!”

Especially when the train keeps stopping unexpectedly. What now? Maybe the West Riding Otter is on the line. The tannoy is crackling but I can only hear heavy breathing and snuffling. Lawks mercy, the wild otter has hijacked the train!

He wants to make people understand that otters have feelings too, they’re not just furry fools—

Oomph.

~~Ooooooh blimey, I nearly shot into the opposite seat then because we're lurching off again.~~

Woo-hoo!

Anyway, I'm being giddy about the otter. He can't really be driving the train because he couldn't reach the driving wheel. Unless he's got stilts. And it doesn't say Skipley is the home of the West Riding Circus Otter. With his big shoes.

I don't care about the otter driver! Live and let live I say.

Uh-oh, the tannoy is crackling again.

"Sorry about that, ladies and gentlemen, I momentarily lost hold of my pie. Next stop Skipley."

We're just passing Grimbottom Peak. Brr. It looks so dark and forbidding up there. I'm surprised it's not pouring down with rain and... it is pouring down with rain.

Crumbs, it's like the lights have been turned off. You can hardly see Grimbottom. The locals say that when daytrippers are up there the fog can come down in minutes. Mr Bottomley at the post office once told me and Flossie:

"One minute t'daytrippers are up there on't top, playing piggy in't middle like barm pots. The next it's so dark they can't even see t'ball. And it's in their hand. Hours later the grown ups stumble home but the little'uns are nivver seen no more. Sometimes late at night tha can hear 'em up the wailing, 'Mummeee... Dadeeeee...' All them lost bairns, speaking from beyond the grave."

Flossie said, "That's rubbish. There's a massive wild dog up there called Fang. Half dog, half donkey, and it comes out in the fog and takes the children and raises them as its puppies."

In my opinion, even though I haven't known her for long, my new friend Flossie is what is commonly known as 'mad'.

But mad or not, I am really really excited about seeing her and my new mates again. Vaisey and Flossie and little Jo and Honey, who can't say her 'r's, but knows everything about boys. She says she always has "two or thwee on the go".

We can go into the woods near Dother Hall again, to our special place! And gather round our special tree. Our special tree where we met the boys from Woolfe Academy when they surprised us doing our special dance that Honey taught us. She said we had to be proud of all of ourselves, even the bits we didn't like. It was a "showing our inner glory" dance. Or "inner glorwee" as Honey called it. Which in my case was hurling my legs around shouting, "I love my knees, I love them!!!"

Not quite as embarrassing as Vaisey waggling her bottom at the tree, but close.

The Woolfe Academy boys, well Charlie and Phil, call us the "Tree Sisters".

Charlie said to me... Well, I won't think about Charlie. Not after what happened after he kissed me.

Where was I in my performing life? Oh yes, when I got to Dother Hall I couldn't do anything. The others could sing and dance and act but all I could do was be tall and do a bit of Irish dancing.

I was convinced that I would never be asked back and that I would never wear the golden slippers of applause. Things changed when Blaise Fox, the dance tutor, saw my Sugar Plum Bike performance. My ballet based on The Sugar Plum Fairy only done on a bicycle. The one when my ballet skirt got caught in the back wheel, and I accidentally shot off my bike and destroyed the backstage area. I remember what she said.

She said: "Tallulah Casey, watching you is like watching someone whose pants are on fire." Then she asked me to play Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* at the end of last term. And the rest is showb

legend.

~~Heathcliff's Irish dancing solo was a triumph!!! And also, not so easy in tight trousers.~~

I still don't know why she cast me as Heathcliff though.

Perhaps I really do look like a boy?

If I look down and squint my eyes a bit I can definitely see pimply bumps in the corker area.

No one can argue with that. The front of a jumper never lies.

My jumper is one of the ones Cousin Georgia and her Ace Gang chose for me. It's green and she says it goes with my eyes and gives me *je ne sais quoi*.

Well, she actually said, "It says 'ummmmmmm' but not 'oooohhhh, look at me, I'm a tart'."

Nearly at Skipley. I'm so excited. This is going to be my Winter of Love, I can tell.

When I stayed with Cousin Georgia on my way back from summer school it was brilliant. I haven't really spent a lot of time with her before because of being in Ireland and having crap parents who actually do stuff. Not just bake tarts or DIY like everyone else's parents. Not good old boring stuff. My mum goes off and paints and my dad goes off exploring to find endangered things. He collects molluscs mostly but I think last time he found a rare hairy potato. He's like a cross between David Bellamy and... a Labrador. That is not a proper dad in anyone's language.

That's a Labradad.

Hee. I think that might very nearly be a joke.

I'm going to put it into my performance art notebook that I will be keeping.

I've got a special new notebook with a black glossy cover and some plums on the front of it.

It's really arty, and er... fruity.

I've already made my first entry.

It says:

*Winter of Love.*

I'll just add my "Labradad" idea.

*Labradad. A portrait of a dad who is half pipe smoking bloke and half Labrador. He's confused between the two worlds. Between pipes and sticks. I'm thinking an improvised dance piece. Perhaps the Labradad fetching sticks. Or pipes?*

*Or ducks?*

Hmmmm.

I love my parents but they're not normal. Or around much. But they have let me come back to Dother Hall – even though I'm not allowed to board.

It was great staying with Cousin Georgia. It was brilliant on the boy front as well.

She got her Ace Gang round to teach me "wisdomosity" and also "snogging techniques". We were tucked up in her bed, which was cosy.

Georgia said, "Have a jammy dodger and give us the goss snogwise."

All the gang were wearing false beards to help me get into the mood.

So... I told her about going to the cinema in Skipley with some boys from Woolfe Academy. I told her about my first kiss. With floppy Ben. And how it was like having a little bat trapped in my mouth.

Her Ace Gang looked at me. Then Georgia said, "Are you a fool with just a hint of an idiot thrown in?"

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Then they gave me their wisdomosity about boys. And snogging.

Gosh, Georgia knows a lot.

About varying pressure of the lips, what to do with your tongue, (don't waggle it about like a fool), the scoring system for snogging, (Number 1 to Number 10, I can't remember all of them but I do remember Number 4 is "a kiss lasting over three minutes without a break". You need a mate for that one, so that they can time it for you.).

Honestly. I couldn't believe it.

I'm dying to try out my new skills.

The amount she knew, she must have spent most of her time doing snogging research.

I said that to her and she said, "I did, my strange gangly coussy. But I have put aside snogging to teach you the ways of boydom. I do it because I luuurve you. But not in a lezzie way."

Which is good.

I think.

What is a "lezzie way"?

I think it's to do with girl snogging.

But I didn't ask.

Oh chuggy-chug-chug. Come on, train!!!

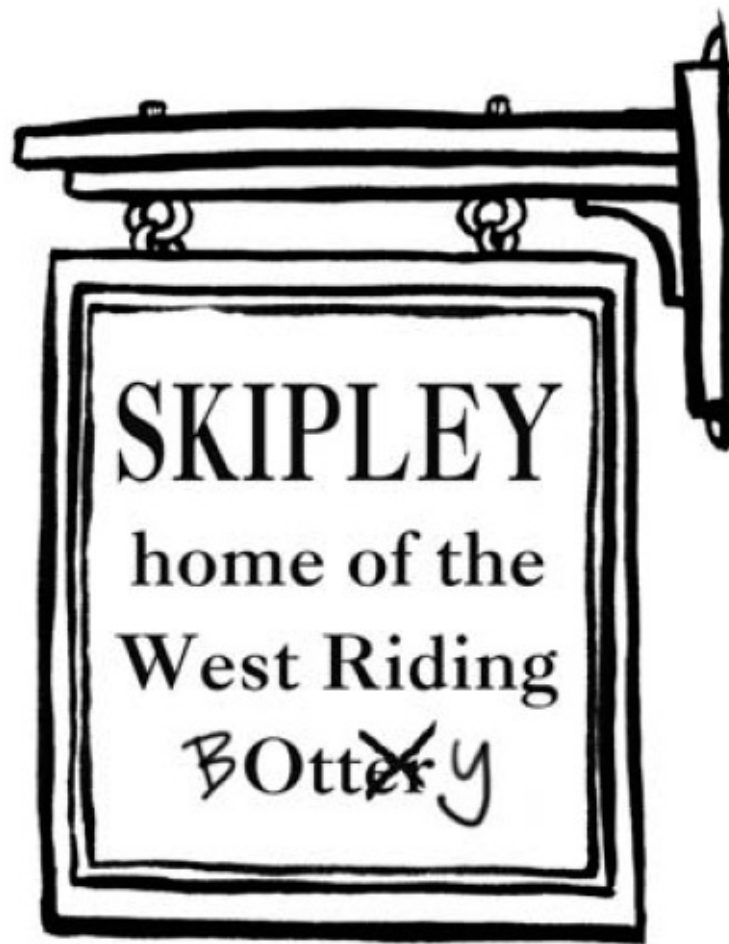
I wonder what time the rest of the Tree Sisters will arrive tomorrow? I can ask Honey about the lezzie thing, she will know.

Oh, here we are at the train station. Hurrah!!! There's its sign swinging in the biting gale force wind. Just as I remember:

**Skipley Home of the West Riding Otter.**

Hang on a minute, some Northern vandal has painted a "b" and a "y" over the otter bit. So now it reads:





I have just got off the showbiz express and now I am getting on the bus of hope. Which will transport me to... The Theatre of Dreams.

I can see the bus driver through the closed door, sitting in the driver's seat. I recognise him from last term. I wonder if he recognises me?

As I hauled my bag on board up the steps he put the pipe to one side of his mouth and shouted, "Stop messing about and get on if you're getting on, merry legs. It's bloody parky with that door open."

I said, "Why did you call me merry legs?"

He said, "Because you're lanky and your legs are all over the shop."

I paid my fare and he said, "Come back to prat around like a fool at Dither Hall again, have you?"

Before I could say, "It's Dother Hall, actual—" he accelerated off so violently that I shot down to the end of the bus and almost ended up in a small child's pushchair. Luckily there wasn't a small child in it, just a pig.

The woman with the pushchair said, "Mind my pig."

I am huddled up well away from her, but I think I can still smell pig poo.

We bumped along the road to Heckmondwhite. The driver is careering along sounding his horn whenever there is anything in his way on the road. Pedestrians. Bicyclists. A cow pat. But he slowed down behind a lollipop lady who was walking home. With her sign. She tried to let him pass but he cheerily waved her on and drove slowly behind her. Then for no reason when we got to a sharp corner he revved up and blasted his horn and she fell into a hedge. He was laughing so much I thought he might swallow his pipe.

I couldn't help being excited. This is like a postcard of a winter scene in Yorkshire. There is even some snow on the top of Grimbottom Peak. And I shivered as I thought about Fang up there. Raising his fictitious children as fictitious puppies.

# CHAPTER 2

## Winter of Love



We arrived at the bus stop in Heckmondwite just as it was getting dark. In my Dother Hall brochure it says, “Heckmondwite has its own ‘zany’ cosmopolitan atmosphere.”

I don’t know that most people would call a village green and a post office and a pub called The Blind Pig “zany”. Unless you counted the knitted flags over the village hall.

I bet the Dobbins, my substitute parents, have got something to do with that.

Maybe I should just nip quickly over to the pub and see my fun-sized friend Ruby and my four-legged mate Matilda, her bulldog? I could give her the lipstick I’ve bought her. Not Matilda, Ruby. Dogs don’t wear make-up. But what they do wear is the little ballet tutu I have got for her from ‘Pets Party’ shop. I hope it will go round her waist. She is quite porky in the middle.

And anyway, even if Rubes was out I could leave the presents with her older brother Alex. Alex is the dream boy. Alex with his long limbs and his longish thick chestnut hair. And his two eyes. And his back and front... and everything. And we could chat about performing arts. He’s gone off to Liverpool to do rep there and I could chat about my performance plans. Maybe discuss my Labradad idea.

Maybe not. I don’t want him to think of me as a bloke with a pipe fetching sticks.

Yes, I could pop to see Ruby. And whilst I was popping about maybe Alex her very gorgeous brother would pop up and that would be popstastic and I could say, “What a surprise, Alex, I was just popping by to...”

“Lullah! Lullah, yoo-hoo, it’s me!!!! And the twins!!!!”

Dibdobs. In her Brown Owl uniform, coming towards me. No, not just coming towards me. Skipping towards me.

The twins were wearing knitted yellow knickerbockers.

I bet Mr Dobbins (Harold) knitted them at one of his “inner woman” groups. Harold goes to the men’s group and they try to find their hidden feminine side.

Uuumph. As I have said before, I am sure Dibdobs has got a “hugging” badge. She’s got badges for everything else, moth conservation, vole watching, pond life, etc.

She almost crushed me to death with her bosom and her badges. And her new whistle.

I couldn’t actually see anything when she was hugging me, but I could feel hugging going on around my knee area as well.

That would be the twins, Max and Sam.

They love my knees.

Probably because that is as far up as their toddler arms can hug.

I don't get a lot of hugging at home.

~~My little brother Connor likes kicking mostly. I hugged him when I left and he said, "Don't be s~~  
gay". Grandma does a lot of patting. But quite often she's off target with that and thinks she is patting me when actually it's the cushion next to me.

Dibdobs was talking really loudly and quickly like she does. She's so keen on everything.

It's nice really. Just odd.

"Oh, Lullah, it's soooooo lovely to have you back. I've missed you. We've all missed you. Haven't we, boys?"

The boys stood there blinking from underneath their pudding basin haircuts.

And sucking their dodies.

They don't get any less odd.

Dibdobs said, "The boys have made something for you. Haven't you, boys?"

She adores the twins, she thinks they are covering up their cleverness. She thinks they are little tiny little brain surgeons in tiny twits clothing.

Max and Sam blinked at me. And kept on sucking.

Then Max (or Sam) took his dodie out and said, "Sjuuuuge one for ooo."

I said, "Oh, well, that's nice I..."

Dibdobs said, "Tell Lullah what you've made for her."

Sam said, "Sjuuuuge."

Dibdobs started slightly losing her rag. "Yes, yes, it is quite big... but TELL Lullah what it is."

Sam blinked and looked a bit cross, like he had suddenly realised he had a Brown Owl for mother. He put his hands on his hips and stamped his foot and said, "SJJJUUUUGEEE."

And Max shouted, "BOGIES!!!!"

Dibdobs went even redder.

She bent down so she could look them both in the eyes and said sternly, "Now, that is a silly, silly word, that big boys don't say any more."

Max and Sam blinked together and smiled. Great Jumping Jehovah, they look like sock animals when they smile.

Dibdobs took their hands and we all walked back to the house. She was chatting on sixteen to the dozen. But I could still hear Max and Sam softly singing, "Bogie, bogie, bogie, bogie, bogie."

Dibdobs said, "Harold is so looking forward to seeing you, he's out tonight with the interknitting group. After the success of the communal skipping rope, you know, the skipathon when the whole village skipped?"

Oh yes, I remembered that.

She was chattering on.

"Well, he's got big plans for knitting the village together for Christmas. Won't that be fun?"

When we got back to Dandelion Cottage the twins present turned out to be some bits of feather stuck into a potato.

Max said, "Fevver man for ooo."

Lovely.

Also there was a postcard addressed to me care of the Dobbins. It was from Honey! It just said:

*Dear Tallulah,*

*Something WEALLY exciting has happened!!!!*

*See you when I get there on Wednesday and tell you all about it!!!*

*Honey xxx*

---

It didn't really say "weally" on the postcard, but I could hear her voice in my head.

I wonder what she means?

Maybe she's got five boyfriends now?!

I took my luggage (and "Fevver man") up into my room while Dibdobs went to make some tea.

So here I am back in my old squirrel room. Sitting on my wooden bed with the squirrel carved into the bedhead. With my feather potato. I've brought back my squirrel slippers; the ones that Dibdobs gave me when I first came. She said they were to make me feel at home.

Which they would have done, had my home been in an oak tree.

I put the squirrel slippers into the bed for company. Well, one looks like a squirrel and the other one looks like a hamster. My brother, Connor, set fire to one of the tail bits so it's just a stump.

I looked around at the familiar carved wooden wardrobe (acorn theme) and the wooden dressing table (with the carved squirrel legs) and the wooden, well, everything really. You name it, if it was in the room, it was wooden.

But wood was OK. Everything was OK.

I put my case on the bed and started to unpack. Georgia and her Ace Gang helped me choose clothes to suit my shape. Like dark tights and bright little skirts. And hats. The Ace Gang said I needed to de-emphasise my bad bits (nobbly knees) and emphasise my good bits (catty eyes and nice swishy black hair). Georgia said to distract boys from my knee area I should swish my hair almost constantly. (Although not to fiddle with my fringe, because she personally thought that was a killing offence.)

I hung all my stuff in the wooden wardrobe.

I even have a special underwear drawer. With bras in it. Oh yes!!!

Yes, I now officially wear corker holders.

And what's more, I have corkers to put in them!!

I've got the tiniest corker appliances you can get (30a) but I have high hopes for a growth spurt when I start tap dancing my way to the top of the showbiz ladder. Not that I can tap dance but I could do something on the ladder, I'm sure. It's just a question of finding it and not falling off the ladder in the meantime. Even though you can't see the ladder.

I'm putting my new shiny, fruity performance art notebook under my pillow for when I come up with more whizzo creative projects. I can't wait to see Dr Lightowler's face when she has to hand me my golden slippers of applause!

She doesn't like me. I don't know why. It was after I did my owl laying an egg mime in her class. I think she took against me then.

Maybe she thought I was pretending to be her. She said I was silly, and shouldn't be at Dotham Hall.

She's in for a surprise when she gets to see how unsilly I can be.

I'm going to put my corker measuring tape in my corker-holder drawer, next to my corker holders.

I wonder if my corkers have grown since I last measured them?

I did a sneaky measuring in the lavatory on the train, which is only about three hours ago, but growing could happen any time, couldn't it?

It could happen the minute after you took the corker-measuring tape measure away.

~~Anyway, I am not going to risk doing a measure, it would be just my luck for the lunatic twins come barging in.~~

Last term, unfortunately I tried my method in front of the window. And Cain Hinchcliff was out there in the undergrowth, snogging some village girl, and he'd seen me, seen me doing my method. He'd seen me rubbing my corks with my hiking socks on my hands.

To make them grow.

My corks not the socks.

The socks were huge.

Best not to think about it.

I shivered at the memory.

Still, that was all in the past.

Dibdobs shouted up, "Tea's ready!!! Boys!! Tallulah! Split splat!!!"

I shook my hair and gave it a bit of a va-va voom.

When I opened my door, there they were. The twins. Blinking and sucking on their dodies. As they knew that I had nearly measured my corks.

Perhaps they have a corker-sensing gene.

Perhaps all boys do.

What a horrific thought.

After tea (local eggs and a local sausage), I said, "I'm just going to pop to The Blind Pig to see Ruby and then we might pop and visit the owlets."

I've entered the "popping zone" again. I like it. It's very me.

As I went out of the door Dibdobs said, "Put this hat on in case of rain. It's my camping hat."

I said, "I'll be all ri—"

But she was ramming the waterproof hat on my head, completely squashing my va-va-voom hair. I'd have to not take it off now in case of hat hair.

Dobbins said, "Ooooooh, look at you!! You're gorgeous. You've grown! Oooohhhh."

And she hugged me again.

And so did the boys.

It's very hard to walk when you've got three people doing hugging.

Was it going to happen every time I went out?

Maybe the right thing to do was to hug them back and then they would let me go.

But that made it worse.

Dibdobs started hugging more tightly and I think she might have been crying.

I got away at last by saying, "Bye then!!!"

I was only going three feet across the green, what if we went on a school trip?

The Blind Pig was all quiet when I got to it. The sign (a pig in dark glasses with a white stick) was creaking in the cold wind.

I remembered last sitting here.

On the wall next to the pub.

With Alex.

Dreamy Alex.

He'd looked at me and smiled his smile. It was the best moment of my life so far. We were s

close. I wanted to say so much. I wanted my eyes to speak the words I couldn't say. Which actually might have been a bit of a surprise to both of us. If they had done.

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So I said to him, "My knees are too far up."

Why?

Why would you say that?

And then he had wanted to look at my knees and the whole thing had gone wrong, leaving him thinking I was just a stupid little kid. With out-of-control legs.

Well, I will not be saying that sort of thing to him again.

In fact I'm going to make a "normal" list in my performance art notebook.

Topics that a normal person would talk about.

Topics that are not knee-based.

Like theatre.

Yes, yes, I will tell him about the plays I have seen.

Well, actually I haven't seen any plays.

Books, then. Yes, books.

I could say, "That Dickens writes a lot, doesn't he?"

Ruby came bursting out of the pub door.

"I saw you through the winder. Ullo ullo. It's me!!!! And Matilda!!!!"

Matilda was barking and throwing herself at me, jumping up. Well, sort of. She was just thudding against my calves to be fair. Her bulldoggy face looks like she is doing a turned down squashy smile all the time. Maybe she is.

Ruby was laughing and her pigtails were jiggling about like ears underneath her hat.

She was still yelling, "Ullo ullo!!!"

It was so nice to see her little freckly face and gappy teeth.

She was skipping around me and shouting, "She's back, she's back!!! Matilda, show Looby lulla how tha can die for England!"

Matilda stopped leaping and lay on her back with her stumpy bow legs in the air.

Ruby said, "Do your Irish dancing over her. She likes that. Go on. I'll do the singing. Hiddly diddly diddly. Hiddly diddly diddly."

As she was bobbing around she said, "You should see the owlets! Shall we go for a wander now? You'll not believe it, they've got right fat. Come on, come on."

As she went skipping off, I said, "Should you tell your dad where you're going? Or... or... Alex?"

She shouted back, "He's not in, he's forming a heavy metal band in Ormskirk."

What?

I caught up with her crossing the green.

I said, "Alex has formed a heavy metal band in Ormskirk? But—"

She said, "Not Alex tha barm pot, Alex has gone off t'college. Me dad. You should see him in his band stuff. He's got these right tight leather trousers. It's horrible, and sometimes he can't get them off. Or walk up stairs in them."

As we went down by the side of the sheep field, I said, "I didn't even know your dad could play guitar."

"Believe me – he can't – but he can shout bloody loud and he's got his own Viking helmet. It's a tribute band."

I said, "What to? Vikings?"

And she said, "No, it's a tribute band to pies. They're called 'The Iron Pies'."

~~I hope I never have to see them.~~

So no Alex around then.

I sighed.

No Mr Darcy to look at and try out my new boy skills on.

As we walked along I said, "Rubes, do you think my knees have got less nobblier?"

Ruby stopped hopping and looked at them. Then she bent down and knocked my knee with her fist. Quite hard. I said, "Owww."

She said, "Aye, I think they av a bit."

Then she looked up at me.

"I tell thee what, that corker rubbing has worked a bit too. Tha looks like you've got two walnuts down your jumper. You haven't, have you?"

We were passing by the back of the Dobbins house, it seemed so familiar to be back here, but so much had changed. I was a woman now with womanly bits. And womanly bits' holders. In various colours.

Ruby said, "Ay up, what did tha mean in your letter? You know, you said you would tell me about Charlie when you saw me."

Hmmmm. I felt a bit sad when I thought about Charlie.

Ruby said, "Yes, you thought he thought you were a long lanky twit and that, didn't you?"

I said, "Er, Ruby. No, I didn't think he thought I was a long lanky twit, actually. I'm not a long lanky tw—"

At which point I caught my head a glancing blow on a low lying branch.

Ruby tried not to laugh. I rubbed my head as we walked on through the dark woods and crouched a bit.

Ruby said, "Go on then."

I wasn't her plaything, I was a sensitive human being. I said, "I think you're too young... I don't think you'd understand."

She said, "Well, I understood about Ben, when you said kissing him were like having a little bit trapped in your mouth."

She was going on, toddling around in front of me.

"Some boys are so useless at snogging. I don't know why they don't practise before they come bothering you. They could practise on... balloons or, or potatoes or a... melon or summat."

Balloons? There was a whole world of snogging I knew nothing about and Ruby was only eleven.

Actually, it was making me feel sad thinking about Charlie. I'd really liked him. He made me laugh. And I thought he sort of liked me.

We were at the barn by now. I wanted to make sure that Connie had gone off. I said to Rube, "I don't want my head pecked off by an enormous angry barn owl. It's not even as though she would peck it off at once and get it over and done with. I saw her eat a mouse head first, bit by bit. Till only its tail was hanging out of her beak."

Ruby crept off and opened the barn door while I crouched behind a bush.

I noticed Matilda sat down behind me.

Ruby came back skipping and said, "They're on their own, come in!!!"

I went into the barn and when my eyes adjusted to the dark I could see them. Our owlets!!! Little Ruby and Little Lullah. Our little owlets.

Little owlets? They were HUGE! We spent an hour with the furry freaks. They can flutter about now, although they do crash into the walls. And they swooped down on to our hats. I think they love us and think we are their stupid friends who don't even know how to fly. Well, maybe I can't fly but

don't poo myself all the time. I said to Ruby, "Look they are pooing while they are eating."

~~Ruby said, "Ah know, sometimes you can see little mouse claws in the poo pellets."~~

It was getting cold and late, so Ruby put them back on their hay pile. I didn't want to handle them in case I was involved in a poo situation. But they were so sweet and they fluffed their feathers up to make themselves look bigger. And did head swivelling, to show off how far they could swivel. I feel proud of them.

I said to Ruby as we left them, cheeping away in the dark, "Little Lullah looks like me, don't you think?"

As she pulled her hat down she said, "Don't make me have to say owt to me dad about you sayin' an owlet looks like you."

It was spooky down the dark lane with the noises in the fields and the rain and moaning wind. There were strange rustlings in the trees and a far off hooting.

Ruby huddled into her jacket and threw a stick for Matilda. Matilda looked at the stick as it flew over her head. Then she just went on toddling along. She knows that it's not a biscuit, so why would she bother to go and get it?

Ruby said, "The Hinchcliffs have had a reight big fight. They smashed the Bottomleys outdoor lavatory when they fell into it."

I tutted.

Typical.

"What were they fighting about this time? Who was the stupidest?"

Ruby said, "No, Ruben found out that Cain had been laiking around with his girlfriend."

I tutted again.

Ruby went on.

"Cain made it worse by saying he was only doing Ruben a favour because she was a real marvellous bum. And thick."

Charming.

As we got back to the Dobbins gate Ruby said, "Oh, I forgot, Alex gi' me a letter for thee but I left it in my room. I'll gi' it thee tomorrow."

I tried not to leap in the air or do Irish dancing. I said, "Oh well. You know I had better... er... walk you to your door because of the... night... er, stuff."

Ruby rolled her eyes at me.

"Come on then, soft lass."

We went across the green to The Blind Pig and Ruby ran up the back stairs to her room.

I was hovering around by the door. With a bit of luck, I wouldn't have to bump into Ted... at which point Ted Barraclough, Ruby's dad, came out of the front bar.

I couldn't help noticing he had a Viking helmet on.

And a guitar in his hand.

And was wearing a very tight pair of leather trousers. He was walking with small steps.

His whole big face lit up when he saw me. Oh dear.

"Well, what a lovely surprise – the thespian is back at last. Thank the Lord. Now then. Don't tell me, let me guess what you are pretending to be this time."

I said politely, "Hello, Mr Barraclough, I—"

He waved his helmet about.



“No, dun’t tell me, dun’t tell me... Are you a historic figure? I’m thinking the woolly tight  
Your rain hat, the slight roll as you walk. Are you Nelson? I’m right, aren’t I?”

I said, “I’m not doing mime I’m just collecting—”

“Ah, the good days are back again. I’ve missed you. I really have. You and your friends, the  
STUDENTS. Monday, I will once more hear the sound of you cantering to Dither Hall on your  
imaginary ponies.”

Actually, Vaisey did have an imaginary pony. Black Beauty.

Had he been spying on us?

Ruby came back and handed a letter to me.

“Don’t go daft.”

I took the letter and said to her, “Heeee heee, why should I go daft, it’s only a letter from, you  
know, a mate to another mate, heeee, I don’t know what you mean.”

She just looked at me and shook her hair.

Then she said to her dad, “How did The Iron Pies rehearsal go?”

He said, “Bloody marvellous. The Iron Pies are going to be the biggest thing this side  
Grimbottom. We are quite literally a sound sensation.”

Ruby said, “Oh yeah? How many songs have you got?”

“Well, fust of all, we’ve done some belters for the mums and dads. All with the original pie  
theme.”

Ruby said, “Like what?”

Mr Barraclough said, “The well-known James Bond themes, *For Your Pies Only*, *Golden Pie*, and  
*From Russia With a Pie*. Then a bit of a classic for the rockers, *Rock Around the Pie*. And a few  
standard Beatles numbers, *The Long and Winding Pie*, *All You Need is Pies*, *Lucy in the Pie with*  
*Diamonds*. We’ll be cracking. I’ll have groupies trying to get hold of my pies.”

I didn’t know what to say, and I also didn’t want to think about his pies any more... I was dying  
to read my letter. So I said I had to go because Dibdobs was waiting for me.

I ran across the green and into Dandelion Cottage. Harold was back from his knitting workshop  
and I had to do more hugging duties with him. Then I started yawning to give him the idea of beddy  
byes, but he said, “Tallulah, before you go up the wooden stairs to Noddsville, let me just show you  
my new cloak. It’s hand-knitted, and as you can see it has shell buttons.”

As he was swishing around modelling it for me, he said, “You see, the shells show many  
connection with the earth or, in this case, Skegness beach.”

At last I was in my squirrel room. I have my squirrel lamp switched on by my bed and outside the  
wind is howling across the moors. But I am snug inside with my letter.

My letter from the Dream Boy.

I paused before I opened it.

To drink in its atmosphere of boyness.

Then I sniffed it.

And licked it.

I don’t know why.

I’m turning into Matilda.

Ooooh. I can imagine him writing it. With a quill pen probably. A candle guttering late at night in his  
room. He is wearing his usual late-night wear – velveteen breeches and flouncy shirt. I don’t know

why his shirt is wet as he writes. Maybe he has been for a midnight swim. Or a late night, fully-clothed bath.

---

To cool his ardour and passions which are running riot.

He looks out of his window over the moonlit dales, thinking of me as he last saw me in last summer. My long dark tresses framing my face. Looking up at him with my green eyes. And as he looks long and deep into my eyes, I feel an urge to raise my bottom eyelids and...

Hang on a minute, I have changed into an owlet!!!

Get a grip, Tallulah!!

I opened the envelope.

Here goes:

*Dear Tallulah*

*Hello Green Eyes, welcome back to Heckmondwhite and the dizzy world of showbiz!*

*Well done for making it to the new term – personally, I think it was your spectacular Sugar Plum Biquey that did it. I don't think any of us who were there will forget your skirt catching in the back spokes, and you flying off into the backstage area.*

*Top.*

*I am off to Liverpool tonight to start my course but hope to see you in a couple of weeks when you come home. Good luck.*

*Knock 'em dead, but try not to break a leg! OR ANYONE ELSE'S.*

*Lots of love*

*Alex*

*xxx*

*Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm.*

Outside in the dark I can hear an owl hooting. It will be big Connie out there, collecting food for the owlets.

She is holding her own mouse massacre. Ruby says the owlets will start hunting for themselves in a week or two. Having to do their own hunting will be a shock for them. They probably think there is a big owl in the sky that just hands them stuff.

I don't think you would poo in front of the big owl in the sky. At the same time as eating. Pooing and eating doesn't seem right to me.

Still, what does make sense in Nature?

Anyway to heck with Nature.

I'm not interested in Nature, I am only interested in Alex.

Alex in his velveteen breeches.

And flouncy shirt.

Alex who said, "Hello Green Eyes."

And, "Hope to see you in a couple of weeks."

And who said, "Lots of love."

And put three kisses.

That Alex.

I am keeping his letter under my pillow.

Night-night dream boy.

Night-night world.



## CHAPTER 3

**I'm not an ice cream, I'm a human being!**



**T**he next day I woke up to the pitter-pattering of light hail on my window. It's nine o'clock but still so dark it could be night-time. I got out of my snuggly squirrel bed and had a look out of the window. Brrrr. This is the life, minus 50 degrees. There is a slight frost on the window. On the inside. When I rubbed it away I could see that even the sheep are huddling together for warmth.

And they are practically walking jumpers.

I don't know what to wear. Something cosy but glam. Thick tights and my new short green woollen skirt, black top and new leather over-the-knee boots?

And a hat so that the hail can't take all the bouncy bounce out of my hair.

I don't want the Tree Sisters to think I have let myself down.

When I was fully toggged up, I went downstairs into the kitchen.

Even though it is Antarctic conditions, the Dobbins have left a note to say they have gone out on their Earth Sky walk with the young Christian table tennis team. They were sorry I was missing it. Well, they are on their own there!

I had a crumpet and some honey and milky coffee. The honey is local of course. Harold is obsessed with local produce. I bet he knows the bees by name. And has made them little winter cloaks like his. And is paying their tuition fees to Bee Academy. So they can better themselves and get out of the worker bee trap.

Ooooooh, I am so excited my legs are wiggling around for no reason. They are uncontrollable. They might calm down when I shove them in my boots.

It feels great to have proper friends and to be on the brink of being a showbiz legend. Or, well,

being on the course.

~~I know it's childish but I wanted to dance and sing with pleasure. I only wish I could do either.~~

I feel soooo lucky to be here.

Anything goes in the crazy world of the-atre dahling. I might be discovered and asked to be Maria in *The Sound Of Music* in the West End. That would make Alex know I was proper girlfriend material, and not some little girl with nobbly knees.

I can imagine myself in the Swiss Alps actually. In a big flouncy dress dancing with goats. "*The hills are alive with the sound of music... lalalala... with songs they have sung for a thousand years...*"

I got bundled up in my coat and hat and left the house. I had to walk slightly bent because there was a mini gale blasting across the moors and fields. But at least it had stopped hailing.

The sheep were still huddled together against the wind.

Looking at me.

I shouted to the sheep. "I love you, my little woolly friends."

They didn't like it. They didn't want to be my friends. They wanted to be my unfriends. They shuffled off as a group and tried to get in the hedge. And looked at me from there.

They are very cross-eyed.

Maybe it is so they can see round corners?

That would be handy if there were wolves creeping up behind you.

Hang on, your eyes should go outwards to do that, not inwards so that you just see your own looming nose. How useful would that be?

Anyway, I can't be bothered about the animal kingdom, I am too busy being in a good mood. I'm going to do run-run-leap to *The Sound of Music* to keep me warm. Run, run, leap... "*The hills are alive with the sound of...*"

Oh great balls of fire. Leaning against the gate of the churchyard, like a great dark crow, was him. The Dark Force of Heckmondwhite. The Black Hearted Prince himself. Cain.

Cain Hinchcliff.

He was dressed all in black, a long black coat and black boots. He had his collar turned up against the wind. His hair is longer than when I last saw him. And it looks even blacker. He saw me, so he stopped leaping and started pretending that my boots were falling down. A half-smile crossed his face. Not a nice beamy smile, a dark twisty smile. He pushed his hair back and looked me right in the eye. His eyes are so black you can't tell what he is thinking. I know what I am thinking, I am thinking "Oh, banana skins and bejesus, he's seen me leaping, and talking to sheep."

Cain licked his lips like a hungry wolf and said, "Well, well, well... it's the young Southern lass back."

Then he ran his eyes up and down my body and said, "Tha's grown a bit."

Oh, how bloody well dare he?! How could he see through my coat? Maybe he had x-ray vision. What colour pants had I got on? Oh stop it, of course he couldn't see through my coat and see my pants. He was just being him. Rude and crude and horrible.

If I had my handbag I would hit him with it. I only had my hat or my mittens and that didn't seem nearly violent enough.

He was like an animal in trousers.

As the wind plucked at his hair and whipped it round his face, I remembered the last time I had seen him. It was in the barn and he was poking the owlets with a little stick.

All dark, with his dark broody eyes. And his black hair. And his long black eyelashes.

He's not good like Alex. Good and tall and brown-haired Alex. With his frilly shirt and his eyes

and so on... he's...

~~He was still just staring at me.~~

He doesn't seem to know that staring is rude.

Well, two can play at that game.

I stared back.

And I'm not going to blink either. That will show him.

Then he stopped staring and came towards me and did up-close staring. His face was only about a foot away from mine.

Looking right in my eyes.

He said, "Tha's got eyes like a wild cat."

I could out stare him any day.

Any day.

It suddenly started to hail quite heavily. I could hear the pattering and bouncing on my hat. I could see the hailstones on his dark hair, hanging there like handfuls of pearls. He didn't seem to notice. Just went on staring right into my eyes. Then I felt a hailstone hit my face. It didn't just ping off, it started slipping slowly down the middle of my forehead. Then it got to my eyebrows and I thought it had gone. But then I felt it start slipping down the side of my nose, like a tear. I went on staring, he was not going to win this staring competition. I could feel the hailstone had just got to my nostril when... still staring at me...

He did this thing.

He stepped right up to me, so I nearly went cross-eyed trying to keep staring and... then he licked his lips and put his tongue out and... and...

And he LICKED off the hailstone.

He was licking my nose. I could feel his hot, soft tongue on my nose.

And he was staring at me while he did it.

What? *What?!*

This wasn't right.

This wasn't even on Cousin Georgia's snogging scale.

This was just wrong.

Very, very wrong.

Then a girl's voice behind him shouted, "Oy, Cain. What's tha doing? I've been waiting by the bike shed like tha said for half a bloody hour."

He was licking my face!

Like I was an ice cream!

I nearly said, "I am not an ice cream! I am a human being!"

He said softly to me, "Tasty."

Then he took a step back and turned around slowly. Behind him I saw Beverley approaching. Cain turned back to me and smiled his mean smile. Then he chucked his teeth like you do when you say giddy-up to a horsie. As he swished his coat round and walked off up the hill towards the moors I could see that Beverly didn't look pleased to see me.

She didn't say, "Gosh, how nice to see you again, Tallulah, on this inclement morning." She just stood with her arms folded looking at me. Had she seen the licking incident? Even though it was hailing, she only had on a short-sleeved jumper.

She had very big arms. Very big. Her dad had a potato farm so she probably did quite a bit of heavy lifting. Maybe if I said something nice to her, you know like, "Ooooh, your arms are a good... shape," she might not hurt me.

Cain kept on walking up the hill while she stood there looking at me.

Cain called back, "Beverley, is tha coming wi' me or are tha going to stand there gabbing a day?"

Beverley went after him but turned back and said in a loud mean voice, "You and your pos stuck-up mates keep your hands off our lads... or else. Think on."

I was thinking of something to say when Cain whistled and his big black dog came bounding over the hedge with a rabbit in its mouth. Every time I saw Cain something died. Cain gave the dog a bri pat on its head and said, "Good Dog. You've got our supper then."

Beverley was still chuntering on as she caught up with them. She said to Cain, "You treat th dog better'n than tha treats me."

Cain said, "Beverley, the dog can fetch sticks, it can catch rabbits... it dun't moan on. Can you c that? No."

He was unbelievable.

I was so shocked at the nose-licking incident I was unable to move. As they disappeared off ov the brow of the hill, Rubster came running along her pigtails going berserk. Matilda was runnin alongside her and tried to stop when she saw me but the momentum of her tummy made her go pa me and collide with the hedge.

Ruby panted, "Were that Cain with Beverley? Uh-oh, he likes trouble that lad, Beverley's mu will be on the warpath big time if she finds out."

I didn't say anything to Ruby. What was there to say? Cain has just licked my face? I must nev think of it again. I must put it out of my mind and think only of my letter from Alex. Alex the Goo who would never lick a girl's face.

We got to the bus stop just as it came careering round the corner. Hurrah!!!! I was so excited about seeing my chums. The bus juddered to a stop and the door opened and... Jo jumped off! All little and dark and excited. With her dark eyes gleaming. Like a human conker, but with legs and arms. And a head. She hadn't changed. Still as mad as a hen. A violent hen. She ran and punched Ruby's arm, and then mine, and then both at the same time. She was yelling, "TALLULAH! THE RUBSTER!"

Vaisey was smoothing her red curls as she came down the steps. She looked at me as she got h rucksack down and smiled a little shy smile. Oh, I had missed that turny up nose and freckles and th roundy waggly bottom (and the other bits in between) I ran over and hugged her to me, and then sh hugged me and Ruby going "Oh, Lullah, Lullah and little Ruby!!"

And a tear came out of the corner of her eye. She was saying, "Oh, oh, oh." And jumping up l little jumps. Jo was running round and round us in circles and Matilda was following her.

Flossie was last off. Blimey, I think she might have grown. Her fringe has. It is down to th middle of her glasses so that you can't see if she's got a forehead.

She gathered us all in a big bear hug. The comrades together again. A feast of talent! Our tigh runneth over.

Flossie said, in a deep Texan accent, which is weird as she's from Blackpool, "Why, y'all, her we damned are – the Tree Sisters and li'l old Ruby-Mae, back again at the old corral!!! This calls for damn special celebration dance, let's show these here people our rootin' tootin' dance. Come o Lullah-Mae, we'll do the tune."

So I did it.

I did the thing that I can do.

My special talent.

I did my spontaneous Irish dancing.

And as I flung my legs around with gay abandon my thespian chums sang, "Hiddly diddly diddly

diddle.”

~~That well-known Irish song that no one has ever heard of because it doesn't exist.~~

Happy days.

I felt once more the golden slippers of applause.

Cain Hinchcliff will not be spoiling my life.

In fact, I will never be thinking about him again.

With his nose-licking ways.

Why would he do that? Why.

Bob the technician from Dother Hall was coming to pick the girls up in his Bobmobile, so we had time to swap news before he arrived. We went and sat on the wall next to The Blind Pig while Rubes went in for nourishing, warming winter snacks. It's handy having a little pub friend.

Oooh, it's good to be back. It had stopped hailing and we snuggled into our coats for a goss.

Vaisey is looking forward to seeing Jack again, her maybe boyfriend.

She said, "He gave me his plectrum to remind me of him."

I said, "That's plucky of him."

And they all laughed. Which is nice. I felt all warmy. Even my knees. Rubes came back with the nourishing snacks – cheese and onion crisps, salt and vinegar crisps, two pickled eggs and some potato scratchings. It was like being in heaven.

Flossie said, "This is my plan for the term – I am going to become a superstar and have three or four boyfriends. I've grown my fringe especially."

Jo was chomping through two packets of crisps at the same time, but managed to say, "I've had loads of letters and phone calls from Phil!! Loads. Every day. He told me about his campaign to let people know that he's not all bad and that he has a serious side."

We looked at her.

I said, "But he doesn't have a serious side."

Jo got a bit defensive. "He has, actually, he's joining in with the police to help them... with the out-of-control yoof."

I said, "He IS the out-of-control yoof."

Flossie said, "Help the police? What, like an informer?"

Jo went red. "No, it's a campaign. Make a policeman your friend. It's to let the police know that teenage boys are people too."

I said, "But that's a lie, isn't it? My brother isn't a person."

Flossie said, "I'm not being rude or anything, but what could Phil help the police with?"

Jo said, "Phil's good at loads of things."

We looked at her.

Jo said going even redder, "Well, he's really excellent at... erm... kissing."

I said, "That's not what policemen like, is it though? They don't like being kissed by teenage boys."

Flossie said, "If he's going around kissing policemen, he's a dead man."

As we chomped away, thinking about kissing policemen, three very big girls I had never seen before came lumbering up. They looked at us like we were snot girls, then they sat on the wall at the other side of The Blind Pig courtyard and started chewing gum.

Ruby said quietly, "Oh, bloody hell, it's the other Bottomley sisters, Chastity, Diligence and

Ecclesiastica.”

I started to laugh.

“Ecclesiastica? Does she get called Eccles for short?”

Ruby said, “No. Dun’t start, they’re bible names and they don’t think it’s funny. The Bottomley’s dun’t think owt is funny, except fighting. In between bus driving, their mam does cage fighting in Leeds.”

Chas, Dil and Eccles, as I called them (quietly in my brain), were looking at us and then they got up fags.

I whispered out of the corner of my mouth, “Are they going to get their pipes out next?”

One of them shouted across, “What are you stuck-up madams looking at?”

Oh dear.

Ruby said, “That’s Ecclesiastica, you’re lucky she’s in a good mood.”

Mr Barraclough came out of The Blind Pig and said to Ruby, “Rubes, say night-night to the thespians, it’s school tomorrow.”

The Bottomley sisters started laughing and going, “Oooooohhh, it’s SCHOOL t’morra. Say night-night.”

Mr Barraclough glanced at the Bottomley sisters and said, “Hello, ladies.” Then he turned to go off into the pub.

Ecclesiastica drew on her fag and said, “Ay up, grandad.”

Ruby sat down and said, “Oh, well, that’s done it.”

There was a bit of a quiet moment, then Mr Barraclough turned around and said to Ecclesiastica, “Is my wall comfortable enough for your enormous arse, dear? Or is it time you took it somewhere else?” And the other two sisters sniggered. Eccles went a sort of dull red colour but she didn’t move, she just kept looking at Mr Barraclough.

He said, “Well, I’ve tried to be nice, but I can see I will have to go the whole hog.”

Ruby said, “Dad. Not the...”

He looked at her sorrowfully. “I’m as sorry as you are, Ruby, but it has to be done.”

Ted went into the pub and came back a moment later with his Viking helmet on and a photograph. He came and showed it to us. It was the picture of him with a gun standing on a pile of pies. Underneath it said, *Ted Barraclough, champion pie eater. 22 steak and kidney, 4 pork.*

Then he walked across and showed it to the Bottomley sisters, and said to them, “Have some respect, girls. Thy father only ate ten pies and then had to go and have a bit of a lie down, so bog off somewhere else.”

The Bottomley sisters looked at him and then they got up and sloped off.

Ted went back into the pub singing, “*I am the king of hell fire!!! PIES, I’m gonna teach you to burn. PIES, I’m gonna teach you to learn!!*”

I went to bed happy after seeing the Tree Sisters. But I gave my nose a good scrub in case any of Cain’s molecules had got into it. And besides, I am sleeping on Alex’s letter and don’t want to besmirch it.



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