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Opening extract from

Battle of the Beach Freaks

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CHAPTER 1

When Gordon Twigg asked my auntie Gloria to marry him, he very nearly killed her. Of course he hadn't meant to. He was just trying to surprise her. But unfortunately his plan went a bit wrong.

It was the end of February, Sunday lunch time at the Golden Wok restaurant. And we were all there – me, my big brother Andy, Mum, Dad, Auntie Gloria and her boyfriend Gordon. He told us later he'd been trying to pluck up the courage to propose for weeks, when suddenly he'd looked across the table, seen something irresistible in the way Auntie Gloria sipped her soup and decided to go for it.

He wanted to make it special. He'd read somewhere about a famous actor who'd surprised his girlfriend with an engagement ring hidden inside her jelly.

Auntie Gloria doesn't like jelly, so Gordon slipped the ring into her chicken noodle soup instead. He thought she'd spot it. But she didn't. Auntie Gloria just spooned up the soup and slurped it down. Or tried to – the ring got stuck in the back of her throat.

For a few ghastly seconds she sat there choking, her face turning purple, then blue, then a scary grey colour. Luckily, my dad was sitting next to her (he's a bus driver and has done loads of first-aid courses because people are always dropping dead on buses). He gave her a hefty thump on the back and the ring shot out like a champagne cork, straight into my lemonade. Plop!



No one knew what to do next. But Auntie Gloria started giggling. And Gordon grinned. And then we all joined in. And suddenly everything was all right again.

After that Gordon did it properly. He fished the ring out of my drink, wiped it on his shirt, got down on one knee and asked Gloria to be his wife. She said, 'Yes!' and then the restaurant went wild. Everyone was shaking Gordon's hand and kissing Auntie Gloria's cheek. And the waiters brought a bottle of champagne, which Dad said they didn't charge us for, and lots of little cakes with syrupy pineapple middles. Then just when I thought the day couldn't get any better, Auntie Gloria turned to me, took my hand and said, 'Of course you'll be my bridesmaid, Jess, won't you . . .'

Wow! It was like a whole box of fireworks had exploded in my belly. I couldn't believe my ears. I'd given up hope of ever being a bridesmaid. Plenty of my mates had done it. But me? No chance. I just didn't have the right relatives. The problem was most of them were happily married, apart from my gran (who's 78 and isn't big on blokes) and my second cousin Connie (who's training to be a mechanic and wouldn't be seen dead in a frilly frock and flowers). No, my only

chance of becoming a bridesmaid rested with Auntie Gloria, who had been (unsuccessfully) looking for love for years. But the funny thing was Mr Right has been right under her nose all along . . .

You see Gordon and Gloria actually worked for the same supermarket. She was a bun baker and he served on the fish counter. But they'd never met. Until one evening Gloria had a sudden fancy for fish for tea and their eyes had met over a slice of salmon. They'd been dating ever since. They were actually very well suited. Gordon lived with his mum and wore sensible sweaters and warm socks. Gloria lived with her three cats and knitted sensible sweaters and warm socks. And now they were going to get married.

'You'll help me choose everything, won't you, Jess?' said Auntie Glow, squeezing my hand. 'The flowers, the dresses, the cake . . .'

(Just for the record, we call her Auntie Glow because it's short for Gloria, but mostly because her face lights up like a lantern when she smiles.)

'Of course I'll help,' I grinned. 'I'd love to!'

'Poor Auntie Glow,' muttered Andy from across the table.

I tried to kick him, but he dodged his legs away.

'I'd like to get married on Midsummer's Day,' said Auntie Glow dreamily, 'in a church filled with friends and flowers . . . I'd like a big floaty frock and a horse and carriage . . .'

I shut my eyes and pictured it. So did Mum. We must have looked a bit daft, because when I opened them again, Dad and Andy were making silly faces.

Gordon, meanwhile, was looking slightly sweaty. 'Er, Gloria . . .' he said nervously. 'I was thinking of something smaller . . . a quiet little wedding, just a few friends.'

But Auntie Glow wasn't listening. She'd been waiting for this day for years and wasn't going to settle for anything small. As soon as lunch was finished, she took my arm (and Mum's too) and headed for the nearest newsagents to buy every glossy wedding magazine she could find.

'Oh, look at that dress,' beamed Auntie Glow, flicking through the first one she picked up. 'And that wedding cake.' She pointed to a massive chocolate layer cake, which was bigger than Dad's bus.

Gordon, who had followed us inside the shop,

bobbed nervously in the background, tugging at his tie. 'I don't know, Glow, it all looks a bit fussy . . .'

But Auntie Glow still wasn't listening. 'Oh, look at that bridesmaid's dress. You'd look beautiful in that, Jess.'

It *did* look amazing. Layers and layers of white chiffon and silk, with daisies round the middle.

'Yeah – amazingly like a marshmallow!' smirked Andy, who was peering over my shoulder.

And then Dad, who had tagged along to look at the golf magazines, pointed to the price, 'Four hundred quid for a bridesmaid's dress!'

And Gordon looked like he might faint.

But despite Auntie Glow's plans for a big summer wedding, she soon discovered there was no way she could get married that summer because everything was already booked up, and had been for months.

In fact, the first free weekend Auntie Glow could find was November 1st, the day after Halloween. Andy helpfully suggested Auntie Glow make it a horror-themed wedding. We rolled our eyes, but as I soon discovered, Andy's suggestion wasn't as silly as it sounded . . .