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opening extract from

Girls, Guilty but somehow Glorious

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FRIDAY 1.45 P.M.

Seven days to the earthquake . . .

'We could always . . . just not go,' I said. We were crossing the schoolyard at change of lessons.

'Not *go*???' cried Chloe. 'Not *GO*? Zoe!'

'I only thought . . .' I said, offering her a piece of my chewing gum, 'we could maybe just kind of ignore it. I mean, stay in and watch the football, or something.'

Zoe scowled. 'But what about all those poor homeless earthquake victims?' she demanded. 'The Earthquake Ball's not just for fun, it's to raise money, yeah? Besides, I hate football! *Hate it!*'

Hmm. It had been a mistake to mention football. I quite like a spot of footie, myself. I enjoy watching England losing gallantly. I might even paint the

St George's flag on my face, one day. It would hide the spots – especially the massive zit which keeps resurfacing again and again on my chin (I call it Nigel).

But Chloe's not into football. In fact, she's not really much into any kind of sport. If you throw her a ball, somehow it tends to hit her on the nose, and if you force her into a pool, she swims like a mad little dog in a panic.

'OK, not football, sorry,' I said. 'But maybe a DVD?'

'Oh nooooo!' wailed Chloe. 'We *can't* miss the Earthquake Ball! The Ball is gonna be where it's at! Think of the music! The noise! The headaches! The vomiting! The jealousy! The fights! The broken hearts!' Her face had a wistful, faraway look. In her imagination, she was already *there*.

'OK, then,' I said. 'Yeah, let's go – I was just being stupid.' I shrugged amiably. One of us has to be chilled out, and clearly, Chloe could never play that vital role.

'Yes,' said Chloe. 'We're going. That's obvious. *Obvious!* But here's the major prob: who's going to take us?'

I tossed another piece of gum into my mouth. It's

amazing how quickly it loses its charm. I offered a piece to Chloe.

'No!' said Chloe. 'My brace, remember?'

'Sorry, sorry,' I said. Chloe's brace had been such an epic ordeal. 'Does it hurt at the moment?' I asked.

'No, but I've got to have it adjusted in a couple of weeks' time. I'd rather do maths for the *rest of my life* than have my brace adjusted *for even two minutes*.'

She looked anxious. Maths is one of her very worst ordeals. Or, as she might put it: 'Maths is two of my very worst ordeals.'

Chloe sighed, and snuggled more deeply into her fleece. Though fresh, the air was also almost freezing. We plunged through the swing doors into the warmth of the corridor.

'Who in the world is going to take us to the Ball, though?' said Chloe miserably. 'If we can't find a couple of boys to go with, we'll be social rejects.'

'What about Fergus and Toby?' I pondered. 'They'd probably take us. If we paid them.'

'Fergus and Toby?' screeched Chloe in horror. 'Nothing personal, I mean they're great guys . . .' she looked round furtively, to make sure neither Fergus nor Toby had inconveniently appeared. 'I would rather walk down the high street wearing *only* an old

man's trilby hat than go with *either Fergus or Toby.*'

'What's wrong with them?' I asked. I quite like Fergus and Toby. They're in our class and they're a laugh.

'Zoe, they're so immature, they're practically foetuses!' whispered Chloe. 'I mean, Fergus is a microbe!'

'I think you may be exaggerating just a tad,' I said, laughing. 'He perched on my hand to peck up a few crumbs yesterday and he was definitely heavier than the average microbe.'

'Fergus is approximately five centimetres high,' insisted Chloe. 'And Toby is technically a cream bun. I mean, we're talking serious lard here.'

'Harsh,' I objected. 'Toby's cuddly. Not that I want to cuddle him – no, no! I'd rather cuddle your dog.'

'Zoe,' said Chloe, putting on her mock head-mistress voice, 'dogs are not allowed at the Earthquake Ball. You cannot go to the Ball with Geraint as your escort. People would talk.'

I laughed, but the problem remained. Why did everything have to be so difficult?

Then – oh God! – the swing doors at the far end of the corridor opened, and somebody walked towards us. Oliver Wyatt! Oliver tall-dark-and-haunted-looking

Wyatt! Ashcroft School's answer to Heathcliff. I instantly forgot all about the Earthquake Ball.

My Heights Wuthered. My heart turned into a caged jaguar. A firework display went off in my chest. Whole flocks of butterflies flew out of my ears.

'We *can't* go with anybody from our year,' Chloe said. She looked thoughtful. She hadn't noticed Oliver. *Hadn't noticed.* She was ransacking her bag.

'Hmmm,' I said. The god was strolling towards us. He was a mere metre away. I didn't look at him, of course. I looked at the floor. I knew every detail of his appearance by heart anyway. He didn't stop. He didn't speak to us. He was totally unaware of my spotty, sad, nerdy little life.

I noticed a tiny patch of mud on the side of his right shoe. What wouldn't I give to be that tiny patch of mud! The air stirred up by him swirled around me. There was a faint smell of limes. (His aftershave, obviously: he isn't a greengrocer.) I inhaled deeply, hoping to capture that divine scent for ever.

'We have to corner somebody in the sixth form,' said Chloe. 'They've got to be sixteen or over. I'm too young for a toyboy. Ah, there's my phone. I thought I'd lost it again.' She turned to me and frowned. 'What's up?'

'Oliver Wyatt just walked past!' I whispered. Chloe's eyes flared excitedly. She turned round. She was just in time to see his back disappearing through some swing doors.

'God! Sorry I missed the sacred moment!' She grinned. 'Did he throw you a contemptuous look of burning passion?'

'Certainly,' I informed her. 'But I'm not quite sure whether it's me he loves, or Nigel.' I fingered my chin anxiously. I could feel Nigel lurking there. He'd gone to ground for the past couple of days, but I could sense he was planning to erupt again, possibly on the left-hand side. If one must have a Nobel-prize-winning zit, it at least should be central. For absolute zit perfection, symmetry is essential.

'Have you seen Jack yet today?' I asked. Chloe has a major crush on Jack Bennett, this wicked guy who can break-dance on his head – and let's face it, what else could one possibly ask of a potential husband?

'I don't know . . .' pondered Chloe. 'I haven't felt quite the same about him since I saw him peeing in that alley after the Cramp gig.' Chloe's so easily put off. She can fall madly for somebody at lunchtime and find them loathsome by nightfall. I wouldn't be put off if I saw Oliver peeing. I know he'd pee in a

divine, stylish way which would turn it almost into an art form.

'OK,' I said, reluctantly abandoning thoughts of Oliver, 'let's get started.' We had to find a couple of fit partners for the Ball.

'Right, then,' sighed Chloe. 'Where *do* we start?' She offered me a piece of chocolate. I accepted. I think it's good for the brain.

'We start by drawing up a shortlist.'

The bell rang. My heart sank. It was time for German. I don't object to Germany or the Germans at all in principle, it's just that for the first few lessons, when we were starting out, I didn't pay attention. I am a bit of a dreamer, I admit it.

And when, after a couple of months, I sort of woke up and started to concentrate, it was too late. The rest of the class were deep in the book *Das geheimnisvolle Dorf* and stuff like that and I knew that the moment had passed and I would never, never, be able to speak a word of German apart from one rather special one. I could more easily communicate with Chloe's dog, Geraint – by barking.

'OK,' said Chloe, 'let's make the list in German.'

I groaned. 'God, no!' I begged. 'Please, not in German! I just can't cope with it.'

'I didn't mean we were going to make the list in German, Zoe,' giggled Chloe. 'I meant we're going to make the list in *German*!'

2

FRIDAY 2.30 P.M.

Making a list of love gods . . .

Frau Leibowitz the German teacher is a sporty-looking old bird. Well, when I say old, I mean, like, possibly twenty-nine. But despite her muscles and bouncy walk, she is strangely timid when it comes to dealing with us snarling beasts. Plus she has a ludicrously squeaky voice.

'Today,' she peeped, 've are goingk to do translation. Bessie, pliss giv out ze papers. Here you haf a passage I haf printed from ze Internet. *Eine Fahrt mit der Eisenbahn.*' There were a few sniggers. Some people just haven't got over it yet: the German for a journey is *Fahrt*. I haven't got over it myself. In fact, I was one of the people sniggering.

'I am going to make a *Fahrt* to Paris,' I whispered.

Fergus was sitting in front of me and he turned round. Fergus looks rather like a pixie. He has slightly pointy ears, a mop of curly hair, and a cute turned-up nose.

'ThatWouldBeAnOlympicRecord!' he whispered. 'WouldItStillCountIfItWasWindAssisted?' Fergus talks so fast, there's no time for gaps between the words. He was giggling so hard, his curls were actually shaking. Frau Leibowitz ignored us.

'You may use your dictionaries,' she squeaked. Then she sat down and started to mark a huge pile of papers.

We found the passage. The first sentence was: '*Eine Fahrt mit der Eisenbahn kann ich beim besten Willen nicht als Reise bezeichnen.*' I feel really sorry for the Germans. Their language sounds like a house being demolished. I'm glad I'm not doing French, though. Two of the other classes in our year group do French. You have to make really disgusting sounds in French. As if you're wrestling with phlegm.

Chloe and I were sharing the book, which enabled us to conduct a simultaneous written conversation on some rough paper. Although Frau Leibowitz is weedy and timid, nobody actually messes about much in her lessons, because if she gets any trouble she sends

people to Irritable Powell straight away. That's Mr Powell, Head of Year. His shouting can cause actual cracks in concrete.

'How about Henry Lovatt?' I wrote.

'No!' Chloe scribbled in reply. 'Terrible teeth. Impossible to snog without serious injury.' Chloe herself has slightly goofy teeth, so I guess this is a factor in her choice of boys. It would be terrible to be separated for ever by matching overbites, your tongues waggling helplessly in mid-air.

'Robin Elliott?'

'Sweat smells like Camembert cheese.'

Chloe started to translate the German passage, so I thought I'd better have a go, too.

'I'd like to ask Gus MacDonald,' Chloe wrote five minutes later, 'but he is rumoured to have a tartan penis.'

That did it. A laugh burst out of me: a truly disgusting snort. Frau Leibowitz looked up crossly.

'Zoe!' she said. 'Pliss stop being schtupid!'

'Sorry!' I said, wiping my nose with a very ragged tissue from my pocket. 'It was a sort of sneeze gone wrong.'

Frau L ignored this and went back to her marking. I began to browse through the German dictionary. I

looked up buttocks. It was *Hintern*. I looked up green. It was *grün*. I looked up polka dots. They weren't in the dictionary. It was a shame, because I was planning a slightly amusing sentence about Chloe's bum.

We walked home with Fergus and Toby. They were arguing about football. Chloe pulled her football face. She's really pretty with masses of freckles, dramatic green eyes, and a wild bunch of red hair. But when she pulls her football face (eyes crossed, tongue lolling out sideways) she manages to look like some primitive life form which has just crawled out of a swamp.

'If you say one more word about sport,' she warned the boys, 'we won't ever share our crisps with you again.'

Predictably, they laughed in an infantile way as if she'd said something obscene. Chloe was right about boys our age being toddlers. The boys went on ahead, still arguing about a missed penalty.

'I think you were a bit harsh about Henry Lovatt,' I said to Chloe. 'OK, his teeth are sort of very much out there, but he is kind.'

'Kind?' said Chloe, looking puzzled. 'What do you mean?'

'We were in the cafeteria once,' I said, 'and I couldn't find a place. And he gave up his seat for me. OK, he had sort of finished, so he was going to get up anyway, but he got up kind of quickly and smiled at me.'

'Oh my God!' said Chloe, grinning. 'You must be married at once, before people start to talk.'

'What's the goss then, girlz?' asked Toby, waiting for us up ahead and pouting cutely. He puts on a camp voice most of the time, and he does a hilarious impression of Sharon Osbourne. Toby's plump and smiley. His hair is flicked up in a series of cute little wisps and his eyes are huge and blue. He has lovely rosy cheeks covered with blond down, like a peach, and his lips are big and rubbery.

'Mind your own business,' said Chloe sniffily.

'It'sBrilliantIt'sBrilliant!' said Fergus. His voice goes even more squeaky when he's excited. Chloe once said Fergus is like a cartoon character, which suits him perfectly.

'What is brilliant?' Chloe asked.

'We'veGotThisBrilliantIdea!' said Fergus. 'We're GonnaBringABlow-upDollIntoSchool, DressItInSchool Uniform, FillItWithHeliumAndLetItOffInAssembly. It'llLike*Fly*RoundTheHall!'

'God, I can hardly wait,' I said drily. 'And where are you going to get the helium?'

'eBay!' yapped Fergus.

'You are sick idiots,' I said, but with genuine affection. 'Why don't you get a life? Learn to play chess, or bandage the legs of old women in Africa, or something?'

'In my gap year,' said Toby, 'I'm going to bandage legs like there's no tomorrow. Only they're going to be rich legs. Old ladies in Vegas. I'll give them a massage and a manicure, and they'll be fighting over me. I'm gonna be married by the time I'm twenty – to a gorgeous ninety-year-old millionairess.'

At this point we turned a street corner, not far from the infamous Dolphin Cafe where, when we can afford it, we hang out after school. A couple of sixth-form guys were strolling towards us: Donut Higgs and Beast Hawkins.

Donut's real name is Phil, but everyone calls him Donut because he's such a lard. His head is shaved and his face is like a potato, complete with scabs and hairy warty bits. His breath smells of sick. Apart from that, he's a real babe-magnet.

As for Beast, he's a big muscular rugby player with long greasy black hair, strange magnetic grey-green

eyes, and a reputation for complete depravity.

As they strolled past us, Beast winked at Chloe. They don't ever talk to us but sometimes Beast gives us a horrid grin or something. Once they'd gone past, Fergus and Toby started to make howling noises. This is traditional with Beast. Everywhere he goes, people howl like dogs.

'Let's hear it for Beast Hawkins,' said Toby. 'He's an animal!' And he threw back his head and yowled.

'OneOfYouTwoShouldMarryHim,' gabbled Fergus. 'ThenYourKidsWouldBeHalfHumanAndYouCould SellYourStoryToThePapers.'

'You idiot!' said Chloe with a nervous giggle. 'I wouldn't ever even soil the sole of my shoe by *walking over* Beast Hawkins. He's half in prison already.' But then something slightly strange happened. She blushed.

I noticed, because I'm very interested in colours. I know everybody's interested in colours, sort of, but I'm obsessed by them in a deranged kind of way. Chloe's complexion is normally porcelain-pale, apart from the freckles. Most redheads are like that.

But for a few seconds after the mention of Beast Hawkins, Chloe's face went an interesting shade of pink. Not shrimp pink, not shocking pink, not shell

pink – oops, sorry, I mustn't let myself get carried away. Anyway, she blushed. I decided to mention Beast Hawkins later, sort of casually, and see if she blushed again.

Fergus and Toby didn't notice, of course. They had found an empty drinks can lying on the pavement and had reverted to football. They were competing, as they walked along, to see who could kick an empty can furthest along the pavement. There was quite a lot of jostling, which Toby mostly won, as he is large. But Fergus was small and nippy and darted in and gained possession of the can several times.

'Why do boys do that?' I asked.

'It's biology,' said Chloe. 'My mum says males are programmed to storm about doing violent things to the environment.' Chloe's mum is a bit of an old hippie, and she loves the environment a lot more than she loves Chloe's dad. He's hardly ever at home. He works in Dubai, which suits Chloe's mum just fine.

'Men!' I sighed. 'Our only hope is to round them all up and sterilise them.'

'Yes!' agreed Chloe. 'We'd have to save a bit of sperm, obviously, to continue the race.'

'Ben Jones's?' I suggested, with a massive Jonesian sigh.

'Ben Jones's, obviously,' said Chloe with another, even bigger sigh.

'I know he's only in our year,' I said, 'but we could ask him to escort us to the Earthquake Ball.'

'Dream on, Zoe,' said Chloe sadly. 'There's a waiting list right around the block just to be spat on by Ben Jones. And you know he never goes to anything with anybody. Except that stupid Mackenzie.'

'Perhaps they're *lovairs*,' I said in a seductive French accent.

'Well, if they are, all I can say is, lucky old Mackenzie!' said Chloe.

At this point we reached my house. It's completely ordinary. The front garden has a couple of bushes and some gravel. My mum sometimes refers to this as 'the shrubbery' and she gets very cross when people throw crisp packets over the wall.

'Hey, guys!' I called to Fergus and Toby, who were still wrestling and kicking over possession of the dented can. 'Wanna come in for a coffee?'

'NoThanks!' said Fergus. 'Dan'sGotANewGame!'

'Yeah,' said Toby, 'we're going to destroy the universe for a couple of hours over at his house.'

They went off, still kicking the can. Chloe watched them for a moment, thoughtfully.

'We so *can't* go to the Ball with Toby and Ferg,' she sighed. 'Which is a shame, because they're really sweet guys. But they're like, totally and utterly *not* Ball material.' She was right.

I opened the front door and immediately smelt coffee. That meant Dad was home. I just hoped he wasn't wearing *those* trousers.