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Opening extract from

The Taming of the Tights

Written by

Louise Rennison

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Dear Eagle-eyed mates,
Some of you may remember that in 'A Midsummer Tights Dream'
I hilariously (in my opinion) mentioned that my mum and sister
would not let me have the dead rabbit in Cain's hand wave its
paw bye-bye to Tallulah.
I said at the time (and I'm not wrong) that it is a tip-top comedy idea.
But oh no – my so-called family said it would make me seem 'childish' –
which clearly I am not. Anyway, I hid this book from them so
the crying rabbit is in, see page 7.
So ha ha ha ha for calling me childish.
Peace.

To my Family Tree and my Tree Sisters and Tree Brothers and
to the various saps – I mean – saplings. Also to the naughty
Skipton Flossies (Katie and Eve).
And of course to the Tree Doctors with their Tree pruning,
Tree mulching and their Tree hugging: Gillie, Lizzie, Tara,
Elorine, Clare, Cassie (actually officially a sap) and Gillon xxxx

Chapter 1

Filling my tights again

Woo-hoo! And chug-a-lug-a-ding-dong. I'm on the train, chugging back to Dother Hall, the Theatre of Dreams.

Once more getting ready to fill my performance tights! Chasing the golden slippers of success! Preparing to let my feet bleed if necessary. That's what Sidone Beaver, our headmistress, says we must do if we want to be stars in the *thea-tah, dahlings*!!! And this term I'm going to fill my tights

as much as is humanly possible!!!!

Who would have thought that I, me, Tallulah Casey, a gangly Irish person, would be back here for the autumn term at a Performing Arts College in the heart of the famous Dales of Yorkshire? Ooh, I think we're stopping at Skipley station. I'll get my case down and hop off.

Uuuumph. Jumping Jehosophat and his dad, it's bouncing down. Skipley is famous for its otters. I'm not surprised. If this rain keeps up, I'll be part otter by Wednesday.

Skipley is so proud of its otters that the station sign reads **Skipley Home of the West Riding Otter**.

But last time I was here some Yorkshire hooligan altered the sign so it read **Skipley Home of the West Riding Botty**.

Honestly...

I am squelching across towards it. That's where Cain was standing when I left at the end of last term. Cain Hinchcliff. Local bad boy made... er, bad.

I remember him winking at me as the train pulled out. With his dark hair whipping around his face and his dark eyes looking and looking at me. Licking his lips. Holding a dead rabbit in his hand. Making the dead rabbit he had in his hand wave its paw at me. And rub its eye with its paw as if it was crying.

He thinks that kind of thing is funny.

I dragged my case along the platform towards the sign. I hope it's been cleaned up because it doesn't give a very good impression of the... Hang on a minute, the hooligan has been at it again! Now the sign reads **Skipley Home of the Brest Riding Otter**.

That is just wrong.

That shouldn't be allowed.

What if American people were on the train? They have a seizure if you say prat.

I left the station and trundled across the bridge to catch the bus to Heckmondwhite. Brrr, I am absolutely soaking now. The rain has got in

through the front of my anorak and jumper and into my new bra. Or new 'corker holder' as me and my friends say. I hope my corkers don't shrink.

Hahahaha. What larks! I'm going to put 'corker shrinking' in my Performance Art Diary, or as I call it, my 'Darkly Demanding Damson Diary'. Under 'Ideas for Modern Dance'.

A bus flew round the bend and screeched to a halt. The warm, welcoming bus opening its welcoming doors to welcome me back to my...

A cloud of smoke billowed out. The driver was smoking a pipe. Uh-oh, I recognised that balaclava. It belonged to Mrs Bottomley. She did part-time bus driving as well as cage fighting in Leeds. I said, "Single to Heckmondwhite, please."

Mrs Bottomley repeated 'single to Heckmondwhite, please' in a horrible posh simpering way as she slammed the ticket down. Then she said, looking down at my legs, "Keep those bloody legs off my seats AND mind how you go!"

She accelerated violently before I had time to sit down and I fell onto the lap of a bloke

with a guide dog.

I said, "I'm really sorry but the bus…"

He said, "Is it full then, the bus? Is there nowhere else to sit? You're a bloody big lad. My legs'll be numb by the time we get to Heckmondwhite."

At a red traffic light I staggered to a spare seat.

Everyone on the bus was looking at me and grumbling. "From that bloody Dither Hall", "simpleton, I think", "they're allus messing about in beards and tights. Sitting on blind people's knees... bloody daft."

It was raining so hard you couldn't see the road ahead. It didn't make Mrs Bottomley slow down though. There was a bump and I thought I saw a sheep fly past the window, but I can't be sure. Then as we passed Grimbottom Peak it stopped raining and a watery sun came out and a little rainbow appeared.

Oooooh, maybe the rainbow was a sign.

A sign that everything was going to be all right. All of my hopes and dreams would come true. I'd become a star but, more importantly, get a proper

boyfriend. Oh, and also I'd have a corker growth spurt. Not just one corker. Both, I mean.

When we stopped at my bus stop, Mrs Bottomley was cleaning her nails with a penknife. She didn't look up as I got off but she said, "Our Beverley dun't like thee, so that meks me not like thee. Watch your sen, lady. Walls have ears and radishes repeat."



I got my case down from the bus and there before me was Heckmondwhite in all its glory! The autumnal light shining on the bus stop! The village green! The shop! The church! And the pub – The Blind Pig.

My substitute parents the Dobbins, who I lodge with in term time, are away on a Young Christians' Foraging weekend in Blubberhouses.

Harold and Dibdobs and the lunatic twins are nice but possibly the maddest people I have ever met. They're away till tomorrow so I'm staying the night with my little mate Ruby at The Blind

Pig. I'm really looking forward to seeing my fun-sized pal and her bulldog Matilda. Ruby told me that out of eighty breeds given an intelligence test, bulldogs come seventy-eighth. But that's the intelligence-o-meter test not the love-o-meter test which Matilda would definitely win paws down.

What I am not looking forward to is seeing Mr Barraclough, Ruby's dad. He's the landlord of the pub but mostly chief tormentor of me and my legs – which I must admit sometimes have a life of their own. When I am nervous or excited they, my legs, well, they initiate Irish dancing. All by themselves. My brain has nothing to do with it. Also, because of my skinniness, Mr Barraclough keeps pretending I am a long lanky lad. In a dress.

In a nutshell, Mr Barraclough and most of the village people think that Dother Hall is for fools. That's why they call it Dither Hall.

I went quietly in through the front door of the pub. There's a real racket coming from the bar so I'll just creepy creep up the stairs to Ruby's room.

"Well, well, well, thank the Lord the thespians

are back!!! I haven't known WHAT to do with myself since tha left. By 'eck, is there a giant gene in your family, young man? You've sprung up again, haven't you, lad! What are you practising being today? Dun't tell me! Let me guess." Oh dear. There he was. Ruby's dad. In his leather trousers and Viking helmet.

He was looking at me, stroking his chin.

"Hmmm. Green trousers, rain hat, anorak. Big boots. Are you a Hobbit, is that it?"

I said, "Hello, Mr Barraclough."

He put his hand to his ear. "Is that elfin you're speaking?"

Just then Bob, the technician from Dother Hall, emerged from the 'Stags' door. He was also wearing a Viking helmet. Over his ponytail. He saw me and said, "Nice one, Tallulah. Great to see you back. Monday I'll be there at Dother Hall, the dude with the know-how, the equipment king, the 'facilitator'... but tonight I'm the real me. The muso. The rhythm master. Be prepared for total madness. The vibe is going to be like awesome."

Like awesome?

He went off into the front bar.

I said, "Why is Bob here?"

Mr Barraclough chucked me under the chin.

"Why is Bob here? Why is Bob here? I'll tell you why he's here, young man. He's our new drummer for The Iron Pies. We are going to be a sound sensation. Good to see you back, young Bilbo."

He went off into the bar shouting, "Hit it, lads!"

And an awful din of drums and guitars started up. It really did sound like Bob was just hitting things.

Ruby and Matilda came tumbling down from upstairs. Matilda was leaping up at my legs and Ruby was dancing around me, yelling, "It's Tallulah-lebulla, Matilda, let's mek her dance, do the dance, Tallulah-lebulla, do the dance!!!"

I said with dignity, "I don't want to, you know I've sort of grown out of the Irish dancing thing."

The Iron Pies crashed into their version of a James Bond theme. Mr Barraclough started singing, "*From Russia with PIES I came to yooooooo.*"

And Ruby had to yell over the top of it. "Oh, come on, just a little bit. For me! I'll sing the Irish song. Hiddly diddly diddly diddle."

So I let myself go. I did my Irish dancing. Ruby joined in and we were leaping and hopping around in the hallway. It was fun actually. There was no one to see me and I needed to relax so I let my knees go wherever they pleased.

When I was mid-hiddly, I noticed Matilda had got caught in the umbrella stand. Umbrellas were crashing around her. She looked up blinking at us. Ruby said, "What? What? Why are you blinking at me?'"

Then Matilda looked at the door and back at Ruby.

Ruby said, "No, I'm not taking you out now, it's quiet time."

Matilda started making a snuffling noise which sounded a bit like crying. Ruby gave in and picked her up.

"Oh, bloody hell, all right, Matilda, you daft ninny. Come on, I'll tek you out, even though it's

going to be a tornado out there. C'mon, Lullah."

She rammed a hat and coat on and dragged me outside with her. For an eleven year-old she's quite strong.

Big black clouds were tumbling in again from Grimbottom and in the distance we could see lightning crackling. There was a rumble as we set off up the back path.

We reached the old tree with its branch that we sit on. Ruby pulled her coat round her and shouted above the gathering wind. "It'll start pouring down in abaht five minutes so 'go fetch!' Matilda." And Ruby flung a stick for Matilda to chase.

Matilda lay down like a splayed chicken.

Ruby said, "Oh, you!!! That's not 'go fetch', is it? That's lying down and dying for England!!!"

Ruby went running off into the bracken to get the stick, shouting, "And then you can start telling me abaht snogging and stuff, Lullah!"

Matilda's not interested in stick fetching. She knows a stick is not a biscuit so why would she

want to fetch it?

Gosh, it was wild up there with the lowering sky and the trees bending in the wind and the moors stretching off.

I sat down on the branch and snuggled into my anorak and put my hood up. I was sitting on the branch that HE had sat on.

I could feel his warm presence even through my anorak.

Alex the Good.

I was sitting where Alex the Good sat.

In a way, I was sitting on his knee.

Alex, Alex the Good. Ruby's gorgey older brother.

I've got a bit of a crush on him. Even though he thinks I'm just a schoolgirl, he's always nice to me. Really specially nice to me.

He's not like the Hinchcliff brothers, Seth, Ruben and the other brother. Whose name I will never mention again. But the one who waved a dead rabbit's paw. That one.

Yes, Alex is always nice to me, encouraging me

to fill my tights. Not like Dr Lightowler the drama tutor who says, "Seeing you onstage makes me feel physically sick."

Mmmmmm, Alex.

It was sunny when I last saw him, he was up here looking out to the moors. Like Mr Darcy. Only not in pantaloons and a ruffled shirt. He saw me and said, "Hey, Lullah!" and hugged me.

In a proper huggy way. I felt myself melt. I don't mean I actually melted, I just mean... anyway, it doesn't matter whether I melted or not. It was just me and him in Brontë country. Where Em Brontë wrote *Withering Tights*. It was a perfect opportunity for him to kiss me.

But then 'she' came wafting out of a field like a, like a twit. A twit in a floaty dress. He introduced us: "Meet Candice, she's at college with me." Then he kissed her on the lips.

Do boys like twits in floaty dresses? I haven't asked Cousin Georgia that. She's told me some number one rules that they do like. Boys, I mean.

Like when you want them to like you, you have to have 'sticky eyes'. Not eyes with glue on, just eyes that do 'looking up, looking down and then just looking, full-on looking at them'.

Georgia said you mustn't accidentally do sticky eyes when a boy says something so stupid you are staring at him in disbelief. Because they will get the wrong impression and think that you actually like them. In an 'I fancy you' way.

Another top tip Georgia says is that boys like you to say nice things to them and praise them for stuff. Even if they unexpectedly do a back flip or something.

You have to say, "Golly, that's the best back flip I've ever seen."

I said to Georgia, "No fool would believe that you really liked people doing back flips."

Georgia said, "Boys will. If you say something nice to them and give them praise, they are like jelly boys and you can do anything with them."

My brother Connor thinks he is the world's top farter. Which he probably is, but I'm not going to

give him praise for that. Otherwise he'd do it all day.

He does do it all day.

I've got a photo from Georgia to remind me of her. I've stuck it in my Darkly Demanding Damson Diary. It's of her and her Ace Gang sitting in one of those big teacups that go round and round at fairgrounds. They're supposed to be for tiny toddlers. In fact, there were some little children in the background crying.

On the back of the photo it says, *Send us the latest on the D. B. C. of H. Yours sincerely, A Friend. And some other friends. In our cups.*

Georgia wants the latest on the D. B. C. of H who is Cain. He's so awful I call him the Dark Black Crow of Heckmondwhite. But there won't be anything to tell Georgia because I won't be having anything to do with him.

EVER again.

Whoever *he* is.

And if I do see him, I'm going to make it clear that what happened, you know, the accidental snogging incident on the moorland path, was…

You know.

Erm, an act of madness brought on by low blood sugar.

Ruby and Matilda came bounding back. Suddenly there was a loud growling in the gorse. Ruby said hoarsely, "Maybe it's a wild otter from Skipton? Gone mad. Say something to it. Calm it down."

What do you say to otters?

Do otters go mad?

I said, "Ruby, how can it be a wild otter gone mad? You've just made that up."

Ruby said, "It's still rustling about, going to rip our throats out though, isn't it? Make friends with it."

Make friends with an otter? I called out shakily, "We come in peace, we mean you no harm."

Cain's big black dog bounded out with its tongue lolling. Cain calls his big black dog 'Dog'.

Matilda shuffled behind Ruby and me. Dog thought she was playing a hiding game. His favourite. He barked and then rushed to one

side of us. Matilda quickly toddled round the other side. But then Dog unexpectedly changed direction and he came up behind and started sniffing her bottom.

Ruby shouted into the dark moors, "Cain! I know you're out there, stop messing abaht and come and get yer bloody dog. It's got its nose up Matilda's bum!"

Oh Dear Mother of Baby Jesus.

The Dark Black Crow of Heckmondwhite.

He was here.

What should I do?

I must be very cool with him.

Which is not going to be easy with my anorak hood up.

But nothing happened. There was no noise except the wind whistling and Dog sniffing.

Ruby shouted again, "Come on Cain, stop messing about."

But the moors were silent.

Then Dog cocked his ear as if he could hear something we couldn't and bounded off.

It started to pelt down, and we ran and stumbled down the hill, almost blinded by the rain.

By the time we got back to The Blind Pig, the rain was thunderous, pounding on the roof like it would break through. We got dried and had our supper in the back room. The Iron Pies were still 'rehearsing'. Well, shouting and banging.

We went up the two flights of stairs and snuggled into bed in Ruby's room high up in the attic. Matilda was tucked up at the bottom of the bed and Ruby put a little nightcap on her head. She almost immediately nodded off. Oooooh, she is sweet.

She reminds me of the owlets. Not her big puggy face and snoring, just the general feeling of lovey-doveyness.

I said to Ruby, "Hey, I'm dying to see the owlets. Shall we pop down to the barn tomorrow? Cor, I bet little Rubes and little Lullah will be pleased as anything to see us."

Ruby started plaiting her hair.

"They're not there. Connie has chucked them out. They've flown the nest."

I looked at her.

"Our little owlets have flown the nest? But…"

Ruby said, "Well, when I say 'flown' the nest, what I mean is they're crashing abaht in the woods somewhere. Tha's nivver seen such rubbish flying in your life. Little Rubes knocked herself out on the barn door the first time she tried to get out."

Our little owlets. Gone?

But they hadn't even said goodbye.

Not even, "Woo-hoo, see you later."

Ruby said, "And guess what, Beverley Bottomley has gone on hunger strike, and she says she won't stop until her mum stops stalking Cain with her shotgun."

I said, "Isn't Beverley glad about the stalking thing? She must hate Cain after what he's done to her. He's awful. He dumped her twice. And he made that song up about her called *Put your coat on, girl, you're leaving*. And the second line was '*You*

were all right in the dark but then I put the light on'. At The Jones gig. He sang it straight at her. Everyone could see."

Ruby said, "I know. But she LUUUUUVES him. She thinks he's a dog wi' a bad name."

"He IS a dog with a bad name – that's because he's a bad dog."

Ruby said, "I know. But *you* let Cain the bad dog lick your nose."

Oh no, the nose-licking incident rears its head again! What would Ruby say if she knew about the accidental snogging on the moors incident?

As we lay in the dark with the wind howling and the rain sluicing down, I quickly said, "I wouldn't like to be out in this. I hope the owlets have got little owl umbrellas."

Ruby went on snuggling down. I couldn't settle though, I kept thinking about Cain.

"Do you think he saw us – Cain? Do you think he was out there with his dog, watching us?"

I shivered.

Ruby said, "Mebbe. You know those Hinchcliffs.

They can be anywhere at any time. Like a reight bad smell."

As she said that, I nearly fell out of bed because there was a massive farty noise from Matilda. It was so loud it even woke Matilda up. Ruby went mad.

"Get down, Matilda!! Bad girl, you've let yourself down AND you've let the bulldog breed down."

Matilda looked all shamefaced and tottered about on the side of the bed. She got tangled up in her nightcap and then one leg got stuck. It took so long that in the end Ruby unfastened the stuck leg and said, "Oh for goodness' sake, get in bed again. And no more trumping."

Matilda blinked sorrowfully at Ruby, who was still harrumphing about. "She hates it when I'm cross with her. Serves her right for trumping, she'll worry all night and not get any slee—"

She was interrupted by little snuffling snoring noises from Matilda.

We settled down again.

I said casually in the dark, "Have you... er,

heard how Alex, you know your brother… erm, is getting on?"

Ruby said sleepily, "Dun't start that again. Anyway, I thought you liked that Charlie?"

Ah yes, Charlie. I do like that Charlie.

The boy from Woolfe Academy for naughty boys.

But he was gorgeous. Not naughty.

Well, not very naughty.

Where's the harm in wiring up your headmaster's door handle to a minor electrical circuit? As Charlie said, "It was just high spirits, an innocent schoolboy prank."

Charlie was lovely in every way and had given me my very first proper kiss. It was dreamy but the only thing is he has a girlfriend already.



As I drifted off to sleep next to Ruby, lulled by the rain pattering on the roof, I dreamed of Charlie... Zzz

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...I was up on the moorland path behind The Blind Pig. Looking through my Darkly Demanding Damson Diary. I was dressed in a black mini skirt and green tights. Thinking of doing a performance about being a person with corkers, not a silly schoolgirl any more.

Hmmmm, perhaps through the medium of dance I could show the things I'd learned from my wise Cousin Georgia.

How to do sticky eyes and 'look interested' when boys do things.

I started wafting my arms from side to side (in my dream, otherwise Ruby would have kicked me out of bed) and sweet music began floating across the moors. So lovely and magical and otherworldly, but somehow familiar.

I looked up into the tree where the music was coming from and...

...there they were, the owlets with tiny electric guitars. Hurrah!

Little Lullah was on rhythm guitar and little Rubes on bass. They were playing *Dancing Queen*

by Abba!

I began to dance more wildly. Drawn by the inescapable rhythms of Sweden, lost in a world of my own.

The owlets turned up their amplifiers. (Not easy when you haven't got any hands.)

I sang my version of *Dancing Queen.*

"*Friday night and it's got late*
I'm out here without a mate
Got my new green tights on
You can see them from Skipton
They're in the mood for a dance
And when I get the chaaaance...
I am the dancing queen
My Irish legs have a lovely sheeeen!!!!
Oh yeah, you can dance, you can…"

And I began to spin and kick wildly, I was doing my Irish dancing on a hillock to the cool sounds of The Owlets when... Charlie! There was Charlie!

He smiled his special smile and gave a thumbs-

up to the owlets. Then he danced towards me. (In time to the music, but carefully as his lurex flares were quite snug.)

Charlie looked into my eyes and then lowered his lips towards mine. Just as he'd touched my lips with his, he drew back and said (in that weird slow voice like in dreams), "No... I caaan't... I haaaaave a girlfrieeeeeend."

And he got a tiny girl out of his pocket. She waved at me.

He left with the tiny girl in his hand and sadness filled my tights. The owlets played a slow version of *Dancing Queen* on pan-pipes.

But the show must always go on. That's what Sidone tells us.

I began singing again, even though my heart was breaking.

"*I am the dancing queen*
My Irish legs have a lovely shhheeeeeen!!"

And someone started whistling along.

Who could this be?

Alex came up the path. In a flouncy shirt!

He danced towards me in time to the music and put his hand to my face. The frills on his sleeve temporarily blinded me. He said in a deep voice, "Hello, Tallulah, you've grown up. You are the dancing queen. Your Irish legs have a lovely sheen."

Then there was a loud growling and Cain's big black dog bounded out – ridden by Cain.