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opening extract from

Secrets at St Jude's: Drama Girl

written by

Carmen Reid

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Chapter One

‘*Mom!*’ Gina Peterson exclaimed, holding her arms wide for a hug.

She’d already galloped down the many stairs from her dorm in the St Jude’s boarding house, hurtled through the long corridor and had just burst out into the entrance hall.

It had been seven whole weeks since she’d last seen her mother, and that had been back at the family home in California. It was so strange and exciting to be meeting her *here*, in Scotland, in Edinburgh, in the red and gold wallpapered entrance hall – half a world away from sunshine-soaked LA.

‘Gina!’ Lorelei Winkelmann exclaimed, and held out her long, slim arms in welcome. Mother and daughter hugged tightly, then let go, took a little step back and looked carefully at each other.

‘You’ve grown – your hair looks different – and it’s only been a few weeks!’ Lorelei said in surprise,

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studying the still tanned teenager with her straight blonde hair and heart-shaped face.

'You look great,' Gina told her mom with a grin. 'How come you look so great when you've been on a plane, like, for ever?'

This was true. Lorelei's hair was pulled up into an elegant chignon; her coat, scarf and high-heeled boots all looked chic, unruffled, uncrumpled.

Somehow, Gina immediately felt too slouchy, too casual and too under-dressed – a feeling that her mother could transmit to everyone standing within a half-mile radius.

As Lorelei shrugged the compliment off, Gina's next excited question was: 'Where are Paula and Maddison? They did come, didn't they?! They are here . . .?' She started feeling almost panicky.

Paula and Maddison were two of her best friends from California. Back when she was at regular day school in the US, these had been the girls she'd seen almost every single day – not just at school, but during the holidays, at weekends, even at night on their regular sleepovers. Along with Ria, the fourth member of the gang, these had once been her best friends in the whole world.

Now Paula and Maddison had flown all the way from California to see Gina, her new school and her

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new friends. Ria hadn't been able to come on this trip because her sister was in hospital.

'They're in the cab,' Gina's mother told her. 'I didn't know if it would be OK for us all to come in and look around the boarding house.'

'Of course it's OK. I'll go get them!' Gina exclaimed.

She pulled open the front door and ran down the stone steps into the driveway.

In another half-hour or so, this driveway would be full of cars as parents arrived to collect their daughters for the half-term holiday. But Lorelei was early, so right now, only a black cab was parked there, engine idling.

The two girls in the back seat were already waving frantically as Gina ran down the steps towards them.

'I can't believe it!' she called out in excitement. 'I can't believe you're here!'

The cab door swung open, and Maddison stepped out: a tall, tanned Californian teenager, complete with pink jewelled braces on her strong white teeth.

The two girls screamed in delight and ran to hug one another. Then, from the other side of the cab, Paula emerged. She was shorter, strong and wiry-looking, with walnut-brown skin and a wild mane of crinkly, all-natural, black-girl hair.

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If Gina was honest, in her heart of hearts, she would say that Paula was her best friend in the whole world. She loved Maddison, Ria and the girls she'd grown so close to at St Jude's – but Paula was special. Paula had been there for her ever since kindergarten, when they'd both spent sunny mornings in the yard, teaching each other how to make the swings fly.

'I can't believe you're here!' Gina whispered into her friend's ear as they flung their arms around each other.

'Of course I'm here!' Paula told her. 'I am *dying* to see this place and meet your new friends and your boyfriend . . . Woo-hoo!' She gave a little shriek of excitement. 'He *so* better be part of our *Edinburray* sightseeing tour, or else, Gina-wina, I am getting straight back on that plane and going home!'

'No way!' Maddison interrupted. 'At least give them time to change the in-flight movies. If I have to sit through another Anne Hathaway moment, I'm gonna die!'

'Are we coming in?' Paula asked. 'Shall I pay the fare?'

'Yeah, but Mom will pay you back,' Gina insisted. 'You're definitely coming in – I have to show you round. Plus, I think my mom is desperate to see round her old boarding house – not that it's changed much since she was here, believe me – and the girls in my dorm can't wait to meet you.'

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‘Your dorm?’ Paula repeated. ‘It is just so weird that you sleep in a dorm every night, Gina. I can’t imagine it. So remind me: you share with Amy, Min and . . . Niffy?’ she asked uncertainly.

Gina nodded. ‘Yeah, they’re all really, really nice. You’re going to love them. C’mon!’

‘Let me get my camera,’ Maddison said, unzipping her handbag. Within seconds, she had her slick, silvery gadget out and was snapping Paula and Gina on the front steps of the boarding house.

‘That’s enough!’ Gina insisted. ‘Let’s go in.’

As they opened the front door, they saw that Lorelei was still in the entrance hall, talking to the formidable-looking housemistress.

Mrs Knebworth, known to all the girls, behind her back, as ‘the Neb’, was the kind of proper, solid, more than slightly fierce woman of fifty-something who made girls nervous even when they hadn’t done anything wrong; even when they hadn’t even *thought* of doing anything wrong. It was the habit she had of fixing her steely blue eyes on you – as if she was trying to catch you out; trying, somehow, to read your guilty thoughts.

‘Take a look at this place!’ Lorelei exclaimed as the girls came in. ‘I can’t believe how well I remember it.’

‘Well, we’ve obviously redecorated over the years,

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Ms Winkelmann, but maybe always in similar shades. Feel free to take a look round. Gina, you'll be tour guide for your Californian friends, won't you?' Mrs Knebworth said in her firm, no-nonsense Edinburgh voice.

Maddison risked a reply: 'Yeah, Gina' – she nudged her friend – 'and after we see round here we want to see all round *Edinboro*. It looks so old and so way cool.'

'Quite. But it's *Edinburrrrrragh*,' the Neb couldn't help correcting Maddison. She sounded as if she was clearing her throat.

Gina and Maddison exchanged a glance. Maddison's said: *Who is this strange lady?*

Gina, with a twitch of her eyebrows, hoped she was conveying: *Yes, I know, but I have to put up with her on a daily basis, so just let it go.*

'Gina's really enjoying her second term at St Jude's, I believe,' the Neb said with a satisfied smile. 'She's settled in now and getting on very well at school.'

'That's great, Gina,' Lorelei replied, putting her arm around Gina's shoulders. 'I can't wait to meet your new friends.'

'Cool!' Paula chipped in. 'Plus we are all desperate to meet your new guy, Gina.'

Oh. Good. Grief! Gina thought to herself. Did Paula *have* to mention him now? In front of the

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housemistress? This was about to cause a major headache.

‘Aha!’ Mrs Knebworth began, raising her eyebrows. ‘You don’t need to worry, Ms Winkelmann. I’ve met Oliver Hughes and he is a charming young man from St Lennox’s. I’m sure you remember the St Lennox boys from your time at St Jude’s . . .?’

‘Well, yes,’ Lorelei began, a look of confusion on her face, ‘but I thought . . .’

Gina’s boyfriend was indeed charming, but he wasn’t called Oliver Hughes, nor did he attend the posh and private St Lennox’s. He was called Dermot O’Hagan, he went to Burnside Academy, a comprehensive, and he worked in his dad’s café at the weekends – which is how Gina had got to know him.

But due to very complicated events at the Halloween party the previous night . . . Well, in a nutshell, the Neb had met Dermot but she thought he was a St Lennox boy called Oliver Hughes.

Gina had no idea how to unravel this situation. She couldn’t just say: *I know his name’s Oliver Hughes, but actually he prefers to be called Dermot O’Hagan – it’s sort of like a nickname. And yes, I know he said he went to St Lennox’s, but that was just a bit of a joke really.*

No. She didn’t think that would work.

‘I thought there was some boy you were seeing

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called Dermot, Gina? And he works in a café?' Lorelei asked.

Gina couldn't think of anything helpful to say. She just felt a blush of meltdown proportions rushing up her face.

'Mrs Knebworth' – Lorelei threw an accusing look at the housemistress – 'just what is Gina getting up to over here?'

'A café?' the Neb spluttered.

'Can I try and explain?' Gina asked nervously.

Maddison held up her camera and took a picture of Mrs Knebworth's face. She couldn't help it – she'd never seen anyone turn purple like that before.