Shades of SCARLET

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Shades of SCARLET

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How do you open the most beautiful notebook you've ever seen, and start to write in it, when you don't even know what you think? I wasn't even sure what I *felt*. I must have sat there on the window seat until my hand was sticky, holding my fine-tipped pen over the first thick, creamy page. So many excellent first sentences ran through my brain. 'My mother's the most selfish person on the *planet*.' 'My mum's an *idiot*.' 'My mother has just spoiled my life, my dad's, and – I really, really hope – her own.'

But none of them was absolutely right.

Bleh, bleh, bleh. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

It's hard to know exactly where to start. But I'm beginning with the day Mum gave me that beautiful book with the creamy blank pages. She said it was a gift, but I know better. We'd had an awful run-in on the night before.

She'd snapped at me, 'Scarlet, I'm absolutely sick of seeing your face stuck to that tiny screen!'

'Don't look, then,' I'd muttered, loud enough for her to catch what I said, but not so loud I wouldn't be able to argue that I hadn't meant her to hear.

She fought back. 'You waste hours of your life on that thing.'

'It's *my* life, though, isn't it? So shouldn't I be the one to judge what's a waste of my time?'

I kept my head down, but I was watching through the curtain of hair that fell over my face. I knew that she was in two minds about starting on the business of getting me to help to put away the shopping – whether to tell me to get off my backside and lend a hand – or skip that argument and just get on with the job herself.

In the end, she said nothing. A while ago I would have

leaped to my feet to help even before being asked. But back then, she was still going through those arguments with Dad, and I felt sorry for her. I'd listen to her telling me that her whole world was crashing down. She couldn't live with Dad another week. He was intolerable with all his silent moods. She couldn't stand another day of it. It was a living death. Bleh, bleh, bleh. Yadda, yadda, yadda.

And then one day she said that we were moving out.

'What are we *doing* here? It's *horrible*.'

It was quite obvious she just assumed that I'd be going with her. That really threw me. She had been threatening to leave for so long, I'd come to think that it would never happen. I was too startled to put up a fight. 'I'll still get time with *Dad*?'

'Of course you'll still get time with Dad. As much time as you want.'

I'd wondered what she'd say if I'd said, '*All* of it.' But she was tense, and on the edge of ratty, so I said nothing and just took a heap of my stuff along with her to that grotty little flat beside the railway station.

It didn't take even a couple of hours to regret it. 'What are we *doing* here? It's *horrible*. There's slime up all the

bathroom walls. The floors are sticky. And it'll take ages for me to get to school from here.'

'It's only for two weeks, Scarlet. After that, we'll be somewhere much better.'

Suspiciously, I asked, 'How come?'

'Because a friend of mine has offered me a long loan of a very nice house.'

('A friend of mine', you notice. Not, 'a girlfriend of mine'. And, 'a very nice house'. Not, 'her very nice house'. Did Mum think I was *stupid*?)

'Why aren't we there already, then?'

'We would be, except that this morning it turned out that there was a bit of a hold-up.'

'Pity you didn't hold up a bit yourself,' I muttered, but she pretended that she hadn't heard, and went on to say that where we were going was even nicer than the house we'd been living in with Dad. 'You'll love it, Scarlet. You'll have the most wonderful bedroom up a tiny winding stair. It runs the whole length of the house. There are windows at each end – round ones, a bit like portholes on a ship, but larger. One overlooks the street, and from the other you can see everyone's back gardens. The ceiling's low and arched so it'll seem a bit like living in the cabin of your own private boat.'

'Why didn't you take me with you to see it?'

She looked a bit uneasy as she explained, 'Oh, I nipped

out in my lunch hour. There wasn't time to get you out of school and back again before your afternoon session.'

It was the first I'd ever heard of Mum having a lunch hour. She runs a hospital, and always before she'd claimed that she's rushed off her feet from the moment she walks through the hospital doors until she finally manages to get away from every last person who wants 'just one quick word before you go home, Fran'. She says she rarely finds time even to buy a sandwich in the middle of the day, let alone eat it.

So I'll admit that, with one thing and another, my antennae were definitely swirling about in the air. Next day, Dad came to fetch me for some time with him, and though I could tell that Mum was really irritated with me for doing it, I dragged him to the bathroom to show him exactly how disgusting it was. Dad shook his head, but all he said to Mum was, 'I'll tell you this, Fran. Whoever owns this place is not in line to win this year's Good Tile Grouting Awards.'

It sounded bland enough, though I did wonder if the dig packed more of a punch against somebody I didn't know about than Dad was letting on. But I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut and my eyes wide open. I knew it wouldn't be too long before I found out what was going on.

Newsflash!

It was only a day or so after we moved out of that fleapit flat into the new house that I got the story. Coming back to class after his music lesson, Pedro leaned close to whisper, 'Hey, Scarlet! Newsflash! Jake Naylor says that his dad's brother is going out with your mum.'

I must have looked an idiot, staring at Pedro with my mouth wide open. 'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Just what I said. Apparently your mum has a boyfriend, and he's—'

Et cetera. Jake Naylor's Uncle Richard.

Jake's actually in my *class*. He is a *friend*. So you can see why, when I got home that night, I stuck to my screen and wouldn't leap up ('Oh, you're a sweetie, Scarlet!') to help Mum sort out the shopping. Why should I? She had lied to everyone. All of that stuff about Dad having moods and their relationship not being 'deep enough'! Who'd be surprised, if she was off out all the time with Richard Naylor? So how could she tick me off for spending more time with my head down, staying in touch with my friends, than wanting to help her unpack the groceries?

When she held out the scarlet book, I kept my hands behind my back.

'Go on,' she said. 'Take it. I thought it was perfect for you, given your name. It's a present.'

I looked at it. Fat, thick and square, with the shiniest cover in wonderful shades of scarlet. She flipped it open to show me its blank cream pages with no schooly blue lines. I knew, at any other time, I would have *loved* it. I'd have pounced on it, saying, 'It's fabulous! Where did you *find* it?'

Instead, I scowled.

'Scarlet,' she told me warningly, 'when someone offers you a gift, it's only polite to accept it and thank them.'

I took it from her, letting the hand that held it drop to my side at once so she could see I wasn't even bothering to look at it. Coolly, I said, 'Thank you.'

'*And* say how nice it is.'

I kept my voice dead frosty. 'It's very nice.'

Mum looked around in a bit of a hunted fashion before she started up again. 'I know things haven't been easy for you these last weeks,' she said. 'All these big changes. So I thought I'd buy you this. We're starting very differently in this new house, and I thought you might like to write about your brand-new life.'

Who did she think I was? Some Jenny-No-Mates with nothing better to do but keep a daily diary?

'Thank you,' I said again, as dully as I dared. I turned

away, and holding the book by the corner as if it were greasy, or crawling with maggots or something, I carried it up here to take a better look at it without her watching to see what I thought.

No chance!

It was the classiest notebook I had ever seen – sort of flashy and cool all at the same time. It must have cost the earth. But if she thought that I was going to use it to write down what was happening in my own 'new life' and how I felt about it, then she was wrong. So wrong.

She might believe that she had thought things through, but I was still a good few steps ahead. I knew why Mum had given me the scarlet book. She wanted me to keep a diary so she could sneak up and take what she would think of as a little motherly look at it every now and again, and read what I'd written. I reckoned that it was the way she thought that she could keep her psychic tabs on me.

No chance!

Oh, I might write in it, all right. I might fill up every last page of it, and then even write more stuff all around the edges like one of those old ladies in Victorian novels. But, if I did, then I'd be using it to spill the beans about *her* life,

not mine. I'd tell the truth. And not *her* version of the truth, seeing things only in the way she chose.

The truth.

And I would hide it where she'd wouldn't ever find it. No, not till I was ready to hand it over to her.

That would drive her mad.

'See if that's her.'

I told Alice what I planned to write inside Mum's sneaky present. She sounded doubtful for only a moment. 'Well, yes. I suppose, when you come down to it, she is pretty well asking for it.'

'Isn't she just?'

We almost always agree on things. I've known Alice since we were four, and met in nursery school. She told me that her mother was a spacewoman and would send me a lump of the Moon. (In fact, she teaches I.T.) And I was so jealous that I told her my dad was a magician (he works in pharmaceuticals) and on her next birthday I would persuade him to give her his big white rabbit.

I don't remember how we managed the disappointment. I just know we've been friends ever since. So she and I were coming out of school together the next afternoon when I

caught a glimpse of a red car exactly like Mum's coming around the corner.

Mum never usually picks me up. I reckoned she was still trying to suck up for the upheaval she was causing everyone. I didn't feel like letting her think that I was falling in with it like some tame lamb, so I pushed Alice on ahead. 'See if that's her.'

Alice did the usual trick – wandered out through the gates, rooting deep in her bag as if to check she hadn't left something behind in our home room. Then she rushed back. 'Yes, that's your mum. She's just pulled up outside.'

'Do you think that she saw you?'

'No, she was fishing in her bag for her phone.'

'Good.'

I sent a message that I'd gone to Dad's. Then I dragged Alice back into school and out of the south door.

'So you *did* know!'

I had been thinking about my dad all day. Up till I learned the truth, I reckon I'd felt more sympathy for Mum than for him. I suppose over the months before things all blew up, I'd swallowed her lines on everything because she talked more:

'Tony, I reckon you take on extra shifts deliberately, to save yourself from having to come home and talk to me and Scarlet.'

'When do you ever start a conversation, Tony? I might as well be living with a brick *wall*.'

'When was the last time you suggested doing anything nice?'

'If I disappeared tomorrow, you'd barely notice that I wasn't here.'

Dad always muttered things like, 'Nonsense, Franny,' and, 'You know that isn't true.' But he had never fought back, and I'd assumed that was because he'd no defence to offer.

Now I was curious to know if he had just stayed quiet because he knew I might be eavesdropping. Maybe he'd known about this Richard Naylor all along. Perhaps they'd had a thousand very different conversations when they knew I was out and couldn't be listening: 'Why should I make an effort to talk to you when . . . ?' 'Who even wants to *try* to have a nice time with somebody who . . . ?'

That sort of thing, instead.

Dad works in Quality Control at Weuth Pharmaceuticals. (Alice calls it 'the Pill Factory'.) He starts at five and ends just after lunch, so I knew he'd be home. I was too jumpy to wait for the bus, so I walked back with Alice as far as her house, then borrowed her bike to get across the park.