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Opening extract from

Introducing Scarlet Lee

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Chapter One

All the world's a stage...

For Scarlett Lee, the whole wide world was a stage. And, to the dismay of her long-suffering family, Scarlett's favourite stage of all was the kitchen at home.

She burst in now, fresh from Drama Club, threw her bag to the floor and announced triumphantly, 'Can you believe it? We're doing *Othello*!'

Crossing the kitchen, Scarlett pulled open a drawer and grabbed the first thing that came to hand – a plastic spatula. She stabbed herself viciously with it, fortunately into her armpit.

'No way but this...' she declared, falling heavily to the floor, 'killing myself, to die upon a kiss!' Scarlett groaned convincingly, then lay there perfectly still – almost, but not quite, dead.

'I do wish you wouldn't roll on the floor in

that new T-shirt,' sighed her mum, Jenny, busy preparing supper.

Scarlett ignored the unwanted interruption and gave a few more heart-rending groans. She concluded her performance with not one, but two long last gasps: 'Ahhh! Ahhhhh!' – before finally expiring.

Scarlett had pretty well perfected the art of dying. She practised daily, dropping to the floor as if she hadn't a bone in her body.

'Watch me! Watch me die!' she routinely begged anyone who came to the house. Scarlett had a variety of methods, but stabbing was currently her favourite.

'Wonderful,' said her mum, giving a short burst of applause. 'Now perhaps you'll get up.' She retrieved the less-than-lethal spatula and returned it to the drawer.

'Oh, not that old Dying Swan routine again,' complained Cleo, Scarlett's fifteen-year-old sister, coming into the kitchen. Obliged to step over Scarlett to reach the fridge, Cleo took the opportunity to tread briefly on her sister's ponytail.

Scarlett cried out in pain, for real this time, 'Mu-u-um! Tell her!'

'Please, girls!' their mother sighed. 'Keep the noise down.'

'*Drama Queen*,' Cleo mouthed at Scarlett.

'*Thanks*,' Scarlett mouthed back, taking this as a compliment.

Scarlett was happy to admit it: she *was* a full-on, five-star, blockbuster of a drama queen. Wasn't she named after Scarlett O'Hara – one of the greatest drama queens ever? With her mum she had watched *Gone with the Wind* a dozen times and knew whole chunks of it by heart.

Their favourite bit was the ending, where Rhett Butler finally leaves and Scarlett asks in a pathetic voice, 'But what about me, Rhett? What will I do?' and Rhett walks out saying, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a da-a-amn.'

At school, Scarlett was famous for being a colossal show-off, which caused her sister a good deal of embarrassment.

'Don't you even *care* what people think?' Cleo often asked in desperation.

But Scarlett merely raised one eyebrow – a habit that drove her sister crazy – stroked an imaginary moustache, and said in her best Rhett Butler voice,

'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a da-a-amn.'

And Scarlett really, really didn't.

According to her parents, even as a baby she had always loved an audience. As soon as she could walk, she had learned to take a bow, and by the age of two was already singing into a hairbrush in front of a mirror.

At the age of five Scarlett had grabbed the microphone at a family wedding and entertained one hundred guests with a performance of 'My Heart Will Go On' from *Titanic*, her hair thrown back in the face of the wind. As her mum often remarked: Celine Dion had a lot to answer for.

Now – at the great age of thirteen – there was no doubt left in anyone's mind, least of all Scarlett's, that *it was her destiny* to become A VERY GREAT ACTRESS!

And what was the one thing that every great actress needed? A loyal audience, of course. Enter stage right: Scarlett's best friend, Gemma.

Gemma and Scarlett had become friends when they both joined Drama Club two years earlier. Right from the start it had been evident that, unlike Scarlett, Gemma was not a natural actress. In their first production Scarlett had been chosen to play

Julius Caesar, the leading role, while Gemma had been merely a spear-carrier. Two years later, on-stage and off, Gemma was still playing the spear-carrier to Scarlett's emperor: never failing to laugh at Scarlett's jokes, gasp at her often outrageous behaviour and loudly applaud her impressions of their teachers and friends at school.

Gemma was, undoubtedly, the ideal best friend for Scarlett – as well as her loyal follower.

Only a few hours earlier the two girls had arrived at Drama Club as they usually did: Scarlett leading the way, demanding everyone's attention as she made her entrance, acknowledging her imagined fans on all sides – *thank you, thank you* – and Gemma bringing up the rear, trying not to feel too embarrassed by her friend's eccentric behaviour.

The other girls rolled their eyes, as they often did around Scarlett, but couldn't resist smiling, before returning to their conversations while they awaited Mr Coe's arrival.

Drama Club met on Tuesdays and Thursdays after school in an old, rather run-down outbuilding. Tucked away from the main school, it gave the girls a warm,

private place to while away break times, free from the interference of teachers. This was one of the perks of being a member of Mr Coe's Drama Club and for some of the girls the main reason they had joined.

This was not true of Scarlett, of course, who was deadly serious about acting. While the others gossiped and giggled she settled down to follow Mr Coe's advice: that to be good actors, they must first become good observers.

'Watch and learn, girls,' he had told them. 'Watch and learn.'

Scarlett had taken these words quite literally and turned overnight into a serious people-watcher – even in cafes, to her sister's further embarrassment!

'For goodness' sake, stop showing us up,' Cleo would hiss across the table, as Scarlett perfectly copied the lady on the next table as she nibbled her way daintily around a large doughnut, looking exactly like a squirrel.

Now, Scarlett applied the same close scrutiny to her friends in Drama Club. First checking that none of them was watching, she nudged Gemma.

'Who's this?' she whispered.

Scarlett sat up straight and pushed out her chest,

tilting her head to one side. She licked her lips and pressed them lightly together in a pout, widening her eyes until she looked like Bambi.

Gemma, stifling a giggle, whispered back, 'Zara!'

Zara sat a few metres away, blissfully unaware. She was probably the easiest of the girls to mimic. With blonde hair, tanned skin and a perfect figure, Zara was by far the most glamorous girl in their year – and the most vain. Although they weren't allowed to wear make-up at school, Zara always carried a pot of lip-gloss, which she constantly reapplied. She had even been known to tuck it down the front of her swimsuit for use in the swimming pool.

Scarlett closed her eyes and moved seamlessly into a second improvisation, where she silently played a set of drums, swaying from side to side in time to the music that seemed to be playing inside her head.

Gemma grinned and flicked her eyes in Leah's direction. When Leah looked their way, Scarlett hastily stopped drumming and gave her a smile and a friendly wave.

For her next impersonation Scarlett was happy to have everyone's attention. Their drama teacher was a small, anxious-looking man who was already losing

his hair. Scarlett jumped up and paced about the room, perfectly mimicking the way he raked his fingers through what little hair he had left until it stood up vertically on his head like a Mohican. 'Girls, girls!' she bellowed at them. 'Give it some *fizz*!'

Scarlett felt gratified by the ripple of laughter – and applause – that followed. She was taking a few bows when they heard the teacher's hurried footsteps coming down the corridor. Everyone stifled their laughter and Scarlett hastily rearranged her face.

Despite sometimes mimicking Mr Coe, Scarlett was actually his biggest fan. When she first met him she thought she had died and gone to actors' heaven. Scarlett's previous experience – at a Saturday morning Drama Club – had been deeply disappointing. She had spent half of the first session pretending to be the sausage in a fried breakfast and the other half as the fork. She'd come home utterly disgusted and told her parents, 'Don't ever send me back to that dodgy place. That teacher was crazy!'

So Scarlett had been just aching to meet someone like Mr Coe, someone who would take her ambitions seriously. Mr Coe was certainly serious, if not passionate, about drama himself. He had very firm

views on acting and believed in throwing his students in at the deep end.

'I know some people might consider Shakespeare too difficult for twelve- and thirteen-year-olds,' he had told them, 'but I have no patience with that view.'

Mr Coe thought that Shakespeare was little short of God and Scarlett soon agreed with him.

So she was utterly thrilled at the end of the session, when Mr Coe announced that their next production would be scenes from *Othello*. Some of the other girls were less enthusiastic and one or two quietly groaned, but Scarlett could hardly wait to give her family the exciting news, especially her dad.

Although Scarlett's dad, Steve, often worked away from home, sometimes for weeks at a time, he tried to call most evenings. When he rang that night, after supper, it was the first thing Scarlett told him.

'*Othello*?! That's a bit heavy isn't it?' he said.

Steve wasn't exactly a keen theatregoer. Sitting through anything for more than an hour, unless it was a rugby match, caused his eyes to close. He was often in trouble with the rest of the family for snoring and showing them up in public.

'We're not doing the *whole* play,' Scarlett explained,

'just a few scenes. Mr Coe's adapted it. He's calling it: *Scenes of a Betrayal.*' She gave the title plenty of dramatic emphasis.

'I suppose there'll be lots of dying in it?' said her dad.

Scarlett was used to being teased about her fondness for a gruesome death scene. 'Yeah!' she said enthusiastically. 'Most of the cast are dead on the bed at the end. It'll be rocking. Anyway, it's not for a few weeks yet, ' she added. 'You'll be home by then, won't you?'

Scarlett heard the slightest hesitation before he said, 'Well...maybe. It all depends...'

Before Scarlett could ask what it depended upon, her mum signalled that her time was up.

Scarlett quickly said, 'Gotta go, Dad. Smile! Be Happy! Love you lots,' and turned off her phone.

Scarlett's dad was a financial advisor. He had his own business, with an office in town and another in Malaga, in Spain, where he advised British people who'd moved out there how to invest their money.

Whenever the girls complained about him being away from home so much, Steve reminded them that by helping his rich clients to become even richer, he

hoped to become rich too. As soon as that happened he planned to take a year off and they would all sail around the world together. This had been her dad's dream for as long as Scarlett could remember. But even this possibility didn't stop Scarlett from wishing him home!

While their mum talked to their dad, Scarlett and Cleo sat at opposite ends of the sofa pulling faces at one another.

'So what part are you after?' Cleo asked sarcastically. 'Othello, I suppose.'

'Why not?' Scarlett asked. The fact that she went to an all girls' school meant that she was never in competition with boys for the male leads.

'Why not!' Cleo laughed. 'Because Othello is *black* is why not.'

'So?' Scarlett replied.

'So, dream on,' Cleo said, giving her sister a superior look which Scarlett perfectly mirrored back.

'You'll go too far one of these days,' Cleo warned her, 'and then you'll be sorry.'

Their mum gave the girls a warning look and they both backed off.

Scarlett didn't care in the least that her sister,

like lots of people at school, thought she was a bighead. But she knew Cleo had a point about Othello. She retreated to her bedroom to ponder the problem in private and to seek comfort from her journal.

Under Mr Coe's influence Scarlett had been keeping a journal for the last two years. It wasn't meant to be a diary exactly, more a collection of her own thoughts and feelings about acting, a record of her many triumphs and occasional disasters – Scarlett knew that every good actress could learn from those.

She also included any pearls of wisdom that dropped from Mr Coe's lips, or Miss Kitty's, her singing teacher. One day Scarlett fully intended to pass these on to other keen drama students, when she herself was a world-famous star of stage and screen.

Scarlett had noticed that whenever Mr Coe spoke about acting it was as if he were speaking *IN CAPITAL LETTERS*, and this had an unconscious effect on Scarlett's journal entries.

Acting is MY LIFE. It's WHO I AM!

Acting is like having a REALLY, REALLY

interesting conversation where someone's already told you what to say.

Mr Coe says that every actor has A STORY and the richer the story the better. I don't think I have A STORY yet because my life so far has been pretty boring, but one day I will have A STORY – and it can't come soon enough.

Mr Coe had also told the girls that an actor must be *RUTHLESSLY HONEST*. This was something that Scarlett prided herself on. She scrutinised herself in just the same way as she studied other people.

Scarlett was ready to admit that at times she did tend to blather on a bit, and when she got passionate about things she knew that other people thought she was plain *weird*. But she had many positive qualities too and she didn't believe in pretending otherwise. If you were good at something why hide it? That was her attitude.

On the other hand, Scarlett wasn't completely thick-skinned. She hadn't yet admitted to any of the other girls that she'd set her heart on the main role of

Othello – because it wasn't a foregone conclusion that she would get it.

If Cleo was right, the only black girl in the group, Leah, would probably get the part. But Scarlett was relying on the fact that Mr Coe wasn't predictable in that way. He might still give it to the best actress in the group – which everyone knew was her.

When she had confided in Gemma how badly she wanted the part, her best friend had been supremely confident on Scarlett's behalf and reminded her that there was no real competition.

'You're bound to get it. It's a done deal. You're the best; everyone knows that.'

Oh, it was like music to Scarlett's ears. Thank goodness for Gemma, who was bright and intelligent and Scarlett's biggest fan.

But sometimes Scarlett couldn't help wishing that Gemma had a little bit more...*backbone*. When Zara was throwing her weight about, or Brogan was looking for an argument, Gemma rarely stood up for herself. Even with Scarlett, Gemma usually just went along with things.

Strangely, Gemma was the only member of Drama Club that Scarlett didn't mimic, even when

Gemma begged her to do so.

'Why won't you ever do me?'

The truth was her friend didn't really have any obvious mannerisms – nothing Scarlett could hook onto. She was just...Gemma, and deep down, even if she never got round to telling her, Scarlett really did love and appreciate her.

Scarlett knew full well how lucky she was to have a best friend like Gemma – backbone or not!