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Opening extract from

Secrets At St Judes: New Girl

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Chapter One

Gina Peterson didn't hear the electric gates slide open, or the silver Mercedes convertible purr through into the drive. She didn't hear the heavy wrought-iron and glass front door slam shut, or the *tappity-tap* of her mother's elegant high heels on the parquet floor of the huge, jaw-droppingly impressive entrance hall.

Over the noise in her bedroom, Gina had no hope of hearing her mother's screech of fury as she took the white marble-topped stairs at something as close to a run as she could manage, what with the heels and the fact that she was pulling a tired eight-year-old boy along behind her.

'*Gina!*' Lorelei Winkelmann screamed at the top of her voice, furious that, yet again, she was going to have a row with her spoiled brat of a daughter.

It was almost 7 p.m. (Pacific Time) and something of an all-girl party was going on in Gina's rooms: her

three best friends, Paula, Ria and Maddison, had come over to the house after school.

House wasn't quite the right word for the place. The Winkelmann, Royce and Peterson family home in Malibu, California, was one of those stunning glass modernist fantasies with enormous windows, billowing curtains and a sparkling view of endless ocean and sky.

The bright turquoise swimming pool in the garden was long enough for Lorelei's fifty laps at 6.20 a.m. to be properly invigorating. Naturally, there was a gardener who mowed the lawns, trimmed the shrubbery and watered the plants all day long, while indoors a housekeeper buffed the maple, chrome and marble surfaces to dazzling perfection.

Gina and her half-brother, Menzie Royce, had lived in this luxury for as long as they could both remember, with not just a room of their own, but a whole suite – bedroom, sitting room and personalized bathroom (Gina's was pink with gold taps; Menzie had recently chosen an elaborate Superman mosaic for his shower, which he was already acutely embarrassed about).

Whenever people asked Gina what Lorelei and her partner, Mick, Menzie's dad, did for a living, Gina's glib reply was: 'Oh, computers . . . software, you

know, that kind of stuff. They practically invented the Internet.'

Maddison and Ria were sprawled across Gina's double bed, taking turns to paint each other's fingernails in the moment's shade of 'Screaming Queen' pink, while Paula and Gina were practising their dance moves to the retro-disco belting out from the surround-sound stereo. All four were decked out in 'awesome' (or, to the uninitiated, 'ludicrous') new outfits chosen at great length from the landslide of expensive tops, skirts, jeans, shoes, bags, jewellery, jackets and sunglasses spread across the floor, the bed, the sofa and as far as the eye could see.

'Man, we rock!' Gina panted, gyrating her hips in time with Paula's and attempting a complicated move that was more painful than she'd expected in the shoes she'd borrowed from her mother's wardrobe. 'I can't wait for next weekend! I. Can. Not. Wait.'

'So has your mom OK'd everything?' Paula asked loudly, so as to be heard over the music.

'Oh . . . you know . . . I'll tell her you're going and your mom's said it's OK, so that will be' – Gina put her hands behind her head, flicked up her long blonde hair and carried on dancing as best she could in three-inch heels – 'cool.'

She, Paula, Ria and Maddison had a plan. The weekend after next they were going to hook up with Paula's boyfriend, Martinez, and three of his friends, including Aidan. Yes, most definitely including Aidan. Gina got that stupid, trippy, butterfly-stomach feeling whenever she thought about Aidan, but that didn't stop her worrying a lot about whether he liked Ria better than her. Gina imagined going for long walks with Aidan, talking to him, holding his hand and feeling his arm around her shoulders. But she didn't like to think about kissing him. Because just *thinking* about kissing brought on flashbacks of her last boyfriend: Squid Boy, so named because he had turned out to be damp, slimy, squelchy and tentacle-armed. Gina shuddered and tried to put the Squid out of her mind.

Anyway, the eight of them were all going to take a bus up-state to the Water's Edge Festival to see some of the coolest, most happening bands in the world, and they were going to camp for two nights in adjoining tents. Paula and Martinez had already organized the tents; had in fact taken quite a close interest in the sleeping arrangements.

'You can't lose your virginity in a tent you're sharing with your friends,' Gina had warned. 'It's just not romantic . . . or polite.'

'As if!' Paula had hissed back.

The trip was organized, the tents and sleeping bags had been bought, the festival tickets booked. There were just a few tiny details to tie up . . . like, mmmmm, getting their parents to agree. Everyone had been so scared their parents would say no that no one seemed to have actually asked yet.

'I was going to tell my mom that your mom had already agreed,' Paula said, breaking into the kind of groovy little on-the-spot moonwalk that proved, yet again, she was the best dancer.

Gina had been dancing with Paula and copying her every move since first grade, but it didn't make any difference: Paula was a natural and Gina was the kind of dancer who twisted her ankles.

'Not a problem,' Gina told Paula now. 'Our moms are far too busy to actually speak to each other. Jeez, they're both such classic over-achievers.' She glanced down at her little silver wristwatch, which was Gucci (of course), just as most of her tops were Juicy and her jeans 7 For All Mankind. In Gina's group these were the current shopping rules, which had to be obeyed.

'It's only seven,' Gina added. 'Mine won't be home for at least another hour, or later if she's doing "me time" at Power Pilates. Yours?'

'Same,' Paula replied.

So all four girls were a little surprised, to say the least, when the bedroom door burst open and they saw Gina's mother, Lorelei, towering before them, all heels, piled-up hair and slick skirt suit, shouting at the top of her voice: '*What are you doing?! What the hell is going on in here?!*'

'Hey, get back in your box, Mom,' was Gina's amazingly cool response. Much as she was used to these regular rants, she did at least have the sense to pick up the remote and snap off the music.

In the sudden silence, Paula, Ria and Maddison stood rooted to the spot, although one glance at Ms Winkelmann's face told them they needed to pack up and get out of there just as quickly as their legs could carry them.

'Look at this place!' Lorelei began, surveying the nuclear damage that four girls in search of the perfect outfit can inflict on a teenage bedroom. 'Look at *you*! You look totally ridiculous!' she added, taking in Gina's crop top, emblazoned with the logo RICH & SKINNY, the denim miniskirt, purple and blue striped leg warmers and then, catastrophically, Lorelei's own very new black patent-leather T-bar heels.

'My shoes!' she shrieked. 'Take them off at once.'

'All right.' Gina glared back, daring to meet her mother eye to eye and folding her arms defiantly across her (still, despite all those exercises, 32 B) chest.

'Don't you dare look at me like that!' Lorelei stormed. 'I want an explanation and I want a really big apology or you don't get one cent in allowance for a very long time.'

'What for?' came Gina's outraged response as her friends began to quietly gather up their things and sidle towards the door.

'Oh, you've forgotten who this is, have you?' Lorelei pulled her left hand forward and Menzie stepped out from behind her legs.

For a moment Gina didn't answer. She was doing the math. Was today Friday, by any chance? Because on Fridays she was supposed to get a cab from her school and go straight to Menzie's school to collect him. Then she was supposed to bring him home and look after him until Lorelei or Mick's return.

Because she had forgotten to show up at Menzie's school several times before, Lorelei always called her on her cell phone to remind her, but then Gina had left her cell in her locker, hadn't she?

And the home landline had been busy all afternoon because Ria had been on it for hours trying to book an

extra Water's Edge ticket. And Lorelei wouldn't have been able to call Dominique, their housekeeper, because today was her day off. And even if Lorelei had managed to get hold of a neighbour, Gina wouldn't have heard the front doorbell because the music was so loud.

So – to conclude – Lorelei must have had to leave her very, very important meeting or whatever it was she was doing that afternoon, speed down the highway to Menzie's school and finally pick him up from the janitor, or wherever he'd been for the past two hours, and bring him home herself – which might explain why she was so eye-poppingly, outrageously furious.

Ooops.

'I think I'll head off now, Ms Winkelmann,' said Paula, edging past Lorelei and out of the door.

Lorelei glared at Paula, held out her hand and snapped, 'My necklace, please.' Paula obliged wordlessly.

'Yeah . . . um . . . got to go,' Maddison added, making her break for freedom.

'Earrings!' Lorelei commanded. Maddison unclipped the pearls and surrendered them.

Ria followed on quickly, handing over a fringed silk scarf and mumbling something nervous-sounding.

'I'm sorry, Mom. Jeez . . . I'm really sorry, Menzie,' Gina said as contritely as she could.

But the bedroom door just slammed shut and she was left alone in her mother's shoes and the stupid legwarmers with a mountain of stuff to put away.

Gina picked up the remote and switched the music back on, then flung herself down on the bed. The worst thing was she'd have to wait absolutely hours now before she could ask her mother about going to the festival.

'And turn that garbage off!' came a shout from the other side of the door.

It was close to 10 p.m. when Gina dared to leave her room in search of her family again. When she'd come down an hour earlier, she'd found a chicken salad set out for her in the kitchen, but it was obvious her mother and Menzie had already eaten and were now busy with Menzie's bedtime. Unfortunately Mick, a welcome and soothing influence on her mom, wasn't home yet. Gina had bolted down the salad and headed back to her room.

Now, as she came down the stairs, she saw the light was on in her mom's home office; she could hear the

TV at low volume. She opened the door quietly and tiptoed in.

Lorelei was at her desk, staring with concentration at the big computer screen in front of her. Her dark blonde hair had begun to slide out of the tight up-do she kept it in for work, but she was still in her silk blouse and skirt. As flip-flops had replaced the heels and there was a glass of white wine crammed full of ice on her desk, Gina knew that her mother was winding down for the evening.

'Mommy?' she said, approaching the desk. 'I'm really sorry about Menzie. I'm really sorry you had to come and get him. I won't forget again. I promise.'

Lorelei turned from the computer screen and gave just the tiniest of half-smiles in Gina's direction.

'Gina,' she said quietly. 'Gina, Gina, Gina . . . What am I going to do with you? What am I going to do?'

Gina decided it was safe to get a little closer, so she put her hands on her mother's shoulders and began to rub at the tight muscles a little.

'I'm still really annoyed with you – there's no use trying to butter me up,' Lorelei began. 'And I might as well tell you straight off that I know about the festival, and Paula's mother and I are in agreement. No way. Definitely not.'

Gina's attempt at a massage stopped abruptly at this news.

'What?!' came the outraged voice Lorelei knew so well.

'Really, Gina.' Her mother turned to face her. 'Did you seriously think I was going to let you go off with some guys I've never met to who knows where, doing who knows what, when it's not even the holidays and I know you're way behind with your schoolwork and your grades are slipping?'

Gina felt a surge of anger sweep through her as she thought of the trip: of the two tents and four boys, of her sleeping bag, which was bright red, of her ticket, stored safely in her jewellery box upstairs, and of Aidan and the fact that now Ria would be at the festival with him and not her . . .

'I want to go!' she yelled. 'I *have* to go! There is no way that I can't go!'

'You're so spoiled, Gina!' her mother replied in a tone that was rising rapidly. 'You have no idea how lucky you are, how much freedom you already have . . . and how much stuff!' she added. 'When I was a teenager . . .'

Good grief, Gina so didn't want to hear this; she rolled her eyes theatrically. Her mother had never been

a teenager! Well, obviously she had, but everything Lorelei had ever told her about *her* teenage years proved to Gina that she was the daughter of a total geek.

Her mother had been a robot teen: the kind who does extra homework for fun, gets amazing grades, becomes captain of the school debating team, never even notices a single boy.

Gina's mother had been the cleverest girl in her year; Gina's mother had gone to a top university; Gina's mother had won trophies for 'outstanding achievement'; Gina's mother had been presented to the Queen of England; Gina's mother had a lump on her middle finger from writing so many hundreds of pages of notes and essays when she was a teenager – '*We didn't have computers then, you know.*'

In short, Gina's mother was perfect and Gina didn't have a hope of ever living up to her. So why bother even trying?

'You can't go,' her mother said firmly. 'You can't go because, guess what? You won't be here,' she added.

'What?!' What was her mother talking about now?

'I've had enough of this,' Lorelei said sharply. 'I'm exhausted with you. I'm exhausted with fighting all

the time, picking up after you, sorting out your messes, solving your problems, doing your homework, Gina! I've just looked through the maths project you're intending to hand in and it's all wrong. Needs total re-working.'

Gina managed to gasp out an exasperated 'But . . .!' as she was handed her homework folder, which had been taken from her school bag without her permission, before Lorelei stormed on.

'I no longer want to watch you change from an A student into a D, maybe even an F if you keep at it. I'm about to take on a really important new project. I'm going to be working all the time. It's a great, *great* opportunity! So I've hired a nanny to look after Menzie out of school . . . But for you, Gina, for you we really need to do something different. We need to turn things around for you or you're going to be in trouble. All you care about is clothes, boys and being cool. No good will come of this. No good at all!'

The way Lorelei was looking at her was making Gina nervous. It sounded like she had a plan. Gina couldn't remember the last time she'd liked one of her mother's plans.

'You know about St Jude's, don't you?' Lorelei was asking her.

See, although it was hard to recognize these days, Gina's mother wasn't Californian. Or even American. She was British. No, actually her dad was German, but anyway, she had spent most of her schooldays in *Edinborrow*, or whatever it was called – some city in Scotland. Anyway, Lorelei had been sent there to some school for girls called St Jude's.

It explained a lot, Gina was sure.

'Yeah?' She crossed her arms, wondering what on earth her mother's school had to do with anything.

'I've been speaking to the headmistress of St Jude's,' Lorelei continued. 'I've told her all about you and she's very interested . . . very sympathetic.'

'Huh?' was Gina's bewildered response.

'And they have a space in the boardinghouse. Most of the pupils are in Edinburgh and go home after school, but about one hundred or so are boarders.'

'*Huh?!*' Pennies were dropping for Gina. Warning lights were clicking on and flashing up. Big time.

'Yes, you're going to start this summer semester – although it's called "term" over there – at St Jude's, in Edinburgh, in Scotland.'

'I am not!' Gina exclaimed.

But Lorelei was carrying on in her *I haven't heard you* way. 'Yup. You're going to St Jude's and you aren't

coming back until you have good grades. Really good grades, Gina. I don't care how long that takes, by the way: a term, a whole year, even the rest of your school career.'

'I'm not going. No way!'

'Oh yes, you are going. The ticket's already booked. You arrive in Edinburgh on the twenty-fourth of April, the day before term starts, just like all the other boarders.'

'NO!!!'