Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Scarlett Fever

Written by

Maureen Johnson

Published by

Hot Key Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Hot Key Books
Northburgh House, 10 Northburgh Street, London EC1V 0AT

Copyright © Maureen Johnson 2014
Cover illustration copyright © Jacqueline Bisset 2014

The moral rights of the author have been asserted.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-4714-0304-0

1

This book is typeset in 10.5 Berling LT Std using Atomik ePublisher

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Hot Key Books supports the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the leading international forest certification organisation, and is committed to printing only on Greenpeace-approved FSC-certified paper.

www.hotkeybooks.com

Hot Key Books is part of the Bonnier Publishing Group
www.bonnierpublishing.com

ACT I

Gothammag.com
"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't": Hamlet at the Hopewell Hotel

So let's set the scene, shall we? Hamlet. *In a hotel. But not one of the grand palaces or tourist farms — a much rarer breed. A tiny, privately owned hotel. It would be fair, and possibly even generous, to call the place distressed. The floors squeak, a fine layer of dust covers everything, and most of the furniture in the lobby has an astonishing lean to it, so much so that I actually found myself cocking my head to the side at points.*

But what is equally obvious is the true style under the decay. It's there, like good bone structure. The place is an absolute Deco masterpiece: cherry wood, silver lightning-bolt motifs where you least expect them, poison-purple and tiger lily-orange tinted light from the colored lamps. You pass from the lobby into a modest dining room, now converted into a theater. Like everything else, the

chandelier is lopsided, but deliberately so, pulled by a wire draped with silver gauze. The walls are bare but alive with the shadows of a hundred small, guttering candles. The room is in decadent disarray, as if a seedy royal wedding has taken place soon before.

Which, of course, it has. Welcome to the world of Hamlet.

Full disclosure: I wanted to dismiss this production as a gimmick, a cheap bag of tricks. Hamlet *in a hotel . . . and next,* Othello *in an office.* Macbeth *in a McDonald's. I've seen shows staged in every possible location, but the fact that this one seemed so tied to the establishment — with backstage access to guests — I assumed it was a new step downward in the ever-devolving state of the art.*

But this show works. I now think every production of Hamlet *should be staged in a broken-down hotel. This is the play where people constantly come and go — royals, courtiers, messengers, servants, students, performers — and events progress from bad to worse to terminal. All is uprooted in* Hamlet, *no one is sleeping in the right bed, and your stay may be much shorter than you expect. So a hotel . . . of course! Why not?*

This Hamlet *is also staged like a kind of carnival — a mad, strange circus. It's an uneven production, overacted at points (Stephanie Damler doesn't quite know where to pull back on Ophelia's insanity, and Jeffery Archson's portrayal of Horatio set my teeth on edge). But there are some true laugh-out-loud moments, mostly provided by*

the inspired clowning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, played by Eric Hall and Spencer Martin, respectively. In particular, when Martin careened through the crowd on his unicycle at the start of the show and had an encounter with a closed door — I actually spit-took my drink onto my companion's shoulder. And I'm not normally a spitter.

Like all good things, it will come to an end, so get your tickets while you can. (SHOW CLOSES AUGUST 28, TICKETS AVAILABLE THROUGH TICKETPRO OR FREE TO HOTEL GUESTS.)

Safety for the Stupid

It was four thirty in the morning, and Scarlett wanted answers.

Unfortunately, four-thirty-in-the-morning questions are often of a very different nature than, say, three-twenty-in-the-afternoon questions. At three twenty in the afternoon, the questions you might be asking yourself are, "What's for dinner?" or "I wonder if that button on my cell phone is stuck or completely broken and if I keep pressing it will I fix it or will it fall off?" You can wave those questions off with a quick swing of the hand. They scare easy.

The questions that creep around at four thirty in the morning are not the kind that can be easily dismissed. You can beat them with a shovel, and they'll just keep getting back up. "What are you going to do with your life?" they demand, pulling themselves from the ground with no visible damage. "Who are you, really?"

Hamlet was big on questions. "To be, or not to be," he asked peevishly, "that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them."

In other words, why not just give up? What's the point?

Life is rough — is it easier just not to bother? Lie here and do nothing? Curl up and die? Scarlett Martin knew the whole whiny speech because she had seen the show every single day for the last four weeks, plus rehearsals. It's hard to miss a show when it's in your dining room.

The questions that Scarlett was asking herself at the moment weren't quite that dramatic. They weren't even that specific. What was going through her head was a querulous vibration with a questiony flavor . . . a general "*What the hell is going on*?"

She lay on the twelve-foot-wide main stage platform, her feet propped up on a unicycle ramp. A sheer purple curtain dangled just inches above her forehead. Higher up, silver banners and purple drapes hung from the set walls. Beyond that, tin lanterns were suspended from the ceiling. Around her, theatrical lights were attached to freestanding poles, and a hundred empty chairs pointed in her direction — an audience of no one.

This was the skeleton of the show, stripped bare of flesh and life. It had been closed for two days, and for those two nights, Scarlett hadn't really slept. She tossed in bed for a few hours, then took the steps down the four flights from her room (the elevator was much too loud to use in the middle of the night) and paced the set. She would not, would not, would not look at the pictures of Eric on her phone. Or the saved messages. She would do none of these things, because it was over.

Probably.

Most likely.

Which is why she would not look at . . .

Too late. The phone was in front of her face and she was clicking through the photos. She saw her finger doing it. It was

like she wasn't even in control of her hand. It had gone rogue, disconnected itself from her brain. The hand wanted to see the photos. The hand *always* wanted to see the photos, clicking through them again and again, one hundred and fifty-four in all. Some were action shots from the show. Some were pictures she snapped in quiet when Eric wasn't looking. It was a minor point of pride for Scarlett that she had gotten very good at doing that. If you're going to be a stalker, she figured, you really should be *good* at it. The shame of failure was too great. Ideally, a good stalker could perhaps gain future employment as a spy. Fight crime. Go undercover. Save the world. Yes. That's what the world needed, someone good with a camera phone, someone prepared to spend five hours online looking at the same video clip, someone who really knew how to read into a status message. Surely, all very desirable skills should the perpetrators of terror ever really get into social networking.

The dining room doors opened and a tall figure appeared in the doorway, casting a long shadow as it came farther into the room. Scarlett sat up abruptly, startling the person and causing him to yelp and almost crash into a chair.

"Sorry," she said. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"God . . . what . . . Scarlett?"

Spencer was always the first awake at the hotel, fully dressed in his uniform: white dress shirt, black pants, and black tie. Unlike at the Hopewell, staff at the Waldorf-Astoria had to get dressed up for work. Also, the Waldorf-Astoria had staff — this was another major difference. Spencer worked the breakfast shift there and always woke at an unreasonable hour. He lived on almost no sleep.

"Why are you up?" he said, sitting on the edge of the platform.

"Just the heat," she said. "Our air conditioner broke again."

The part about the air conditioner in the Orchid Suite was true. It used to freeze Scarlett and Lola with its powerful, energy-draining, light-dimming gusts, but it had recently given up on emitting anything aside from a painfully loud squeal. So they poached all night long in the hot, damp air. That had nothing to do with why she was awake tonight, though, and Spencer seemed to know that. He looked at the phone, still grasped in her hand.

"Expecting a call?" he asked, nodding at it.

The whole Eric situation had caused tension between Scarlett and Spencer for a little while over the summer, tension that had been resolved when Spencer punched Eric in the face during a fight practice, coincidentally just minutes after Eric sort-of dumped Scarlett and made her cry. The matter had been put down by all involved as an unfortunate accident. Spencer and Eric performed every night from that point on without a problem and everyone acted as if nothing had happened between Scarlett and Eric at all. It had all been swept away, just like the play. A moment of unreality, long past.

Spencer may have pretended all month long that all was well and maintained a never-wavering "I don't want to know" stance on the whole thing . . . but he had surely noticed Scarlett's nervous, careful behavior and inability to speak around Eric. Or Eric's excessively polite, excruciating efforts to make sure it was perfectly clear that nothing was happening. Scarlett had seen the other cast members jump in to fill the holes in the conversation when she and Eric were cornered together. The

Eric situation was a lot of work for everyone. Never mentioned, but always there, always generating a crackle of unpredictable energy.

"It's nothing," she said.

"Yeah," he mumbled, rubbing his face tiredly. "I hope so. Come on. Since you're up, I need your help."

Just because she was awake at this hour didn't necessarily mean that Scarlett actually wanted to *do* anything, but she followed him along to the kitchen anyway. She sat on one of their large wooden prep tables while he set up the coffee station. That was his early morning task, and it only took a few minutes. He pulled a few script pages out of his back pocket and handed them to her.

"This," he said, "is killing me. The audition is at one. I have no idea what I'm doing. Help me think of something. Read the highlighted part."

"'Man holds two ends of seat belt in his hands,'" Scarlett read, as Spencer filled an industrial-size coffee urn with water. "'He is unable to figure out how they click together. He tries several times. He puts up his hand for help from the flight attendant.' Seems pretty easy."

"Seems easy. *Is* impossible."

He turned off the water and hauled the heavy urn up by its side handles, taking it out of the kitchen. He returned a moment later and sat on the counter. He unbuckled his belt, slipped it from around his waist, and held it up for examination.

"This is a seat belt," he said, "and I am the guy who can't figure this out. What is my problem? Look." He looped the belt around himself and jabbed the end at the buckle. "Seat belts

are just insert and click. That's it. How do you play someone who can't figure that out? Why do they even do safety videos on planes?"

"If I flew," Scarlett said, "maybe I could tell you. What is this for, anyway? Air Stupid?"

"I know. This is my problem. I don't know how to play someone who doesn't know how to fasten a seat belt without acting like an idiot. But the airline won't want the person in the video to seem stupid, because I'm supposed to be playing their typical customer. So I have to *be* stupid without *looking* stupid. I can do looking stupid. Looking stupid is easy. But *this* is harder than Shakespeare. People get Oscars for playing the kind of guy who can't fasten the seat belt. It's a well-known fact."

"Do they give Oscars to people in airline safety videos?"

"They should," he said. "God. This is going to be another Day of the Sock."

It had been four weeks since the Day of the Sock, and yet there was no sign that Spencer was any closer to getting over it.

A casting director had come to see *Hamlet* on its first night. Spencer had impressed him with his skills — fighting, fake falling, backflipping, running into walls on a unicycle. The casting director brought him in to audition for a washing machine commercial, in which he was asked to play a sock stuck in an oversize fake dryer. Spencer spent a good eight hours in the fake dryer, getting callback after callback all day long, until it was down to just him and one other actor. Apparently, eight hours in a fake oversize dryer is not nearly as much fun as it sounds. Especially when the other guy gets the part, and all you get is a headache that lasts for a day and a half.

The Day of the Sock had come to symbolize a kind of curse Spencer thought had come over his career. It cast a pall over his ordinarily high spirits. Since that day, he had been going on auditions several times a week, but nothing was panning out. Casting directors liked him. They called him back again and again. But at the last second, someone else would get the part. Again and again and again. It was wearing him down.

"Maybe you've never been on a plane before?" Scarlett suggested, trying to sound positive.

"I've only flown twice, and even I could master the seat belt," he said. "Anyone can work a seat belt. A seat belt practically fastens itself."

He slumped down a bit, resting his elbows on his knees and running his hands through his dark hair. Scarlett stared at his black tie.

"The tie," she said suddenly. "What if you got it caught in the seat belt? You wouldn't be able to buckle it then."

This made Spencer sit up. He looked at his tie, then yanked on the knot to loosen it.

"Okay," he said, pulling the tie so that it hung low. "I just lean over a little when I'm trying to put on the seat belt, and . . ."

He made sure to dangle the tip of his tie into the imaginary clamp so that it couldn't catch.

". . . oh no! I can't figure out my seat belt!"

He increased his struggle, and began doing a very good simulation of choking himself with the belt-clamped tie. He somehow managed to make it look like it had tightened around his neck, and he gagged and choked and pulled himself all the way down to the floor.

"How's that?" he asked, opening his eyes in his death pose. "It's just a starting point. Obviously, I have to work that out a bit."

"I like it," Scarlett said approvingly.

Spencer got up and straightened out his shirt and tie. He opened the accordion guard on one of their large and dusty kitchen windows and surveyed the day. It was just before sunrise, the sky a heavy purple-gray, the air already thick and warm. A summer morning in the city, in the pocket of time when the heat was between merely uncomfortable and completely unbearable. Spencer just stared out at the small, paved area that separated their property from the apartment building behind them — just a little plot of concrete with a table and some chairs that no one ever used. He exhaled long and slow.

"What?" Scarlett asked.

Spencer just shook his head and snapped the guard back into position.

"Nothing," he said. "I should get going. Walk out with me?"

Outside, Spencer's bike was looking a little worse than usual. It had been the duct-tape special since he was in high school, but now one of the handlebars was bent up and forward, like the horn of a bull.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Oh yeah," he said, unlocking it. "A little present from yesterday. I went to pick up some new copies of my headshot, and when I came out, this is what it looked like. The whole frame is messed up. Someone must have nailed it with a car. I'm on a lucky streak these days."

He fastened the bike chain around his waist and squatted down, balancing the bike in his hands and examining the line of vision from seat level. The bike was clearly crooked. He rolled it along as they walked down the sidewalk, and it was obviously a struggle. It kept pulling in Scarlett's direction, sometimes nudging her, and he would drag it back.

"Can you really ride that?" she asked.

"I don't have much choice. It's mostly okay, except that it always wants to go left now, so I have to steer right to keep it straight."

"That's really bad in traffic. There's about a dozen ways to die on that thing."

Spencer stopped and looked at her like she was a genius.

"A dozen ways to die," he repeated. "That's it!"

"What?"

"I'm going to strangle this guy in a few different ways, besides the tie. I'll make everything dangerous. Like when the oxygen mask drops down, I'll strangle him on the cord. I can do the same thing with the inflatable life preserver. I'll make him the most inept passenger of all time. You always think of something!" He yelled some kind of farewell as he wobbled off into traffic at high speed.

It was just dawn now, a violent burst of sun breaking between the buildings on the east side. Scarlett pulled her phone from the pocket of her pajama shorts. The screen displayed the time, signal strength, battery life . . . but otherwise, its face was blank and stupid.

She sat on the front step of the hotel and watched Mrs. Foo, their dry-cleaner neighbor, open the gate in front of her shop.

She waved to Scarlett. Scarlett lifted her arm to wave back. The arm felt tired. The first wave of weariness washed over her; still . . . there was something about this up-with-the-dawn thing. What if . . . she wondered . . . what if she made today the first day of a whole new era? She was literally up with the dawn. School started in less than a week. The show was over. In a few hours, she'd be seeing all of her friends together for the first time since the end of school.

This was the day to begin again, to put Eric behind her, to think about what came next. Something quivered in her, something made of enthusiasm or exhaustion, something that told her that this was the plan. This was the way.

She pulled out her phone again. This time, she gave her hand permission to pull up the pictures of Eric. There was an ERASE ALL button. All she had to do was hit it. That would be a good start.

Her finger hovered over the button for a moment, teasing it, just coming into enough contact. But she didn't press down.

No. Even better. She would go through the pictures one by one and erase them manually. That was more like a ritual, more cleansing. She would wipe out all one hundred and fifty-four of them right now, in her sleeping clothes, on her stoop, in the early morning sunshine in full view of Mrs. Foo and whoever walked by.

Picture one: a very early one of Eric, soon after they met. He was buying a sandwich and didn't even see her take the photo. Kind of historical. She would come back to that one.

Picture two: from an early rehearsal. Same thing. She would come back to these. Better to start in the middle. Back to the

main menu. Scroll, scroll . . .

Picture thirty-nine: Eric in the theater. Very generic. A little blurry. Erasable. She took a deep breath, clenched her free hand into a fist, and hit the TRASH button. Picture gone.

Or was it? Did the phone save trashed pictures? She had no idea. She backed through the menus to check. No, it did not. The picture was gone. Only one hundred and fifty-three left to go.

Scarlett managed to prune twenty-three of the pictures before the second, heavier wave of exhaustion hit. She crept back up to her room, her feet heavy. Her sister Lola was already awake and in the shower. Scarlett dropped down on her bed and listened to the water run in the bathroom next door.

It was six thirty in the morning, and Scarlett felt herself falling under. But before she gave up and just let the sleep come, she said to herself, out loud, "I am making a new start."