

Creeping with the Enemy

LANGDON PREP #2

Chapter 1

The line in the Center Street bodega is five deep because it's Freebie Friday and the tamales are buy one, get one. I don't mind the wait—the scent of green chili reminds me how lucky I am to live on Aurora Avenue, just two blocks from the best tamales on the planet. Seeing how it's smack in the middle of Metro's second worst police zone, there isn't a lot to appreciate about the Ave, so that's saying something about these tamales.

Since they only let you get one order, I always find someone to go along who doesn't love them like I do so I can get one extra. Today my tamale pimp is Bethanie—we're numbers six and seven in line—and she's calling me some choice words for making her wait for a free tamale when she can afford to buy the whole bodega. I'm trying to explain to her that there's no sport in being rich (not that I would know)

when a guy walks in from a Ralph Lauren ad and becomes number eight in line.

I don't know how a person could look so out of place and seem completely at ease at the same time, but this guy is pulling it off. He's also checking out Bethanie so hard that even though he's a complete stranger, he makes me feel like I'm the one who crashed the party.

"Did you lose something over here or what?" I ask the dude since Bethanie doesn't seem to mind him staring at us like we're on the menu with the tamales.

"Chanti, that's so rude," Bethanie tells me, never taking her eyes off Preppie. "Pay her no mind. She simply gets out of sorts when she's hungry."

First off, it's none of this complete stranger's business how I get when I'm hungry. It doesn't matter that he looks like a model, I pretty much don't trust anyone with my business. You never know how they might use it against you, even something as minor as your eating pattern. No, I'm not paranoid—I'm speaking truth. Second, why is she talking like that? *Pay her no mind. She simply gets out of sorts.* Bethanie's still working on her old money, rich girl impersonation, so maybe she thinks the girls Preppie hangs around talk that way.

"What's so good in here that people are willing to wait for it?" he asks Bethanie. He pretty much

ignores me, so I almost laugh when his line goes right over her head.

"Supposedly the tamales are," she says, "but I've never had them."

I'm no pro at the flirty thing, but I'm sure he wasn't expecting her answer to be *tamales*. I move forward in the line, ignore their small talk and study the five-item menu as though I don't know what to order. Now there are only two people in front of me. Some Tejano music and the smell of cooking food drifts into the store from somewhere behind the clerk. I imagine somebody's grandmother back there wrapping corn husks around masa harina and pork. Yum.

I check out Preppie Dude like I'm not really looking at him but concentrating on the canned peaches on the shelf behind him. Cute. Not so cute he couldn't at least say hello to me before he starts fiening for my friend. He's still the last person in line even though tamale happy hour starts at four o'clock and the line is usually out the door until five. Weird, because it's only four thirty. I'm about to mention how weird that is to Bethanie, but she's finally figured out Preppie is flirting with her and has apparently forgotten me, too.

Now there's just one person ahead, Ada Crawford, who lives across the street from me and who I'm pretty sure is a prostitute even though I don't have any proof. If we lived in a different neighborhood, I

might say she was a call girl since her clients come to her. But we live in Denver Heights, so she doesn't get a fancy title. Luckily, she hasn't noticed me behind her because I'm not supposed to be here and I wouldn't want her to tell my mother she saw me. Not that Ada ever has much to say to my mom.

Still no one else has come in. Even more strange is the fact there's only one person working the counter on busy Freebie Friday, a man I've never seen before and I'm a regular. Along with the new clerk, maybe they've also changed the cut-off time to four thirty. I suppose the owners would go broke if all people did was come in for the Freebie and not buy anything else. Or worse, get a friend to pimp an extra Freebie. I place my order—feeling slightly guilty—when I hear the bells over the door jangling a new arrival just as Ada walks away with her order. I look back to see a man holding the door open for Ada. He stays by the door once she's gone, and just stands there looking at the three of us still in line. He's jumpy. Nervous. He looks around the bodega but doesn't join the line and doesn't walk down the aisles of overpriced food. His left hand is in the pocket of his jacket.

My gut tells me to get out of the store. *Now.*

Just as I grab Bethanie's arm, the man brings his hand out of his jacket. It's too late.

"All right, everybody stay cool. Don't start none, won't be none. Just give me what's in the drawer," he says to the clerk, pointing the gun at him.

I'm hoping the clerk won't try to jump bad and pull out whatever he has under the counter. Every owner of a little mom-and-pop in my neighborhood has something under the counter. Or maybe it's in the back with the tamale-making grandmother. But no one comes from the back and the clerk isn't the owner. From what I can tell, it's his first day and he apparently doesn't care about the money or the shop, because he opens the cash drawer immediately. Bethanie pretends she's from money, but I know she's a lot more like me than she lets on. She knows what to do in a situation like this. Stay quiet and let it play out. We steal a quick glance at one another and I know I'm right. Either she's been through it before, or always expected it to happen one day.

I'm trying to stay calm by thinking ahead to when it will be over. Ninety seconds from now, this will just be a story for us to tell. The perp will be in his car taking the exit onto I-70. Hopefully I will not have puked all over myself by then. Or worse.

But then the cute guy speaks.

"Look man, just calm down."

What the hell? *Just shut up*, I want to scream. The clerk has already put the money into a paper bag and

he's handing it over right now. This will all be over in thirty seconds if Preppie will just shut up.

The perp turns the gun in our direction. I lock eyes with him even though I know it's not the smartest thing to do. He realizes I can identify him; I can see him thinking about it, wondering what to do next. Suddenly, the smell of tamales sucker punches me and my stomach lurches. The wannabe-hero turns his back to the perp and shields Bethanie, pushing her to the ground and sending the contents of her bag all over the bodega floor. That move is like a cue for the perp. He breaks our gaze, grabs the paper bag from the clerk, and takes off.

I was right—it's over in just about ninety seconds. None of us wants to stick around to give the cops a statement. Preppie, who might have gotten us all killed, helps Bethanie grab the stuff that fell out of her bag while I scan the store for cameras. There aren't any that I can tell. As the three of us leave the store, the clerk is picking up the phone to call either the owner or the police, depending on how good the owner is about obeying employment laws and paying his taxes. I manage not to puke until I reach the parking lot.

"Clean yourself up and let's get out of here," Bethanie says, handing me a fast-food napkin from her purse to wipe my mouth. It smells like a fish sandwich and perfume, which doesn't do a thing for my upset stomach.

"But we're witnesses," I say, though I have no intention of sticking around, either. But saying it makes me feel like I at least considered doing the right thing.

"Exactly. Get in the car and open your window. I don't want my car smelling like sick."

I do what she says and tell myself I have to leave because Bethanie is my ride, even though I'm only two blocks from home. She hustled me out of the store and to her car because she's hiding something and has been since I met her a little over a month ago. So far, I've figured out that she lied her way into Langdon Preparatory School, pretending to be poor so she could get in on a scholarship because the only remaining slots were for the underprivileged. Like me. Unlike Bethanie, I never wanted to be there. Lana—that's my mother—forced me to because she was worried that I'd get into trouble in my neighborhood school.

That's the real reason I don't stay around to talk to the cops. The minute I tell her I can identify that perp, Lana will take me down to the police department to pick him out of a lineup. That would be a problem because one, I am a total wuss and don't want some pissed-off bad guy after me for retaliation. And two, Lana will put me on lockdown immediately following the lineup, just when I'm beginning to have a life.

This is one of the many drawbacks to having a cop for a mother. She sees nothing but bad all day so she figures her number-one job is to shield me from it. That's a tough gig in our neighborhood, so she made me go way across town to this rich prep school, which turned out to have more bad guys than there are on my street. She made me quit working at the Tastee Treets because a couple of crackheads held it up one night during my shift. If she finds out about the robbery at the bodega, she'll make me identify the perp because she takes being a cop seriously, then she'll put me into her own version of a witness protection program because she takes being a mother seriously.

And I can't have that because, as I said, I am finally beginning to have a social life. It's sad to admit, but I am a high school junior who had never been kissed—I mean really kissed where you feel it in every part of you and you wonder how you were able to survive without it, as though oxygen and water and food will never be enough to sustain you ever again because of that kiss—until just two weeks ago. To my credit, I'm a year younger than the average junior, so the fact that I'm a late bloomer isn't all that weird. Now that I'm finally blooming, there is no way anyone can stop me from having that kind of kiss again.

Bethanie definitely won't tell anyone what happened today. That's a fact. She's been through something worse than what just went down. I know this not just because she didn't lose her lunch in the parking lot

like I did, but because of something she said to me when I figured out she was really rich and she thought I might expose her: *You don't know nothing about me or where I come from. I can tell you now—I'm never going back.* She's running from something bad, and anytime someone's running, it's either from the cops or from someone who is being chased by the cops, which is probably worse.

I'm not sure why Preppie was in such a hurry to get out of here—maybe he doesn't want his friends to know he was slumming in Denver Heights—but he was gone by the time Bethanie and I got into her car.

I just hope the bodega didn't have a surveillance camera I missed when I made a quick scan of the store, that the clerk doesn't recognize me from the neighborhood (not a stretch since I've never seen him before), and that there were no witnesses who saw me go in or out. Then it would be as though I was never there. That's why I get into Bethanie's car even though I know it's wrong to run. I guess the owner minds all the laws because we can hear the sirens approaching as we drive away.

Also by Kimberly Reid

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