

# *My Own Worst*

## *Frenemy*

**LANGDON PREP #1**

### *Chapter 1*

I'm eating Coco Puffs on my last day of summer vacation and watching the news because there's nothing else on but Sunday-morning church shows and infomercials. The reporter is on location, telling me how the police finally closed down a prostitution ring. I'd rather not share my breakfast with hookers or the helmet-haired reporter who's way too happy reporting their arrest, so I reach for the remote. That's when I recognize one of the women being loaded into the police truck. In case I'm not sure what I'm seeing, the reporter steps to the side and passes her arm through the air, Vanna White-style, so I can get a better look. The woman is trying to hide her face, and doing a good job, but I'd know that outfit anywhere.

It's definitely Lana, in her favorite wig, the platinum-blond one with the bangs. She's wearing a baby tee that reads YOUNG, WILLING, AND ABLE, with the neckline cut wide so one side slips off her shoulders to reveal a red bra strap. The T-shirt is cut so short that if not for the bra, all her business would be peaking out from the curled edges of cotton. If the shirt isn't bad enough, the Daisy Duke shorts are. And God, please don't let her bend over to duck into the truck like the other hookers are doing. Too late.

But that isn't the worst of it. People I know might be watching this. I might have to explain to them that my mother is not really a crack ho. Come to think of it, I'd be better off letting them think she is a crack ho since her real job is ten times worse. In my neighborhood, you can't get much lower than a vice cop.

A few hours later, no one has mentioned Lana or the fact that her butt cheeks were all over the news. It makes sense—none of my friends would be up that early on a Sunday, especially when it's our last day of freedom. We're spending it on my front porch doing what we've done pretty much all summer. Talking about being broke, gossiping about who hooked up and who broke up over the break, and trying to figure out what's going on at Ada Crawford's house across the street.

Ada's house doesn't fit in with the rest of the street. It was built in the fifties like the others, but her house is prettier, what real estate agents would call a *real*

*cream puff* if anyone was actually interested in buying in our neighborhood. It's freshly painted and newly landscaped with the greenest grass that Ada has to water practically 24-7, which is no problem since she also has a new sprinkler system. Everybody else's house appears to have the original 1950s paint job, new landscaping is limited to plastic flowers on the porch, and we have to water our half-green, half-brown grass with a garden hose. What makes Ada a mystery is that she's got the nicest house on the block and no job. I know people can make a food stamp stretch, but not that much.

"It has something to do with all the men coming and going," I speculate. "There goes one now."

"Maybe she's a romantic and has lots of generous boyfriends, Chanti," Michelle offers.

"Riiight, she's a romantic. And please pronounce my name right—*Shawnty*, not *Shanty* like the towns where poor people live in a Steinbeck book."

"Who?" Michelle asks.

Maybe if she stopped calling me a book geek and picked one up herself, she'd find out. I know I sound a little testy, but Michelle annoys me. She's taken my best friend since third grade away from me, which is funny because Tasha and I never hung out with her before this summer. We even called her Squeak when she first moved on the block—not to her face or anything—because her voice reminded us of

Minnie Mouse. Now they're almost besties. It isn't all Michelle's fault since I've been somewhat negligent in my best-friend duties and I suppose Tasha had to find someone to hang with all summer, but I'm still a little peeved.

"Well, she can't be dealing, because someone else has cornered that market, right, Michelle?" Tasha says as she glues a track onto Michelle's scalp. Tasha's mom can't stand the smell of the glue, so she has to do all her weaving outside. Most people would be afraid to get their weave done on somebody's porch by a girl with no professional training, but Tasha is a lot cheaper than the salon and really has a way with hair. She's like the weave whisperer or something.

There's a loud bang and Michelle jumps out of her chair and ducks behind the glider swing, ripping the newly glued track right off her head because Tasha is still holding it.

"What is your problem?" Tasha asks.

"I thought I heard a gunshot."

"I know this isn't the farm, but it's not *that* bad, Michelle," I say. "Mr. Harrison is trying to get his lawnmower started. It always sounds like that."

Michelle comes out from behind the glider and returns to her chair. "Now it's my turn to correct you—I lived on a ranch, not a farm."

"Close enough," I say.

"Michelle isn't too far off the mark," Tasha defends her. "Isn't that why you aren't working at Tastee Treats anymore?"

"My mother made me quit because a meth-head held us up, even though I was in the back walk-in freezer sneaking some Rocky Road during the whole thing," I say. "Besides, that guy pulled a gun—he didn't shoot it."

"Well, I heard somebody did get shot last weekend, a couple blocks over," Tasha says.

Tasha knows everything about our neighborhood, but I know there wasn't a shooting two blocks over because Lana would have been talking about it for days. It would have been another justification for making me change schools, which she decided to do when my school announced it was closing. After years of people leaving for the suburbs, our school was down to five hundred students so the city merged it into our rival, North High. Lana won't move because she says if we wait a minute, it won't be long before someone opens an Asian bistro, a yoga studio, and a Starbucks on Center Street and we'll be all gentrified, like what happened in some other Denver neighborhoods. Then she plans to sell for a lot of money. Lana is more optimistic than I am. I think we'll be waiting longer than a minute for that to happen.

"Chanti, you can't convince your mother to let you go with us to North?" Tasha says. She knows me so well, it's like she can read my mind. I bet she can't do that with Squeak.

"It's the day before school starts. What do *you* think?"

I've been telling her all summer that nothing I say will make Lana change her mind about forcing me to go to some stuck-up rich school across town just because I made one little mistake. She thinks I'll get into more trouble if I stay in Denver Heights and go to North.

"Don't get attudinal on me, Chanti. I'm not the one who screwed up my life."

I ignore Tasha and do the only thing I can given the situation: I lie.

"The only thing worse than going to a school you hate is starting a new school after everyone else. Even if Lana lets me go to North, by the time the transfer paperwork happened, I'd be starting three weeks late. By then, everyone will have staked out their tables in the cafeteria. All the back seats in class will be taken. I'd rather go to the new school on day one than start North late and be the new girl."

"That would be tragic," says Michelle in the only tone she seems to know—sarcastic. "Ow, Tasha. Stop pulling!"

"At least I didn't choose my school based on a boy," I say to Michelle, who gives me the finger. "A boy so sorry he gets kicked out of school before he even started it, and in the meantime spends the summer cheating on me with Rhonda Hodges so I have to break up with him anyway."

Michelle looks sincerely wounded now, not just from the way Tasha is handling her head, and I feel bad for adding on that last part. But not as bad as I feel about her messing up me and Tasha's perfectly good friendship. Although I'm sure Tasha would say I was the one who messed things up.

"You wouldn't be new," Tasha says. "You'd know me and Michelle, and a bunch of other people from the old school. Not to mention kids from around the way, like ..."

"Speaking of kids from The Ave," I say, cutting her off because there's no chance of me going to North and it bums me out talking about it. "Did y'all hear about Donnell Down-the-Street?"

"What about him?"

"He got picked up." I say this as though it's old news, knowing that neither of them have heard a thing about Donnell Down-the-Street. We call him that because there are two Donnells on Aurora Avenue, where I live. The one closest to Center Street got to keep his name without anything added on. The other one got arrested yesterday. I only

know this because Lana told me during this morning's tirade entitled *Chanti, You're Going to That School and Donnell Is Just Another Example Why—As If We Need More Examples—and You Better Not Ask Me Again Because You're Going and That's All There Is to It.*

"No he didn't!" Michelle says without a hint of sarcasm. Until recently (well, until Rhonda Hodges), she had a serious thing for Donnell DTS. "For what? How do you know?"

"I just do."

Tasha vouches for me. "Chanti always knows this stuff before everyone else. She just does."

My friends can never know Lana is my source. They think she's a paralegal in an office downtown. That's because when you're Vice and all the undercover cases you work are related to drugs, prostitution, or gambling, it's all about the down low. The minute anyone figures out she's a cop, she'll have to leave Vice and go back to the burglary division, which she says is nowhere near as exciting. Lana guards her secret like Michelle guards the fact she is no longer a virgin (thanks to Donnell DTS) from her preacher daddy. But I know all about Michelle because Tasha can't keep her mouth shut. I keep it to myself because that's one of the things I do well, hold on to other people's business. You never know when you might need it.



Information is negotiable, like currency. I learned that from Lana. Not information like her identity, of course. That secret keeps us both safe. It's the reason I call her Lana instead of Mom, even though everyone knows her by a totally different name on the street. Thanks to great genes and the fact that she had me when she was just sixteen, Lana looks too young to be my mother, which is kind of helpful. The fewer people who know I'm her kid, the better. Some of her more vindictive perps would be happy to know she has a kid. Except for my grandparents in Atlanta, I'm the only one outside the department who knows what she really does—we don't have family in town and Lana's closest friends are cops. So keeping Lana's secret sort of makes me her partner. It's like I'm kind of a cop, and it doesn't matter that I'm way too scared to actually ever *be* a cop.

Just as I'm about to tell them what I know—which is nothing, but I'm very good at embellishing—we see MJ Cooper walking toward us, on the other side of the street. Tasha and Michelle go quiet because they're too busy trying to watch MJ without actually looking at her. Well, I'm not afraid to look at her, and I do. That's why I notice that she stops for just a second, like she might consider crossing the street, but she gives me a look that almost strikes me down where I'm standing, then keeps walking.

Michelle speaks first, but only when she's certain MJ is halfway down the block. "What's *she* looking at?"

"Seems like she's still mad at you, Chanti," Tasha says. "What did you do to her, anyway? Whatever it was, I think you best watch your back."

"Please. She's just been watching too many reruns of *The Wire*. Thinks she's Snoop Pearson or somebody," Michelle says. "Nobody's scared of her."

"Chanti's mother is. That's why she's sending her away to school."

Tasha thinks she knows everything.

"It isn't *away*. It's like ten miles from here, and I'll be taking the bus there and back every day."

"Well, MJ's still the reason," Tasha says, smug in being right.

"I wonder if she had anything to do with the police harassing Donnell," Michelle says.

My natural instinct is about to kick in, the one that makes me angry whenever anyone acts like the cops are the bad guys, but I let it go. Because around here, where profiling was probably invented, sometimes they *are* the bad guys. Still, if anyone on The Ave is prime for getting picked up, it's Donnell DTS, if not for whatever he did last night, then surely for something else.

"Donnell doesn't need to be harassed," I remind Michelle.

"It isn't his fault he's like that."

"Whose fault is it?" Tasha asks.

"My daddy says it's because he doesn't have a father figure. He sees that a lot in his congregation."

"You mean his church of twenty that he holds in your basement?" Tasha asks.

"It'll be a big church one day and you won't be talking smack then," Michelle says. "He used to have a good-size congregation when we lived in Texas."

"My father skipped out before I was born and you don't see me going to jail," I say. "It's Donnell's third time in. Don't make like he's a choirboy."

"It's only his second time," Michelle says, as if it still makes him eligible for that choirboy job. "Not that I'm defending him or anything."

"Yeah, you are, and you need to give it up." Tasha adds. "Donnell ain't thinking about you, especially if he's in jail. If he's thinking about anything other than how his public defender is going to get him off, it's going to be how he can get even with Chanti."

*Uh, what?*

"Why does he care anything about her?" Michelle asks, looking at me suspiciously.

"I heard he knows it was Chanti who told you about Rhonda Hodges."

"How would he know that unless you told?" I ask Michelle.

"Because I told," she says, seeming not to care one bit that I now have an ex-con gunning for me. That'll be the last time I mind someone else's business.

"I also heard MJ isn't talking to Chanti because she double-crossed her."

"Tasha, how come half your sentences start with 'I heard'?" I say, angry not so much with Tasha's gossiping than with the fact that she's probably right on both counts.

"You used to ask me for the scoop all the time, Chanti. Now that it's about you, suddenly you don't want to hear it."

Tasha doesn't understand. I'm starting eleventh grade and never had a real boyfriend, I have to keep my mother's job a secret on a block where the truth would get us run out at gunpoint, and I have to start a new school tomorrow. With all that going on, I really don't need to hear two crazy ex-cons might have it in for me.

**Also by Kimberly Reid**

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