

Sweet 16 to Life

LANGDON PREP #3

Chapter 1

I promise. That's the last thing I said to my mother before she left this morning to relieve the detectives working the graveyard shift of a 24-7 stakeout, right after I listed for the third time everything I'd promised to do:

1. Stay out of trouble. (I didn't plead my case that trouble finds me, not the other way around.)
2. Stop playing amateur detective. (I didn't point out how, for an amateur, I'd solved more big cases than she had in the last couple of months.)
3. Focus on school and make the most of the opportunity Langdon Preparatory School has given me. (I didn't blame her for the aforementioned trouble, which mostly happened because she made me go to Langdon in the first place.)

4. Choose my friends more carefully. (I didn't remind my mom that Bethanie couldn't help it if her father was a crook or that MJ might be an ex-con, but she's saved my butt a few times now.)

5. Stay out of grown folks' business.

I plan to keep all of these promises except number five; I was crossing my fingers behind my back on that one, which is why I didn't complain about the first four. Lana—which is what I call my mother instead of mom (it's an undercover cop thing)—had been hiding something from me for a while now, and a couple of weeks ago she finally admitted the big secret is my father. I prefer to think of him as my sperm donor since that's the first, last, and only thing he has ever brought to the party. He disappeared the minute Lana told him I was on the way. Sixteen years later, he started calling Lana, and she held out on me about it, pretending he was an annoying bill collector. When it became obvious her threats weren't going to stop the calls, she promised to tell me everything, but so far, the only thing she's copped to is his identity. Then she got all cryptic about how he's bad news and we don't want him in our lives.

I want to know what's so sinister about my—well, let's call him SD for short because the long version is a little too gross to think about more than once. It must be serious because he has my mother slightly unhinged and almost nothing has that effect on her. Lana works undercover in the vice division where

half the job is being unflappable. She can't flinch when a pimp she's investigating threatens her. If some junkie in a crack house she's pretending to live in jumps bad on her because she's claimed his corner of the city-condemned house, Lana has to jump bad right back. She's a third-degree black belt in karate and leaves the house for work strapped, not once, but three times if you include her baton.

So when something has my mother looking over her shoulder, avoiding phone calls at the house, and worse, evading my questions, something is seriously wrong. It was better when I suspected some bad guy she put away years ago was out of jail and making threats. Now that I know it's my SD making Lana this way, it's totally my business and I'm going to figure out what his story is.

Yeah, I'm going to fit that investigation somewhere between getting my grades in shape before finals; wishing my friend Bethanie wasn't in witness protection, leaving me to deal with that viper pit of a school on my own; and pretending Marco Ruiz, my former quasi-boyfriend, doesn't break my heart every time I catch a glimpse of him at school, which is all the time and everywhere. Oh yeah, I also need to plan my birthday party. My life has become a total wreck since I started my junior year at Langdon Prep, but no matter what happens between now and my birthday, I will be celebrating my sweet sixteen in style.

I'm about to head back to bed when I think I smell smoke. I check the kitchen, but the stove is off and the coffee maker is cold. I unplug the toaster, just in case. Still smell it. There's no way Lana would have curled her hair just to sit in a surveillance van with her partner all day—even though he is hella cute and she really should make a little more effort—but I check her bathroom for a hot curling iron anyway. Nope, it's cold, too. Then I realize the smell can't be from coming from inside because Lana has a smoke detector in every room of our house.

I follow the smell to the kitchen again and notice the window isn't completely closed. I'd cracked it open to air out the kitchen last night when I burned a pizza. The smoke is outside somewhere. It's November and definitely fireplace weather, but not before eight o'clock on Sunday morning—people are either still asleep or just starting their coffee brewing. When I step out on the back porch, the smell of burning wood mixed with paint, plastic, and rubber hits me. Someone's house is on fire. Since I've made the mistake before of calling the fire department when it was just a neighbor's barbecue, I lean over the porch railing and look left, then right. That's when I see the smoke coming from the house two doors down. I grab the fire extinguisher from the kitchen pantry and call 911 from the cordless phone as I run down the street toward MJ's place.

Chapter 2

"9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

"My name is Chantal Evans. I'm reporting a fire at my neighbor's house. 698 Aurora Avenue in Denver Heights."

By the time I reach the house, the 911 dispatcher has confirmed MJ's address and has told me a truck is on the way. She tries to keep me on the phone by asking questions about me, my location, my phone number—probably because I told her I was going to the house to make sure everyone was awake and out of there—but I hang up on her. I also ignore her attempts to call me back, but not because I'm rude. For one thing, I'm not brave enough to go into a burning house so she doesn't have to worry about that. But I also need the phone to call MJ. It's definitely too early for MJ to be awake, and even her mostly God-fearing, church-going grandmother may not be up yet.

While I wait for someone to answer, I run around to the backyard to see how bad the fire is. It's still contained to the porch from what I can tell, but it's starting to snake up the porch wall, which it shares with the kitchen. Damn—my call goes to voice mail. I run around front to bang on the door, forgetting Big

Mama has *rejas* on every door and window of the house, so all I can do is ring the bell. No one comes.

This whole time I've been carrying the fire extinguisher and somehow forgot I had it. The fire is too big for it to be any use, but it should make a ton of noise if I bang it against the metal bars on the front door. After about thirty seconds of banging the extinguisher against the bars, then dragging it across them, I haven't managed to awaken anyone inside the house. A weird thing to worry about at a time like this, but I check the street behind me to see if I've woken up half the neighborhood yet and I'm surprised to find only one person. There's a dude I've never seen before standing across the street in front of Ada Crawford's place. At least I'm pretty sure I've never seen him around, but there isn't much to go on as far as trying to recognize him, since he's wearing sunglasses and a jacket that must be two sizes too big for him because the hoodie covers most of his face. But I can see that he's smiling, and it sends a chill through me.

I go back to ringing the doorbell, feeling completely helpless. It's been about three minutes since I hung up with 911, and thanks to having a cop for a mother, I know the response time for the nearest firehouse is about four minutes from the time the call is dispatched. They shouldn't be late at this time of day, but what if they are? If I'm wrong and the fire is inside the house, there's been enough time for smoke inhalation to make a sleeping person inside pass out. I'm trying to decide whether I should slip something

through the *rejas* to break a window and call for MJ and her grandmother. Since it's November and Big Mama likes to keep her house like an oven, I know there isn't a window open anywhere. If the fire has moved into the house and I break a window open, that's only going to accelerate the fire's movement from the back of the house to the front. But what do I do? They must be inside—where else would they be this time of day?

That's when I hear the sirens; they are close. In Denver Heights, sirens are like crickets to people in the suburbs—the sound is always there in the background so you tune them out. But I've been listening for them today, praying they live up to their four-minute response time. Now I don't have to make a decision about whether to break the window because the fire trucks are on Center Street, less than a quarter mile away. Now I hear them turning onto Aurora Ave. I'm still ringing the doorbell and calling MJ's phone for the umpteenth time when two trucks stop in front of the house.

The first man off the truck runs up to me while the others begin their work.

"Did you call this in?"

"Yes, sir. Looks like it started around back on the porch," I say.

"Anyone in there?" he asks me while he waves the men around back.

"It's so early, they must be, even though they don't answer the phone or the doorbell. That's their car parked out front."

"How many?"

"Two. Their bedrooms are on that side," I tell him, pointing out the location. "Probably still asleep. I don't hear any smoke detectors, so maybe the fire hasn't moved inside."

"Or they don't have any. Move over there now," he says, waving. I go in the direction I think he waved. I'm not sure.

It's starting to sink in that the fire may be worse than I thought and MJ and Big Mama are in there, already passed out from lack of oxygen, and every entryway to the house is covered with iron bars. I feel kind of numb—this is all so surreal—but I move out of the path of firefighters and hoses. People are starting to come out of their homes. The strange dude is still standing in Ada's yard, but he's no longer smiling. Now he looks agitated as he stares in the direction of MJ's house, shifting his weight from one foot to another, jiggling his hands inside the pockets of his jacket. He's still wearing dark glasses even though the morning isn't bright at all, and I can only assume he's watching the firefighters work.

Just then, I spot MJ near the end of the block, coming from Center Street. First she's walking; then she starts to jog and then breaks into a full-out run. I

meet her one house away so I can try to stop her from trying to get inside. How I expect to stop a girl who has seven inches and seventy pounds on me, I don't know.

"MJ! You're okay."

"Yeah, I was at the bodega. What the hell ...?"

"What about Big Mama? They're prying the *rejas* off now so they can get inside."

"No, she ain't in there. She left last night on a church mission to Grand Junction. No one's in there," MJ says, although it sounds more like a question than a statement.

"Are you sure? We need to tell the firefighters."

"Yeah, I'm sure. Who else would be in there?" she asks, looking over the growing crowd. "They're going to ruin the door. I need to give them the house key."

MJ runs up to the nearest firefighter who looks the least engaged with putting out the fire. I scan the crowd, too. The dude in the hoodie is gone, but my friends Tasha and Michelle are standing in the spot he was standing just sixty seconds ago. Tasha waves at me; I wave back. Maybe I was crazy and there was never a guy in a jacket.

Then I spot him, or at least I think it's the guy because I can only see the back of him. He's walking up Aurora Ave toward Center Street, and I notice he has an odd gait. His jacket was solid brown when I saw him from the front. Now I see the back is printed in white, some kind of elaborate scroll or vector design. In the middle of the artwork are large numbers, maybe *04*, written in an Old English kind of font. I've never seen a sports jersey where the numbers were so elaborate. And I don't know much about sports, but I've been a groupie at enough of Marco's football games to know they don't use the zero in front of a number. If it's a single digit number, they just use that digit—no zero. He's getting too far away for me to see it clearly, but it's enough of a description to be helpful to the cops.

I look around for MJ so we can follow him. That's something I'd never have the nerve to do, but with MJ—former gang girl, ex-con, and still scary—I'm fearless. But by the time I turn around to make sure the guy is still walking down The Ave, he isn't. He has disappeared.

Also by Kimberly Reid

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