

Chapter One: Sneak Attack

Birthday parties were supposed to be fun, but that warm Saturday evening, nothing went as Jeri McKane expected. Illness was the last thing on her mind as a cardinal whistled outside her open window. She had no clue that in two short hours her friends would be poisoned.

Jeri twisted from side to side in front of the mirror. “What’s wrong with how I look?” she asked her roommate. Her dark blue shirt complemented both her jeans and the denim flats with red bows.

“What’s *wrong* with it?” Rosa Sanchez peered over her shoulder. “It looks like something your mom would wear.” Rosa always looked cool—like now, in her short denim skirt and tee with a fuzzy pink scarf. Her black waist-length hair made any outfit look awesome. “Want to borrow something?” she asked with a wink. “Don’t forget, Dallas is coming tonight. What if he brings some cutie with him and you look like that?”

Dallas. Jeri’s heart skipped a beat, and she turned her back to Rosa to hide the blush that flooded her face. Dallas Chandler, a boy from their church, attended the Patterson School for Boys on the other side of Landmark Hills. So far, Jeri had done a good job of hiding her crush on him. She refused to risk Rosa telling Dallas about her feelings. Before Christmas, Rosa had done that to a boy Abby liked, and Abby had nearly died of shame.

“How about this?” Rosa held up a lavender top with a lace edge. Then she grabbed a short black skirt from her closet. “Or this?”

“Hmm.” It was tempting, even if it was awfully short. “I suppose I could wear tights with it.”

“No way, José!” Rosa shook her head. “Show off those legs!” She frowned. “You’re awfully white though. You have any of that bronze gel stuff?”

“No.” Jeri glanced at her watch. “Anyway, I gotta get downstairs. I’m setting tables for Abby.”

Tonight, Abby Wright, the girl from England who lived in the dorm room next to theirs, was fixing a meal for eight people. It was her home ec project, and it included a birthday cake for another sixth grader who lived there in Hampton House. Since part of her grade was based on proper boy/girl etiquette at a dinner, Dallas and a friend had agreed to show up and lend a hand.

Just then, heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs, and Jeri whipped around as their door burst open. Nikki Brown’s face was beaded with sweat. “Come quick! Both of you.”

“What’s the matter?” Jeri asked.

“You know Abby’s tuna turnovers? A tube of biscuits exploded!”

Jeri gasped. “No way!”

“It was sitting on the stove while the oven preheated.”

“I saw something like that on TV,” Rosa said. “Groceries were left in a car parked in the sun. It got so hot the cans of biscuits exploded all over in the car.”

“Exactly.” Nikki rolled her eyes. “The grocery store’s delivery guy is busy, so Ms. Carter’s driving Abby there for more biscuits.” Nikki flicked some lettuce off her fringed leather vest. “I was making the salad, but now I have to clean up the biscuit glop. I can’t do everything!”

“We’ll help,” Jeri said. “Is the birthday cake okay?”

“Sorta. A flying biscuit mashed some of the frosting.”

“I’ll fix the cake.” Rosa put on a pink ball cap with a silver band. “Nikki, you clean up the biscuit mess. Jeri’s setting the tables.”

“Okay, but hurry up. Those guys get here in half an hour.” Nikki’s cowboy boots clomped back down the stairs.

Jeri turned back to the mirror. Should she wear the skirt or shouldn’t she? In the mirror’s reflection, she spotted the desktop photo of her and her mom sitting in their porch swing back home in Iowa. Her mom’s trusting smile made her hesitate. And yet, if she was old enough to go to school halfway across the country, wasn’t she old enough to dress herself without Mom’s advice? If only the skirt wasn’t quite so short ...

Jeri handed Rosa’s skirt back. “Thanks, anyway.” She yanked a comb through her shoulder-length brown hair, added a headband, and followed Rosa down the steps.

“Weird to have the dorm so quiet tonight,” Rosa said.

Jeri nodded. Most of the girls were eating supper in the dining hall. Miss Barbara, their assistant housemother, planned to take them roller skating afterward. Only Emily—the birthday girl—and her roommate, Brooke, were still upstairs in their room, waiting for Abby’s dinner.

Downstairs, the kitchen was a disaster. Globes of sticky biscuit dough stuck to the floor, the table, the stove, and the windowsill. One biscuit had mashed a yellow frosting rose and the green y from *Birthday*. Rosa immediately went to work on the cake.

Nikki was on the floor scraping up pieces of canned biscuits. The makings for the turnover filling—tuna, shredded cheese, ripe olives, and hardboiled eggs—were on the

counter, waiting to be mixed and wrapped inside biscuit dough. *Poor Abby!* Jeri thought as she went to set the tables and arrange flowers.

Down the hall, two card tables and eight chairs were already set up in the first-floor study room. Disposable items—bright yellow paper tablecloths, plates, and cups, plus plastic silverware—were in a sack beside the door. Jeri quickly set both tables.

Also by the door was a huge bouquet of yellow daffodils with orange centers, enough flowers for two centerpieces. She breathed deeply; she *loved* that smell. Using the sharp knife lying there, she followed Abby's written instructions to cut an inch off each stem before putting the flowers in vases.

As she worked, she allowed herself to pretend that the flowers were *hers*, and Dallas had surprised her with them. "Just to celebrate spring," he might say, giving her that slow Southern grin and a wink.

"Are you done?" Nikki called from the doorway, making her jump.

"Ow!" Jeri dropped the knife. A thin red line appeared on her thumb, and blood dripped on a daffodil. "Get me a Band-Aid, will you?"

Nikki dashed off and reappeared with the kitchen's first-aid kit. She wiped Jeri's cut and applied disinfectant cream and a Band-Aid. "You okay?" At Jeri's nod, Nikki headed back to the kitchen. Jeri finished the bouquets, tossing the stems and the bloom with her blood on it in the garbage.

In the kitchen, Jeri found things more under control. Rosa had fixed the y on top of the cake and removed the flattened rose. The biscuits were in the wastebasket. Nikki was breaking fresh mushrooms into small pieces for the salad, while Rosa grated a carrot to add. The filling for the turnovers still needed to be mixed.

“Should I go ahead—” Jeri was cut off as Abby and the housemother rushed in the back door.

Abby’s gaze darted around the room, then she visibly relaxed. “You guys are the best mates!” She set a new can of biscuits on the counter. “Thank you!” After shrugging off her jacket, she dumped the ingredients into a mixing bowl.

Jeri gave Abby’s shoulder a quick squeeze. “Everything else is done. Can I help with the turnovers while you get dressed?”

“I wish!” Abby tucked her wind-blown blonde hair behind her ears. “I can have helpers for everything but the main dish. I have to cook it by myself.”

“While I take photos for proof,” Ms. Carter said, clicking away with her digital camera.

“Wait, Jer, can you do something else for me?” Abby asked, stirring her ingredients together. “Have Emily and Brooke come downstairs now. Then, when the guys arrive, you take them into the living room and serve the hors d’oeuvres.”

“You’re having hors d’oeuvres?” Jeri smiled, but her stomach tightened. She didn’t want to be in charge. What if she dumped the snacks in Dallas’ lap? “What do you want me to serve?”

“Tortilla swirls and Asian meatballs—they’re in the fridge.” Abby nodded toward a cupboard. “In there are some colored toothpicks. They’re for dipping the meatballs in the sweet and sour sauce.”

“You’re making my mouth water!”

“Good.” Abby grinned. “Tell that to my home ec teacher. You’ll love those swirls. They’re tortillas filled with cream cheese and salsa, then rolled up and sliced like

little pinwheels.” She flattened a canned biscuit, spooned tuna mixture into the center, folded the dough over, and pinched the edges together with a fork. “I’ll change clothes while the turnovers bake.”

Fifteen minutes later the front doorbell sounded. Jeri checked her reflection in the mirror over the fireplace, took a deep breath, and started down the short hallway.

Rosa came from behind, stepped around her, and opened the door with a flourish. Flashing a bright smile, she ushered the boys in. “Welcome to Hampton House,” she said.

Dallas spotted Jeri and grinned. “Hi.” He hung his cowboy hat on the hall tree. Jeri didn’t know which was shinier—his polished boots or his silver belt buckle. “You all know Jonathan?” he asked, hooking a thumb at his friend.

Jonathan mumbled “hello.” His red tracksuit swished as he tossed his ball cap on one of the hooks.

Rosa stepped between the boys and slipped her arms through theirs. “Let me introduce you to the birthday girl.” She led them to the living room, where Emily softly played a song by heart on the piano. “Meet Emily Kirkland,” Rosa said.

“Hi, Emily,” Dallas said. “Are ya’ll having a good birthday today?”

“Yes. Thanks.” Emily’s smile transformed her plain round face. Dressed in tan Bermudas and a brown shirt, she almost blended into the wood paneling. “That’s my roommate, Brooke.”

“Hey.” Brooke stood framed by the picture window, poised as if waiting to have her photo taken. In her cropped jacket, plaid capris and sequined flip-flops, she could have been a model. *She must love those capris*, Jeri thought. It looked like she’d

outgrown them a while back. Then again, most of Rosa's capris were skin tight, and they were brand new.

Rosa tuned the radio to her favorite music station, and then turned to Jeri. "Wanna get the snacks? I mean, the hors d'oeuvres? Tell Nikki to bring in sodas too." She perched on the arm of the couch beside Dallas, her swinging legs barely covered by her short skirt. "I'll take care of our guests."

"Sure." Jeri turned, wishing now that she *had* borrowed the skirt. Rosa was getting all the attention, and her bossiness was irritating. Who left *her* in charge?

Jeri passed around the hors d'oeuvres, and she was grateful when Brooke offered to help refill people's glasses. Finally Abby came downstairs. "Hi, everybody. I think it's all ready." She headed to the study room. "Follow me. One guy per table, okay?"

"Relax, everybody," the housemother added from the hall where she waited with her camera.

Jeri's heart fluttered. Now what? Would Dallas ask her to sit at his table?

The boys grinned and split up. Rosa, Emily, and Brooke hurried to Dallas' table. Disappointed, Jeri followed Nikki and Abby to Jonathan's table. Very nice, very quiet Jonathan. The boys seated each of the girls before sitting down themselves. Ms. Carter's camera clicked away.

Jeri couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so stiff and awkward. She knew this was all part of Abby's requirement for a good grade, but it felt so silly. She sneaked a glance at Abby, waiting for her to unfold her perfect fan-shaped napkin. Next to her, apparently stumped, Jonathan pondered the three forks by his plate. The formally set table looked odd with plastic silverware, Jeri thought, but cleanup later should be easy.

Comment [BF1]: "but quiet" rather than "slightly chubby"? Since she isn't interested in Jonathan, it seems more reasonable that she would be disappointed in his social skills rather than his appearance at this point.

The seating etiquette seemed pointless to her too. Jeri had to jump back up immediately to help carry in the salads and warm garlic bread sticks. A few minutes later, Jeri whispered, “Abby, sit down and eat.” But Abby kept running back and forth to the kitchen, refilling glasses of sweet tea and checking the oven.

Once Emily’s glass got knocked over, and Abby jumped up, but Dallas waved her back down. “We’ve got it,” he said, grabbing his napkin. “It’s just water.”

Conversation felt unnatural and phony until Ms. Carter finished taking photos and left. Then Jeri sensed everyone relaxing. Her own back ached from sitting up so straight, and she slumped in relief. Conversation flowed freely then, although there was a lot more laughing at Dallas’ table than theirs.

Jonathan was intent on eating his own meal—two helpings of each dish plus anything the girls couldn’t finish. Between bites he asked each girl the same two questions: “Where are you from?” and “Do you have any brothers or sisters?” Jeri shook her head. He must have memorized them from some old etiquette book. Couldn’t he dry up so she could hear the conversation at Dallas’ table?

Jeri caught snatches of talk about the science fair the following week. She glanced behind her, green with envy at Dallas listening so intently to Emily. She was describing “interactive brain teasers to demonstrate how parts of the brain functioned.” Whatever *that* meant!

“She has a good chance of winning,” Brooke added. “Ms. Todd said so.”

“Impressing the science teacher is one thing,” Emily said. “Demonstrating for the judges is something else.” She blushed then. “Anyway, Brooke’s entry is just as good as mine. She’s doing hers on making flowers bloom longer.”

Brooke shrugged. “My parents own a florist shop. I grew up watching them arrange flowers.”

Jonathan quizzed Abby about her brothers and sisters, drowning out further comments about the science fair. Jeri knew that the winner would walk away with a blue ribbon and a huge scholarship. Abby was competing in it too, with something about the food pyramid.

The month of May was filled with final competitions for scholarships: Abby in the science fair, Rosa’s scrapbooking project for the art fair, Nikki’s equestrian contest, and the media fair Jeri would compete in. She planned to enter her self-published sixth-grade newspaper.

The newspaper had started as a group assignment early in the school year for herself, Rosa, Abby, and Nikki. It had been an instant hit with their friends—especially Rosa’s advice column—so Jeri had decided to keep publishing it. To win at the media fair, all she needed was a zinger of a front-page article. Time was getting short to find something catchy to write about.

Finally Abby stood up. “Ready for birthday cake, Emily?”

“Sure!” Emily was the kind of plain brainy girl you barely noticed, Jeri thought, but tonight she was almost radiant.

“Everybody stay put,” Abby said. “I’ll be right back.”

Jeri pulled the study room’s heavy drapes closed to make it really dark, and then she stood by the door. A moment later, Abby called, “Lights out!” Jeri flipped the light switch and then hurried to her seat.

Abby carried in the two-layer birthday cake with twelve blazing candles. Her face shone eerily above the candlelight. "Happy birthday to you!" she sang, and everyone joined in. Dallas laughed when Emily blew too hard on the candles, spraying bits of melted wax across the cake.

Within fifteen minutes the entire cake was gone. Both boys ate two pieces. Emily escaped up to her room with the remaining chunk of cake, saving it for a midnight snack. Then the boys' ride back to Patterson arrived, and Abby walked Dallas and Jonathan to the door, thanking them for their help.

After they left, Abby closed the door and collapsed against it. "I'm bloomin' tired," she said. "Hurray for paper plates."

"I'll help clean up," Jeri said. "You did an awesome job, Abby."

"An A is definitely in the bag," Rosa agreed.

Abby and Jeri joked around as they washed and dried the cooking and baking dishes. Nikki and Rosa slumped in the breakfast nook, where Rosa flipped on the portable TV. When Jeri wiped off the table, she was surprised to see Nikki so pale.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Not really." Nikki's skin was an odd shade of green.

Jeri frowned. Actually she was feeling a bit queasy herself.

Standing, Nikki grabbed the edge of the table. "I'm going to bed." She started toward the hallway. "Oh, *man*." She turned abruptly and stumbled into the small half-bath off the kitchen. She slammed the door shut and threw up, over and over. Jeri's stomach lurched at the retching sounds.

"I'll get Ms. Carter," Rosa said. She raced up the stairs to find the housemother.

Jeri knocked on the closed door. "Nikki, can I help?"

"No," she answered weakly. "I'll be okay."

Jeri looked over her shoulder at Abby. "Are you sick too?"

"No, but I didn't eat that much. Nikki had two big helpings of everything."

Jeri frowned. *I didn't eat that much either.* But if Nikki didn't stop throwing up, the retching threatened to make Jeri vomit too.

Rosa and Ms. Carter rushed into the kitchen. The housemother knocked on the bathroom door. "I'm coming in, Nikki," she said, going in and closing the door.

Jeri, Rosa, and Abby waited in the kitchen. Abby wrung her hands. "Poor Nikki! Do you think there was something wrong with what I cooked?"

"Probably," Rosa said. "Emily and Brooke are sick upstairs too, but not this bad."

Jeri's stomach cramped suddenly. "It's not your fault. Maybe the tuna was old or something. It'll be okay."

It took Nikki forever to stop throwing up. When she finally spoke, her words to the housemother were clear, even through the closed bathroom door.

"Ms. Carter," she moaned, "I think I'm going to die."