



Secrets for Sale
Copyright © 2008 by Kristi Holl
Illustrations © 2008 by Bruce Emmett

Requests for information should be addressed to:
Zonderkidz, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Holl, Kristi.
Secrets for sale/ by Kristi Holl.
p. cm. -- (Faithgirlz) (Boarding school mysteries ; bk.2)
ISBN 978-0-310-71430-9 (softcover)
[1. Boarding schools--Fiction. 2. Schools--Fiction. 3. Extortion--
Fiction. 4. Christian life--Fiction.] I. Title.
PZ7.H7079Se 2008
[Fic]--dc22 2008008344

All Scripture quotations unless otherwise noted are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version*®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Zonderkidz is a trademark of Zondervan.

Editor: Barbara Scott
Art direction & cover design: Sarah Molegraaf
Interior design: Carlos Eluterio Estrada

Printed in the United States of America

08 09 10 11 12 • 5 4 3 2 1

*So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen.
For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

— 2 Corinthians 4:18

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	The Threat	7
2	Blackmail	21
3	Fall-Out	33
4	Strike Two	45
5	Keeping Secrets	57
6	The Spy	65
7	Friends and Suspects	73
8	Warning	85
9	Trapped!	101
10	Starting Over	115

1

THE THREAT

Damp musty air hovered over the historic theater's orchestra pit. Notebook in hand, Jeri McKane carefully stepped around the six-foot pit, mounted the stage steps, and slipped behind the plush red curtain. Backstage in the cavernous gloom, she picked her way around props, stools, and other obstacles. Squinting, she read the antique movie posters in plastic cases hung on the putrid green walls: *Birth of a Nation* ... *Cleopatra* ... *The Bells of St. Mary's*.

She tripped over a coiled rope and narrowly escaped landing on a papier-mâché horse and pumpkin coach. She was at Monday night's rehearsal in order to write an article about the spring play, a Rodgers and Hammerstein version of *Cinderella*. Jeri's roommate, Rosa Sanchez, was the star. Although only a sixth

grader, Rosa's voice at tryouts had been the strongest by far. Onstage or off, she had a bubbly flair for the dramatic, and she'd been a natural choice for the lead.

Glancing across the small stage to the opposite wing, Jeri spotted Rosa. She started to call to her best friend but then paused, struck by Rosa's odd expression. Bent forward, Rosa looked as though she'd been hit in the stomach. Rosa covered her mouth with a shaking hand as she read a note.

What in the world was wrong?

Rosa hurriedly stuffed the paper in her purse. Jeri started toward her, but Rosa straightened and moved to center stage, her lips pressed into a thin line.

Frowning, Jeri reluctantly focused on her original goal. Turning, she found the set designers stretching material across a wooden frame. Painted on it were streaks of moonlight and village houses with glowing windows.

"Cool painting." Jeri reached out to touch it, but—unbalanced—she leaned her weight on one corner.

"Don't!" shouted a husky girl with a red bandana covering her hair. "It's wet!"

"Sorry," Jeri said, fingertips covered in blue paint. "I can't see back here." She looked for something to wipe her hands on and then finally used her jeans. "That really is beautiful."

"It was before you pulled it loose from the flat." Bandana Girl yanked on the chain of an overhead light. It swung back and forth, causing shadows to jump and leap across the stage. She touched up the smear with the tail of

her T-shirt and then stretched the material and re-tacked it to the corner.

“Hey, I’m writing an article for the paper,” Jeri explained, trying to sound important. “What’s that wooden thing called again?”

“A flat.” The girl pointed to other scenery painted on screens suspended from the ceiling. “Those are called backdrops. You raise and lower them with pulleys.” Her eyes glinted. “*Don’t touch the pulleys.*”

“No problem,” Jeri said.

Jeri turned in a slow circle. Although it smelled musty, she loved the old theater at the Landmark School for Girls. The restored theater was on the National Register of Historic Places, and it felt like a museum.

Without warning, someone grabbed Jeri’s arm and she jumped. It was Britney, a seventh grader, who had appeared out of nowhere. “Rosa said you’re writing about the play for the paper. Wait till you hear my song with Hailey. It’s *hilarious*. You’ll *love* ‘Stepsisters’ Lament.’ I play Esmerelda, and Hailey is Prunella.” She tapped Jeri’s notebook. “You want to write that down?”

“Um. Okay.”

“Really, someone ought to write a whole musical starring Esmerelda. We need to hear the other side of the story! Don’t you think so?” Britney shook her cascading blonde hair that reached to her elbows.

Jeri remembered from tryouts that Britney had

auditioned for the lead. "It's hard to imagine you as an ugly stepsister."

"Stage makeup!" Britney squatted, dug into a backpack on the floor, and then handed Jeri two 4" x 6" glossy photos. "Keep these for your article. Isn't that some transformation?"

"No kidding." In the first photo Britney was her normal beautiful self. The second photo showed her in stage makeup. Britney-as-Esmerelda had a wart on her nose, a protruding chin, whiskers poking from several moles, and a scraggly black wig.

Britney grabbed Jeri's pen and wrote in her notebook. "My name ends in *ey*. B-r-i-t-n-e-y B-r-o-w-n. Let's get the publicity right."

"Thanks," Jeri said, thinking, *Chill!* Apparently, Rosa hadn't mentioned that Jeri's article was only for their sixth-grade media project, not for the official school paper, the Landmark *Lightning Bolt*.

"Let's go!" the director said, clapping her hands. "Ready, Cinderella? We'll do 'In My Own Little Corner.'"

Turning, Jeri skirted the scenery and props and hurried down the steps to take a front-row-center seat. She glanced around the stage and finally spotted Miss Kimberly down in the orchestra pit. Only her head, thick neck, and beefy raised arms were visible. The obese twenty-something woman was an enthusiastic drama coach, but she looked more like a sumo wrestler.

Onstage, Cinderella was “locked up” in a tower room to perform her next song. Earlier, she and Salli Hall (who played Prince Charming) had both been totally convincing in their duet—despite their matching blue uniform jumpers. Jeri couldn’t wait until her friends could perform in costume.

Jeri gave Rosa a thumbs-up, but her roommate didn’t respond. Instead, Rosa stared into space. *What’s up?* Jeri wondered.

A musical introduction blared over the loudspeakers, startling Rosa. She missed her cue by a couple of beats, and when she came in, her voice was weak. Jeri could barely hear her. In a thin, thready soprano, Rosa sang about her own little corner of the world and being whatever she wanted to be. Woodenly, she moved back and forth in front of the tower windows.

Jeri sat forward. *What’s the deal?*

At the end of the song, Jeri clapped and whistled. Rosa stood with shoulders sagging. Miss Kimberly, dressed in black Spandex pants and a ruffled pink tent top, laboriously climbed the stairs from the orchestra pit to the stage. She closed her eyes for a moment, as if dizzy, and then lumbered over to the tower setting and spoke quietly to Rosa. Judging by the look on Rosa’s embarrassed face, the comments weren’t good.

“—and when you hit this part,” Miss Kimberly said, raising her voice, “your body language and tone of voice need to match the words and meaning of the song. Here.

Like this." She sat down on the child-size footstool, and it disappeared beneath her hulking frame. Although she sang the song without accompaniment and hit every note clear and true, she was breathless and pale at the end.

In the wings, Britney and Hailey snickered as the drama teacher sang about her own little chair. Jeri thought it was mean to laugh, but Miss Kimberly *did* need something more than a tiny chair.

Miss Kimberly's finger combed her short, curly hair and announced, "Rosa needs to try on her ball gown, but the rest of you can leave now." She yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Good job, everyone."

Cast members gathered up books, jackets, and backpacks. Jeri ran up the steps to the stage area, waited for Miss Kimberly to go ahead, and followed Rosa to the dressing room. "Are you sick? What's the matter?" she asked outside the door.

"Nothing."

"Come on, Rosa. What gives?" She blocked the doorway. "You always have more energy than everyone else put together. What happened?"

Rosa's eyes glistened with tears. "My song stunk!"

"Not true," Jeri said. "You didn't miss a note."

Head down, Rosa pushed past her into the dressing room. Jeri followed, still worried. The dressing room was done in red and white: a red wicker couch, two white wicker rockers, and a red wicker changing screen. Miss Kimberly

held up a pink and white sequined gown hanging on a padded hanger.

“Sweet dress!” Jeri said.

Rosa studied it doubtfully. “It looks awfully small.”

Miss Kimberly slipped the dress off its hanger. “Try it on.”

Rosa took the dress behind the changing screen.

“I’ll help,” Jeri said, following her.

“I can do it myself.”

“You need someone to zip it.”

Rosa was silent as Jeri helped her into the dress. Layers of a pink taffeta slip made the skirt stand out, but Rosa was right about the fit.

“Suck in,” Jeri whispered, trying to close the back zipper. Rosa held her breath. “Suck *way* in.”

“I *am*!”

Jeri tugged on the zipper, but it wouldn’t budge. She feared ripping it loose from the fabric if she kept yanking on it.

“Come out when you’re dressed,” Miss Kimberly called.

Rosa rolled her eyes and then stepped out, holding the unzipped bodice up in front of her. “It’s beautiful, but way too tiny. Maybe I could lose weight before opening night.”

Jeri shook her head. “You *don’t* need to lose weight.”

“Anyway,” the director said, “that’s less than two weeks away. Losing weight isn’t that easy.” Miss Kimberly slapped her own bulging thighs as she heaved herself up from a rocker. Breathing hard, she circled the ball gown, examining the side and back seams, tugging here and jerking there.

“Someone took this in several inches,” she said. “The last person to wear this costume must have been skin and bones. The seams can be let back out.”

Rosa twisted sideways to look. “Man, there’s enough extra material for someone humongous.”

The director caught her breath. A tremor passed through her, and then her hands were motionless as they rested on the satiny fabric.

Rosa’s eyes widened in horror. “I didn’t mean *you*, Miss Kimberly. I meant someone *really* big.”

Eyes wide, Jeri glanced at Rosa. She meant well, but what a lie! Miss Kimberly weighed at least three or four hundred pounds.

“Well,” Jeri added, trying to sound convincing, “you’re so pretty that no one notices,”

Miss Kimberly’s hands dropped to her sides, and she tugged on her pink tent top.

Rosa nodded. “And you’re a lot of fun!”

“Don’t worry, girls.” Miss Kimberly forced a smile. “My size honestly isn’t a problem. I can do whatever I want. If I wasn’t swamped directing this play, I’d be in the community theater production in town. They’re doing *Okalahoma!* It required some dancing as well as singing, and despite my bad knees, I got the part.”

“Cool,” Jeri said, flabbergasted at the idea of Miss Kimberly dancing onstage.

“I found I couldn’t manage both plays at once though. The practice times overlapped. Maybe next time.”

Jeri sighed, relieved the teacher's feelings didn't seem hurt.

Miss Kimberly glanced at her watch. "It's nearly seven thirty. Better change and get back to your dorm. Just leave the dress, and I'll get it resized." She smiled at Rosa. "Don't worry about it tonight. *Cinderella* will be a smashing success."

Rosa gave a half smile back and ducked behind the screen to change.

"I left my notebook in the front row," Jeri called. "Meet you by the back door." A minute later, Jeri spotted Rosa rushing to the exit. "Wait up!" She grabbed her coat, shrugged into the sleeves, and snatched up her backpack. When she got outside, Rosa was already half a block ahead. "Wait!" Jeri called again.

Rosa picked up speed, and Jeri finally slowed to a walk, bending into the stiff March wind. Her roommate obviously wanted to be alone, but why? Was she upset about the ball gown being so tight? Or Miss Kimberly's criticism of her song? Maybe it had something to do with the note she was reading before practice. Whatever it was, Jeri intended to find out the minute she got back to Hampton House.

She hurried down the dark sidewalk, barely aware of the carillon bells echoing from the bell tower across the frigid campus. She felt sorry for whichever frostbitten music student was playing the carillon keyboard tonight.

Five minutes later, Jeri opened the heavy door of the sixth-grade dorm and stepped inside. Warm cinnamon-

scented air enveloped her, driving away the damp chill in her bones. She flung her coat on the hall tree and kicked off her wet shoes onto the rug. Passing the study room, she spotted her friends Abby and Nikki studying by the fire.

“Want a biscuit?” Abby asked, holding out a sugar cookie to Jeri. Abby was from Bath, England, and Jeri loved her accent. “Was practice beastly? Rosa ran upstairs without saying a word.”

“Like she had blinders on,” Nikki agreed. She leaned back and crossed her ankles, admiring her leather cowboy boots.

“Something’s up with her.” Jeri took the cookie from Abby and started toward her dorm room. She was halfway up the steps when Miss Barbara, the house mother’s assistant, popped out of the kitchen doorway.

“You have mail, Jeri,” she called, waving a letter.

“Really?” Jeri leaned over the banister for it and read the return address with disbelief. Her dad? “Thanks,” she finally said, heading back upstairs.

Thoughts tumbled in her brain. Why was he contacting her *now*?

He’d dropped out of her life when she started at Landmark Hills last fall. Even when she went home to Iowa for winter break, he hadn’t seen or called her. She couldn’t believe he’d actually forgotten her at Christmas. He’d been on a cruise to the Bahamas with his girlfriend—some ditz named Sabrina. He’d promised to mail some gifts to Jeri, but no presents—or explanation—ever arrived.

Her mom had warned Jeri to expect Dad and Sabrina to get married, so Jeri dreaded reading the news in this letter. Taking a deep breath, she opened the letter, skimmed it, and broke into a grin. *Whoa!* Her dad *wasn't* getting married. He wanted to come for a visit—this weekend!

Apparently, he and Sabrina had broken up. *Thank heaven!* The last thing Jeri needed was a twenty-five-year-old stepmom. In the letter, her dad said he really missed Jeri and wanted to spend time with her. She'd been waiting all year for him to say that.

Slowly the smile faded, however, and her heart sank. Wait a minute! Her dad didn't miss *her*. He was just between girlfriends and feeling lonely. So *now* he had time to come for a visit. *Now* he wanted to see her. Anger burned in her chest. *Talk about unfair! Where was he when I needed him?* Well, maybe she didn't have time for *him* now. She had her newspaper writing and her friends.

She took several deep breaths. She'd answer him soon, but right now Rosa needed her.

Down the hall, Jeri paused outside their room before opening the door slowly. Rosa stood by the window, staring out into the darkness. Jeri could see her tormented expression reflected in the window pane.

"Rosa?" Jeri came in and closed the door behind her. "What's wrong?"

Rosa threw a wadded paper on her bed. "*This* is what's wrong."

Jeri smoothed out the note and read aloud: “You weren’t in church on Sunday; you were in the park with Kevin. The headmistress doesn’t know—yet. If you want to keep it that way, I want \$20. Bring the money to the girls’ restroom in the dining hall. Hide it in the garbage can on Tuesday by noon.”

Jeri glanced up. “You’re being *blackmailed*? No way you’re doing this!”

“Like I have a choice.”

Jeri read the note again. Last Sunday, Jeri didn’t go to church because she wasn’t feeling well, but Rosa had gone. She’d told Jeri afterward about her impulsive decision to skip church and walk along the creek with Kevin instead. They were just friends—Kevin went to the nearby boys’ school—but Jeri knew Rosa could get in a lot of trouble for it.

“If you pay, Rosa, the blackmailer will ask for more later. It’s always like that in the movies.”

Rosa sat down on the silver radiator, her fingers clenched into fists. “What else can I do? This creep threatens to squeal if I don’t.”

Jeri frowned. At the very least, Rosa would get a reprimand and the school would call her missionary parents.

Rosa sniffed back her tears. “I could get expelled.”

“Don’t give the blackmailer money though. Give me a chance to help you first,” Jeri said, touching Rosa’s arm. “Maybe I could set a trap and catch him . . . or her—it *must* be a girl if she’s going to get the money from the girls’ bathroom.”

“And why would *you* want to catch the creep?”

Jeri frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean? I want to help you!”

“I think you just want to report on it for your little newspaper and be a hero!”

“You really think that?!” Jeri cried, shocked.

Tears filled Rosa’s eyes and spilled over, running down her cheeks. “You’re the only person I told about going to the park with Kevin.”

“But lots of people could have seen you. Or maybe Kevin told someone. Or—”

“I thought I could *trust* you,” Rosa said.

Jeri stared at her. “What are you saying?”

“*You* wrote the note! I saw you backstage before my song.” Rosa grabbed the paper. “Is that when you put this in my purse?”