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Secrets at St. Jude's: Rebel Girl

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Secrets at
St Jude's
Rebel Girl

Chapter One

Long after midnight, Gina lay wide awake in her narrow dorm bed. It was her first night back at school after the Christmas holidays. Although the eighteen hours of travel which had taken her from California to her boarding school in Scotland had been exhausting, her body clock was still set stubbornly to Pacific Standard Time and she could not get to sleep.

She listened to the quiet breathing around her and guessed that the three girls who shared her dorm weren't having the same problem. Amy had travelled to St Jude's School for Girls in Edinburgh from her home just one hour away in Glasgow, so no jet-lag issues there. Niffy ('my real name's Luella, but it stinks') had come from the creaky, ramshackle family country home in Cumbria.

Then there was Min, who had flown into Edinburgh from South Africa earlier today, but the time difference

between Scotland and her home town, Durban, was only a couple of hours, so she wasn't suffering.

The first night back at school was always weird.

The small room, the orange street-light shining behind the curtains, the narrow bed . . . everything felt so different from home. Even though Gina knew she would miss her family and the warm, outdoorsy Californian lifestyle, she was still pleased to be back. St Jude's was her school now and these three girls asleep in their beds beside her were best friends. Yes, she still had three best friends back home in California, but after two whole terms here, the St Jude's girls had become just as important to her now.

As Gina lay awake, looking up at the sloping attic ceiling above her head, she suddenly heard an unexpected noise. It sounded like the low rumble of a wooden window being pulled up, but she couldn't be sure.

The 'Iris' dorm, which Gina shared with Amy, Niffy and Min, was up on the top floor of one of the huge old Victorian houses which formed the St Jude's boarding house. Now that Gina was straining her ears, she thought she could hear more noises and they sounded as if they were coming from the top of the fire escape.

'Psssst! Are you awake?'

This whisper had come from Niffy's direction.

'Yeah,' Gina whispered back.

'Did you just hear that?' Niffy asked.

'Yeah.'

'It sounds like something's happening on the fire escape outside Daffodil dorm.'

Daffodil dorm, which Gina and her friends had shared last year, had four beds, just like Iris. It was also tucked up under the sloping attic ceilings. The great thing about Daffodil dorm was that it had a window leading out onto the fire escape. On a sunny evening, the top of the fire escape was a forbidden, but nonetheless delicious, place to sit.

'I think we should go and investigate,' Niffy added.

'I don't know,' Gina began. Wandering about the boarding house at night, for any purpose other than trips to the loo, was against the rules. She didn't like to think of herself as a total stickler for school rules, but she didn't like to break them unless there was a good reason.

'But what if someone has climbed up the fire escape and is trying to get in . . . ?' Niffy whispered urgently.

Gina considered: hadn't the noise sounded like a window being opened?

'What if some burglar or an armed maniac is trying to get into that dorm right now?' Niffy went on.

To be honest, if that was happening, Gina would really rather stay hidden in bed.

'We need to go!' Niffy said, throwing back her duvet and sitting up. She quickly pushed her feet into her slippers, then tied her dressing gown around her.

'Stay here if you like, chicken-licken, but I'm going to take a look.'

Gina sighed, pulled her own duvet back, then put on her slippers and dressing gown. She did not like the idea of confronting a burglar one tiny little bit, but she didn't like the idea of Niffy having to confront one on her own either.

'OK,' she agreed.

But Niffy was definitely going to go first.

The two girls tiptoeing out of the Iris dorm looked very different from one another. Gina was dainty, pretty, blonde and tanned. She was wrapped in a delicate silk kimono with fluffy pink mules on her feet. Niffy was tall, gangly, all arms, legs and unruly brown hair, bundled into some shabby brown tartan dressing gown, which had probably once belonged to her big brother.

Together, they crept out of the dorm, shutting the door quietly behind them. The hallway glowed faintly

with the night-lights which picked out the fire exits. Without hesitating, Niffy made straight for the door of the Daffodil dorm. She took hold of the handle and began to push the door open.

Gina stood behind her friend, her heart hammering nervously in her chest. She did not like this, not one little bit, but she couldn't stop herself from looking over Niffy's shoulder into the darkened room.

It was totally silent and still. Gina could make out the four beds in the room. Three girls, wrapped in duvets, seemed to be fast asleep. The window at the fire escape looked shut.

But then, all of a sudden, one of the duvet bundles sat up and hissed, 'Niffy! Is that you?'

'Yes,' Niffy answered.

The two other duvet bundles sat up too and someone snapped on a side light.

'For Pete's sake, go away!' the first bundle, now very obviously Milly from the Lower Sixth, instructed.

'Why?' Niffy asked, all fired up with curiosity.

'Go away!' Anthea, one of the other dorm members, repeated.

'No, she's OK, she can stay if she wants,' the third girl, Shyanne, chipped in.

'You know Gina, don't you?' Niffy asked as she

stepped into the dorm, revealing the friend standing behind her.

'Gina from California? Who goes out with Dermot at the Arts Café? Yup, we know her,' Shyanne replied.

'Hi,' Gina said shyly, not sure if she liked being known for just those two things.

'So what's going on?' Niffy wanted to know. 'We heard a noise . . . it woke us up. We thought you were being burgled or kidnapped – something exciting.'

Milly got out of bed. She was already wearing her dressing gown. 'Something exciting *is* about to happen,' she said. 'We just thought you were the Neb about to catch us red-handed.'

At this mention of the fearsome woman who ruled the boarding house, everyone felt a little shiver of nerves.

But nevertheless, Milly went over to the fire-escape window and threw it open, letting a blast of cold January air sweep through the room.

Anthea crouched down by the side of her bed and pulled out a neatly rolled coil of bright-blue climbing rope.

'If you're running away, you won't need a rope,' Niffy pointed out. 'There is a fire escape.'

'Very funny.'

'So what *are* you doing?' Niffy had to know, as two of the three older girls stepped out of the window, on to the top of the fire escape and began to tie the rope to the stair-rail.

'Shhhhh!' Milly insisted. 'What time is it?' she asked in a whisper.

Shyanne glanced at the clock beside her bed and whispered back, 'Twelve fifty-six.'

'Four minutes till delivery,' Milly said, 'and we've definitely put the hook end down in the garden, haven't we?'

As the girls checked over the rope arrangement, Gina and Niffy looked at one another.

What on earth was going on? Delivery of what?

'What's happening? C'mon. Give us a clue!' Niffy pleaded, determined to wangle something out of someone. 'And where's Laurel?' she asked next, pointing at the empty bed. 'Broken something skiing?'

The two older girls came back in through the window and half closed it against the wind. They were obviously waiting for something to happen in the garden.

'Is someone coming? Is something arriving for you?' Niffy asked.

'Yes!' Milly said with exasperation. 'Just keep very quiet. At one a.m. exactly – I don't want to miss it.'

'And Laurel?' Niffy asked again in a tiny whisper.

For a moment no one replied. Gina bumped against Niffy's arm to try and give her the message to be quiet.

But then Anthea blurted out: 'Laurel's not here because her parents ran a building firm and it's finally gone bust. She was really worried about them last term and then, over Christmas, well . . . they told her they couldn't afford to send her back to St Jude's. So she's going to some day school in Aberdeen now.'

'That's tough,' Niffy whispered, shaking her head in sympathy. 'That is really tough. I spent half a term at a comprehensive last year and no one there was very pleased to see me.'

'Poor Laurel,' Gina sympathized. She had worries about family finances too. She knew her mom and her step dad, Mick, were hoping for a really big deal to come off for their software company.

As Gina's mom, Lorelei, had put it: 'Baby, if this happens, we won't need to worry about money for a while, just about making a great product. But if the deal doesn't go through . . . we might have to look at making some cut-backs.'

'It's one o'clock now,' Shyanne said, pointing at the bedside clock.

Milly pulled the window further open again and stuck her head out to listen.

The other girls in the dorm all crowded towards the window too.

There was definitely a sound coming from the garden . . . someone was down there and that someone seemed to be making a faint clinking noise.

Gina and Niffy looked at each other with raised eyebrows. Both suspected that the Daffodil dorm was about to get a delivery of bottles. Both guessed that there wasn't exactly going to be mineral water in those bottles.

In another bedroom, way over on the far side of the boarding house, but with a window facing onto the back garden, someone else was now waking up. Someone else who was also sure she had heard something in the garden.

This someone was definitely not going to be amused that bottles full of booze were being clinked in the St Jude's boarding-house garden at one o'clock in the morning on the first night of term.

Mrs Norah Knebworth, housemistress at the boarding house for seventeen years, opened her eyes.

She looked up at the ceiling of her small ground-floor bedroom and wondered what it was that had

woken her. Once again, she heard some sort of unusual noise coming from the back garden.

She listened hard and then sat bolt upright. She was now certain that she had heard clinking: the unmistakable kind of clinking that bottles make when they bang together as someone tries to walk with them.

Bottles? *Bottles!!* Only one kind of bottle would be trying to make its way through the boarding-house garden well after midnight.

Mrs Knebworth raised her formidable bulk from the bed. Even in a ruffled pink and white nightie with a neat regiment of foam curlers organized through her steely blonde hair, she looked like a mighty force.

Putting her feet into sensible sheepskin slippers, designed to keep the chill of draughty Victorian floors at bay, she hurried over to her bedroom window. She peered through the chintz curtains and right there on the back lawn, underneath the long washing line where jeans and sweatshirts often flapped on breezy days, she saw something which made her mouth drop open with astonishment.

Not even ten metres from her bedroom window – the cheek of it! – was a teenage boy. In his hands was a

large shopping bag, and attached to the bag was a length of rope.

Mrs Knebworth's beady blue eyes followed the rope up to the window at the top of the fire escape. There, in the dim light coming from the Daffodil dorm window, she could see two girls who were holding the other end of the rope.

This was just *unbelievable*!

Girls were trying to smuggle in booze, right under her very nose! How did they think they were going to get away with this?

Mrs Knebworth, who had grown up in Edinburgh's very respectable Morningside area, and who had never once even thought about breaking a school rule back in the days when she had been a St Jude's girl, was outraged. In fact, she was properly furious.

It wasn't just that these thoughtless girls in Daffodil dorm were in serious trouble; no, it was the fact that when things like this happened at the boarding house, it reflected very, very badly on Mrs Knebworth. And if stories like this got out into the wider community, well, they reflected very, very badly on the school.

She wasn't going to stand for that. Not for one moment.

Her fingers were at the window catch. She intended to throw the window open and bellow out into the garden: 'Hands up, you've all been caught!'

But she thought it through for a moment. The bag was still in the boy's hands. He would run off with it. The dorm window would shut, the lights would go off and everyone would deny everything. Even though she had seen it with her own eyes, she wouldn't be able to prove anything.

No. She wouldn't open the window and shout out, she had a better idea. Quickly pulling on her dressing gown, she decided to hurry as silently as she could up to the Daffodil dorm. That way she would catch everyone involved red-handed.

Mrs Knebworth sped out of her bedroom, past her small bathroom and through the private sitting room which she kept so neatly that whenever anyone was invited inside, they found it hard to believe that the housemistress really lived there.

Now she turned into a hallway and began to hurry down the long locker-lined corridor which connected this building to the second big house where, up in the attic, Daffodil dorm could be found.

Unfortunately, Daffodil dorm was many, many flights of stairs from the ground level and Mrs Knebworth was

a large woman, approaching sixty, who had never been much of a keep-fit fan.

No matter how outraged and how furious she felt, she couldn't propel herself up the stairs as quickly as she would have liked.

But she was going to get there in time, she told herself as she pulled herself up the second flight by the wooden banister. She was going to catch them in the dorm with all their contraband, she thought, as her breathing grew a little wheezy on the third set of stairs. Oh yes, she was!