

Chapter One

My name is Annabelle Macalaster. In three weeks, I turn 17, and the parole board will either transfer me to the adult penitentiary in Normal or release me. It's ironic that my suitability hearing is on my birthday—it's the circumstances of my birth that landed me in juvenile detention in the first place. At two, my moms said I had no dad. At six, they said there was a man who helped us create a family—but still no dad. At eleven, they said I could meet my donor when I turned 18 and could call him dad if I chose. Confusing, right? But if I had been like my little brother Bradley, and left it at that, I might not have spent the last two years in jail.

I could blame my moms. I could blame my fifth grade teacher. I could even blame my best friend Michelle. But Marty, my case manager, tells me maturity means taking responsibility for my actions. Marty is a she, though you'd never know it, with her buzz cut and chunky black shoes. Her desk is plastered with photos of bass fishing with her husband Bob in the Upper Peninsula, but all she needs is mirrored sunglasses and a package of cigarettes rolled up her sleeve. If she's not gay, nobody is. Not that I have a problem with being gay, I just don't like people pretending to be something they're not.

"These are exactly the kind of assumptions that get you in trouble," Marty says to me now, fingering the "IMAGINE" rock on her desk. I made the mistake of mentioning Marty's gayness to a couple of my girls in the cafeteria and it's gotten back to her. It's not my assumptions that get me into trouble, I think, it's telling them to the wrong people that does. But with Marty, it's best to be agreeable. She sees agreeability as maturity and maturity equals parole.

"Yes, ma'am," I say.

It was pasty Belinda, who chews the ends of her hair and picks at her toenails, who ratted me out. Belinda is the second scariest girl in our ward. She keeps a stack of family photos, every single one with the eyes scratched out, under her mattress. Anything Belinda knows, she's overhead—no one speaks to her. She must have heard me in the cafeteria saying how every Tuesday at my mother's

visiting time, Marty magically appears at our table, dripping in cheap cologne. She's all smiles and *howyadoin* Ms. Macalaster, that color is so pretty on you and you are such a supportive mother and yadda-gag -yadda. I only have an hour with my mother, and Marty-married-to-Bob drooling over my mother eats into my time. Even my mother asked me what Marty's deal was.

"She thinks you're hot," I said. My mother laughed. Ever since my trial, we can say anything to each other.

Marty is another matter. "Now, I don't give a bunny's bumpkin what you girls say privately," Marty is saying, pressing the tips of her fingers together. "I been here twenty-five years and heard it all." She plants a meaty forearm on her desk, leans toward me, and whispers: "Did you know, for instance: I have undescended testicles and fondle little girls?"

If this was meant to shame me, it worked. I look away.

"Belinda, however," Marty continues in her normal voice, "was sufficiently troubled by what she heard you say to sign a statement—" Marty lifts a pink document between her thumb and forefinger, "—stating your gossip creates 'a threatening and hostile environment' for her rehabilitation."

Talk about bunny's bumpkins. Belinda should know threatening and hostile; she planted a letter opener in her grandmother's eye and set her garage on fire after her grandmother (threateningly, no doubt) told Belinda she wouldn't give her any more money for drugs. And now because of me, poor Belinda has no safe environment in which to scrape butter knives across photos of her enemies.

"Strange things happen to girls right before their parole hearing," Marty says. "Do you know what I'm talking about?" She leans back and rests her left hand on her belly, and her blue shirt spreads open between the buttons.

"Yes ma'am."

"Graffiti appears in the bathroom with your name signed to it. Shanks appear under your mattress. Stolen items show up in your room. Do you understand what I am saying?"

“Yes ma’am.” It doesn’t matter if I say yes or no. Marty talks.

“There’s girls here who don’t want you out,” Marty says.

Girl, singular, who doesn’t want me out: Belinda. I am a long way from home. Outside Marty’s window, rows of seed corn stretch endlessly in all directions, hopping over clots of new housing developments and two-lane highways until they dwindle into suburbia. With Belinda’s report, I could be even farther. Whenever someone complains, it goes in your file, even if it is a lie. Of course Belinda wants to jeopardize my parole. She has nothing better to do in her next twenty years in the bucket. Still, filing a complaint is a weak move for someone as scheming as Belinda. She has bigger plans. But what?

“The parole board isn’t stupid,” Marty is saying, “we’re not going to believe that a girl who never caused a lick of trouble gets to stealing hairbrushes a week before her release.” She chuckles, tickled at her own cleverness, then goes stern. “But you, Annabelle, have a mouth. It would be a shame if your trouble came of your own making.”

I stare at the back of my hand, criss-crossed with a web of tiny lines, while Marty waits for a response. Most girls love Marty. They barely know their own parents, so Marty’s the most maternal figure they have. To me, she’s an idiot. I take a breath.

“I am sorry for what I said about you, Marty.”

Marty raises her eyebrows and makes a notation on the report. Case managers love apologies. Because hardly anybody makes one, they go a long way. I’m surprised no one else has caught on to this.

“And I’m sorry for the distress I caused Belinda. My behavior was wrong and immature.”

Marty smiles. “I’ll set up a mediation hearing for you two Monday,” she says, thwacking my folder closed and wrapping it in a heavy blue rubber band. “You’ll have the chance to tell Belinda to her face.” I grit my teeth. Marty stands up and lifts her arm to indicate the door. I can so easily see a tattoo on that bulging bicep.

Walking back to the common room, I focus on the red line and linoleum tiles passing beneath my plastic slippers. Something doesn't sit right about this meeting with Marty. I'm wondering what Belinda's grand plan is when a hand squeezes my shoulder so hard my knees buckle. I gasp for air. This can only be Shar, approximating affection. I turn.

There are frightening girls in this place, but Shar is worst. Except for a nucleus of love she reserves for me, every cell in her body is crystallized into hate. I'm the only person Shar respects, and that's because I killed a man. I did for Shar what she could not do for herself.

"You cracked him in the skull?" she asks—all the time.

"Yep," I say. Less is more when it comes to Shar.

She'll lean forward, her lips practically brushing my ear, and whisper: "Did it feel good?"

After twelve years of sexual abuse by her father, brother and uncle, Shar ripped the electric cord out of the television and took revenge—on her baby sister. Her sister will never walk again. The story sickens me; every day, I hear some version of how her little sister was to blame. But I understand in a way. Shar did what her family taught her—she took her rage out on the person most powerless to defend herself.

It's been an uneasy two years as Shar's confidante. I'm so scared of Shar I could crap in my pants, so it's not like I can say: "Too much information, yo." One of the most exciting things about parole is getting away from Shar, but Shar doesn't know that, and she's honestly happy for me.

"Hello Shar," I say now. Pustules array themselves in a milky constellation around her mouth. Her cinnamon-colored eyes shimmer.

"I heard what Belinda did to you," Shar hisses. "Someone need to cut her up."

Belinda's plan hits me with a whoosh. Belinda's target is Shar. If Belinda can set off Shar's depraved sense of justice, the result will be incendiary. There's no telling what Shar is capable of. Belinda will risk anything to find that out. And if the trouble is traced back to me running my mouth in the cafeteria, I'm off to the state penitentiary. I need to end this, now.

“Shar, what’s in your hand?” I say. She’s got what looks like a horse’s tail clenched in her fist.

Shar looks down at her hand, lifts the greasy hank to her cheek, and smiles adoringly at me.

“Belinda’s hair.”