

Chapter One

If Charlie Stone hadn't drunk the Kool-Aid, she would have died

But in the random way the world sometimes works, the seventeen-year-old did drink several big tumblers full of Goofy Grape generously mixed with vodka, courtesy of her new best friend Holly Palmer. As a result, she just happened to be in the utilitarian bathroom off the Palmers' basement rec room, hugging the porcelain throne when the first scream penetrated her consciousness.

Even muffled by floors and walls and who knew what else, it was loud and shrill and urgent enough to penetrate the haze of misery she was lost in.

"Holly?" Charlie called, lifting her head, which felt like it weighed a ton and pounded unmercifully.

No answer.

Okay, her voice was weak. Probably Holly hadn't heard her. Probably the scream was nothing, Holly's little brothers fighting or something. Seeing that it was around two a.m., though, shouldn't the eleven- and thirteen- year-olds have been asleep? Charlie had no idea: she knew nothing about tweenie boys. God, she should have followed her instinct and just said no to the booze. But as the new girl in Hampton High School's senior class, Charlie hadn't felt like she was in a position to refuse. From the first day of school, when they'd found out they were sharing a locker, sweet, popular Holly had taken Charlie under her wing, introduced her around. For that, Charlie was grateful.

The veteran of seven high schools in just over three years, Charlie knew from bitter experience that there were a lot more mean girls out there than nice ones.

A late August Friday night in this small Virginia beach town meant the movies. Four of them had gone together. The other two had moms that were reliable about picking their daughters up after. When Charlie's mom hadn't shown (typical), Holly had invited her to spend the night. They'd wound up sneaking out to meet Holly's boyfriend Garrett – a total hottie, who had to work till midnight, which was past Holly's curfew - and go for a ride in his car. Since he'd had a friend with him – James, not quite as hot as Garrett, but *still* – it had actually worked out pretty well, except for the whole toxic Kool-Aid thing.

They'd driven to the shore, plopped down in the sand, and shared the concoction Garrett had mixed for them while they talked and watched the waves.

The good news was, Charlie might actually have gotten a bead on landing her own boyfriend. The bad news was, as soon as Garrett had dropped them off and they'd crept back down to the basement where supposedly they'd been watching TV all along,

Charlie had had to rush straight to the bathroom. She'd been in there for what felt like forever, being sick as a parrot.

She'd be lucky if Holly ever invited her over again.

The second scream definitely did not come from one of the boys. High-pitched and shattering, it smashed through the ordinary sounds of the babbling TV and humming air-conditioning and thumping dryer in the next room like an axe through Jell-O. The fear in it was enough to make the hair stand up on the back of Charlie's neck. Until it abruptly cut off, she forgot to breathe. The ensuing silence pulsated with – something. Tension, maybe. An electric kind of heaviness. Shooting to her feet, she swiped her long brown hair back from her face with one hand and headed for the door. Knees weak, battling a disorienting attack of the woozies along with the worst taste ever in her mouth, she grabbed the cold-from-the-air-conditioning brass knob.

“Teach you to ignore me....” The words were followed by the sharp sound of a blow. It was a man's voice, low and deep. Mr. Palmer? Had he found out they'd snuck out?

Charlie froze, her hand still on the knob. She could see herself in the mirror over the sink. Average height, maybe a little too plump. Her face, cute, round, currently rosy from her mostly futile attempts to tan, had gone utterly white. Her blue eyes were the approximate size and shape of golf balls. The yellow tee-shirt she wore with jeans looked neon bright in the drab space. Tonight there would be no blending in to the background for her. Earlier, standing out was what she had wanted. Her yet-to-be-proven theory was that, unlike birds, brilliant plumage on girls helped to attract boys. Whatever, James had seemed to like her.

“Don't go anywhere,” the man said. At the ugly note in his voice, Charlie let go of the knob and took a step back. Pulse pounding, she stared at the raw wood panel. The tiny bathroom with its plain white toilet and sink and unpainted concrete block walls seemed to shrink as she stood there. There was no window, no way out except through that door.

Her heart thudded so hard she could feel it knocking in her chest.

A moment later the unmistakable creak of the door to the rec room told her it was being opened. She didn't hear it shut, but then she didn't hear anything after that. No footsteps, no voices. What was happening? Was he gone? Where was Holly? All Charlie knew for sure was that she wasn't about to just open that door.

Instead she dropped to her knees and tried looking beneath it, through the crack between door and floor.

The overhead light was still on, just like it was when she'd run for the bathroom. She could see the rug, a tan kind of Aztec print laid down over the concrete. She could see two legs of the coffee table, and a sliver of the tan leather couch. And Holly's feet. Yes, definitely Holly's feet, bare like her own. Slim and tanned, toenails painted bubblegum

pink, poking out from beneath the fashionably raggedy hems of her jeans.

From their position, Holly was lying on her side on the floor between the coffee table and the couch.

Charlie wet her lips. Something bad had happened. Something was really wrong.

Even as Charlie watched, Holly's toes curled, straightened, curled again. Then Charlie heard a moan, low and drawn out. Her stomach bunched into a big knot. The moan came from Holly, no mistake about that. Whatever had gone down, Holly was hurt. She needed help. Had her dad beaten her up?

Mr. Palmer – Ben, all Holly's friends called him, although Charlie, who'd only met him twice, hadn't quite gotten there yet – was a lawyer. He seemed nice, not like the type who'd hit his daughter, but in Charlie's experience of men, you just never knew.

The door to the rec room was open, she could see that much. There was no sign of the man, no sound from him. In her gut Charlie felt he was gone.

Standing up, Charlie took a deep breath. Then slowly, carefully, she eased open the door.

Just a crack. Just enough to see.

As she had thought, Holly lay on the floor, on her side. Her taut, tanned, cheerleader-worthy midriff was visible from the top of her hipbones to halfway up her ribcage because her hot pink tee was pulled way up. It was pulled way up because her arms were raised above her head in the most awkward-looking position ever. Charlie's heart stuttered as she took in the silver bracelets circling Holly's wrists, recognized them as handcuffs, and registered that Holly was handcuffed to the black plumbing pipe that rose along the room's concrete block outer wall.

Oh my God.

Holly's dad hadn't done that.

A swift glance around assured Charlie there was no one else in the room. So nervous she almost vibrated with it, Charlie hesitated. But what else could she do? Pulse racing, she flew to her friend's side, nudging the coffee table out of the way, careful not to make a sound. Holly's eyes were closed, she saw as she crouched beside her. Blood trickled from a cut just above her temple. The thread of bright scarlet sliding along Holly's cheekbone horrified Charlie almost as much as the two strips of gray duct tape plastered over her friend's mouth.

Oh God. Oh, no. What do I do?

Panic tightened her throat, but she did her best to force it back. Cold sweat prickled to life around her hair line, beaded her upper lip.

“*Holly.*” Charlie’s whisper was urgent. She grabbed Holly’s arm, shook her. Whatever had happened, this was something way outside her experience. Way outside her ability to deal with. Casting terrified glances over her shoulder, she frantically felt the smooth metal handcuffs, felt the cool strength of the chain linking them, felt the solidity of the iron pipe they were wrapped around. No way were they coming off without the key. Her friend’s hands felt warm, but they were limp and almost colorless except for the pink of her nail polish. “Holly, wake up.”

Holly’s eyes opened. The pupils were enormously dilated, making her blue eyes look almost black. For a moment she blinked, unfocused. Then she saw Charlie, and seemed to regain awareness.

“Mmm.” Holly moved in agitation. She turned her head, twisting, struggling to get free. The handcuffs clanked against the pipe. She kicked the coffee table, the sound of her feet hitting the wood loud as a clap to Charlie’s suddenly hypersensitive ears. Charlie’s heart leaped. She cast another of those terrified glances at the door.

If the man should come back....

Fear twisted inside her like a knife.

Grabbing Holly’s arm again, Charlie shook her head in an emphatic no.

“Shh,” she warned. Holly’s eyes met hers and clung, begging her. Fingers trembling, Charlie reached for the edge of the duct tape. Scrabbling at the edges, she managed to pull it off. The sticky side clung to her fingers. She had to pull the doubled strips off with her other hand, then stuck the tape on the wall.

“Do something. Get me out of here. He just walked in. He hit me.” The words spilled so fast out of Holly’s mouth they tumbled over each other. Her face was shiny with sweat. Her eyes were huge and glassy, her mouth blurry and smashed-looking from the tape. “Who?” Grabbing one of metal rings with both hands, Charlie tried yanking the cuff open.

“I don’t know. A stranger. *Hurry.*”

The cuff didn’t give by so much as a millimeter. Neither did the other. Upstairs, another scream split the night. This one was loud, guttural, animal-like. Charlie’s hands dropped away from the chain she was attempting to separate from the metal bracelets as a chill raced down her spine. Holly went completely still.

“Mom,” Holly whimpered. Her eyes darted around the room. “Oh, God, what’s happening? Help me.”

“Shh. I’m trying.” Desperately Charlie yanked at the pipe. Solidly set into the wall, it didn’t budge. Rolling onto her knees, Holly started yanking at the pipe, too. Clank, clank, clank, went the handcuffs.

“You have to be quiet.” Charlie’s voice was low but sharp. “If he hears you....”

“Is he still here? Oh my God, what if he comes back?” Frantic, panting, Holly grabbed the pipe and tried to break it free of the wall. Thud, thud. Clank, clank. “You have to help me get out of here.”

Terror sent goosebumps racing over Charlie’s skin. She shot another frightened look at the door.

“Holly. Stop it. Be quiet. ”

“You have to help me.”

“Shut up.”

Charlie’s palms were damp with sweat. She let go of the pipe. Holly wasn’t the only one at risk here. If the man came back, if he caught her, if he found out she was here, whatever this terrible thing was could happen to her, too. The knowledge dried Charlie’s mouth, sent her pulse into overdrive.

She stood up abruptly. “I can’t get you loose. I have to go for help.”

“Don’t leave me.” Holly’s eyes blazed with fear. Strands of her long blonde hair hit Charlie’s face as Holly whipped her head around so that she was facing the wall. Scrambling into a crouch, Holly yanked desperately at the pipe, trying to free her trapped hands. Even as she was backing away, Charlie smelled the citrus-y scent of her friend’s perfume. Holly was sweating bullets, Charlie realized. Just like she was herself.

“I have to. I have to go.” Anguish made Charlie’s voice break as she continued to back away.

“You can’t.” The handcuffs clanked as Holly kept trying to free herself. Her head turned to track Charlie’s progress. Her eyes clung desperately to Charlie’s. “You can’t just leave me.”

“Be quiet, he’ll hear you. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

“Please. Please.” Holly started to sob as Charlie, able to take no more, turned her back on her and ran from the room. Her throat went tight. Her heart hung heavy as a bowling ball in her chest. Leaving her friend behind was one of the hardest things Charlie had

ever had to do in her life. But getting help was the only smart thing to do, she told herself. She could use the phone, or run to a neighbor. What she couldn't do was free Holly herself. And if the man caught her....

She couldn't finish the thought. Fear washed over her in a cold wave.

The stairs were in the unfinished part of the basement, the part that held the washer and dryer and furnace and water heater. Out the rec room door, turn left and there they were.

Charlie hesitated at the foot, looking up. Her heart pounded. Her pulse raced. The door at the top of the stairs was closed. It opened, she knew, into the kitchen. Concentrating hard as she crept up the stairs, hanging onto the handrail, moving as quietly as it was possible to move, Charlie tried to picture the Palmers' kitchen. Big and modern, it had an island in the center where she and Holly and the other girls had chowed down on pizza earlier. And – yes, in the far corner, beside the refrigerator, was the back door. All she had to do was make it to that door, then race across the backyard to the next house just yards away. Forget trying to call for help: she was better off getting out of the house and running to the next door neighbor as fast as she could go.

I can't let him catch me. Even forming the words in her mind made shivers race over her skin.

Pausing on the top step, listening intently at the closed door, she heard nothing beyond the normal sounds of the house. But she knew people were up there, in the main part of the house: for one thing, Holly's family had to be there. And the man – where was he? *Who* was he?

Oh, God, if he decides to come into the basement now....

The thought was so horrifying Charlie felt faint.

Holding her breath, she turned the knob with infinite care, then pushed the door open the merest sliver.

And found herself meeting Holly's mom's eyes as the man cut her throat. The silver blade of the black-handled butcher knife gleamed in the warm light of the kitchen's recessed lighting. Like Holly's, Diane Palmer's mouth was sealed with duct tape. Her hair was blonde like Holly's. The man's fist was wrapped in the short strands, holding her head back so that her throat was exposed. Her eyes were blue like Holly's. As they locked with Charlie's, they radiated the ultimate in horror. But it was too late, it was done, there was nothing anyone, not Charlie, not anyone, could do. The knife left the flesh with a whoosh, flinging blood in its wake. Blood poured like a red Niagara from the gaping wound in Diane's tanned throat. Her apple green nightgown was instantly swallowed up by the flood of red. Her arms, her legs, the kitchen floor – everything was splattered with blood, puddled with blood, smeared with blood.

Every tiny hair on Charlie's body shot to instant attention. A scream tore out of her lungs, but she managed to swallow it just in time. Her heart jackhammered. Her breathing stopped.

Then she turned and fled back down into the basement.