

**PUNCH  
LIKE A GIRL**

Karen Krossing

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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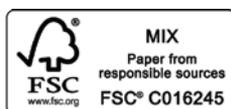
**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

CIP DATA TO COME

First published in the United States, 2015

**Library of Congress Control Number:** 2014952065

**Summary:** After Tori is sexually assaulted, she tells no one and her rage and confusion erupt into violent behavior that mystifies her friends and family.



*Orca Book Publishers is dedicated to preserving the environment and has printed this book on Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.*

Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Cover design by Chantal Gabriel

Cover image by TO BE CONFIRMED

Author photo by Owen Captures (owencaptures.com)

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CUSTER, WA USA  
98240-0468

[www.orcabook.com](http://www.orcabook.com)

Printed and bound in Canada.

18 17 16 15 • 4 3 2 1

*For my girls*



# SHEAR

 *to cut away* 

I wake in the dark, breathing hard, my hair tangled across my face, strands caught in my mouth. Not even sleep can slow the constant pounding in my head.

My eyes water. My nose runs. I kick against the sheets wrapped tightly around my legs. As I sweep the hair off my face, I fight the urge to retch.

When my stomach settles, I stumble across the hallway to the upstairs bathroom. The light from the streetlamp falls across the double sink. I stare into the mirror, repulsed by my hair.

It has to go.

First, I tie off two ponytails, each more than eight inches long. Next, I cut close to the scalp with Mom's haircutting shears, laying two hunks of curly, blond hair across the back of the toilet.

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The girl in the mirror still has too much hair.

I hack at the tufts with Dad's electric clippers. Why can I still feel Matt's fingers stroking my hair, praising it? *It's your best feature*, he used to say.

Sobs rattle my chest. When the clippers become too dull to cut, I toss them in the sink, cracking their plastic casing.

Dad will be pissed, but I don't care. I empty the drawers until I find his straight razor and shaving soap.

I cry out when the razor slices my skin just above my right ear. Blood trickles down my neck. A stain spreads slowly across my lacy, white pajama top.

When my head is shaved raw, I stop.

A tough girl glares back at me from the mirror.

# GNAW

*to wear down*

The next day, I let Alena run her hand over my freshly shaved head.

“Jeez, Tori.” She bumps into a display of spring sandals. “It’s smooth, like satin.”

It’s Monday after school, and we’re strolling through Glencrest Mall, heading for the post-office counter inside the drugstore. I’m wearing low-rise skinny jeans with a yellow H&M sweater and ballet flats. A typical outfit for me, but it feels off, like it doesn’t suit me anymore.

“And you’re just going to mail your hair to some company?” Jamarlo touches his stumpy dreads protectively.

“Yup.” I hoist the oversized envelope under my arm. “They make wigs for kids who’ve gone bald, so I couldn’t resist,” I say for the hundredth time today.

“Kids with cancer—how sad.” Alena fingers her own hair as if she’s ready to cut it off and hand it over. Her dark Mediterranean waves are forcibly straightened each morning. “But won’t you miss your hair? It was a guy magnet.”

“So what?” I say. “Those kids are facing worse than I am.”

Jamarlo raises his eyebrows. Alena glances at me.

“I mean, I’m healthy, and I live in a suburb where nothing bad is supposed to happen, in a house where the fridge is always full.” My voice catches. “Life is great for people like us. That’s why we have to give back.”

Alena squeezes my arm in that concerned way she has. “I get that you’ve got a big heart, but does the head shaving have anything to do with Matt? He was crazy about your hair, but you didn’t need to shave it to chase him away.”

“Yeah, the knee to the groin was clear enough.” Jamarlo winces.

“Matt has been erased from my memory banks.” I ignore the pressure building inside my head. How can I talk about what happened when even thinking about it makes me sick? “I’m off the market until the guys our age are mature enough to date,” I say.

Alena snorts. “Maybe in ten years, if you’re lucky.”

Jamarlo shoots us a pissed-off look. “We’re not all jerks.”

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“Of course, you’re the one exception.” I drape an arm over his shoulder. He’s only a bit bigger than me, which isn’t saying much, since I’m five feet tall and I weigh ninety-nine pounds after a plate of spaghetti.

“Damn right I am.” Jamarlo nods, still frowning.

“What exactly did Matt do at Carmen’s party on Saturday night?” Alena asks as we turn into the drugstore. “You haven’t said. I mean, he showed up with Melody, but you’d broken up with him a week before, so—”

“We argued. I kned him. It’s over.” I force my voice to stay steady, tenderly prodding the razor cut above my ear.

“But—” Alena begins.

“You know, it isn’t easy to get rid of hair. In the end, I had to use my dad’s straight razor.” I blabber on, not mentioning how freaked out my parents were when they saw my head at breakfast. How Mom almost spilled her coffee down her blouse, and Dad choked on his toast. “Did you know that women who were accused of sleeping with German soldiers during World War II were forcibly shaved in Paris after the war? Mr. Hadley told us about it in World History.”

“Brutal,” Jamarlo says.

Alena wrinkles her nose. At least she’s stopped asking questions.

We don’t have to wait long at the post-office counter. When the clerk gives my head a hostile look, I practice

my new don't-mess-with-me stare on her. I guess my fake-polite face disappeared with my hair. Then I watch the clerk place my package in the outgoing bin; suddenly I'm desperate to be rid of it.

As we wander out of the drugstore, I'm dizzy. We pass a café with giggling girls at one of the tables. When scrawny Jamarlo struts for them, the girls whisper and turn away. It's rough—Jamarlo is friends with a lot of girls, but no one wants to date him.

"Bald can be sexy," he says once we pass the girls. "Except for Britney Spears during her cosmic meltdown. I'd give her a two out of ten on the female bald-o-meter."

"Sexy is overrated," I say.

"Since when are you against sexy?" Jamarlo pretends to pole-dance using me as the pole.

I push him away, but nicely. "Since sexy started to suck."

"Uh-oh. Someone's got the break-up blues," Jamarlo teases.

"Wouldn't you if you'd just ditched a jerk?"

"You know, Tori"—Alena keeps her tone light, as if she knows I'm tensing up—"your new look makes your eyes bigger and your neck longer. You're just lucky you have a nicely shaped head. You could've had lumps under all that gorgeous hair."

"Or pus-filled scars." Jamarlo grins.

“Your face is a pus-filled scar, Jamarlo.” I pretend to punch him.

He pretends to duck, as always.

The familiar routine calms me a bit.

“Oh, look.” Alena points to Felipe’s Glam Boutique. “We have to check out the dresses in the sale section. Do you mind, Jamarlo?”

“Course not.” He flips up the collar of his purple plaid shirt and sets his black-brimmed hat low on his forehead. “I’m cool with it.”

“Hey, Tori, we’ve got our own pimp!” Alena laughs.

A middle-aged woman in a pastel suit frowns at Alena, but I scowl until she looks away. Is everyone in the mall a jerk today?

We pass the glittery, low-cut dresses in the window and head into Felipe’s—the most exciting shop in this suburban paradise.

Inside, Felipe—the flamboyant, silver-haired owner—is showing versions of the little black dress to a twenty-something woman and her boyfriend, who has a serious Neanderthal forehead. The boyfriend wraps a protective arm around his girl’s waist and narrows his eyes as he watches Felipe swing dresses off a rack with a flourish and display them across his hairy forearm.

“Did you hear about the anti-prom?” Alena’s brown eyes sparkle in the overhead lights.

“Not really.” I frown. The last thing I want is to go to another party.

“Well, we have to go! It’s June 23 at some club. It’ll be way more fun than the official prom—better music, no teachers.” Alena tugs us toward the sale section at the back of the store, near the dressing rooms and the three-way mirror. “I hear they’re hiring a DJ and everything.”

“And it’s only for grade elevens,” Jamarlo adds. “Because we’re not too lame to enjoy it.”

“We’ll need to find dresses for it.” Alena runs her hands over the rainbow of dresses in the sale section. She holds up a full-length turquoise gown with a Marilyn Monroe-style halter top and ruffles from the hips down. “What do you think of this one for you?”

“The party’s seven weeks away.” I try not to roll my eyes, even though a few weeks ago I would’ve loved any dress from Felipe’s. “And won’t it be casual? No one will be wearing a dress like that.”

“What’s wrong with it?” Alena twirls, letting the skirt flare. “I’d wear it. It’s drop-dead gorgeous.”

“Anti-proms are supposed to be subversive, Alena. That dress is too”—I notice the hurt expression on her face and back off—“traditional.”

Jamarlo snorts.

Alena sticks her tongue out at me. “Nothing is more subversive than showing up at an anti-prom in formal wear.”

She holds the dress in place and examines her reflection in the three-way mirror. “What are you going to wear? Jeans?”

I flash back to Carmen Carter’s house party: Matt finding me on the makeshift dance floor to grind against my jeans, zipper to zipper. “*You owe me, Tori. I’ve waited long enough.*” His arms snaking around me, forcing me closer. Me yanking free. Melody shooting me deadly looks from across the crowded room.

“I’m not going.” I lean against a row of dresses and crush the crisp fabric of a honey-colored taffeta dress.

“What?” Alena almost drops the gown. “Tori, you have to!”

I pretend to examine the dresses. I hate to disappoint her, but I just can’t go.

“Come on, Tori. You can be my date.” Jamarlo slips his arms around my waist.

“Who will wear the dress?” I tease, plastering on a smile. Then I grip his hand and lead him in a fake waltz, sideswiping dresses.

“You’d look great in a tux.” Jamarlo laughs.

Alena is still pouting.

“You’d look amazing in this, Jamarlo.” I grab a red strapless with a short poufy skirt off a sale rack and hold it up to him, trying to make Alena laugh.

“It’s divine.” Jamarlo grins as he takes the dress from me. It’s actually nice against his brown skin. He links

arms with Alena. “Come on, girlfriend. Let’s try these beauties on.”

I laugh a little too loudly. Alena sighs.

“Fucking faggot,” someone says.

We spin around. It’s Neanderthal with his girl, who’s clutching a black dress. Neanderthal glares at Jamarlo, his muscled arms crossed.

“What did you say?” Jamarlo grips the red strapless, his face flushing.

I step toward Neanderthal, even though he’s twice my size.

“I’m sorry”—I pretend to address Felipe, who’s yakking with a preteen and her mother near the cash—“but do you let homophobes shop here?” Felipe may be gay, and I know Jamarlo isn’t, but that’s not the point.

“Uh, Tori?” Alena slinks into the next row of dresses. Neanderthal’s girl blinks at us with wide, startled eyes.

“Tori, leave it.” Jamarlo tugs my arm.

“What’d you call me?” Neanderthal’s face gets redder.

Adrenaline pumps through me. The pressure in my head swells. “Was that too big a word for you? How about *stupid*? Do you know what that means?”

“Cut it out, Tori.” Jamarlo’s voice is a warning.

“No, Jamarlo. He can’t call you a—”

“A faggot?” Neanderthal’s lip curls. “You need a girl to defend you, faggot?” He makes two meaty fists.

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Jamarlo's face goes burgundy.

"So what if he does?" I get into protective position—hands clenched in front of me, ready to defend. My knees tremble.

Neanderthal smirks at my undersized fists. "I bet you punch like a girl."

"You bet I do." I reach up and land a hammerfist on his nose, just like I should have done with Matt.

Alena gasps. Neanderthal's girlfriend shrieks.

"What the hell?" Jamarlo yells.

Neanderthal howls. He ignores the blood oozing from his left nostril and reaches for me.

Terror clogs my veins. I kick him hard in the shin with one of my ballet flats. Once. Twice. Three times.

He moans and clutches his leg, hopping on one foot until he loses his balance, taking out a rack of dresses as he falls.