

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KARIN
SLAUGHTER

PRETTY
GIRLS

"STUNNING . . .
CERTAIN TO BE A
BOOK OF THE YEAR."
-LEE CHILD

a novel

PRETTY GIRLS

A NOVEL

KARIN
SLAUGHTER

The logo for William Morrow, featuring a stylized, cursive 'wm' monogram.

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DEDICATION

FOR DEBRA

EPIGRAPH

A PARTICULARLY BEAUTIFUL WOMAN IS A SOURCE OF TERROR.

—*Carl Jung*

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i.

When you first disappeared, your mother warned me that finding out exactly what had happened to you would be worse than never knowing. We argued about this constantly because arguing was the only thing that held us together at the time.

“Knowing the details won’t make it any easier,” she warned me. “The details will tear you apart.”

I was a man of science. I needed facts. Whether I wanted to or not, my mind would not stop generating hypotheses: Abducted. Raped. Defiled.

Rebellious.

That was the sheriff’s theory, or at least his excuse when we demanded answers he could not give. Your mother and I had always been secretly pleased that you were so headstrong and passionate about your causes. Once you were gone, we understood that these were the qualities that painted young men as smart and ambitious and young women as trouble.

“Girls run off all the time.” The sheriff had shrugged like you were any girl, like a week would pass—a month, maybe a year—and you would come back into our lives offering a halfhearted apology about a boy you’d followed or a friend you’d joined on a trip across the ocean.

You were nineteen years old. Legally, you did not belong to us anymore. You belonged to yourself. You belonged to the world.

Still, we organized search parties. We kept calling hospitals and police stations and homeless shelters. We posted flyers around town. We knocked on doors. We talked to your friends. We checked abandoned buildings and burned-out houses on the bad side of town. We hired a private detective who took half of our savings and a psychic who took most of the rest. We appealed to the media, though the media lost interest when there were no salacious details to breathlessly report.

This is what we knew: You were in a bar. You didn’t drink any more than usual. You told your friends that you weren’t feeling well and that you were

going to walk home and that was the last time anyone ever reported seeing you.

Over the years, there were many false confessions. Sadists rallied around the mystery of where you'd gone. They provided details that could not be proven, leads that could not be followed. At least they were honest when they were caught out. The psychics always blamed me for not looking hard enough.

Because I never stopped looking.

I understand why your mother gave up. Or at least had to appear to. She had to rebuild a life—if not for herself, for what was left of her family. Your little sister was still at home. She was quiet and furtive and hanging out with the kind of girls who would talk her into doing things she should not do. Like sneak into a bar to hear music and never come home again.

On the day we signed our divorce papers, your mother told me that her only hope was that one day we would find your body. That was what she clung to, the idea that one day, eventually, we could lay you down in your final resting place.

I said that we might just find you in Chicago or Santa Fe or Portland or some artistic commune that you had wandered off to because you were always a free spirit.

Your mother was not surprised to hear me say this. This was a time when the pendulum of hope still swung back and forth between us, so that some days she took to her bed with sorrow and some days she came home from the store with a shirt or a sweater or a pair of jeans that she would give you when you returned home to us.

I remember clearly the day I lost my hope. I was working at the veterinary office downtown. Someone brought in an abandoned dog. The creature was pitiful, obviously abused. He was mostly yellow Lab, though his fur was ashen from the elements. Barbs were clumped in his haunches. There were hot spots on his bare skin where he'd scratched too much or licked too much or done the things dogs try to do to soothe themselves when they are left alone.

I spent some time with him to let him know he was safe. I let him lick the back of my hand. I let him get used to my scent. After he calmed, I started the examination. He was an older dog, but until recently, his teeth had been well kept. A surgical scar indicated that at some point, an injured knee had

been carefully and expensively repaired. The obvious abuse the animal suffered had not yet worked its way into his muscle memory. Whenever I put my hand to his face, the weight of his head fell into the palm of my hand.

I looked into the dog's woeful eyes, and my mind filled in details from this poor creature's life. I had no way of knowing the truth, but my heart understood this was what had happened: He had not been abandoned. He had wandered off or slipped his leash. His owners had gone to the store or left for vacation and somehow—a gate accidentally left open, a fence jumped, a door left ajar by a well-meaning house sitter—this beloved creature had found himself walking the streets with no sense of which direction would take him back home.

And a group of kids or an unspeakable monster or a combination of all had found this dog and turned him from an adored pet into a hunted beast.

Like my father, I have devoted my life to treating animals, but that was the first time I had ever made the connection between the horrible things people do to animals and the even more horrific things they do to other human beings.

Here was how a chain ripped flesh. Here was the damage wrought by kicking feet and punching fists. Here is what a human being looked like when they wandered off into a world that did not cherish them, did not love them, did not ever want them to go home.

Your mother was right.

The details tore me apart.

CHAPTER 1

The downtown Atlanta restaurant was empty except for a lone businessman in a corner booth and a bartender who seemed to think he had mastered the art of flirty conversation. The predinner rush was starting its slow windup. Cutlery and china clashed in the kitchen. The chef bellowed. A waiter huffed a laugh. The television over the bar offered a low, steady beat of bad news.

Claire Scott tried to ignore the endless drum of noise as she sat at the bar, nursing her second club soda. Paul was ten minutes late. He was never late. He was usually ten minutes early. It was one of the things she teased him about but really needed him to do.

“Another?”

“Sure.” Claire smiled politely at the bartender. He had been trying to engage her from the moment she sat down. He was young and handsome, which should’ve been flattering but just made her feel old—not because she was ancient, but because she had noticed that the closer she got to forty, the more annoyed she was by people in their twenties. They were constantly making her think of sentences that began with “when I was your age.”

“Third one.” His voice took on a teasing tone as he refilled her glass of club soda. “You’re hittin’ ’em pretty hard.”

“Am I?”

He winked at her. “You let me know if you need a ride home.”

Claire laughed because it was easier than telling him to brush his hair out of his eyes and go back to college. She checked the time on her phone again. Paul was now twelve minutes late. She started catastrophizing: carjacking, hit by a bus, struck by a falling piece of airplane fuselage, abducted by a madman.

The front door opened, but it was a group of people, not Paul. They were all dressed in business casual, likely workers from the surrounding office

buildings who wanted to grab an early drink before heading home to the suburbs and their parents' basements.

"You been following this?" The bartender nodded toward the television.

"Not really," Claire said, though of course she'd been following the story. You couldn't turn on the TV without hearing about the missing teenage girl. Sixteen years old. White. Middle class. Very pretty. No one ever seemed quite as outraged when an ugly woman went missing.

"Tragic," he said. "She's so beautiful."

Claire looked at her phone again. Paul was now thirteen minutes late. Today of all days. He was an architect, not a brain surgeon. There was no emergency so dire that he couldn't take two seconds to text or give her a call.

She started spinning her wedding ring around her finger, which was a nervous habit she didn't know she had until Paul had pointed it out to her. They had been arguing about something that had seemed desperately important to Claire at the time but now she couldn't remember the topic or even when the argument had occurred. Last week? Last month? She had known Paul for eighteen years, been married to him for almost as long. There wasn't much left that they could argue about with any conviction.

"Sure I can't interest you in something harder?" The bartender was holding up a bottle of Stoli, but his meaning was clear.

Claire forced another laugh. She had known this type of man her entire life. Tall, dark, and handsome with twinkling eyes and a mouth that moved like honey. At twelve, she would've scribbled his name all over her math notebook. At sixteen, she would've let him put his hand up her sweater. At twenty, she would've let him put his hand up anything he wanted. And now, at thirty-eight, she just wanted him to go away.

She said, "No thank you. My parole officer has advised me not to drink unless I'm going to be home all evening."

He gave her a smile that said he didn't quite get the joke. "Bad girl. I like it."

"You should've seen me in my ankle monitor." She winked at him. "Black is the new orange."

The front door opened. Paul. Claire felt a wave of relief as he walked toward her.

She said, "You're late."

Paul kissed her cheek. "Sorry. No excuse. I should've called. Or texted."

"Yes, you should've."

He told the bartender, "Glenfiddich; single, neat."

Claire watched the young man pour Paul's Scotch with a previously unseen professionalism. Her wedding ring, her gentle brush-offs, and her outright rejection had been minor obstacles compared to the big no of another man kissing her cheek.

"Sir." He placed the drink in front of Paul, then headed toward the other end of the bar.

Claire lowered her voice. "He offered me a ride home."

Paul looked at the man for the first time since he'd walked through the door. "Should I go punch him in the nose?"

"Yes."

"Will you take me to the hospital when he punches me back?"

"Yes."

Paul smiled, but only because she was smiling, too. "So, how does it feel to be untethered?"

Claire looked down at her naked ankle, half expecting to see a bruise or mark where the chunky black ankle bracelet had been. Six months had passed since she'd worn a skirt in public, the same amount of time she'd been wearing the court-ordered monitoring device. "It feels like freedom."

He straightened the straw by her drink, making it parallel to the napkin. "You're constantly tracked with your phone and the GPS in your car."

"I can't be sent to jail every time I put down my phone or leave my car."

Paul shrugged off the point, which she thought was a very good one. "What about curfew?"

"It's lifted. As long as I stay out of trouble for the next year, my record will be expunged and it'll be like it never even happened."

"Magic."

"More like a very expensive lawyer."

He grinned. "It's cheaper than that bracelet you wanted from Cartier."

"Not if you add in the earrings." They shouldn't joke about this, but the alternative was to take it very seriously. She said, "It's weird. I know the monitor's not there anymore, but I can still feel it."

"Signal detection theory." He straightened the straw again. "Your perceptual systems are biased toward the monitor touching your skin. More

often, people experience the sensation with their phones. They feel it vibrating even when it's not."

That's what she got for marrying a geek.

Paul stared at the television. "You think they'll find her?"

Claire didn't respond. She looked down at the drink in Paul's hand. She'd never liked the taste of Scotch, but being told she shouldn't drink had made her want to go on a week-long bender.

This afternoon, out of desperation for something to say, Claire had told her court-appointed psychiatrist that she absolutely despised being told what to do. "Who the hell doesn't?" the blowsy woman had demanded, slightly incredulous. Claire had felt her cheeks turn red, but she knew better than to say that she was particularly bad about it, that she had landed herself in court-appointed therapy for that very reason. She wasn't going to give the woman the satisfaction of a breakthrough.

Besides, Claire had come to that realization on her own the minute the handcuffs were clamped around her wrists.

"Idiot," she had mumbled to herself as the cop had guided her into the back of the squad car.

"That's going in my report," the woman had briskly informed her.

They were all women that day, female police officers of varying sizes and shapes with thick leather belts around their chunky waists carrying all manner of lethal devices. Claire felt that things would've gone a lot better if at least one of them had been a man, but sadly, that was not the case. This is where feminism had gotten her: locked in the back of a sticky squad car with the skirt on her tennis dress riding up her thighs.

At the jail, Claire's wedding ring, watch, and tennis shoelaces had been taken by a large woman with a mole between her hairy eyebrows whose general appearance reminded Claire of a stinkbug. There was no hair growing out of the mole, and Claire wanted to ask why she bothered to pluck the mole but not her eyebrows, but it was too late because another woman, this one tall and reedy like a praying mantis, was already taking Claire into the next room.

The fingerprinting was nothing like on TV. Instead of ink, Claire had to press her fingers onto a filthy glass plate so the swirls could be digitized into a computer. Her swirls, apparently, were very faint. It took several tries.

