

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

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.

WILLIAM MORROW

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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 Stolli, 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.

"Good thing I didn't rob a bank," Claire said, then added, "ha-ha," to convey the humor.

"Press evenly," the praying mantis said, chewing off the wings of a fly.

Claire's mug shot was taken against a white background with a ruler that was clearly off by an inch. She wondered aloud why she wasn't asked to hold a sign with her name and inmate number.

"Photoshop template," the praying mantis said in a bored tone that indicated the question was not a new one.

It was the only picture Claire had ever taken where no one had told her to smile.

Then a third policewoman who, bucking the trend, had a nose like a mallard, had taken Claire to the holding cell where, surprisingly, Claire was not the only woman in a tennis outfit.

"What're you in for?" the other tennis-outfitted inmate had asked. She looked hard and strung out and had obviously been arrested while playing with a different set of balls.

"Murder," Claire had said, because she had already decided that she wasn't going to take this seriously.

"Hey." Paul had finished his Scotch and was signaling the bartender for a refill. "What are you thinking about over there?"

"I'm thinking your day was probably worse than mine if you're ordering a second drink." Paul rarely drank. It was something they had in common. Neither one of them liked feeling out of control, which had made jail a real bummer, ha ha.

She asked him, "Everything all right?"

"It's good right now." He rubbed her back with his hand. "What did the shrink say?"

Claire waited until the bartender had returned to his corner. "She said that I'm not being forthcoming about my emotions."

"That's not like you at all."

They smiled at each other. Another old argument that wasn't worth having anymore.

"I don't like being analyzed," Claire said, and she could picture her analyst offering an exaggerated shrug as she demanded, "Who the hell does?"

"You know what I was thinking today?" Paul took her hand. His palm felt rough. He'd been working in the garage all weekend. "I was thinking about how much I love you."

"That's a funny thing for a husband to say to his wife."

"It's true, though." Paul pressed her hand to his lips. "I can't imagine what my life would be like without you."

"Tidier," she said, because Paul was the one who was always picking up abandoned shoes and various items of clothing that should've been put in the laundry basket but somehow ended up in front of the bathroom sink.

He said, "I know things are hard right now. Especially with—" He tilted his head toward the television, which was showing a new photo of the missing sixteen-year-old.

Claire looked at the set. The girl really was beautiful. Athletic and lean with dark, wavy hair.

Paul said, "I just want you to know that I'm always going to be here for you. No matter what."

Claire felt her throat start to tighten. She took him for granted sometimes. That was the luxury of a long marriage. But she knew that she loved him. She needed him. He was the anchor that kept her from drifting away.

He said, "You know that you're the only woman I've ever loved."

She invoked her college predecessor. "Ava Guilford would be shocked to hear that."

"Don't play. I'm being serious." He leaned in so close that his forehead almost touched hers. "You are the love of my life, Claire Scott. You're everything to me."

"Despite my criminal record?"

He kissed her. Really kissed her. She tasted Scotch and a hint of peppermint and felt a rush of pleasure when his fingers stroked the inside of her thigh.

When they stopped for air, she said, "Let's go home."

Paul finished his drink in one swallow. He tossed some cash onto the bar. His hand stayed at Claire's back as they left the restaurant. A cold gust of wind picked at the hem of her skirt. Paul rubbed her arm to keep her warm. He was walking so close to her that she could feel his breath on her neck. "Where are you parked?"

"Parking deck," she said.

"I'm on the street." He handed his keys to her. "Take my car."

"Let's go together."

"Let's go here." He pulled her into an alley and pressed her back against the wall.

Claire opened her mouth to ask what had gotten into him, but then he was kissing her. His hand slid underneath her skirt. Claire gasped, but not so much because he took her breath away as because the alley was not dark and the street was not empty. She could see men in suits strolling by, heads turning, eyes tracking the scene until the last moment. This was how people ended up on the Internet.

"Paul." She put her hand to his chest, wondering what had happened to her vanilla husband who thought it was kinky if they did it in the guest room. "People are watching."

"Back here." He took her hand, leading her deeper into the alley.

Claire stepped over a graveyard of cigarette butts as she followed him. The alley was T-shaped, intersecting with another service alley for the restaurants and shops. Hardly a better situation. She imagined fry cooks standing at open doors with cigarettes in their mouths and iPhones in their hands. Even without spectators, there were all kinds of reasons she should not do this.

Then again, no one liked being told what to do.

Paul pulled her around a corner. Claire had a quick moment to scan their empty surroundings before her back was pressed against another wall. His mouth covered hers.

His hands cupped her ass. He wanted this so badly that she started to want it, too. She closed her eyes and let herself give in. Their kisses deepened. He tugged down her underwear. She helped him, shuddering because it was cold and it was dangerous and she was so ready that she didn't care anymore.

"Claire . . ." he whispered in her ear. "Tell me you want this."

"I want this."

"Tell me again."

"I want this."

Without warning, he spun her around. Claire's cheek grazed the brick. He had her pinned to the wall. She pushed back against him. He groaned, taking the move for excitement, but she could barely breathe.

"Paul—"

"Don't move."

Claire understood the words, but her brain took several seconds to process the fact that they had not come from her husband's mouth.

"Turn around."

Paul started to turn.

"Not you, asshole."

Her. He meant her. Claire couldn't move. Her legs were shaking. She could barely hold herself up.

"I said turn the fuck around."

Paul's hands gently wrapped around Claire's arms. She stumbled as he slowly turned her around.

There was a man standing directly behind Paul. He was wearing a black hoodie zipped just below his thick, tattooed neck. A sinister-looking rattlesnake arced across his Adam's apple, its fangs showing in a wicked grin.

"Hands up." The snake's mouth bobbed as the man spoke.

"We don't want trouble." Paul's hands were in the air. His body was perfectly still. Claire looked at him. He nodded once, telling her it was going to be okay when clearly it was not. "My wallet's in my back pocket."

The man wrenched out the wallet with one hand. Claire could only assume a gun was in the other. She saw it in her mind's eye: black and shiny, pressed into Paul's back.

"Here." Paul took off his wedding ring, his class ring, his watch. Patek Philippe. She had bought it for him five years ago. His initials were on the back.

"Claire"—Paul's voice was strained—"give him your wallet."

Claire stared at her husband. She felt the insistent tapping of her carotid artery pulsing in her neck. Paul had a gun at his back. They were being robbed. That's what was going on. This was real. This was happening. She looked down at her hand, the movement tracking

slowly because she was in shock and terrified and didn't know what to do. Her fingers were still wrapped around Paul's keys. She'd been holding on to them the entire time. How could she have sex with him if she was still holding his keys?

"Claire," Paul repeated, "get your wallet."

She dropped the keys into her purse. She pulled out her wallet and handed it to the man.

He jammed it into his pocket, then held out his hand again. "Phone."

Claire retrieved her iPhone. All of her contacts. Her vacation photos from the last few years. St. Martin. London. Paris. Munich.

"The ring, too." The man glanced up and down the alley. Claire did the same. There was no one. Even the side streets were empty. Her back was still to the wall. The corner leading to the main road was an arm's length away. There were people on the street. Lots of people.

The man read her thoughts. "Don't be stupid. Take off the ring."

Claire took off her wedding ring. This was okay to lose. They had insurance. It wasn't even her original ring. They had picked it out years ago when Paul had finally finished his internship and passed his Registration Exam.

"Earrings," the man ordered. "Come on, bitch, move."

Claire reached up to her earlobe. Her hands had started to tremble. She hadn't remembered putting in the diamond studs this morning, but now she could see herself standing in front of her jewelry box.

Was this her life passing before her eyes—vacant recollections of *things*?

"Hurry." The man waved his free hand to urge her on.

Claire fumbled with the backs on the diamond studs. A tremble made her fingers thick and useless. She saw herself at Tiffany picking out the earrings. Thirty-second birthday. Paul giving her a "can you believe we're doing this?" look as the saleslady took them back to the special secret room where high-dollar purchases were made.

Claire dropped the earrings in the man's open hand. She was shaking. Her heart beat like a snare drum.

"That's it." Paul turned around. His back was pressed against Claire. Blocking her. Protecting her. He still had his hands in the air. "You have everything."

Claire could see the man over Paul's shoulder. He wasn't holding a gun. He was holding a knife. A long, sharp knife with a serrated edge and a hook at the point that looked like the sort of thing a hunter would use to gut an animal.

Paul said, "There's nothing else. Just go."

The man didn't go. He was looking at Claire like he'd found something more expensive to steal than her thirty-six-thousand-dollar earrings. His lips tweaked in a smile. One of his front teeth was plated in gold. She realized that the rattlesnake tattoo had a matching gold fang.

And then she realized that this wasn't just a robbery.

So did Paul. He said, "I have money."

"No shit." The man's fist hammered into Paul's chest. Claire felt the impact in her own chest, his shoulder blades cutting into her collarbone. His head snapping into her face. The back of her head banged against the brick wall.

Claire was momentarily stunned. Stars fireworked in front of her eyes. She tasted blood in her mouth. She blinked. She looked down. Paul was writhing on the ground.

"Paul—" She reached for him but her scalp ignited in white-hot pain. The man had grabbed her by the hair. He wrenched her down the alley. Claire stumbled. Her knee grazed the pavement. The man kept walking, almost jogging. She had to bend at the waist to alleviate some of the agony. One of her heels broke off. She tried to look back. Paul was clutching his arm like he was having a heart attack.

"No," she whispered, even as she wondered why she wasn't screaming. "No-no-no."

The man dragged her forward. Claire could hear herself wheezing. Her lungs had filled with sand. He was taking her toward the side street. There was a black van that she hadn't noticed before. Claire dug her fingernails into his wrist. He jerked her head. She tripped. He jerked her again. The pain was excruciating, but it was nothing compared to the terror. She wanted to scream. She needed to scream. But her throat was choked closed by the knowledge of what was coming. He was going to take her somewhere else in that van. Somewhere private. Somewhere awful that she might not ever leave again.

"No . . ." she begged. "Please . . . no . . . no . . ."

The man let go of Claire, but not because she'd asked him to. He spun around, the knife out in front of him. Paul was up on his feet. He was running toward the man. He let out a guttural howl as he lunged into the air.

It all happened very quickly. Too quickly. There was no slowing of time so that Claire could bear witness to every millisecond of her husband's struggle.

Paul could've outrun this man on a treadmill or solved an equation before the guy had a chance to sharpen his pencil, but his opponent had something over Paul Scott that they didn't teach in graduate school: how to fight with a knife.

There was only a whistling noise as the blade sliced through the air. Claire had expected more sounds: a sudden slap as the hooked tip of the knife punctured Paul's skin. A grinding noise as the serrated edge sawed past his ribs. A scrape as the blade separated tendon and cartilage.

Paul's hands went to his belly. The pearl handle of the knife stuck up between his fingers. He stumbled back against the wall, mouth open, eyes almost comically wide. He was wearing his navy blue Tom Ford suit that was too tight across his shoulders. Claire had made a mental note to get the seam let out but now it was too late because the jacket was soaked with blood.

Paul looked down at his hands. The blade was sunk in to the hilt, almost equidistant between his navel and his heart. His blue shirt flowered with blood. He looked shocked. They were both shocked. They were supposed to have an early dinner tonight, celebrate Claire's successful navigation of the criminal justice system, not bleed to death in a cold, dank alley.

She heard footsteps. The Snake Man was running away, their rings and jewelry jangling in his pockets.

"Help," Claire said, but it was a whisper, so low that she could barely hear the sound of her own voice. "H-help," she stuttered. But who could help them? Paul was always the one who brought help. Paul was the one who took care of everything.

Until now.

He slid down the brick wall and landed hard on the ground. Claire knelt beside him. Her hands moved out in front of her but she didn't

know where to touch him. Eighteen years of loving him. Eighteen years of sharing his bed. She had pressed her hand to his forehead to check for fevers, wiped his face when he was sick, kissed his lips, his cheeks, his eyelids, even slapped him once out of anger, but now she did not know where to touch him.

"Claire."

Paul's voice. She knew his voice. Claire went to her husband. She wrapped her arms and legs around him. She pulled him close to her chest. She pressed her lips to the side of his head. She could feel the heat leaving his body. "Paul, please. Be okay. You have to be okay."

"I'm okay," Paul said, and it seemed like the truth until it wasn't anymore. The tremor started in his legs and worked into a violent shaking by the time it reached the rest of his body. His teeth chattered. His eyelids fluttered.

He said, "I love you."

"Please," she whispered, burying her face in his neck. She smelled his aftershave. Felt a rough patch of beard he'd missed with the razor this morning. Everywhere she touched him, his skin was so very, very cold. "Please don't leave me, Paul. Please."

"I won't," he promised.

But then he did.