

Pretty Girls

By: Karen Slaughter

CHAPTER 18

Paul was smiling when he put the phone down on the table beside the black hood. Lydia didn't look at the phone, which she could not reach, but at the soaked black hood next to it, which she knew would eventually be wrapped around her head again. The spray bottle was empty for the third time. Paul was drinking filtered water so he could fill it back up again. When he was ready, he would make her watch him fill up the bottle, then he would put the hood back over her head, then he would start spraying. Seconds before she passed out, he would shock her with the cattle prod or whip her with the leather belt or punch her or kick her until she gasped for breath.

And then he would start the process all over again.

He said, "She sounds good, right? Claire?"

Lydia looked away from the hood. There was a computer on a workbench like the one Paul had in his garage at home. Metal storage shelves. Old computers. She had catalogued everything in her head because she had been here almost thirteen hours—Paul updated her with the time every half hour—and the only thing that was keeping her from going insane was reciting the inventory like a mantra while he tried to drown her in his piss.

Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.
"I bet you want to know what's on that USB drive, Lydia. I like to call it my 'get out of jail free' card."

Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.
"Fred Nolan wants it. Mayhew. Johnny. Lots of other -people want it, too. What a surprise. Paul Scott has something that everybody else wants." He paused. "What do you want from me, Liddie?"

Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.
"Do you want some Percocet?"

The question pulled her out of her stupor. She could almost taste the bitter pill in her mouth.

He shook the prescription bottle in front of her face. "I found it in your purse. I guess you stole it from Claire." He sat down in the chair across from her. He rested the bottle on his knee. "You were always stealing from her."

Lydia stared down at the bottle. This would be it. She had told Claire that she was already dead, but there was still an ounce of life left inside of her. If she gave into her desire, if she took the Percocet, that would truly be the end.

"This is interesting." Paul crossed his arms. "I've listened to you beg and plead and squeal like a stuck pig, and this is the line you're drawing? No Percocet?"

Lydia tried to summon the euphoria the pills would bring. She'd read somewhere that if you thought about a food long enough, you wouldn't want it anymore. You would trick yourself into thinking you'd already eaten it. This had never worked with cupcakes or

hamburgers or French fries or—*Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.*

"I could force the pills down your throat, but what would be the fun in that?" He stretched her legs wider apart with his knees. "I could put them somewhere else. Somewhere you could more easily absorb them into your system." He took a deep breath and sighed it out. "What would that be like, I wonder? Would it be worth fucking you if I could use my cock to shove all of these pills up your fat ass?"

Lydia's mind started to go blank. This was how it happened. Paul would push her and she would get too scared or too broken and she would just shut down.

His hand went to her thigh. His fingers drilled toward the bone. "Don't you want the pain to go away?"

Lydia was too exhausted to cry out. She wanted him to get it over with—the punch, the jab, the slap, the electric cattle prod, the branding iron, the machete. She had seen what the masked man had done with the tools of his trade. She had seen what Paul's father had done to Julia. She had experienced firsthand the type of torture Paul was capable of and she was certain that his role in the movies had been far from passive.

He was enjoying this. No matter what derogatory things he'd said, Paul was aroused by Lydia's pain. She could feel the hard shaft of his prick when he leaned in close to gorge himself on her terror.

Lydia just prayed that she would be dead by the time he finally got around to raping her. "New strategy." Paul snatched the pill bottle off his leg. He placed it on the rolling table where he was keeping his tools. "I think you're going to like this."

Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner. He stood in front of the metal shelves beside the computer. Her anxiety ramped back up, not because he was going to do something terrible and new but because he was going to mess up the order of the items on the shelves.

Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner. They had to stay that way—in that exact order. No one could touch them.

Paul dragged over a step stool.

Lydia nearly cried with relief. They were safe. He was reaching up to the top shelf, past the equipment, past the floppy discs. He pulled down a stack of notebooks. He showed them to Lydia. Her relief dissipated.

Her father's notebooks.

Paul said, "Your parents are quite the prolific letter--writers." He sat down across from Lydia again. The notebooks were in his lap. A stack of letters she hadn't noticed before were on top. He held up an envelope for Lydia to see.

Helen's handwriting—precise and neat and so sorrowfully familiar.

"Poor, lonely Lydia. Your mother wrote you tons of letters over the years. Did you know that?" He shook his head. "Of course you didn't know that. I told Helen I tried to get them to you, but you were homeless and living on the streets or you were in rehab but you checked yourself out before I could get to you." He tossed the letters on the floor. "I actually felt bad every time Helen asked me if I'd heard back from you, because of course I had to tell her that you were still a fat, worthless junkie sucking cock for Oxy."

His words had the opposite effect. Helen had written to her. There were dozens of letters in the pile. Her mother still cared. She hadn't given up.

"Helen would've been a good grandmother to Dee."

Dee. Lydia couldn't even summon her face. She had lost all images of her daughter the second time Paul had electrocuted her with the cattle prod.

"I wonder if she'll check out when Dee goes missing the same way she did after Julia was gone." He looked up. "You wouldn't remember this, but Claire was all alone after Julia."

Lydia remembered it. She had been there.

"Every night, poor little Claire was all by herself in that big house on Boulevard listening to your worthless--piece--of--shit mother cry herself to sleep. No one cared if Claire cried herself to sleep, did they? You were too busy stuffing every hole in your body. That's why she fell so hard for me, Liddie. Claire fell for me because none of you were there to keep her from falling."

Apple Macintosh, dot--matrix printer, five--inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.

"These." Paul held up one of her father's notebooks. "Your dad didn't care about Claire either. All of his letters were to Julia. Claire read most of them, at least the ones he wrote before she went to college. Think about how that made her feel. Her mother was a borderline alcoholic who couldn't get out of bed. Her father spent hours writing to his dead daughter when his living daughter was standing right in front of him."

Lydia shook her head. It hadn't been like that—at least not entirely. Helen had eventually pulled herself out of her depression. Sam had tried so hard with Claire. He had taken her shopping and to see movies and to visit museums.

"No wonder she didn't want to go see him after he had the stroke." Paul thumbed through the pages. "I made her go. I told her that she would regret it if she didn't. And she listened to me, because she always listens to me. But the funny thing is, I really liked your dad. He reminded me of my own father."

Lydia felt her jaw ratchet down so she wouldn't scream at him.

"You never know with parents, do you? They can be selfish bastards. For instance, I thought Dad and I were close, but he took Julia without me." Paul looked up from the notebooks. He obviously liked what he saw in Lydia's surprised expression. "I gotta say, I was upset about that. I got home from spring break and there your big sister was in the barn. He hadn't left much of her for me to enjoy."

Lydia closed her eyes. *Apple Macintosh*. What came next? She couldn't look at the shelves. She had to think of it on her own. *Apple Macintosh*.

He said, "Sam was smart. I mean, a lot smarter than any of us gave him credit for. He would've never found Julia's body, I'm the only person left alive who knows where she is, but your father was on to me. He knew about my dad. He knew that I was somehow involved. Did you know that?"

Lydia had become anesthetized to surprises.

"Sam asked me over to his apartment. He thought he was going to trick me, but I did some reconnaissance before we were supposed to meet." He held up her father's notebooks like a trophy. "My advice: If you're trying to trick somebody, don't leave your playbook lying around."

Lydia gripped the arms of the chair. "Shut the fuck up."

Paul smiled. "There's my little fighter."

"What did you do to my father?"

"I think you know what I did." Paul shuffled through the stack of notebooks. He checked the front pages. He was looking for something. "I arrived at his apartment at the requested

hour. I poured us some drinks so we could talk like men. Your father liked doing that, didn't he? Making sure we knew who the men were and who were the boys."

Lydia could hear her father's voice in his words.

"Sam drank his vodka. He called himself a social drinker, but we know he drank himself to sleep at night, don't we? Just like Helen did while poor Claire was sitting alone in her room wondering why no one in her family noticed that she was still alive."

Lydia swallowed. She tasted the sour burn of his piss.

"I guess the vodka masked the sleeping pills I ground up in his drink."

Lydia wanted to close her eyes. She wanted to block him out. But she couldn't.

"I watched his head dip." Paul imitated her father falling into a stupor. "I tied him up with some sheets that I brought with me. They were torn into long strips. His hands were so limp when I tied him up that I was worried he'd died before the fun could start."

Lydia felt every sense lock on to him.

Paul leaned back in the chair with his legs spread wide. Lydia forced herself not to look down because she knew exactly what he wanted her to see. "If you use strips of bedsheets to tie somebody up, then the marks don't show when the coroner gets them. If you're careful, I mean, because of course you have to fold the sheets properly, which I did because I had time with your father. I want you to hear that, Liddie: I had lots and lots of time with your father."

Lydia's mind had gone haywire. It was too much. She couldn't take in what he was saying.

"When Sam woke up, we watched the tape together. You know the tape I'm talking about? The tape with Julia?" Paul rubbed the sides of his face. His beard was growing in. "I wanted us to watch all of the tapes together, but I was worried the neighbors would hear his screams." Paul added, "Not that Sam didn't scream a lot at night anyway, but still."

Lydia listened to the steady in and out of her own breathing. She rearranged his words in her head until they fell into digestible sentences. Paul had drugged her father. He had made her father watch his oldest daughter being brutally murdered.

"At the end, I debated whether or not to tell Sam where Dad and I had dumped Julia's body. What's the harm, right? We both knew he was going to die." Paul shrugged. "Maybe I should've told him. It's one of those questions you still ask yourself years later. I mean, Sam was so tortured, right? All he wanted to know was where she was, and I knew, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell him."

Lydia knew that she should rage against him. She should try to kill him. But she couldn't move. Her lungs were wet with urine. Her stomach was filled. Her body was seized by pain. There were welts on her arms where he'd electrocuted her. The cut on her forehead had been opened. Her split lip had been torn in two. Her ribs were so bruised that she felt like the bones had turned into knives.

He said, "I used Nembutal. You know what that is, right? They use it to put animals out of their misery. And he *was* miserable, especially after he watched the tape." Paul had found the notebook he was looking for. "Here you go." He held up the page so Lydia could see. The bottom half was torn away. "Look familiar?"

Her father's suicide note had been written on a torn-off sheet of notebook paper. Lydia could still see his shaky words in her head:

To all of my beautiful girls—I love you with every piece of my heart. Daddy

Paul said, "I think I chose a good line. Don't you?" He put the notebook back in his lap. "I chose it for Claire, really, because I thought that the line was particularly true about her. All his beautiful girls. You were never really beautiful, Lydia. And Julia—I told you I still visit her sometimes. She's no longer beautiful. It's been sad watching her decay over the years. The last time I checked in on her, she was just rotten bones with long strands of dirty blonde hair and those stupid bracelets she used to wear on her wrist. You remember those?"

Bangles. Julia had worn bangles on her left wrist and a big, black bow in her hair and she'd stolen Lydia's saddle oxfords to complete the outfit because she'd said they looked better on her anyway.

Suddenly, Lydia had too much saliva in her mouth. She tried to swallow. Her throat spasmed. She coughed.

"Don't you want to know where Julia is?" Paul asked. "It's really the one thing that broke you all apart. Not her disappearance, not her probable death, but the never knowing. Where is Julia? Where is my sister? Where is my daughter? The not-knowing completely destroyed every single one of you. Even Grandma Ginny, though the old bitch likes to act like the past is past."

Lydia felt herself start to slip back into that in-between space. There was no use listening to him anymore. She already knew everything she needed to know. Dee and Rick loved her. Helen had not given up. Lydia had forgiven Claire. Two days ago, she would've panicked if someone had told her that she had a finite amount of time to settle all of her affairs, but when she got down to it, her family was really the only thing that mattered.

"I visit Julia sometimes." Paul was studying her face to gauge his words. "If you had a dying wish, wouldn't it be to know where Julia is?"

Apple Macintosh, dot-matrix printer, five-inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.

"I'm going to read you some selections from your father's journals, and then I'm going to waterboard you again in . . ." He looked at his watch. "Twenty-two minutes. All right?"

Apple Macintosh, dot-matrix printer, five-inch floppy discs, duping machine, disc burner.

Paul rested the notebook in his lap on top of the others. He started reading aloud, "I remember the first time your mother and I walked you through the snow. We wrapped you up like a precious gift. The scarf was wound so many times around your head that all we could see was your little pink nose."

His voice. Paul had known her father. He had spent hours with him—even up to his last hours—and he knew how to read Sam's words with the same soft cadence that her father had always used.

"We were taking you to see your Grandma Ginny. Your mother, of course, was not pleased with this particular errand."

"Yes," Lydia said.

Paul looked up from the page. "Yes what?"

"Give me the Percocet."

"Sure." Paul dropped the notebooks on the floor. He unscrewed the top from the spray bottle. "But first you have to earn it."

ANALYZING THE SCENE

A STORY EVENT is an active change of life value for one or more characters as a result of conflict (one character's desires clash with another's).

A WORKING SCENE contains at least one Story Event.

To determine a Scene's Story Event, answer these four questions.

What are the characters literally doing?

Paul is torturing Lydia. Lydia is trying to distract herself from the torture by reciting the inventory of items on the shelf.

What is the essential action of what the characters are doing in the scene?

Paul wants to find something that breaks Lydia, that is Lydia's fate worse than death. Lydia realizes she is not done fighting yet, since she won't initially take the Percocet, and tries to hold on to her last bit of humanity.

What life value has changed for one or more of the characters in the scene?

Paul's life value has changed from unsatisfied to satisfied.

Lydia's life value has changed from acceptance of death to acceptance of a fate worse than death.

Which life value should I highlight on my Story Grid Spreadsheet?

Lydia's life value, since it best tracks the value of the thriller genre.

HOW THE SCENE ABIDES THE FIVE COMMANDMENTS OF STORYTELLING

Inciting Incident: Paul asks Lydia if she wants some Percocet.

Progressive Complication Turning Point: Paul reads Lydia's father's journal in his voice.

Crisis: Will Lydia take the Percocet and relieve herself from the emotional, in addition to the physical, torture Paul imposes on her, which will require her to give up the last vestige of hope she has, knowing she'd never take the drugs if she thought she'd get out of the situation alive, or will she suffer knowing that she won't get out of the situation alive anyway, but will retain her nearly 18 year battle to stay sober?

Climax: Lydia asks Paul for the Percocet.

Resolution: Paul agrees to give her the Percocet, but only after another round of water boarding.