

New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Good Daughter*

KARIN SLAUGHTER

WITNESS
IMPULSE



LAST BREATH

"I'd follow her anywhere."

—Gillian Flynn

Last Breath

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Chapter One

“Come on now, Miss Charlie.” Dexter Black’s voice was scratchy over the jailhouse payphone. He was fifteen years her senior, but the “miss” was meant to convey respect for their respective positions. “I told you I’m’a take care of your bill soon as you get me outta this mess.”

Charlie Quinn rolled her eyes up so far in her head that she felt dizzy. She was standing outside a packed room of Girl Scouts at the YWCA. She should not have taken the call, but there were few worse things than being surrounded by a gaggle of teenage girls. “Dexter, you said the exact same thing the last time I got you out of trouble, and the minute you walked out of rehab, you spent all of your money on lottery tickets.”

“I could’a won, and then I would’a paid you out half. Not just what I owe you, Miss Charlie. Half.”

“That’s very generous, but half of nothing is nothing.” She waited for him to come up with another excuse, but all she heard was the distinct murmur of the North Georgia Men’s Detention Center. Bars being rattled. Expletives being shouted. Grown men crying. Guards telling them all to shut the hell up.

She said, “I’m not wasting my anytime cell-phone minutes on your silence.”

“I got something,” Dexter said. “Something gonna get me paid.”

“I hope it’s not anything you wouldn’t want the police to find out about on a recorded phone conversation from jail.” Charlie wiped sweat from her forehead. The hallway was like an oven. “Dexter, you owe me almost two thousand dollars. I can’t be your lawyer for free. I’ve got a mortgage and

school loans and I'd like to be able to eat at a nice restaurant occasionally without worrying my credit card will be declined."

"Miss Charlie," Dexter repeated. "I see what you were doing there, reminding me about the phone being recorded, but what I'm saying is that I got something might be worth some money to the police."

"You should get a good lawyer to represent you in the negotiations, because it's not going to be me."

"Wait, wait, don't hang up," Dexter pleaded. "I'm just remembering what you told me all them years ago when we first started. You remember that?"

Charlie's eye roll was not as pronounced this time. Dexter had been her first client when she'd set up shop straight out of law school.

He said, "You told me that you passed up them big jobs in the city 'cause you wanted to help people." He paused for effect. "Don't you still wanna help people, Miss Charlie?"

She mumbled a few curses that the phone monitors at the jail would appreciate. "Carter Grail," she said, offering him the name of another lawyer.

"That old drunk?" Dexter sounded picky for a man wearing an orange prison jumpsuit. "Miss Charlie, please can you—"

"Don't sign anything that you don't understand." Charlie flipped her phone closed and dropped it into her purse. A group of women in bike shorts walked past. The YWCA mid-morning crowd consisted of retirees and young mothers. She could hear a distant *thump-thump-thump* of heavy bass from an exercise class. The air smelled of chlorine from the indoor pool. *Thunks* from the tennis courts penetrated the double-paned windows.

Charlie leaned back against the wall. She replayed Dexter's call in her head. He was in jail again. For meth again. He was probably thinking he could snitch on a fellow meth head, or a dealer, and make the charges go away. If he didn't have a lawyer looking over the deal from the district attorney's office, he would be better off holding his nuts and buying more lottery tickets.

She felt bad about his situation, but not as bad as she felt about the prospect of being late on her car payment.

The door to the rec room opened. Belinda Foster looked panicked. She was twenty-eight, the same age as Charlie, but with a toddler at home, a baby on the way and a husband she talked about as if he was another

burdensome child. Taking over Girl Scout career day had not been Belinda's stupidest mistake this summer, but it was in the top three.

"Charlie!" Belinda tugged at the trefoil scarf around her neck. "If you don't get back in here, I'm gonna throw myself off the roof."

"You'd only break your neck."

Belinda pulled open the door and waited.

Charlie nudged around her friend's very pregnant belly. Nothing had changed in the rec room since her ringing cell phone had given her respite from the crowd. All of the oxygen was being sucked up by twenty fresh-faced, giggling Girl Scouts ranging from the ages of fifteen to eighteen. Charlie tried not to shudder at the sight of them. She had a tiny smidge over a decade on most of the girls, but there was something familiar about each and every one of them.

The math nerds. The future English majors. The cheerleaders. The Plastics. The goths. The dorks. The freaks. The geeks. They all flashed the same smiles at each other, the kind that edged up at the corners of their mouths because, at any time, one of them could pull a proverbial knife: a haircut might look stupid, the wrong color nail polish could be on fingernails, the wrong shoes, the wrong tights, the wrong word and suddenly you were on the outside looking in.

Charlie could still recall what it felt like to be stuck in the purgatory of the outside. There was nothing more torturous, more lonely, than being iced out by a gaggle of teenage girls.

"Cake?" Belinda offered her a paper-thin slice of sheet cake.

"Hm," was all Charlie could say. Her stomach felt queasy. She couldn't stop her gaze from traveling around the sparsely furnished rec room. The girls were all young, thin and beautiful in a way that Charlie did not appreciate when she was among them. Short miniskirts. Tight T-shirts and blouses opened one button too many. They seemed so frighteningly confident. They flicked back their long, fake blonde hair as they laughed. They narrowed expertly made-up eyes as they listened to stories. Sashes were askew. Vests were unbuttoned. Some of these girls were in serious violation of the Girl Scout dress code.

Charlie said, "I can't remember what we talked about when we were that age."

"That the Culpepper girls were a bunch of bitches."

Charlie winced at the name of her torturers. She took the plate from Belinda, but only to keep her hands occupied. “Why aren’t any of them asking me questions?”

“We never asked questions,” Belinda said, and Charlie felt instant regret that she had spurned all the career women who had spoken at her Girl Scout meetings. The speakers had all seemed so old. Charlie was not old. She still had her badge-filled sash in a closet somewhere at home. She was a kick-ass lawyer. She was married to an adorable guy. She was in the best shape of her life. These girls should think she was awesome. They should be inundating her with questions about how she got to be so cool instead of snickering in their little cliques, likely discussing how much pig’s blood to put in a bucket over Charlie’s head.

“I can’t believe their make-up,” Belinda said. “My mother almost scrubbed the eyes off my face when I tried to sneak out with mascara on.”

Charlie’s mother had been killed when she was thirteen, but she could recall many a lecture from Lenore, her father’s secretary, about the dangerous message sent by too-tight Jordache jeans.

Not that Lenore had been able to stop her.

Belinda said, “I’m not going to raise Layla like that.” She meant her three-year-old daughter, who had somehow turned out to be a thoughtful, angelic child despite her mother’s lifelong love of beer pong, tequila shooters, and unemployed guys who rode motorcycles. “These girls, they’re sweet, but they have no sense of shame. They think everything they do is okay. And don’t even get me started on the sex. The things they say in meetings.” She snorted, leaving out the best part. “We were never like that.”

Charlie had seen quite the opposite, especially when a Harley was involved. “I guess the point of feminism is that they have choices, not that they do exactly what we think they should do.”

“Well, maybe, but we’re still right and they’re still wrong.”

“Now you sound like a mother.” Charlie used her fork to cut off a section of chocolate frosting from the cake. It landed like paste on her tongue. She handed the plate back to Belinda. “I was terrified of disappointing my mom.”

Belinda finished the cake. “I was terrified of your mom, period.”

Charlie smiled, then she put her hand to her stomach as the frosting roiled around like driftwood in a tsunami.

“You okay?” Belinda asked.

Charlie held up her hand. The sickness came over her so suddenly that she couldn't even ask where the bathroom was.

Belinda knew the look. "It's down the hall on the—"

Charlie bolted out of the room. She kept her hand tight to her mouth as she tried doors. A closet. Another closet.

A fresh-faced Girl Scout was coming out of the last door she tried.

"Oh," the teenager said, flinging up her hands, backing away.

Charlie ran into the closest stall and sloughed the contents of her stomach into the toilet. The force was so much that tears squeezed out of her eyes. She gripped the side of the bowl with both hands. She made grunting noises that she would be ashamed for any human being to hear.

But someone did hear.

"Ma'am?" the teenager asked, which somehow made everything worse, because Charlie was not old enough to be called ma'am. "Ma'am, are you okay?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, thank you. You can go away." Charlie bit her lip so that she wouldn't curse the helpful little creature like a dog. She searched for her purse. It was outside the stall. Her wallet had fallen out, her keys, a pack of gum, loose change. The strap dragged across the greasy-looking tile floor like a tail. She started to reach out for it, but gave up when her stomach clenched. All she could do was sit on the filthy bathroom floor, gather her hair up off her neck, and pray that her troubles would be confined to one end of her body.

"Ma'am?" the girl repeated.

Charlie desperately wanted to tell her to get the hell out, but couldn't risk opening her mouth. She waited, eyes closed, listening to the silence, begging her ears to pick out the sound of the door closing as the girl left.

Instead, the faucet was turned on. Water ran into the sink. Paper towels were pulled from the dispenser.

Charlie opened her eyes. She flushed the toilet. Why on earth was she so ill?

It couldn't be the cake. Charlie was lactose intolerant, but Belinda would never make anything from scratch. Canned frosting was 99 percent chemicals, usually not enough to send her over the edge. Was it the happy chicken from General Ho's she'd had for supper last night? The egg roll

she'd sneaked out of the fridge before going to bed? The luncheon meat she'd scarfed down before her morning run? The breakfast burrito fiesta she'd gotten at Taco Bell on the way to the Y?

Jesus, she ate like a sixteen-year-old boy.

The faucet turned off.

Charlie should have at least opened the stall door, but a quick survey of the damage changed her mind. Her navy skirt was hiked up. Pantyhose ripped. There were splatters on her white silk blouse that would likely never come out. Worst of all, she had scuffed the toe of her new shoe, a navy high-heel Lenore had helped her pick out for court.

"Ma'am?" the teen said. She was holding a wet paper towel under the stall door.

"Thank you," Charlie managed. She pressed the cool towel to the back of her neck and closed her eyes again. Was this a stomach bug?

"Ma'am, I can get you something to drink," the girl offered.

Charlie almost threw up again at the thought of Belinda's cough-mediciney punch. If the girl was not going to leave, she might as well be put to use. "There's some change in my wallet. Do you mind getting a ginger ale from the machine?"

The girl knelt down on the floor. Charlie saw the familiar khaki-colored sash with badges sewn all over it. Customer Loyalty. Business Planning. Marketing. Financial Literacy. Top Seller. Apparently, she knew how to move some cookies.

Charlie said, "The bills are in the side."

The girl opened her wallet. Charlie's driver's license was in the clear plastic part. "I thought your last name was Quinn?"

"It is. At work. That's my married name."

"How long have you been married?"

"Four and a half years."

"My gran says it takes five years before you hate them."

Charlie could not imagine ever hating her husband. She also couldn't imagine keeping up her end of this under-stall conversation. The urge to puke again was tickling at the back of her throat.

"Your dad is Rusty Quinn," the girl said, which meant that she has been in town for more than ten minutes. Charlie's father had a reputation in Pikeville because of the clients he defended—convenience store robbers, drug dealers, murderers and assorted felons. How people in town viewed