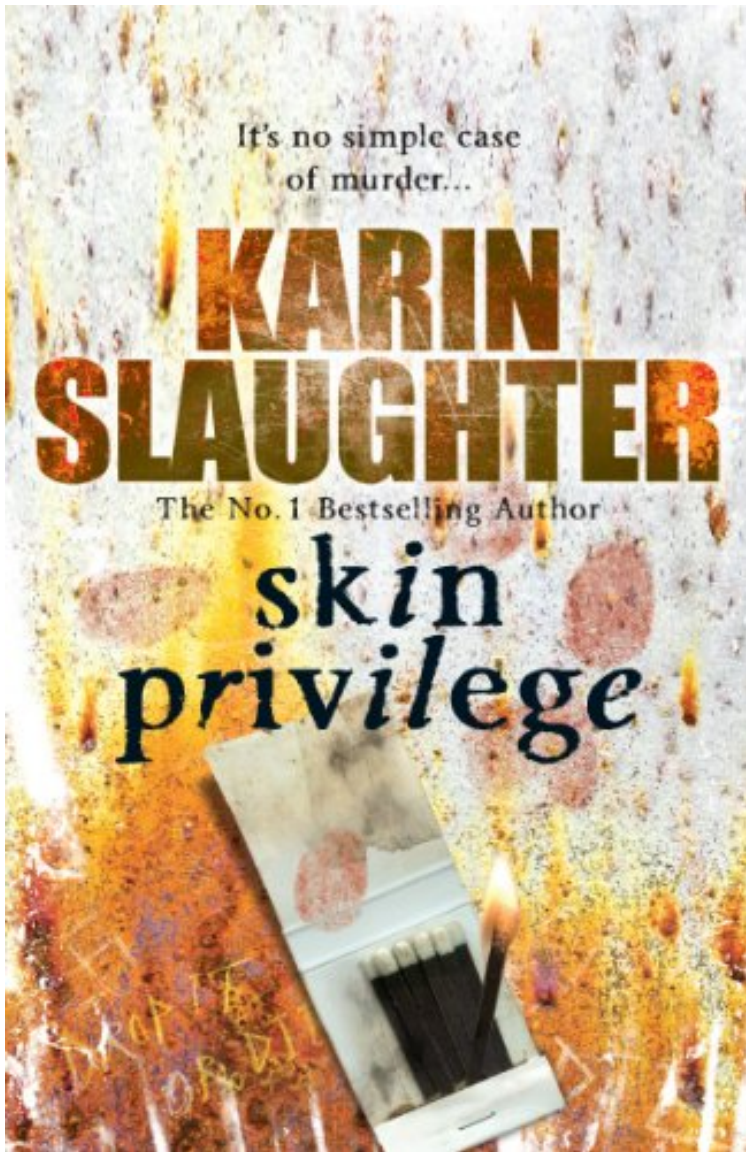


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## Skin Privilege: (Grant County series 6)



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**Description :** Description du produitFrom the #1 bestseller

Prsentation de l'diteurThe sixth Grant County novel, from the No. 1 Bestseller.Lena Adams has spent her life struggling to forget her childhood in Reece, the small town which nearly destroyed her. She's made a new life for herself as a police detective in Heartsdale, a hundred miles away - but nothing could prepare her for the violence which explodes when she is forced to return. A vicious murder leaves a young woman incinerated beyond recognition. And Lena is the only suspect.When Heartsdale police chief Jeffrey Tolliver, Lena's boss, receives word that his detective has been arrested, he has no choice but to go to Lena's aid - taking with him his wife, medical examiner Sara Linton. But soon after their arrival, a second victim is found. The town closes ranks. And both Jeffrey and Sara find themselves entangled in a horrifying

underground world of bigotry and rage - a violent world which shocks even them. But can they discover the truth before the killer strikes again?

Chapter One

SARA LINTON LOOKED AT HER WATCH. The Seiko had been a gift from her grandmother on the day Sara graduated from high school. On Granny Em's own graduation day, she had been four months from marriage, a year and a half from bearing the first of her six children and thirty-eight years from losing her husband to cancer. Higher education was something Emma's father had seen as a waste of time and money, especially for a woman. Emma had not argued she was raised during a time when children did not think to disagree with their parents though she made sure that all four of her surviving children attended college. "Wear this and think of me," Granny Em had said that day on the school campus as she closed the watch's silver bracelet around Sara's wrist. "You're going to do everything you ever dreamed of, and I want you to know that I will always be right there beside you." As a student at Emory University, Sara had constantly looked at the watch, especially through advanced biochemistry, applied genetics, and human anatomy classes that seemed by law to be taught by the most boring, monosyllabic professors that could be found. In medical school, she had impatiently glanced at the watch on Saturday mornings as she stood outside the lab, waiting for the professor to come and unlock the door so she could finish her experiments. During her internship at Grady Hospital, she had stared blurry-eyed at its white face, trying to make out the hands, as she calculated how much longer she had left in thirty-six-hour shifts. At the Heartdale Children's Clinic, she had closely followed the second hand as she pressed her fingers to a child's thin wrist, counting the beats of his heart as they ticked beneath his skin, seeking to discern if an "achy all-over" was a serious ailment or if it just meant the kid did not want to go to school that day. For almost twenty years, Sara had worn the watch. The crystal had been replaced twice, the battery numerous times, and the bracelet once because Sara could not stomach the thought of cleaning out the dried blood of a woman who had died in her arms. Even at Granny Em's funeral, Sara had found herself touching the smooth bezel around the face, tears streaming down her own face at the realization that she could never again see her grandmother's quick, open smile or the sparkle in her eyes as she learned of her oldest granddaughter's latest accomplishment. Now, looking at the watch, for the first time in her life Sara was glad her grandmother was not there with her, could not read the anger in Sara's eyes, know the humiliation that burned in her chest like an uncontrollable fire as she sat in a conference room being deposed in a malpractice suit filed by the parents of a dead patient. Everything Sara had ever worked for, every step she had taken that her grandmother could not, every accomplishment, every degree, was being rendered meaningless by a woman who was all but calling Sara a baby killer. The lawyer leaned over the table, eyebrow raised, lip curled, as Sara glanced at the watch. "Dr. Linton, do you have a more pressing appointment?" "No." Sara tried to keep her voice calm, to quell the fury that the lawyer had obviously been stoking for the last four hours. Sara knew that she was being manipulated, knew that the woman was trying to bait her, to get Sara to say something horrible that would forever be recorded by the little man leaning over the transcript machine in the corner. Knowing this did not stop Sara from reacting. As a matter of fact, the knowledge made her even angrier. "I've been calling you Dr. Linton all this time." The lawyer glanced down at an open folder in front of her. "Is it Tolliver? I see that you remarried your ex-husband, Jeffrey Tolliver, six months ago." "Linton is fine." Under the table, Sara was shaking her foot so hard that her shoe was about to fall off. She crossed her arms over her chest. There was a sharp pain in her jaw from clenching her teeth. She shouldn't be here. She should be at home right now, reading a book or talking on the phone to her sister. She should be going over patient files or sorting through old medical journals she never seemed to have time to catch up on. She should be trusted. "So," the lawyer continued. The woman had given her name at the start of the deposition, but Sara couldn't remember it. All she had been able to concentrate on at the time was the look on Beckey Powell's face. Jimmy's mother. The woman whose hand Sara had held so many times, the friend she had comforted, the person with whom she had spent countless hours on the phone, trying to put into simple English the medical jargon the oncologists in Atlanta were feeding the mother to explain why her twelve-year-old son was going to die. From the moment they'd entered the room, Beckey had glared at Sara as if she were a murderer. The boy's father, a man Sara had gone to school with, had not even been able to look her in the eye. "Dr. Tolliver?" the lawyer pressed. "Linton," Sara corrected, and the woman smiled, just as she did every time she scored a point against Sara. This happened so often that Sara was tempted to ask the lawyer if she suffered from some unusually petty form of Tourette's. "On the morning of the seventeenth this was the day after Easter you got lab results from the cell blast you'd ordered performed on James Powell. Is that correct?" James. She made him sound so adult. To Sara, he would always be the six-year-old she had met all those years ago, the little boy who liked playing with his plastic dinosaurs and

eating the occasional crayon. He'd been so proud when he told her that he was called Jimmy, just like his dad."Dr. Tolliver?" Buddy Conford, one of Sara's lawyers, finally spoke up. "Let's cut the crap, honey." "Honey?" the lawyer echoed. She had one of those husky, low voices most men found irresistible. Sara could tell Buddy fell into this category, just as she could tell that the fact the man found his opponent desirable heightened his sense of competitiveness. Buddy smiled, his own point made. "You know her name." "Please instruct your client to answer the question, Mr. Conford." "Yes," Sara said, before they could exchange any more barbs. She had found that lawyers could be quite verbose at three-hundred-fifty dollars an hour. They would parse the meaning of the word "parse" if the clock was ticking. And Sara had two lawyers: Melinda Stiles was counsel for Global Medical Indemnity, an insurance company to whom Sara had paid almost three and a half million dollars over the course of her medical career. Buddy Conford was Sara's personal lawyer, whom she'd hired to protect her from the insurance company. The fine print in all of Global's malpractice policies stipulated limited liability on the part of the company when a patient's injury was a direct result of a doctor's willful negligence. Buddy was here to make sure that did not happen."Dr. Linton? The morning of the seventeenth?" "Yes," Sara answered. "According to my notes, that's when I got the lab results." Sharon, Sara remembered. The lawyer was Sharon Connor. Such an innocuous name for such a horrible person. "And what did the lab results reveal to you?" "That more than likely, Jimmy had acute myeloblastic leukemia." "And the prognosis?" "That's out of my realm. I'm not an oncologist." "No. You referred the Powells to an oncologist, a friend of yours from college, a Dr. William Harris in Atlanta?" "Yes." Poor Bill. He was named in the lawsuit, too, had been forced to hire his own attorney, was battling with his own insurance company. "But you are a doctor?" Sara took a deep breath. She had been instructed by Buddy to only answer questions, not pointed comments. God knew she was paying him enough for his advice. She might as well start taking it. "And surely as a doctor you know what acute myeloblastic leukemia is?" "It's a group of malignant disorders characterized by the replacement of normal bone marrow with abnormal cells." Connor smiled, rattling off, "And it begins as a single somatic hematopoietic progenitor that transforms to a cell incapable of normal differentiation?" "The cell loses apoptosis." Another smile, another point scored. "And this disease has a fifty percent survival rate." Sara held her tongue, waiting for the ax to fall. "And timing is critical for treatment, is that correct? In such a disease a disease that literally turns the body's cells against themselves, turns off apoptosis, according to you, which is the normal genetic process of cell death timing is critical." Forty-eight hours would not have saved the boy's life, but Sara was not going to utter those words, have them transcribed into a legal document and later thrown in her face with all the callousness Sharon Connor could muster. The lawyer shuffled through some papers as if she needed to find her notes. "And you attended Emory Medical School. As you so graciously corrected me earlier, you didn't just graduate in the top ten percent, you graduated sixth in your class." Buddy sounded bored with the woman's antics. "We've already established Dr. Linton's credentials." "I'm just trying to put it all together," the woman countered. She held up one of the pages, her eyes scanning the words. Finally, she put it down. "And, Dr. Linton, you got this information this lab result that was almost certainly a death sentence the morning of the seventeenth, and yet you chose not to share the information with the Powells until two days later. And that was because . . . ?" Sara had never heard so many sentences starting with the word "and." She imagined grammar wasn't high up on the curriculum at whatever school had churned out the vicious lawyer. Still, she answered, "They were at Disney World for Jimmy's birthday. I wanted them to enjoy their vacation, what I thought might be their last vacation as a family for some time. I made the decision to not tell them until they came back." "They came back the evening of the seventeenth, yet you did not tell them until the morning of the nineteenth, two days later." Sara opened her mouth to respond, but the woman talked over her. "And it didn't occur to you that they could return for immediate treatment and perhaps save their child's life?" It was clear she didn't expect an answer. "I would imagine that, given the choice, the Powells would rather have their son alive today instead of empty photographs of him standing around the Magic Kingdom." She slid the picture in question across the table. It glided neatly past Beckey and Jim Powell, past Sara's two lawyers, and stopped a few inches from where Sara was sitting. She shouldn't have looked, but she did. Young Jimmy stood leaning against his father, both of them wearing Mickey Mouse ears and holding sparklers as a parade of Snow White's dwarfs marched behind them. Even in the photo, you could tell the boy was sick. Dark circles rimmed his eyes and he was so thin that his frail little arm looked like a piece of string. They had come back from vacation a day early because Jimmy had wanted to be home. Sara did not know why the Powells had not called her at the clinic, brought in Jimmy that day so she could check on him. Maybe his parents had known even without the test, even without the final diagnosis, that their days

of having a normal, healthy child were over. Maybe they had just wanted to keep him to themselves one more day. He had been such a wonderful boykind, smart, cheerful everything a parent could hope for. And now he was gone. Sara felt tears well into her eyes, and bit her lip so hard that the tears fell from pain instead of grief. Buddy snatched away the picture, irritated. He slid it back to Sharon Connor. "You can practice your opening statement in front of your mirror at home, sweetheart." Connor's mouth twisted into a smirk as she took back the photograph. She was living proof that the theory that women were nurturing caretakers was utter bullshit. Sara half-expected to see rotting flesh between her teeth. The woman said, "Dr. Linton, on this particular date, the date you got James's lab results, did anything else happen that stood out for you?" A prickling went up Sara's spine, a spark of warning that she could not suppress. "Yes." "And could you tell us what that was?" "I found a woman who had been murdered in the bathroom of our local diner." "Raped and murdered. Is that correct?" "Yes." "That brings us to your part-time job as coroner for the county. I believe your husband then ex-husband, when this rape and murder occurred is chief of police for the county. Both of you work closely together when cases arise." Sara waited for more, but the woman had obviously just wanted to get that on the record. "Counselor?" Buddy asked. "One moment, please," the lawyer murmured, picking up a thick folder and leafing through the pages. Sara looked down at her hands to give herself something to do. Pisiform, triquetrum, hamate, capitate, trapezoid, trapezium, lunate, scaphoid . . . She listed all the bones in her hand, then started on the ligaments, trying to distract herself, willing herself not to walk into the trap the lawyer was so skillfully setting. While Sara was in her residency at Grady, headhunters had pursued her so relentlessly that she had stopped answering her phone. Partnerships. Six-figure salaries with year-end bonuses. Surgical privileges at any hospital she chose. Personal assistants, lab support, full secretarial staff, even her own parking space. They had offered her everything, and yet in the end, she had decided to return home to Grant, to practice medicine for considerably less money and even less respect, because she thought it was important for doctors to serve rural communities. Was part of it vanity, too? Sara had seen herself as a role model for the girls in town. Most of them had only ever seen a male doctor. The only women in authority were nurses, teachers, and mothers. Her first five years at the Heartsdale Children's Clinic, Sara had spent at least half of her time convincing young patients and frequently their mothers that she had, in fact, graduated medical school. No one believed a woman could be smart enough, good enough, to reach such a position. Even when Sara bought the clinic from her retiring partner, people had still been skeptical. It had taken years to carve herself a place of respect in the community. All for this. Sharon Connor finally looked up from her papers. She frowned. "Dr. Linton, you yourself were raped. Isn't that correct?" *Revue de presse* Praise for Karin Slaughter and *Beyond Reach* Will leave you breathless. USA Today Slaughter writes with a razor. The Plain Dealer Slaughter will have you on the edge of your seat. Seattle Post-Intelligencer Powerful and complex . . . Slaughter gradually unspools her fascinating story, all the way up to its shocking conclusion. Chicago Sun-Times From the Hardcover edition.