

**LISA
GARDNER**

**Catch
Me**

headline

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My name is Charlene Rosalind Carter Grant.

I live in Boston, work in Boston, and in four days, will probably die here.

I'm twenty-eight years old.

And I don't feel like dying just yet.

It started two years ago, with the murder of my best friend, Randi Menke, in Providence. She was strangled in her living room. No sign of a struggle, no sign of forced entry. For a while the Rhode Island cops thought maybe her ex had done it. I guess there'd been a history of domestic assaults. Nothing she'd ever told me, or our other best friend, Jackie, about. Jackie and I tried to console ourselves with that, as we wept together at Randi's funeral. We hadn't known. We just hadn't known or of course we would've done . . . something. Anything.

That's what we told ourselves.

Fast forward one year. January 21. The anniversary. I'm at home with Aunt Nancy in the mountains of northern New Hampshire, Jackie's returned to her corporate life as a VP for Coca-Cola in Atlanta. Jackie doesn't want to mark the occasion of Randi's murder. Too morbid, she tells me. Later, in the summer, we'll get together and celebrate Randi's birthday. Maybe we'll hike to the top of Mount Washington, bring a bottle of single malt. We'll have a good drink, have a good cry, then sleep it off at the Lake of the Clouds AMC hut.

I still call Jackie on the twenty-first. Can't help myself. Except she doesn't answer. Not her landline, not her work line, not her mobile. Nothing.

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In the morning, when she doesn't show up for work, the police finally give in to my pleas and drive by her house.

No sign of a struggle, I will read later in the police report. No sign of forced entry. Just a lone female, strangled to death in the middle of her home on January 21.

Two best friends, murdered, exactly one year and roughly one thousand miles apart.

The locals investigated. Even the FBI gave it a whirl. They couldn't find anything definitive to link the two homicides, mostly because they couldn't find anything that was definitive.

Bad luck, one of the guys actually told me. Sheer bad luck.

Today is January 17 of the third year.

How much bad luck do you think I'm going to have on the twenty-first? And if you were me, what would you do?

I met Randi and Jackie when I was eight years old. After that final incident with my mother, I was sent to live with my Aunt Nancy in the wilds of New Hampshire. She came to fetch me from a hospital in upstate New York, two relatives, two strangers, meeting for the first time. Aunt Nancy took one look at me and started to cry.

'I didn't know,' she told me that first day. 'Trust me, child, I didn't know or I would've taken you years ago.'

I didn't cry. Saw no purpose for the tears and didn't know if I believed her anyway. If I was supposed to live with this woman, then I'd live with this woman. Not like I had anyplace else to go.

Aunt Nancy ran a B&B in a quaint resort town in the Mount Washington Valley, where rich Bostonians and privileged New Yorkers came to ski during the winter, hike in the summer, and 'leafpeep' in the fall. She had one part-time helper, but mostly my aunt relied on herself to greet guests, clean rooms, set up tea, cook breakfast, provide directions, and all the other million little odd jobs that go into the hospitality trade. When I came along, I took over dusting and vacuuming. I could spend hours cleaning. I loved the scent of Pine-Sol. I loved the feel of freshly polished wood. I loved the way I scrubbed the floor again and again, and each time, it looked pretty and fresh and new.

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Cleaning meant controlling. Cleaning kept the shadows at bay.

First day of school, Aunt Nancy personally walked me down the street. I wore stiff new clothes, including black patent Mary Janes I polished obsessively for the next six months. I felt conspicuous. Too new. Too fresh out of the box.

I still wasn't used to all the noise and clamor that came with 'village' life. Neighbors, everywhere I looked. People who made eye contact and smiled.

'Your tea set is tarnished,' I informed my aunt, one block from my first ever school. 'I'll go home and polish it for you.'

'You're a funny child, Charlene.'

I stopped walking, my hand rubbing my side and the scar that still itched sometimes. I had more scars, spiderweb fine, on the back of my left hand, let alone the ugly surgical mark on my right elbow, burn marks on my right thigh. I was pretty sure other kids didn't have such blemishes on their bodies. I was pretty sure other children's mothers didn't 'love' them as much as mine had sworn she loved me. 'I don't want to go.'

My aunt stopped walking. 'Charlie, it is time to go to school. Now, I want you to march through those front doors. I want you to hold your head high. And I want you to know, you are the bravest, toughest little girl I know, and none of those kids have anything on you. Do you hear me? None of those kids have anything on you.'

So I did what my aunt said. I walked through those doors. I kept my head high. I slid into a desk at the back of a room. Where the little girl on my left turned and said, 'Hi, I'm Jackie.' And the little girl on my right turned and said, 'I'm Randi.'

And just like that, we were friends.

But I never told them everything.

You know what I mean, don't you?

How sometimes, even with best friends, even with the sisters of your heart who laugh with you and cry with you and know every single minuscule detail of your first crush and final heartbreak, you still can't tell them *everything*.

Even best friends have secrets.

Take it from me, the last one standing, who's spent the past two years learning most of our secrets the hard way.

We grew up in the last days of real childhood. Spending our summers running wild in the woods, where we built tree forts out of downed limbs and had tea parties featuring acorn soup and pinecone parfaits. We raced leaf boats down eddying streams. We discovered secret swimming holes. We wired soup cans with twine in lieu of cell phones.

I'd help Aunt Nancy every morning and every evening during the summer. But afternoons were mine, and I spent every minute with my two best friends. Even back then, Jackie was the organizer. She'd have our afternoons all mapped out, probably would've developed a marketing plan and forecasted future opportunities for play if we'd let her. Randi was quieter. She had beautiful wheat blond hair she wore tucked behind her ears. She preferred playing house in the tree fort, where she always had the perfect finishing touch for her tree stump, maybe some creative combination of berries and leaves that made a random pile of decaying limbs feel just like home.

I recommended her skills to Aunt Nancy, and for much of our high school years Randi helped out in the B&B on the weekends, hanging holiday ornaments, preparing fresh centerpieces for the dining room, decorating the front parlor. Jackie would come along as well, hooking up Aunt Nancy's first computer and, when the time came, introducing my aunt to the Internet.

I didn't have Jackie's drive, or Randi's artistic skills. I thought of myself as the glue. Whatever they wanted to do, I did. Whatever hobby they had, I took up. I'd been raised at an early age to go along, so going along was what I did best.

But I meant it. I loved them. I'd grown up in the dark, then I'd come to the mountains of New Hampshire and found the light. Randi and Jackie laughed. They asked my opinions, they complimented my efforts, they smiled when I walked into a room.

I didn't care what we did. I just wanted to do it with them.

Of course, small town kids inevitably have big city dreams. Jackie started the countdown our junior year in high school. She was sick of nosy neighbors, community theater, and a post office that doubled as the biggest gossip center in town. She had her sights

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on Boston College, gonna hit the big city and live the glamorous life.

Randi, in her quiet way, upstaged Jackie. One snowy weekend in January, she met a Brown University med student on the ski slopes. We graduated high school in June, and she was married July 1, packing her childhood into four cardboard boxes and heading for Providence, content to spend the rest of her life as a doctor's wife.

Jackie got her scholarship. She was gone by September, and for the first time in ten years I didn't know what to do with myself. I stripped, sanded, and refinished Aunt Nancy's hardwood floors. Steam cleaned all the drapes. Shampooed all the furniture. Started organizing the bookshelves.

End of September, Aunt Nancy took me by the hand.

'Go,' she said, firmly, gently. 'Spread your wings, and then, when you're ready, come home to me.'

I ended up in Arvada, Colorado. Followed some guy I never should've followed. Did some things it's best that Aunt Nancy never knows about. I learned the hard way, you can't always just go along. Sooner or later, you have to find yourself, even without your beloved aunt and two best friends to help show the way.

After the breakup, determined not to slink home with my tail between my legs, I applied for a job as a 911 operator. Biggest attraction of the job: You didn't need a college degree, just a high-school diploma, fast typing fingers, and an innate ability to think on your feet. Given those were about the only skills I possessed, I decided to give it a whirl. For thirty thousand dollars a year, I worked long hours, surrendered any hope of having a personal life, and actually discovered a calling.

I worked at a command center with twenty-two phone lines, four radios, and nearly two hundred thousand calls a year. Requests for police, fire, emergency services, animal control – it all came to us. We transferred the calls for emergency services and fire to a second dispatch service, but animal control, police, the prank calls, the incoherent calls, the genuinely panicked and hysterical calls were all ours.

I once worked a shift where my fellow dispatch officer saved a woman's life by having her scream until the home invaders panicked

and ran away. Another shift, my colleague got a terribly injured teenage girl to describe the car that ran her down. The girl died before the police got there, but her statement was recorded on our call lines and became the evidence that put the drunk driver away. I cried with people. I screamed with people. Once, I sang lullabies to a five-year-old boy while his parents shattered glass and hurled insults just outside the closet door.

I don't know what happened to the boy. I think about him sometimes, though. More than I should.

Which is why after six years, I left Arvada and returned to the mountains. I guess I'd lost some weight. I guess I didn't look so good.

'Oh, Charlene Rosalind Carter Grant,' my Aunt Nancy said quietly when I got off the plane.

She took me in her arms. I stood in the middle of the airport and cried.

My aunt had been right: I'd needed to go away, and now it was good to be back. I embraced the mountains; I welcomed my community, where I was surrounded by neighbors and everyone looked you in the eye and smiled. Aunt Nancy had become my family, and this one town, had, finally, become my home.

I didn't plan on leaving again. But I guess someone else had other ideas.

Standing at Randi's funeral, I didn't feel any sense of danger. My childhood friend was dead, but the more Jackie and I learned about her rat bastard ex, the more we thought we knew the perpetrator. Just because the police couldn't charge him, didn't mean her abusive, alcoholic ex hadn't done the deed. Doctors are probably wise enough in the general workings of forensic science to cover their tracks. Plus, Randi was softhearted. We could see her letting her ex through the front door, despite her best judgment.

I spent some time with the Providence detectives, trying to advocate on my friend's behalf. Jackie sprung for a private consultant from Oregon, some retired FBI agent to analyze the scene. Neither one of us got anything to show for our efforts.

Then, one year later, Jackie . . . Who lived in downtown Atlanta, who was city-smart and corporate battle-hardened, and, in many

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ways, forewarned. Who would she have welcomed into her home that night? Who would she have stood quietly and allowed to strangle her in her own living room, without putting up a fight?

Certainly not Randi's ex-husband.

Meaning, maybe the abusive ex didn't do it. Meaning, maybe it was someone else.

Someone who knew Randi and knew Jackie. Someone they knew and trusted.

Someone who, by definition, would have to know me, too. Because there were no such things as Randi and Jackie. For ten years, in our town, it had always been Randi Jackie Charlie. Just like that. One name for one entity. The three amigos. All for one, one for all.

With two dead, did that mean there was now one left to go?

In contrast to Randi's memorial service, I stood dry-eyed next to Jackie's cherrywood coffin, searching the crowd in the tiny, tastefully decorated Victorian funeral parlor. I peered into the faces of my grieving neighbors, community members, friends.

I wondered if someone standing beside me right now was already counting down until the next January 21. Except why and how and who? So many questions. I figured I had 362 days left to find answers.

We concluded Jackie's service at 9 p.m. I was in my car by 9:15. Luggage in the trunk, the feel of Aunt Nancy's dry kiss fresh on my cheek.

I drove to Boston. Ditched the car, tossed my cell phone, and turned my back on Aunt Nancy, my community, the mountains, and the only shot I'd had at a real life. As the saying goes, hope for the best, but plan for the worst.

So that's what I'm doing. Hoping for the police to do their thing, and catch the bastard who murdered my best friends. But planning on January 21 rolling around, when sometime around 8 p.m., according to the police reports, someone may come looking for me. Because once there'd been Randi Jackie Charlie, then Jackie Charlie, then just Charlie. And soon maybe none of us at all.

I don't have friends anymore. I don't encourage acquaintances. I live in Cambridge, where I rent a single room from a retired widow who needs the income. I work a solo graveyard shift as a dispatch

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officer for a thirty-man PD outside of Boston. I work all night, sleep all morning.

I run ten miles four times a week. I attend firearms training courses. I box. I lift weights. I prepare, I plan, I strategize.

In four days, I believe someone's going to try to kill me.

But the son of a bitch has gotta catch me first.