

**LISA  
GARDNER**

**the Next  
Accident**

headline

Copyright © 2001 Lisa Baumgartner

The right of Lisa Gardner to be identified as the Author  
of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

First published in Great Britain in 2002 by Orion Publishing Group

This paperback edition first published in 2012 by  
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

Apart from any use permitted under UK copyright law, this publication  
may only be reproduced, stored, or transmitted, in any form, or by any  
means, with prior permission in writing of the publishers or, in the case  
of reprographic production, in accordance with the terms of licences  
issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any  
resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7553 9643 6

Typeset in Sabon by Avon DataSet Ltd,  
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and  
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.  
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to  
the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

An Hachette UK Company  
338 Euston Road  
London NW1 3BH

[www.headline.co.uk](http://www.headline.co.uk)  
[www.hachette.co.uk](http://www.hachette.co.uk)

# Prologue

*Virginia*

His mouth grazed the side of her neck. She liked the feel of his kiss, whisper-light, teasing. Her head fell back. She heard herself giggle. He drew her earlobe between his lips, and the giggle turned to a moan.

God, she loved it when he touched her.

His fingers lifted her heavy hair. They danced across the nape of her neck, then slid down her bare shoulders.

‘Beautiful, Mandy,’ he whispered. ‘Sexy, sexy, Mandy.’

She giggled again. She laughed, then she tasted salt on her lips and knew that she cried. He turned her belly-down on the bed. She didn’t protest.

His hands traced the line of her spine before settling in at her waist.

‘I like this curve right here,’ he murmured, dipping one finger into the concave curve at the small of her back. ‘Perfect for sipping champagne. Other men can have breasts and thighs. I just want this spot here. Can I have it, Mandy? Will you give that to me?’

Maybe she said yes. Maybe she just moaned. She didn’t know anymore. One bottle of champagne empty on the bed.

Another half gone. Her mouth tingled with the forbidden flavor, and she kept telling herself it would be okay. It was just champagne, and they were celebrating, weren't they? He had a new job, the BIG job, and oops, it was far away. But there would be weekend visits, maybe some letters, long-distance phone calls . . .

They were celebrating, they were mourning. It was a farewell fuck, and either way champagne sex shouldn't count with the nice folks at AA.

He tilted the open bottle of bubbly over her shoulders. Cool, sparkling fluid cascaded down her neck, pooling on the white satin sheet. She lapped it up helplessly.

'That's my girl,' he whispered. 'My sweet, sexy, girl . . . Open for me, baby. Let me in.'

Her legs parted. She arched her back, the whole of her focusing down, down, down, to the spot between her legs where the ache had built and now only he could ease the pain. Only he could save her.

*Fill me up. Make me whole.*

'Beautiful, Mandy. Sexy, sexy, Mandy.'

'Pl-pl-please . . .'

He pushed inside her. Her hips went back. Her spine seemed to melt and she gave herself over to him.

*Fill me up. Make me whole.*

Salt on her cheeks. Champagne on her tongue. Why couldn't she stop crying? She tilted her head down to the sheets and sipped champagne as the room spun sickeningly.

Suddenly the bed was gone. They were outside. In the driveway. Clothes on, cheeks dry. Champagne gone, but not the thirst. Six months she'd been dry. Now she craved another drink horribly. One bottle of champagne still

unopened. Maybe she could get him to give it to her for the drive home. One for the road.

*Don't go . . .*

'You okay, baby?'

'I'm okay,' she mumbled.

'Maybe you shouldn't be driving. Maybe you should stay the night . . .'

'I'm okay,' she murmured again. She couldn't stay, and they both knew it. Beautiful things came, beautiful things went. If she tried to hold on now, it would just make it worse.

He was hesitating, though. Looking at her with those deep, concerned eyes. They crinkled at the corners. She had loved that when she first met him. The way his eyes creased as if he was studying her intently, really, truly seeing her. Then he'd smiled a split second later, as if merely finding her had made him so very happy.

She'd never had a man smile at her like that before. As if she were someone special.

*Oh God, don't go . . .*

And then: *Third bottle of champagne. All full. One more for old times' sake. One more for the road.*

Her lover took her face between his hands. He stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. 'Mandy . . .' he whispered tenderly. 'The small of your back . . .'

She couldn't answer anymore. She was choking on her tears.

'Wait, baby,' he said suddenly. 'I have an idea.'

Driving. Thinking really hard because the narrow road curved like a snake and it was dark and it was so strange how early she could have a thought, and how late her body would be in responding. He sat beside her in the passenger's

seat. He wanted to make sure she got home safe; then he'd take a cab. *Maybe she should take a cab. Maybe she was in no shape to drive. As long as he was coming with her, why was she the one at the wheel?*

She couldn't hold on to that thought long enough to make it work.

'Slow down,' he cautioned. 'The road is tricky here.'

She nodded, frowning her brow and struggling to concentrate. *Wheel felt funny in her hand. Round. Huh.* Pressed on the brakes. Hit the gas instead. The SUV lurched forward.

'Sorry,' she muttered. World was beginning to spin again. She didn't feel well. Like she was going to throw up, or pass out. Maybe both. *If she could just close her eyes . . .*

Road moved on her again. Vehicle jerked.

Seat belt. Needed a seat belt. She groped for the strap, got the clasp. Pulled. Seat belt spun out toothlessly. *That's right. Broken. Must get that fixed. Someday. Today. May day. Stars spinning away, sky starting to lighten. Sun going to come up. Now she just needed a little girl singing, 'Tomorrow, tomorrow, there's always tomorrow—'*

'Slow down,' he repeated from the passenger's seat. 'There's a sharp turn ahead.'

She looked at him numbly. He had a strange gleam in his eyes. Excitement. She didn't understand.

'I love you,' she heard herself say.

'I know,' he replied. He reached for her kindly. His hand settled on the wheel. 'Sweet, sexy, Mandy. You're never going to get over me.'

She nodded. The dam broke, and tears poured down her cheeks. She sobbed hopelessly as the Ford Explorer swerved across the road, and the gleam built in his eyes.

*The Next Accident*

‘I’m as good as it gets,’ he continued relentlessly. ‘Without me, Mandy, you’ll be lost.’

‘I know, I know.’

‘Your own father left you. Now, I’m doing the same. The weekend visits will stop, then the phone calls. And then it will just be you, Mandy, all alone night after night after night.’

She sobbed harder. Salt on her cheeks, champagne on her lips. *So alone. The black abyss. Alone, alone, alone.*

‘Face it, Mandy,’ he said gently. ‘You’re not good enough to keep a man. You’re nothing but a drunk. Christ, I’m breaking up with you, and all you can think about is that third bottle of champagne. That’s the truth, isn’t it? *Isn’t it?*’

She tried to shake her head. She ended up nodding.

‘Mandy,’ he whispered. ‘Speed up.’

*‘Why didn’t Daddy come home for my birthday? But I want Daddy!’*

*‘Sweet, sexy Mandy.’*

*Fill me up. Make me whole.*

*So alone . . .*

‘You hurt, Mandy. I know you hurt. But I’ll help you, baby. Speed up.’

Salt on her cheeks. Champagne on her lips. Her foot settling on the gas . . .

‘One little push of the accelerator, and you’ll never be lonely again. You’ll never have to miss me.’

Her foot . . . The approaching curve in the road. *So alone. God, I’m tired.*

‘Come on, Mandy. Speed up.’

Her foot pressing down . . .

At the last minute, she saw him. A man on the narrow shoulder of the country road. Walking his dog, looking

startled to see a vehicle at this time of the morning, then even more surprised to have it bearing down on him.

*Turn! Turn! Must turn!* Amanda Jane Quincy jerked frantically at the wheel . . .

And it remained pointed straight ahead. Her lover still gripped it, and he held it tight.

Time suspended. Mandy looked up without comprehension at the face she had grown to love. She saw the rushing dark through the window behind him. She saw the seat belt strapped tight across his strong, broad chest. And she heard him say, 'Bye-bye, sweet Mandy. When you get to hell, be sure to give your father my regards.'

The Explorer hit the man. Thump bump. A short-circuited cry. The vehicle plowed ahead. And just as she was thinking it would be okay, she was still in one piece, they were still in one piece, the telephone pole reared out of the darkness.

Mandy never had time to scream. The Explorer hit the thick wooden pole at thirty-five miles per hour. The front bumper drove down, the back end came up. And her unsecured body vaulted from the driver's seat into the windshield, where the hard metal frame crushed the top of her skull.

The passenger had no such problems. The seat belt caught his chest, pushing him back into his seat even as the front end of the Explorer crumpled. His neck snapped forward. His internal organs rushed up in his chest, momentarily cutting off his air. He gasped, blinked his eyes, and seconds later, the pressure was gone. The SUV settled in. He settled in. He was fine.

He unfastened his seat belt with his bare hands. He had done his homework and he wasn't worried about prints.



*The Next Accident*

Nor was he concerned about time. A rural road in the early hours of dawn. It would be ten, twenty, thirty minutes before someone happened by.

He inspected beautiful, sexy Mandy. She still had a faint pulse, but she was now missing most of the top of her head. Even if her body was putting up a last-ditch fight, her brain would never recover.

A year and a half of planning later, he was satisfied. Amanda Jane Quincy had died scared, died confused, died heartbroken.

He and Pierce Quincy were still not even, the man thought, but it was a start.