

**LISA
GARDNER**

Gone

headline

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Tuesday, 12:24 A.M. PST

She is dreaming again. She doesn't want to. She wrestles with the sheets, tosses her head, tries to keep the dream version of herself from walking up those stairs, from opening that door, from entering the gloom.

She wakes up stuffing the scream back into her throat, eyes bulging and still seeing things she doesn't want to see. Reality returns in slow degrees, as she registers the gray-washed walls, the dark-eyed windows, the empty side of the bed.

She heads for the bathroom, sticking her head under the faucet and gulping mouthfuls of lukewarm water. She can still hear the rain thundering outside. It seems like it has been raining forever this November, but maybe that's only her state of mind.

She goes into the kitchen. Note's still on the table. Seven days later, she doesn't read it anymore, but can't quite bring herself to throw it away.

Refrigerator inventory time: yogurt, tuna fish, pineapple, eggs. She grabs the eggs, then realizes they expired two weeks ago.

Screw it, she goes back to bed.

Same dream, same images, same visceral scream.

One A.M., she gets up for good. She showers, scrounges for clean clothes, then stares at her gaunt reflection in the mirror.

'How do you spell fuckup? R-A-I-N-I-E.'
She goes for a drive.

Tuesday, 2:07 A.M. PST

'Baby's crying,' he mumbled.

'Wake up.'

'Mmmm, honey, it's your turn to get the kid.'

'Carl, for God's sake. It's the phone, not the baby, and it's for you. Snap out of it.'

Carlton Kincaid's wife, Tina, elbowed him in the ribs. Then she tossed him the phone and burrowed back under the covers, pulling the down comforter over her mocha-colored head. Tina wasn't a middle-of-the-night sort of person.

Unfortunately, neither was Kincaid. Sergeant Detective, Major Crimes, Portland office of the Oregon State Police, he was supposed to be prepared for these sort of calls. Sound intelligent. Commanding even. Kincaid hadn't gotten a good night's sleep in nearly eight months now, however, and was feeling it. He stared sulkily at the phone, and thought it had better be damn good.

Kincaid sat up straight and attempted to sound chipper. 'Hell-oh.'

A trooper was on the other end of the line. Had gotten called out by a local deputy to the scene of an abandoned vehicle on the side of a rural road in Tillamook County. So far no sign of the owner at the vehicle's site or at the owner's legal address.

Kincaid had one question. ‘Is the vehicle on public or private property?’

‘Dunno.’

‘Well, figure it out, ’cause if it’s private, we’re gonna need consent to search the grounds. You’ll also need to contact the local DA for a warrant to search the vehicle. So get the DA rolling, buckle up the scene, and I’ll be there in’ – Kincaid glanced at his watch – ‘fifty-five minutes.’

‘Yes, sir.’

The trooper hung up; Kincaid got moving. Kincaid had been with the OSP for the past twelve years. He’d started as a trooper, spent some time on a gang task force, then transferred to Major Crimes. Along the way, he’d acquired a beautiful wife, a big black mutt, and as of eight months ago, a bouncing baby boy. Life was going according to plan, if you included in that plan that neither he nor his wife had slept or chewed their food in over half a year.

Kids kept you hopping. So did Major Crimes.

He could hear the rain coming down in sheets off the roof. What a bitch of a night to be pulled out of bed. He kept two changes of clothes in the trunk of his take-home car. Night like this, that’d get him through the first half hour. Shit. He looked back at the bed with a pang and wished it’d been the baby crying after all.

Moving on autopilot, he dug through the dresser and started pulling on clothes. He was just buttoning up his shirt when his wife sighed and sat up.

‘Bad one?’ she whispered softly.

‘Don’t know. Abandoned vehicle over in Bakersville.’

‘Baby, what’s that got to do with you?’

‘Driver’s-side door’s open, engine’s still running, and purse is sitting in the passenger’s seat.’

She frowned. ‘That’s weird.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Baby, I hate the weird cases.’

Kincaid pulled on his sports coat, crossed to his wife and planted a big one on her cheek. ‘Go back to sleep, honey. Love you.’

Tuesday, 1:14 A.M. PST

She can’t see a damn thing. Her wipers are on high speed, flailing violently across her windshield. It makes no difference. The rain comes and comes and comes. Bend in the road. She takes the turn a little too late and promptly hydroplanes.

She is breathing hard now. Hiccupping. Is she crying? It’s hard to tell, but she’s grateful to be alone in the dark.

Easing off the gas, she steers carefully back into the proper lane. There are advantages to being out this late at night. No one else on the road to be punished by her mistakes.

She knows where she is going without ever telling herself. If she thought about it, then it would be a conscious decision, which would underline the fact she has a problem. Far easier to simply discover herself pulling into the parking lot of the Toasted Lab Tavern. Half a dozen other vehicles are sprinkled across the graveled lot, mostly wide-cab pickup trucks.

The hard-core drinkers, she thinks. You have to be hard-core to be out on a night like this.

What is she doing here?

She sits in her car, gripping the steering wheel hard. She can feel herself starting to shake. Her mouth is filling with saliva. She is already anticipating that first long, cold sip of beer.

For one moment, she hangs on the precipice.

Gone

Go home, Rainie. Go to bed, watch TV, read a book. Do something, do anything but this.

She is shaking harder, her entire body convulsing as she hunches over the wheel.

If she goes home, she will fall asleep. And if she falls asleep . . .

DO NOT climb those stairs. DO NOT open that door. DO NOT peer into the gloom.

There is so much darkness inside of her. She wants to be a real person. She wants to be strong, resolute, and sane. But mostly she feels the darkness move inside her head. It started four months ago, the first few tendrils fingering the corners of her mind. Now it consumes her. She has fallen into an abyss and she can no longer see the light.

Rainie hears a noise.

Her head comes up.

She sees a large figure loom ahead suddenly in the pouring rain. She doesn't scream. She grabs her gun.

The drunken cowboy lurches past, never knowing how close he came to losing his ass.

Rainie sets her Glock back down in the passenger seat. She is no longer trembling. She's wide-eyed. Grim-faced. A stone-cold sort of crazy, which is far, far worse.

She puts her car into gear and heads back into the night.

Tuesday, 3:35 A.M. PST

Bakersville, Oregon, was a small coastal town smack dab in the middle of Tillamook County. Nestled in the shadows of the towering coastal range inside Tillamook County. It featured endless acres of verdant dairy farms, miles of rocky beach, and from a detective's point of view, a growing methamphetamine

problem. Pretty place to live if you were into honky-tonks and cheese. Not much else to do if you weren't, and didn't the local kids know it.

It should've taken Kincaid fifty minutes to hit Bakersville. On a night like this, with zero visibility, slick mountain passes, and driving sheets of rain, it took Kincaid an hour fifteen. He pulled onto the lit-up site, breathing hard and already feeling behind the eight ball.

In the good-news department, the first responders had done their job. Three strategically placed spotlights glared into the night, high-powered beams slicing through the ribbons of rain. Yellow crime scene tape roped off a decent-sized perimeter, outside of which the vehicles were starting to pile up.

Kincaid noted a deputy's truck, then the sheriff's, then a slick black SUV with all the bells and whistles, which he figured belonged to the Tillamook County DA. They would need more bodies if they decided to launch a full-scale search, and they would need the forensic lab and Latent Prints to process the scene, but those would be his calls to make.

An hour and forty minutes after the first call out, they were still covering the basics: Did they, or did they not, have a crime? Most taxpayers probably liked to think the police went into these situations full bore. Notify the crime lab, bring in the National Guard, call in the choppers. Yeah, well, those same taxpayers kept hacking away at the OSP's budget, until Kincaid now had three and a half detectives working for him instead of the original fourteen. Real-world policing meant all decisions came attached to dollar signs. For better or for worse, these days he was operating on the cheap.

Kincaid pulled in behind the monstrous black Chevy Tahoe and cut his engine. No way around it. He opened his door and stepped out into the deluge.

The rain nailed him square on the forehead. For a moment, he paused, steeling himself against the onslaught. Then, his hair was soaked, the water trickled beneath the collar of his Columbia raincoat, and the worst of it was over. He no longer had to worry about getting muddy and wet; he was already there.

Kincaid trudged around to the trunk of his Chevy Impala, pulled out the giant plastic bin containing his crime scene kit, and ducked beneath the tape.

Trooper Blaney trotted over, black Danner boots splashing through the muck. A good doobie, he was wearing full department-issued rain gear, including a black-and-blue OSP jacket that looked like a biker coat gone bad. No one really liked the jacket. Kincaid kept his stashed in the trunk for the rare occasions the press was around – or a superior officer.

Blaney had obviously been standing outside awhile; his coat looked slick as glass beneath the high-powered lights, while beneath the cover of his wide-brim hat, the water ran in rivulets down his square-jawed face and dripped off the end of his nose. Blaney stuck out his hand; Kincaid returned the favor.

‘Trooper.’

‘Sergeant.’

The Tillamook County sheriff and a deputy had followed in the trooper’s wake. Blaney made the introductions as they all stood in a rain-soaked huddle, teeth chattering, arms tight against their sides for warmth.

Deputy Dan Mitchell had been the first responder. Kid was young, farming stock, but trying hard. He didn’t like the look of things – the open door, headlights on, engine running. Seemed kind of Hollywood to him. So he’d called Sheriff Atkins, who hadn’t been wild to be pulled out of bed on such a night, but had headed down.

The sheriff was a bit of a surprise. For one thing, he was a she – that would be Sheriff Shelly Atkins to you. For another, she had a firm handshake, a no-nonsense stare, and apparently didn't feel like beating around the bush.

'Look,' she interjected halfway through her deputy's energetic spiel, 'Tom's waiting' – she jerked her head toward the DA, who Kincaid now saw was tucked back inside his SUV. 'We got a search warrant for the car and, per your trooper's instructions, we've confirmed this is public land. Now, I don't know what the hell happened here, but someone left that car in a hurry, and that's a source of concern for me. So let's get this ball rolling, or there won't be anything left to find but a bunch of soggy police reports.'

No one could argue with that logic, so their little scrum moved toward the car, edging carefully toward the open door.

Vehicle was a late-model Toyota Camry, white exterior, blue cloth interior. Nice, but nothing fancy. The driver had pulled well over, conscientiously trying to get off the road. To the left of the driver's door was the winding backwoods lane. To the right was a steep embankment leading up into a heavily shrouded forest.

As the trooper had reported by phone, the driver's-side door was slung wide open, tip of the door scraping the edge of the asphalt. Kincaid's first thought was that most people didn't open their doors that far. Maybe if they had really long legs. Or maybe if they were loading something in and out of the car.

Something to think about.

From this angle, Kincaid could make out the shape of a brown leather handbag sitting in the passenger's seat.

'Did you check the purse?' he asked no one in particular.

'I picked it up,' Deputy Mitchell reported, already sounding defensive. 'To check for ID, you know. I mean, it just seemed

strange to find the car, lights on, engine running, door open wide as day. I had to start somewhere.'

'Did you find a wallet?'

'No, sir. But then I opened the glove compartment and found the vehicle registration. I pulled the name off that.'

'Purse was empty?'

'No, sir. Lots of stuff in the purse – cosmetics, pens, PDA, etc. But I didn't see anything that looked like a wallet. I placed the purse back just how I found it. Swear to God I touched nothing else.'

'Except the glove compartment,' Kincaid said mildly, but he wasn't really angry. The deputy was right – you had to start somewhere.

The car's engine had been turned off; the trooper had done it to preserve the tank of gas. Always useful when you found an abandoned vehicle, to see how much gas was left in the tank. But the engine had been running fine when Deputy Mitchell had arrived, and at a glance, there was nothing wrong with the tires. Seemed to rule out pulling over due to mechanical problems.

Kincaid walked to the rear of the Camry, eyeing the fender. No sign of dents or scrapes, though it was hard to tell with everything so wet. He made a halfhearted attempt to look for other tire tracks or footprints. The driving rain had destroyed the ground, leaving nothing but shallow pools of muddy water. Sheriff Atkins's warning had been on the money, but a dime too late.

He moved to the interior of the vehicle, careful not to touch.

'Owner a woman?' he asked.

'According to the registration,' Trooper Blaney supplied, 'name is Lorraine Conner from Bakersville. Sheriff Atkins sent a deputy to the address. No one answered.'

‘Do we have a physical description?’

‘According to DMV records, she’s five six, 120 pounds, brown hair, blue eyes.’

Kincaid eyed Sheriff Atkins.

‘Five five,’ she supplied. ‘I didn’t want to touch anything just yet, but at a glance, the seat looks about right.’

That’s what Kincaid thought, too. Seat was fairly close, about what he’d expect. He needed to check the mirrors, of course, steering column, too, but that’d have to wait until after the lab rats and Latent Prints were done. According to Blaney, the gas tank had registered half full before he’d shut down the engine, so while they’d canvass the local gas stations just to be safe, Lorraine probably hadn’t fueled up recently.

He straightened, blinking his eyes against the rain while the wheels of his mind started to turn.

Kincaid had spent his first three years as a trooper working along the coast. It amazed him how many of his reports had started with the discovery of an abandoned vehicle. The ocean seemed to draw people, speak to them one last time. So they’d drive out to the coast, catch that final glorious sunset. Then they’d lock up their vehicle, head into the woods, and blow out their brains.

But in all of Kincaid’s years, he’d never seen anyone walk away from a car like this – engine idling, windshield wipers beating, headlights beaming.

Deputy Mitchell had been right. The scene was too Hollywood. It felt wrong.

‘All right,’ Kincaid said. ‘Let’s pop the trunk.’

Tuesday, 1:45 A.M. PST

She has stopped paying attention. She knows this is a bad thing. Once upon a time, she was a small-town deputy, and God knows she's seen exactly what can happen when, even for a second, a person's eyes stray from the road.

But she is very tired now. How long has it been since she's slept? Hours, days, months? Fatigue has eroded her motor skills. Her short-term memory is shot. She tries to remember what she did yesterday, but the image that swims in front of her mind could have easily been from last week. She can't track time anymore. Her life exists in a vacuum.

The windshield wipers thump, thump rhythmically. The rain beats against the roof of her car. The headlights sway in the night.

When she was younger, fourteen, fifteen, in the days before her mother was shot, she'd had a boyfriend who loved to go out on nights like this. They would find a back road, cut the headlights, and soar the dark.

'HEEEE-hawwww!' he would roar, before taking a swig of Wild Turkey.

Later, they would screw like minks in the backseat, a blur of whiskey, sweat, and condoms.

Thinking about those days, Rainie feels a pang. It has been so long now since she's felt young and wild and free. It has been too long since she's trusted herself to drive blind in the dark.

And then her thoughts veer, taking her to a place she doesn't want to go.

She thinks of Quincy. She remembers the first time they were together. The way he touched her tenderly. The way he held her afterward.

'Rainie,' he assured her softly, 'it's all right to enjoy life.'

And now she hurts. She hurts beyond pain, she cannot draw a breath. Seven days later, it's still as if she's been punched in the solar plexus, and her lips move, but she can't find any air.

The road bends. She's too distracted to react. Wheels spin, brakes squeal. Her car whips round and round and she releases the steering wheel. She takes her foot off the gas. She finds herself letting go, a solitary version of Thelma and Louise, waiting to sail into the Grand Canyon, grateful to just get it over with.

The car spins to the side, whips back to the middle. Old instincts take place, muscle memory from the days when she was an adept, capable policewoman. She catches the wheel. She turns into the spin. She applies the brakes more carefully and eases over to the side of the road.

Then she has a nervous breakdown. She places her forehead against the steering wheel and bawls like a baby, shoulders heaving, chest hiccupping, nose running.

She cries and cries and cries, and then she thinks of Quincy, the feel of her cheek against his chest, the sound of his heartbeat in her ear, and she starts sobbing all over again. Except beneath her tears is no longer sadness, but white-hot rage.

She loves him, she hates him. She needs him, she despises him. That seems to be the story of her life. Other people fall in love. Other people are happy.

Why is it so difficult for her? Why can't she just let go?

And then the images appear once more in her mind. The porch steps, the opening door, the beckoning gloom . . .

Rainie reaches reflexively for her gun. To fight back, to lash out, to shoot . . . what? She has met the enemy, and it is herself. Which, in her own crazy way, makes her hate Quincy all over

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again. Because if he had never loved her, then she'd never have to know what she had lost.

Her fingers caress her Glock. And just for a second, she finds herself tempted . . .

A rap on her window.

Her head jerks up.

The universe explodes in white light.

Tuesday, 3:49 A.M. PST

Deputy Mitchell didn't understand the contents of the trunk at first. Kincaid could see the awareness finally penetrate as the deputy turned various shades of green.

'What the hell . . . ' The deputy stumbled back, his arm going up as if to block out the image.

Kincaid reached in a hand and carefully lifted the first page of photos. His gaze shot to Sheriff Atkins. 'You don't know the name?'

'No, but I just started the job last month. That's really what I think it is?'

'Oh yeah.'

'Sweet Jesus.' She stared at the abandoned car. 'This isn't gonna end well, is it?'

'Not likely.'

Kincaid got out his phone and made the call.