

LISA
GARDNER

Touch
& GO

headline

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1

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1

Here is something I learned when I was eleven years old: Pain has a flavor. The question is, what does it taste like to you?

Tonight, my pain tasted like oranges. I sat across from my husband in a corner booth at the restaurant Scampo in Beacon Hill. Discreet waiters appeared to silently refill our glasses of champagne. Two for him. Three for me. Homemade breads covered the white linen tablecloth, as well as fresh selections from the mozzarella bar. Next would be tidy bowls of hand-cut noodles, topped with sweet peas, crispy pancetta, and a light cream sauce. Justin's favorite dish. He'd discovered it on a business trip to Italy twenty years ago and had been requesting it at fine Italian restaurants ever since.

I lifted my champagne glass. Sipped. Set it down.

Across from me, Justin smiled, lines crinkling the corners of his eyes. His light brown hair, worn short, was graying at the temples, but it worked for him. He had that rugged outdoors look that never went out of fashion. Women checked him out when we entered bars. Men did too, curious about the new arrival, an obvious alpha male who paired scuffed work boots with two-hundred-dollar Brooks Brothers shirts and made both look the better for it.

'Gonna eat?' my husband asked.

'I'm saving myself for the pasta.'

He smiled again, and I thought of white sandy beaches, the salty tang of ocean air. I remembered the feel of the soft cotton sheets tangled around my bare legs as we spent the second morning of our

Lisa Gardner

honeymoon still sequestered in our private bungalow. Justin hand-fed me fresh peeled oranges while I delicately licked the sticky juice from his calloused fingers.

I took another sip of champagne, holding it inside my mouth this time, and concentrating on the feel of liquid bubbles.

I wondered if she had been prettier than me. More exciting. Better in bed. Or maybe, in the way these things worked, none of that mattered. Didn't factor into the equation. Men cheated because men cheated. If a husband could, he would.

Meaning that, in its own way, the past six months of my marriage hadn't been anything personal.

I took another sip, still drinking champagne, still tasting oranges.

Justin polished off the selection of appetizers, took a restrained sip of his own champagne, then absently rearranged his silverware.

Justin had inherited his father's twenty-five-million-dollar construction business at the age of twenty-seven. Some sons would've been content to let a successful business continue as is. Not Justin. By the time I met him when he was thirty-four, he'd already doubled revenue to the fifty-million mark, with a goal of achieving seventy-five million in the next two years. And not by sitting in some office. Justin prided himself on being a master of most trades. Plumbing, electrical, drywall, concrete. He was boots on the ground, spending time with his men, mingling with the subcontractors, first one on the site, last one to leave.

In the beginning, that's one of the things I'd loved most about him. A man's man. Comfortable in a wood-paneled boardroom but also played a mean game of pickup hoops and thought nothing of taking his favorite .357 to light up the firing range.

When we were first dating, he'd take me with him to his gun club. I'd stand, tucked into the solid embrace of his larger, stronger body, while he showed me how to position my hands on the grip of a relatively petite .22, how to sight down the barrel, home in on the bull's-eye. The first few times, I missed the target completely, the sound of the gunshot startling me, causing me to flinch even with ear protection. I'd fire into the ground or, if I was very lucky, hit the lowest edge of the paper target.

Touch & Go

Time and time again, Justin would patiently correct me, his voice a low rumble against the back of my neck as he leaned over and helped me level out my aim.

Sometimes we never made it home. We'd end up naked in the closet of the rifle range, or in the backseat of his SUV, still in the parking lot. He'd dig his fingers into my hips, urging me faster and harder and I'd obey, out of my mind with gunpowder and lust and pure mind-blowing power.

Salt. Gunpowder. Oranges.

Justin excused himself to use the bathroom.

When he left, I rearranged the pasta on my plate so it would appear as if I'd eaten. Then, I opened my purse and, under the cover of the table, doled out four white pills. I popped them as a single handful, chased down with half a glass of water.

Then I picked up my glass of champagne and steeled myself for the evening's main event.

Justin drove us the five minutes home. He'd purchased the Boston town house pretty much the same day we'd confirmed that I was pregnant. From doctor's office to real estate office. He brought me to see it after reaching a verbal agreement, the big-game hunter showing off his trophy. I probably should've been offended by his high-handedness. Instead, I'd walked through four and a half stories of gorgeous hardwood floors, soaring nine-foot ceilings and intricate hand-carved moldings, and felt my jaw drop.

So this is what five million dollars bought you. Bright, sunlit rooms, a charming rooftop patio, not to mention an entire neighborhood of beautifully restored redbrick buildings, nestled shoulder to shoulder like long-lost friends.

The townhome was on tree-lined Marlborough Street, just blocks away from Newbury Street, not to mention walking distance to the Public Gardens. The kind of neighborhood where the poor people drove Saabs, the nannies spoke with French accents and the private school had an application process that started the baby's first week of conception.

Justin gave me *carte blanche*. Furniture, art, draperies, carpets. Antiques, no antiques, interior decorator, no interior decorator. He

didn't care. Do whatever I had to do, spend whatever I had to spend, just make this our home.

So I did. Like that scene out of *Pretty Woman*, except it involved slathering painters and decorators and antique dealers, all plying their wares while I sat my pregnant bulk on various divans and with an elegant wave of my hand ordered a bit of this, a dash of that. Frankly, I had fun with it. Finally, a real-world application for my fine-art skills. I could not only fashion jewelry out of silver-infused clay, I could renovate a Boston brownstone.

We were giddy those days. Justin was working a major hydroelectric project. He'd helicopter in and out, literally, and I'd show off the latest progress on our home, while he rubbed my lower back and brushed back my hair to nuzzle the side of my neck.

Then, Ashlyn. And joy, joy, joy. Happy, happy, happy. Justin beamed, snapped photos, showed off his precious baby girl to anyone who made eye contact. His crew filed into our Boston town house, muddy boots left in the gleaming foyer so a bunch of former Navy SEALs and ex-marines could make googly eyes at our sleeping daughter in her pink-coated nursery. They swapped tips on diaper changing and proper swaddling, then set out to teach a newborn how to burp the ABCs.

Justin informed them their sons would never date his daughter. They accepted the news good-naturedly, then made googly eyes at me instead. I told them they could have whatever they wanted, as long as they'd change diapers at 2:00 a.m. This led to so many suggestive comments, Justin escorted his crew back out of the house.

But he was happy and I was happy and life was good.

That's love, right? You laugh, you cry, you share midnight feedings and eventually, months later you have really tender sex where you realize things are slightly different, but still, fundamentally great. Justin showered me in jewelry and I took up the requisite yoga while learning hideously expensive places to buy baby clothes. Sure, my husband was gone a lot, but I was never the kind of woman who was afraid of being alone. I had my daughter and soon Dina, who helped out so I could return to playing in my jewelry studio, where I fashioned and created and nurtured and glowed.

Now, Justin slowed the Range Rover, starting the futile search for

curbside parking. Our town house included a lower-level garage, a luxury nearly worth the property taxes, but of course Justin saved the space for me, leaving him to play the highly competitive game of street parking in downtown Boston.

He passed by our town house once and my gaze automatically went up to the third-story window, Ashlyn's room. It was dark, which surprised me as she was supposed to be staying in for the evening. Maybe she simply hadn't bothered with the overhead light, sitting before the glow of her laptop instead. Fifteen-year-olds could spend hours like that, I'd been learning. Earbuds implanted, eyes glazed over, lips sealed tightly shut.

Justin found a space. A quick reverse, a short pull forward and he'd neatly tucked the Range Rover into place. He came around the front to get my door and I let him.

Last few seconds now. My hands were clenched white-knuckle on my lap. I tried to force myself to breathe. In. Out. Simple as that. One step at a time, one moment after another.

Would he start by kissing me on the lips? Perhaps the spot he'd once discovered behind my ear? Or maybe we'd both simply strip, climb into bed, get it over with. Lights off, eyes squeezed shut. Maybe, he'd be thinking about her the whole time. Maybe, it shouldn't matter. He was with me. I'd won. Kept my husband, the father of my child.

Door opened. My husband of eighteen years loomed before me. He held out his hand. And I followed him, out of the car, down the sidewalk, neither of us speaking a word.

Justin paused at the front door. He'd been on the verge of punching the code into the keypad, when he stopped, frowned, then shot a quick glance at me.

'She disarmed the system,' he muttered. 'Left the door unsecured again.'

I glanced at the door's keypad and saw what he meant. Justin had installed the system himself; not a mechanically controlled bolt lock, but an electronically controlled one. Punch in the right code, the system disarmed the locks, the door opened. No code, no entry.

The system had seemed to be an elegant solution to a teenage

daughter who more often than not forgot her key. But for the system to work, it had to be armed, which was proving to be Ashlyn's next challenge.

Justin tried the knob, and sure enough, the door opened soundlessly into the darkened foyer.

My turn to frown. 'She could've at least left on a light.'

My stiletto heels clipped loudly as I crossed the foyer to flip on the overhead chandelier. No longer holding on to Justin's arm, I didn't walk as steadily. I wondered if he noticed. I wondered if he cared.

I made it to the wall panel. Flipped the first light switch. Nothing. I tried again, flipping up and down several times now. Nothing.

'Justin . . .' I started in puzzlement.

Just as I heard him say: 'Libby . . .'

A funny popping sound, like a small-caliber gun exploding. Whizzing. Justin's body suddenly arching. I watched, open mouthed, as he stood nearly on his tiptoes, back bowing, while a guttural sound of pain wrenched through his clenched teeth.

I smelled burning flesh.

Then, I saw the man.

Big. Bigger than my six-two, two-hundred-pound husband who worked in the construction field. The massive black-clad figure loomed at the edge of the foyer, hand clutching a strange-looking pistol with a square-shaped barrel. Green confetti, I noted, almost hazily. Little pieces of bright green confetti, raining down on my hardwood foyer as my husband danced macabre and the faceless man took another step forward.

His finger released on the trigger of the gun, and Justin stopped arching, sagging instead. My husband's breath came out ragged, right before the big man hit the trigger again. Four, five, six times he made Justin's entire body convulse while I stood there, open mouthed, arm outstretched as if that would stop the room from swaying.

I heard my husband say something, but I couldn't understand it at first. Then, it came to me. With a low, labored breath, Justin was ordering me to run.

I made it one step. Long enough to glance pleadingly at the darkened staircase. To pray my daughter was tucked safely inside her

Touch & Go

third-story bedroom, rocking out to her iPod, oblivious to the scene below.

Then the huge man twisted toward me. With a flick of his wrist, a square cartridge was ejected from the front end of what I now realized was a Taser, then he leapt forward and planted the end of the barrel against the side of my leg. He pulled the trigger.

The contact point on my thigh immediately fired to painful, excruciating life. More burning flesh. Screaming. Probably my own.

I was aware of two things: my own acute pain and the whites of my attacker's eyes. Mask, I realized faintly. Black ski mask that obliterated his mouth, his nose, his face. Until he was no longer a man, but a faceless monster with white, white eyes, stepping straight out of my nightmares into my own home.

Then Justin lurched awkwardly forward, windmilling his arms as he rained feeble blows on the larger man's back. The black-masked figure turned slightly and with some kind of karate chop caught Justin in the throat.

My husband made a terrible gurgling sound and went down.

My left leg gave out. I went down as well. Then rolled over and vomited champagne.

My last thought, through the pain and the burning and the panic and the fear . . . don't let him find Ashlyn. Don't let him find Ashlyn.

Except then I heard her. High-pitched. Terrified. 'Daddy. Mommy. *Daddy!*'

In my last second of consciousness, I managed to turn my head. I saw two more black forms, one on each side of my daughter's twisting body, as they dragged her down the stairs.

Briefly, our gazes met.

I love you, I tried to say.

But the words wouldn't come out.

The black-masked figure raised his Taser again. Calmly inserted a fresh cartridge. Took aim. Fired.

My fifteen-year-old daughter started to scream.

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