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Live To Tell

Written by Lisa Gardner

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Live to Tell

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Live to Tell

Prologue

Danielle

I don't remember that night much anymore. In the beginning, it seems like you'll never forget. But time is a nebulous thing, especially for a child. And year by year, bit by bit, details started to fade from my memory. Coping skills, Dr. Frank assured me. The natural evolution of my psyche starting to heal. Nothing to feel guilty about.

But of course, I do.

I remember waking up to a scream. Maybe my mother's, but according to the police report, most likely my sister's. It was dark in my room. I was disoriented, couldn't see. And there was a smell in the air. That's what I remember most clearly after all these years. A smoky odor I thought might be from a fire, but was actually cordite, drifting down the hall.

More noises. Things I could hear but not see: pounding footsteps, the thud of a body falling down the stairs. Then my father's voice, booming from outside my bedroom door.

'Oh Danny girl. My pretty, pretty Danny girl.'

My door opened. A bright glowing rectangle amidst a field of black. My father's shadow, looming in the doorway.

'Danny girl,' he sang more brightly. *'My pretty, pretty Danny girl.'*

Then he tapped the gun against his forehead and pulled the trigger.

*

I'm not sure what happened immediately after that. Did I get out of bed? Did I dial 911? Did I try to revive my mother, or maybe stop the blood pouring from my sister's shattered head or my brother's broken body?

I remember another man walking into my room. He spoke in a soothing voice, told me everything was okay now, I was safe. He picked me up in his arms, though I was nine years old and too big to be treated like a baby. He told me to close my eyes. He told me not to look.

I nodded against his shoulder, but of course I kept my eyes open.

I had to see. I had to record. I had to remember. It is the duty of the lone survivor.

According to the police report, my father was drunk that night. He'd consumed at least a fifth of whiskey before loading his service revolver. He'd lost his job with the sheriff's department the week before – after being reprimanded twice for showing up for work in a less-than-sober state. Sheriff Wayne, the man who carried me out of the house, had hoped the termination would force my father to clean up his act, maybe join AA. I guess my father had other ideas.

He started in the bedroom, catching my mother next to her bed. Then he moved on to my thirteen-year-old sister, who'd stuck her head out of her room, probably to see what was going on. My eleven-year-old brother also appeared in the hallway. He tried to run for it. My father shot him in the back, and Johnny fell down the stairs. It wasn't a clean shot and it took Johnny a while to die.

I don't remember this, of course. But I read the official report on my eighteenth birthday.

I was looking for an answer that I've never found.

My father killed my entire family except me. Did that mean he loved me the most, or hated me the most?

'What do you think?' Dr. Frank always replied.

I think this is the story of my life.

I wish I could tell you the color of my mother's eyes. I know logically they were blue, because after my family died, I went to live with Aunt Helen, my mother's sister. Aunt Helen's are blue, and judging by the photos I have left, she and my mother were spitting images of each other.

Except that's the problem. Aunt Helen looks so much like my mother that over the years, she's become my mother. I see Aunt Helen's eyes in my mind. I hear her voice, feel her hands tucking me in at night. And I ache because I want my mother back. But she's gone from me, my traitorous memory killing her more effectively than my father did, so that I was driven to look up police reports and crime-scene photos, and now the only image I have of my mom is a curiously slack face staring up at the camera with a hole in the middle of her forehead.

I have photos of Natalie and Johnny and me sitting on a porch, our arms around one another. We look very happy, but I can't remember anymore if my siblings teased me or tolerated me. Did they ever guess that one night they would die, while I would get to live? Did they ever imagine, on that sunny afternoon, that none of their dreams would come true?

'Survivor's guilt,' Dr. Frank would remind me gently. 'None of this is your fault.'

The story of my life.

*

Aunt Helen did right by me. She was over forty and childless, a corporate lawyer married to her job, when I came to live with her. She had a one-bedroom condo in downtown Boston, so for the first year, I slept on the couch. That was okay, because for the first year, I didn't sleep anyway, so she and I would stay up all night, watching reruns of *I Love Lucy,* and trying not to think of what had happened one week ago, then one month ago, then one year ago.

It's a kind of countdown, except you never get any closer to a destination. Each day sucks as much as the one before. You simply start to accept the general suckiness.

Aunt Helen found Dr. Frank for me. She enrolled me in a private school where the small class size meant I got constant supervision and lots of one-on-one care. I couldn't read the first two years. I couldn't process letters, couldn't remember how to count. I got out of bed each day, and that took so much energy, I couldn't do much else. I didn't make friends. I didn't look teachers in the eye.

I sat, day after day, trying so hard to remember each detail, my mother's eyes, my sister's scream, my brother's goofy grin, I had no room in my head for anything else.

Then one day when I was walking down the street, I saw a man lean over and kiss his little girl on top of the head. A random moment of fatherly tenderness. His daughter looked up at him, and her round little face lit into a million-watt smile.

And my heart broke, just like that.

I started to cry, sobbing incoherently through the streets of Boston as I stumbled my way back to my aunt's condo. When she came home four hours later, I was still weeping on the leather sofa. So she joined me. We spent an entire week crying together on the couch, with *Gilligan's Island* playing in the backdrop.

'The rat bastard,' she said when we'd finally finished weeping. 'That fucking, fucking rat bastard.'

And I wondered if she hated my father for slaughtering her sister, or for saddling her with an unwanted child.

The story of my life.

I survived. And even if I don't always remember, I do live, the survivor's ultimate responsibility.

I grew up. I went to college. I became a pediatric psych nurse. Now I spend my days at a locked-down pediatric psych ward in Boston, working with the six-year-old boy who's already hearing voices, the eight-year-old girl who self-mutilates, the twelve-year-old big brother who absolutely, positively can't be left alone with his younger siblings.

We're an acute care facility. We don't *fix* these kids. We stabilize them, using proper medications, a nurturing environment, and whatever other tricks we can pull out of our sleeves. Then we observe. We try to figure out what makes each child tick, and we write up recommendations for the next set of experts who will ultimately deal with these kids, either at a residential program, or a long-term-care institution, or a supervised return to the home environment.

Some of our kids make progress. They become the best person they can be, a triumph by anyone's definition. Some of our children commit suicide. Others commit murder. They become that headline you've read in the paper: 'Troubled Youth Opens Fire'; 'Older Brother Slaughters Entire Family.' And people die, whether they had anything to do with it or not.

I know what you're thinking. You're thinking I took this job to save lost children like me. Or perhaps, even more

heroically, I took this job to avert tragedies like the one that happened to my family.

I understand what you're thinking.

But you don't know me yet.

Thursday

Chapter One

Thursday night, Sergeant Detective D.D. Warren was out on a date. It wasn't the worst date she'd ever been on. It wasn't the best date she'd ever been on. It was, however, the only date she'd been on in quite some time, so unless Chip the accountant turned out to be a total loser, she planned on taking him home for a rigorous session of balance-the-ledger.

So far, they'd made it through half a loaf of bread soaked in olive oil, and half a cow seared medium rare. Chip had managed not to talk about the prime rib bleeding all over her plate or her need to sop up juices with yet another slice of bread. Most men were taken aback by her appetite. They needed to joke uncomfortably about her ability to tuck away plate after plate of food. Then they felt the need to joke even more uncomfortably that, of course, none of it showed on her girlish figure.

Yeah, yeah, she had the appetite of a sumo wrestler but the build of a cover girl. She was nearly forty, for God's sake, and well aware by now of her freakish metabolism. She certainly didn't need any soft-middled desk jockey pointing it out. Food was her passion. Mostly because her job with Boston PD's homicide unit didn't leave much time for sex.

She polished off the prime rib, went to work on the twice-baked potato. Chip was a forensic accountant. They'd been set up by the wife of a friend of a guy in the unit. Yep, it made that much sense to D.D. as well. But here she was, sitting in a coveted booth at the Hilltop Steakhouse, and

really, Chip was all right. Little doughy in the middle, little bald on top, but funny. D.D. liked funny. When he smiled, the corners of his deep brown eyes crinkled and that was good enough for her.

She was having meat and potatoes for dinner and, if all went as planned, Chip for dessert.

So, of course, her pager went off.

She scowled, shoved it to the back of her waistband, as if that would make a difference.

'What's that?' Chip asked, catching the chime.

'Birth control,' she muttered.

Chip blushed to the roots of his receding brown hair, then in the next minute grinned with such self-deprecating power she nearly went weak in the knees.

Better be good, D.D. thought. *Better be a fucking massacre, or I'll be damned if I'm giving up my night.*

But then she read the call and was sorry she'd ever thought such a thing.

Chip the funny accountant got a kiss on the cheek.

Then Sergeant Detective D.D. Warren hit the road.

D.D. had been a Boston PD detective for nearly twelve years now. She'd started out investigating traffic fatalities and drug-related homicides before graduating to such major media events as the discovery of six mummified corpses in an underground chamber; then, more recently, the disappearance of a beautiful young schoolteacher from South Boston. Her bosses liked to put her in front of the camera. Nothing like a pretty blonde detective to mix things up.

She didn't mind. D.D. thrived on stress. Enjoyed a good pressure-cooker case even more than an all-you-can-eat buffet. Only drawback was the toll on her personal life. As a

sergeant in the homicide unit, D.D. was the leader of a three-person squad. It wasn't uncommon for them to spend all day tracking down leads, interviewing informants, or revisiting crime scenes. Then they spent most of the night writing up the resulting interviews, affidavits, and/or warrant requests. Each squad also had to take turns being 'on deck,' meaning they caught the next case called in, keeping them stuck in a permanent vortex of top-priority active cases, still-unsolved old cases, and at least one or two fresh call-outs per week.

D.D. didn't sleep much. Or date much. Or really do anything much. Which had been fine until last year, when she'd turned thirty-eight and watched her ex-lover get married and start a family. Suddenly, the tough, brash sergeant who considered herself wed to her job found herself studying *Good Housekeeping* magazine and, even worse, *Modern Bride.* One day, she picked up *Parenting.* There was nothing more depressing than a nearly forty-year-old single, childless homicide detective reading *Parenting* magazine alone in her North End condo.

Especially when she realized some of the articles on dealing with toddlers applied to managing her squad as well.

She recycled the magazines, then vowed to go on a date. Which had led to Chip – poor, almost-got-his-brains-screwed-out Chip – and now had her on her way to Dorchester. Wasn't even her squad's turn on deck, but the notification had been 'red ball,' meaning something big and bad enough had happened to warrant all hands on deck.

D.D. turned off I-93, then made her way through the maze of streets to the largely working-class neighborhood. Among local officers, Dorchester was known for its drugs, shootings, and raucous neighborhood parties that led to more drugs and shootings. BPD's local field district, C-11,

had set up a noise reduction hotline as well as a designated 'Party Car' to patrol on weekends. Five hundred phone tips and numerous preventive arrests later, Dorchester was finally seeing a decline in homicides, rapes, and aggravated assaults. On the other hand, burglaries were way up. Go figure.

Under the guidance of her vehicle's navigational system, D.D. ended up on a fairly nice street, double lanes dotted with modest stamps of green lawn and flanked with a long row of tightly nestled three-story homes, many sporting large front porches and an occasional turret.

Most of these dwellings had been carved into multiple-living units over the years, with as many as six to eight in a single house. It was still a nice-looking area, the lawns neatly mowed, the front-porch banisters freshly painted. The softer side of Dorchester, she decided, more and more curious.

D.D. spotted a pileup of Crown Vics, and slowed to park. It was eight-thirty on a Thursday night, August sun just starting to fade on the horizon. She could make out the white ME's vehicle straight ahead, as well as the traveling crime lab. The vans were bookended by the usual cluster of media trucks and neighborhood gawkers.

When D.D. had first read the location of the call, she'd assumed drugs. Probably a gangland shooting. A bad one, given that the deputy superintendent wanted all eighteen detectives in attendance, so most likely involving collateral damage. Maybe a grandmother caught sitting on her front porch, maybe kids playing on the sidewalk. These things happened, and no, they didn't get any easier to take. But you handled it, because this was Boston, and that's what a Boston detective did.

Now, however, as D.D. climbed out of her car, clipped her credentials to the waistband of her skinny black jeans, and retrieved a plain white shirt to button up over her date

cleavage, she was thinking, *Not drugs.* She was thinking this was something worse. She slung a light jacket over her sidearm, and headed up the sidewalk toward the lion's den.

D.D. pushed her way through the first wave of jostling adults and curious children. She did her best to keep focused, but still caught phrases such as 'shots fired . . .' 'heard squealing like a stuck pig . . .' 'Why, I just saw her unloading groceries not four hours before . . .'

'Excuse me, excuse me, pardon me. Police sergeant. Buddy, out of the way.' She broke through, ducking under the yellow tape roping off portions of the sidewalk, and finally arrived at the epicenter of crime-scene chaos.

The house before her was a gray-painted triple-decker boasting a broad-columned front porch and large American flag. Both front doors were wide open, enabling better traffic flow of investigative personnel, as well as the ME's metal gurney.

D.D. noted delicate lace curtains framed in bay windows on either side of the front door. In addition to the American flag, the porch contained four cheerful pots of red geraniums, half a dozen blue folding chairs, and a hanging piece of slate that had been painted with more red geraniums and the bright yellow declaration: *Welcome.*

Yep, definitely something worse than gun-toting, tennis-shoe-tossing drug dealers.

D.D. sighed, put on her game face, and approached the uniformed officer stationed at the base of the front steps. She rattled off her name and badge number. In turn, the officer dutifully recorded the info in the murder book, then jerked his head down to the bin at his feet.

D.D. obediently fished out booties and a hair covering. So it was that kind of crime scene.

She climbed the steps slowly, keeping to one side. They

appeared recently stained, a light Cape Cod gray that suited the rest of the house. The porch was homey, well kept. Clean enough that she suspected it had been recently broom swept. Perhaps after unloading groceries, a household member had tidied up?

It would've been better if the porch had been dirty, covered in dust. That might have yielded shoe treads. That might have helped catch whoever did the bad thing D.D. was about to find inside.

She took another breath right outside the door, inhaled the scent of sawdust and drying blood. She heard a reporter calling for a statement. She heard the snap of a camera, the roar of a media chopper, and white noise all around. Gawkers behind, detectives ahead, reporters above.

Chaos: loud, smelly, overwhelming.

Her job now was to make it right.

She got to it.