

CRASH & BURN

ALSO BY LISA GARDNER

NOVELS

The Perfect Husband

The Other Daughter

The Third Victim

The Next Accident

The Survivors Club

The Killing Hour

Alone

Gone

Hide

Say Goodbye

The Neighbor

Live to Tell

Love You More

Catch Me

Touch & Go

Fear Nothing

SHORT WORKS

The 7th Month

LISA
GARDNER
CRASH &
BURN

A NOVEL

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— est. 1852 —

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CRASH & BURN

Chapter 1

DIED ONCE.

I remember now, as much as I am capable of remembering anything, the sensation of pain, burning and sharp, followed by fatigue, crushing and deep. I'd wanted to lie down; I recall that clearly. I'd *needed* to be done with it. But I hadn't. I'd fought the pain, the fatigue, the fucking white light. I'd clawed my way back to the land of the living.

Because of Vero. She needed me.

What have you done?

I am weightless now. I understand, absently, this is not a good thing. Cars shouldn't be weightless. A luxury SUV was never intended to fly. And I smell something sharp and astringent. Alcohol. More specifically, whiskey. Glenlivet. Always prided myself on drinking the good stuff.

What have you done?

I want to cry out. As long as I'm sailing through the air, about to die for the second time, I should at least be able to scream. But no sound comes from my throat.

Instead, I stare through the plunging windshield, out into the pitch-black night, and I notice, of all things, that it's raining.

Like that night. Before . . .

What have you done?

It is not so bad to fly. The feeling is pleasant, even exhilarating. The limits of gravity defied, the pressure of earthbound life left far behind. I should lift my arms, spread them wide and embrace the second death looming before me.

Vero.

Beautiful little Vero.

And then . . .

Gravity takes its revenge. My car is weightless no more as it re-connects savagely with the earth. A shuddering crash. An echoing boom. My body, once in flight, now tossed like a rag doll against steering wheel, dashboard, gear shift. The sound of glass cracking. My face shattering.

Pain, burning and sharp. Followed by fatigue, crushing and deep. I want to lie down. I *need* to be done with it.

Vero, I think.

And then: Oh my God, what have I done?

My face is wet. I lick my lips, tasting water, salt, blood. Slowly, I lift my head, only for my temple to explode in agony. I wince, tucking my chin reflexively against my chest, then rest my aching forehead against hard plastic. The steering wheel of my car, I realize, is now crushed against my chest, while my leg is twisted at a nearly impossible angle, my knee wedged somewhere under the crumpled dash. I have fallen, I think, and I can't get up.

I hear a sound. Laughter. Or maybe it's keening. It's a strange sound. High-pitched, continuous and not entirely sane.

It's coming from me.

More wet. The rain has found its way inside my vehicle. Or I have found a way outside. I'm not sure. Whiskey. The stench of alcohol is so strong it makes me want to vomit. Soaked into my shirt, I realize. Then, my gaze still struggling to take in my surroundings, I spy glass fragments scattered around me; the remains of a bottle.

I should move. Get out. Call someone. Do something.

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My head hurts so damn much, and instead of velvet black sky, I see bursting white lights exploding across my field of vision.

Vero.

One word. It rises to the front of my mind. Grounding me. Guiding me. Urging me forward. Vero, Vero, Vero.

I move. Laboriously, the keening sound replaced by a soul-wrenching scream as I attempt to extricate myself from the driver's seat. My vehicle appears to have landed on its front end, the dash nearly crushed against me. I'm not upright, but tilted forward, as if my Audi, once it broke its nose, couldn't regain its balance. It means I have to work doubly hard to unpin myself from the accordionized space between my seat and the steering wheel and collapsed dash.

Airbag. The excess mass wraps around my arms, tangles up my hands, and I curse it. Back to screaming and fighting and ranting gibberish, but the senseless rage spikes my adrenaline until at least the crushing fatigue is gone, and now there is only pain, an endless, terrible pain I already understand I can't afford to contemplate, as I finally wiggle my way sideways from between the driver's seat and the dash. I collapse, panting heavily, onto the center console. Legs work. Arms, too.

Head's on fire.

Vero.

Smoke. Do I smell smoke? I suffer an immediate bolt of panic. Smoke, screams, fire. Smoke, screams, fire.

Vero, Vero, Vero.

Run!

No. I catch myself. No smoke. That was the first time. How many times can a woman die? I'm not sure. It's a blur in my head, from the smell of wet earth to the heat of flames. All separate and yet together. I am dying. I am dead. No, I am merely dying. No, wait, I am dead. The first time, the second time, the third?

I can't sort it out.

Only one thing matters, has ever mattered. Vero. I must save Vero.

Backseat. I twist myself around. I hit first my left knee, then my right, and scream again. Fuck it. Don't care. Backseat. I have to get to the backseat.

I fumble around in the dark, licking rain and mud from my lips as other impressions start to register. The windshield is shattered, but also the moonroof, hence the inside rain. My once gorgeous, relatively new and luxurious Audi Q5 crossover SUV has been shortened by at least a foot, if not two, the front end sustaining the worst of the impact and the front doors most likely too warped to open. But the back appears to be relatively intact.

“Vero, Vero, Vero.”

I realize for the first time I am wearing gloves. Or used to be wearing gloves. The glass has shredded them into large bloody flaps that hinder my movements. I wrestle the first one off, then the second, then jam them self-consciously in my pants pocket. Can't toss them on the floor. That would be littering and I treat my car better than that. Used to treat my car better than that?

My head hurts so damn much. I want to curl up in a ball and sleep and sleep and sleep.

But I don't. I can't. Vero.

Forcing myself to move once more, I rummage right, then left, fingers fumbling in the dark. But I find nothing. No one. I search and search, first the backseat, then, more shakily, the floor. But no small body magically appears.

What if . . . She could've been thrown, tossed from the airborne vehicle. The car had tried to fly, and maybe so had Vero.

Mommy, look at me. I'm an airplane.

What have I done, what have I done, what have I done?

I must get out of the vehicle. Nothing else matters. Out there, something in the dark, the rain, the mud. Vero. I must save her.

I drag myself by the elbows from the front of my crumpled car

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to the back. Then, a sharp turn for the rear passenger's door. But it won't open. I yank the handle, smearing blood. I shove against the door. Cry, beg and plead, but nothing. It won't give. The damage, the child's safety lock. *Shit!*

One other exit. The way back, rear cargo hatch. Moving again, painfully slow as the pain in my head turns to nausea in my stomach, and I know I'm going to vomit, but I don't care. I have to get out of this car. I have to find Vero.

The puke, when it comes, is a thin liquid spew that smells of expensive single malt and a long night's regret.

I drag myself through the heinous puddle and keep going. First lucky break: The collision has jarred the rear hatch open.

I push it the rest of the way up. Then, when crawling proves too much for my bruised—broken?—ribs, I drag myself out with my arms and belly flop onto the ground. Mud, soft and oozing, eases my fall. I roll over, panting from the pain, the force of my exertions, the hopelessness of my situation.

Rain, rain, go away, please come back some other day.

Mommy, look at me, I'm an airplane.

I'm tired again. Fatigue, crushing and deep. I could just lie here. Help will come. Someone who saw the accident, heard the crash. Another motorist passing by. Or maybe someone will miss me. Someone who cares.

An image of a man's face pops into my mind but is gone before I can catch it.

"Vero," I whisper. To the falling rain, the oozing mud, the starless night.

The smell of smoke, I think idly. The heat of fire. No, that was the first time. Focus, dammit. Focus!

I roll back over and begin my journey.

The road appears to be high above me. There is mud, grass, scraggly bushes and sharp rocks between it and me. I hear distant

sounds, cars whizzing above me, like exotic birds, and I realize, as I belly crawl forward inch by inch, that the vehicles are too far away. They are up; I am down. They will never see me. They will never stop and help me find Vero.

Another inch, two, three, four. Gasping as I hit a rock. Cursing as I tangle in a bush. My trembling fingers reaching forward, searching, searching, searching. While my head screams in agony and I pause, time after time, to retch pathetic little spits of bile.

Vero.

And then: *Oh, Nicky, what have you done?*

I hear that keening noise again, but I don't stop. I don't want to realize that the distressed animal making all those sounds is actually me.

I don't know how long I wriggle myself up through the slipping, sliding mud. I know by the time I crest the hill, I'm covered head to toe in black ooze, and far from disturbing me, it amuses me. It's fitting, I think. I look as I ought to look.

Like a woman who's crawled from the grave.

Lights. Twin pinpricks, looming closer. I get up on my hands and knees now. Have to, if the passing motorist is to see me. And it's okay, because my ribs don't hurt anymore. My body has gone numb, the screaming in my head having overloaded all circuits and left everything else curiously blank.

Maybe I'm already dead. Maybe this is what the dead look like, as I get one foot beneath me and, slowly but surely, rise to standing.

A screech of brakes. The oncoming car, fishtailing briefly as the driver overapplies the brakes in the wet conditions. Then, miraculously, it stops, right before my raised hand and pale, rain-streaked face.

"Holy—" An elderly man, clearly shaken, is briefly illuminated by the interior light as he opens the driver's side door. He steps out uncertainly, rises to standing. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

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I don't say a word.

"Is it an accident? Where's your car? Ma'am, you want me to dial nine-one-one?"

I don't say a word.

I just think: Vero.

And suddenly, I remember. I remember everything. An enormous explosion of light, terror and rage. A shooting pain not only through my head but through my heart. And in that instant, I recall exactly who I am. The monster from underneath the bed.

Across from me, as if sensing my thoughts, the old man recoils, takes a small step back.

"Um . . . just stay there, ma'am. Just . . . I'll, um, I'll phone for help."

The man disappears back inside the dimly lit interior of his car. I don't say anything. I stand in the rain, swaying on my feet.

I think, one last time: Vero.

Then the moment is gone, the memory passed.

And I am no one at all, just a woman twice returned from the dead.

Chapter 2

THE CALL CAME in shortly after 5 A.M.: single MVA, off the road, unknown injuries. Given that the town in question didn't have a nighttime duty officer—welcome to the wilds of New Hampshire—county patrol was dispatched to handle the situation. That officer, Todd Reynes, arrived fifteen minutes later—again, welcome to the wilds of New Hampshire, or more accurately, long, windy back roads that never lead directly from here to there—just as the EMTs were struggling to strap a single muddy, bloody woman onto a backboard. The driver, he was told, had definitely suffered extensive injuries and reeked of enough alcohol to make standing next to her a risk for a contact high.

A second motorist lingered nearby, the old guy who'd found the woman and placed the initial call. He was keeping away from the action but acknowledged Officer Reynes with a short nod, clearly prepared to make a statement or sign on the dotted line or do whatever it was you did to officially end your part of something you never wanted to be involved with in the first place.

Officer Reynes returned the nod, already thinking this was pretty straightforward. One drunk driver, about to be hauled away by the EMTs. One smashed-up car, soon to be towed by the next available wrecker. That would be that.

At which point, the rain-soaked, mud-covered, blood-spattered