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READ THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS 

Chapter 1

THESE ARE THE THINGS I DIDN'T KNOW:

When you first wake up in a dark wooden box, you'll tell yourself this isn't happening. You'll push against the lid, of course. No surprise there. You'll beat at the sides with your fists, pummel your heels against the bottom. You'll bang your head, again and again, even though it hurts. And you'll scream. You'll scream and scream and scream. Snot will run from your nose. Tears will stream from your eyes. Until your screams grow rough, hiccuppy. Then, you'll hear sounds that are strange and sad and pathetic, and you'll understand the box, truly get, hey, I'm trapped in a dark wooden box, when you realize those sounds come from you.

Pine boxes aren't composed entirely of smooth surfaces. Air holes, for example, can be crudely drilled. When you run your finger around them, when you poke your fingertip into them, desperately seeking . . . something . . . you'll get splinters. You'll chew out the wooden shards best you can. Then you'll suck on your injured digit, lick the blood beading the tip, and make more hurt puppy dog sounds.

You're alone in the box. It's frightening. Overwhelming. Awful. Mostly because you don't yet understand how much you have to fear.

You'll get to know the box well, this home away from home. You'll wiggle against it with your shoulders to determine the width. You'll trace the length with your hands, attempt to bring up your feet. Not

enough room to bend your knees. Not enough room to roll over. It's exactly your size. As if it's been made just for you. Your very own pine coffin, straining your lower back, bruising your shoulder blades, paining the back of your head.

One convenience: newspapers lining the bottom. You don't notice this detail in the beginning. Don't understand it once you do. Until the first time you wet yourself. Then spend days lying in your own filth. Like an animal, you'll think. Except most animals are treated better than this.

Your mouth will grow parched, your lips chapped. You'll start jamming your fingers into those air holes, ripping apart your own skin, just so you have something to taste, swallow, suck. You'll know yourself in a way you've never known yourself before. Broken down. Elemental. The stink of your own urine. The salt of your own blood.

But you still don't know anything yet.

When you finally hear footsteps, you won't believe it. You're delirious, you'll tell yourself. You're dreaming. You're a lost, pathetic waste of human skin. A stupid, stupid girl who should've known better and now just look at you. And yet, the sound of a metal lock jangling on the other side of the box wall, inches from your ear . . .

Maybe you cry again. Or would if you had any moisture left.

When you first see his face, the man who has done this to you, you're relieved. Happy even. You gaze upon his puffy cheeks, his beady eyes, his gaping mouth, yellow-stained teeth, and you think, thank God. Thank God, thank God, thank God.

He lets you out of the box. Lifts you up, actually, because your legs don't work, and your muscles lack all strength, and your head lolls. Which makes you giggle. Head lolling. One of those words from English class that never made any sense. But there you have it. Heads loll. Your head lolls.

God, the smell. Garlic and BO and unwashed clothes and skanky

hair. Is it you? Is it him? You gag, helplessly. And that makes him laugh. As he holds up the bottle of water. As he spells out exactly what you'll have to do in order to earn it. He's fat. Old. Disgusting. Repulsive. The unkempt beard, the greasy hair, the ketchup stains splotching the front of his cheap checkered shirt.

You're supposed to be too good for him. Young, fresh, beautiful. The kind of girl who could have her pick of the litter at a frat party. You have moves. Had moves?

You cry for your mother. You beg him to let you go as you lie in a crumpled heap at his feet. Then, finally, ultimately, with the last of your strength, you remove your clothes. You let him do what he's going to do. You scream, but your throat is too dry to make a sound. You vomit, but your stomach is too empty to yield any contents.

You survive.

And later, when he finally offers up that bottle of water, only to dump it over your head, you lift your hands shamelessly to capture as much of the moisture as you can. You lick it from your palms. Chew it from your oily, filthy hair. You wait till he's distracted, then suck that spot of ketchup from his now discarded shirt.

Back to the box. The box. The Box.

The lid hammers now. The lock snaps shut. The repulsive man walks away. Leaves you once again all alone. Naked. Bruised. Bloody. Knowing things you never wanted to know.

"Mommy," you whisper.

But this monster's real. And there's nothing anyone can do to save you anymore.

THIS IS WHAT I DO KNOW:

There's not much to do day after day trapped in a coffin-size box. In fact, there's really only one thing worth imagining, obsessing, con-

templating minute by minute, hour after terrible hour. One thought that keeps you going. One focus that gives you strength. You'll find it. You'll hone it. Then, if you're anything like me, you'll never let it go.

Revenge.

But be careful what you wish for, especially if you're just a stupid girl trapped in a coffin-size box.

Chapter 2

SHE STARTED WITH A POMEGRANATE MARTINI. Paid too much, of course. Boston bars being very expensive. Pomegranate juice being very trendy. But it was Friday night. Another week survived, and by God she deserved at least an overpriced fruity cocktail.

Besides, she had some faith in herself. Loosen another button of her white fitted shirt, pull a few clips from her shoulder-length blond hair. She was twenty-seven, fit, and with the kind of ass that brought notice. She might buy her first drink. But odds were, she wouldn't be buying the second.

She took a sip. Cool. Sweet. Biting. She warmed it on her tongue, then let the vodka slide down her throat. Worth every penny of the fourteen bucks.

For a moment she closed her eyes. The bar disappeared. The sticky floor, the strobing lights, the high-pitched squeal of the opening band, still warming up.

She stood in a void of silence. In a place that was solely hers.

When she opened her eyes again, he was standing there.

HE BOUGHT HER A SECOND DRINK. Then a third, even offered a fourth. But by then the vodka and the dance-floor lights were starting to mix in a way that didn't make for a great morning after. Besides,

she wasn't an idiot. Whole time Mr. Haven't I Seen You Around Here Before was plying her with martinis, he stuck to beer.

He was nice enough looking, she decided somewhere near the end of martini number two. Muscular, clearly a guy who worked out. Uninspired taste in clothing, though, with his tan slacks, button-up blue-striped shirt. Going for young professional, she supposed, but she noticed his pants were frayed at the hems, his shirt faded from too many washings. When she asked what he did for a living, he tried for charm. Oh, a little of this, a little of that, he said, going with a wink and a grin. But his eyes remained flat, even distant, and she felt the first pinprick of unease.

He recovered quickly. Produced martini number three. Wasn't wearing a watch, she noticed, as he tried to catch the bartender with a twenty, then failed, as the other patrons were flashing hundreds. Not a wedding ring either. Unattached. Well built. Maybe her night was looking up.

She smiled, but it wasn't a happy look. Something moved across her face, that void again, that realization that all these hours, days, weeks later, she still felt alone. Would always feel alone. Even in a crowded room.

It was just as well he didn't turn around.

He finally snagged the bartender—white shirt, black tie, the kind of pecs that produced big tips—and got her a fresh drink.

She was ready for the fourth martini by then. Why not? It enabled her to talk about her little bit of this and little bit of that with a wink and a grin that matched the gleam in her eyes. And when his gaze lingered on the front of her shirt, the extra button that she might've slipped just moments before, she didn't back away. She let him stare at the lacy hint of her hot-pink bra. She let him admire her tits.

Why not? Friday night. End of the week. She'd earned this.

HE WANTED TO LEAVE THE BAR AT MIDNIGHT. She made him wait till close. Band was surprisingly good. She liked the way the music made her feel, as if her blood were still alive, her heart still beating in her chest. He was clearly uncomfortable on the dance floor, but it didn't matter; she had moves good enough for both of them.

Her white fitted shirt was now tied beneath her breasts Daisy Duke-style. Her low-riding black dress jeans clung to every curve, her tall leather boots stomping out each rhythmic beat. After a while, he didn't even bother with dancing but simply swayed in place, watching her. Her arms flung overhead, lifting her breasts. Her hips swinging round and round, taut bare abdomen glistening with sweat.

He had brown eyes, she noted. Dark. Flat. Watchful. Predatory, she thought. But this time around, instead of being spooked, she felt a fresh spike of adrenaline. The well-chiseled bartender was staring at her now too. She did a tour of the dance floor for both of them. Having accepted that fourth martini, her mouth now felt sweet and purple while her limbs were liquid ice.

She could dance all night. Take over this floor, take over this bar, take over this town.

Except that wasn't what Mr. Haven't I Seen You Around Here Before wanted. No guy bought a girl three overpriced drinks merely for the privilege of watching her dance.

Band wrapped up, started putting away their instruments. She missed the music acutely. Felt it like a pang to her soul. No more driving bass to power her feet, mask her pain. Now it was just her, Mr. Haven't I Seen You Around Here Before, and the promise of a killer hangover.

He suggested they head outside for some fresh air. She wanted to laugh. To tell him he had no idea.

Instead, she followed him to the narrow side street covered in littered cigarette butts. He asked her if she wanted to smoke. She declined. He took her hand. Then, he pinned her to the side of a blue-

painted dumpster, left hand already squeezing her breast, palming her nipple.

His eyes weren't flat anymore. They were molten. Predator having secured prey.

"Your place or mine," he demanded.

She couldn't help herself. She started to laugh.

Which was when the evening really took a turn for the worse.

MR. HAVEN'T I SEEN YOU AROUND HERE BEFORE didn't care for being laughed at. He struck quickly. Right hand connecting open-palmed against the side of her face. Her head rocked back into the metal dumpster. She heard the crash. Registered the pain. But courtesy of four martinis, it all felt distant, a bad night happening to someone else.

"You a tease?" he yelled at her, hand squeezing her breast, face screaming just inches from hers.

This close, she smelled the beer on his breath, noted the distinct webbing of red veins around his nose. Closet drinker. She should've realized that sooner. Kind of guy who liquored up before coming to the bar because it was cheaper that way. Meaning he wasn't there for the booze at all but to hook up. To find a girl like her and take her home.

In other words, he was perfect for her.

She should say something. Or stomp her heel on the instep of his foot. Or grab his pinky—not his whole hand, just the pinky finger—and wrench it back till it touched his wrist.

He'd scream. He'd let her go.

He'd look into her eyes and realize his mistake. Because big cities such as Boston were filled with guys like him.

But also with girls like her.

She never got a chance.

He was shouting. She was smiling. Maybe even still laughing. With her head ringing and the taste of blood salting her tongue. Then Mr. Haven't I Seen You Here Before ceased to exist.

He was there. Then he was gone. Replaced by the body-conscious bartender with the amazing pecs and now a very concerned look on his face.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "Did he hurt you? Do you need help? Do you want to call the cops?"

He offered his arm. She took it, stepping over the body of Mr. Haven't I Seen You Around Here Before, who was knocked, slack-jawed, to the ground.

"He shouldn't have touched you like that," the bartender informed her soberly. Leading her away from the gawkers gathering around. Leading her deeper into the shadows beyond the perimeter of the bar's flashing lights.

"It's okay. I'll take care of you now."

As she realized for the first time that the bartender was gripping her arm harder than necessary. Not letting go.

SHE TRIED TO TALK HER WAY OUT OF IT. Even when you knew better, it was a natural place to start. Hey, big boy, what's your hurry? Can't we just slow down? Hey, you're hurting me. But of course he never broke his stride, nor relaxed his bruising grip above her elbow.

He was walking funny, keeping her tucked against his side, like two lovers out on a very fast stroll, but his head was tucked down and tilted to the side. Keeping his face in the shadows, she realized. So no one could see him.

Then, it came to her. The line of his posture, the way he moved. She'd seen him before. Not his face, not his features, but the hunch of his shoulders, the rounded bend of his neck. Three or four months ago, summertime, on the evening news, when a Boston College stu-

dent went out drinking and never came home again. The local stations had repeatedly aired a video clip from a nearby security camera, capturing the girl's last known moments as she was hustled away by an unknown male, head twisted from view.

"No," she breathed.

He didn't acknowledge her protest. They'd come to an intersection. Without hesitation, he yanked her left, down a darker, skinnier street that already smelled of urine and dumpster trash and dark things never spoken of again.

She dug in her heels, sobering up quickly now, doing her best to resist. At 110 pounds to his 190, her efforts hardly made a difference. He jerked her tighter against him, right arm clamped around her waist, and continued on.

"Stop!" she tried to scream.

But no sound came out. Her voice was locked in her throat. She was breathless, lungs too constricted to scream. Instead, a faint whimper, a sound she was embarrassed to admit was her own but knew from past experience had to be.

"I have a family," she panted at last.

He didn't respond. Fresh intersection, new turn. Skittering between tall brick buildings, out of public view. She already had no idea where they were.

"Please . . . stop . . ." she squeezed out. His arm was too tight around her waist, bruising her ribs. She was going to vomit. Willed it to happen as maybe that would gross him out, convince him to let her go.

No such luck. She heaved abruptly, purple liquid spewing from her mouth, spraying her feet, the side of his pants. He grimaced, jerked reflexively away, then quickly recovered and yanked her once again forward, pulling her by the elbow.

"I'm gonna be sick again," she moaned, feet tangling, finally slowing his momentum.

“Drank too much.” His voice was filled with scorn.

“You don’t understand. You don’t know who I am.”

He paused long enough to adjust his grip on her arm. “Shouldn’t have come to the bar alone.”

“But I’m always alone.”

He didn’t get it. Or maybe he didn’t care. He stared at her, gaze flat, face expressionless. Then, his arm shot forward, and he socked her in the eye.

Her neck snapped back.

Her cheek exploded. Her eyes welled with tears.

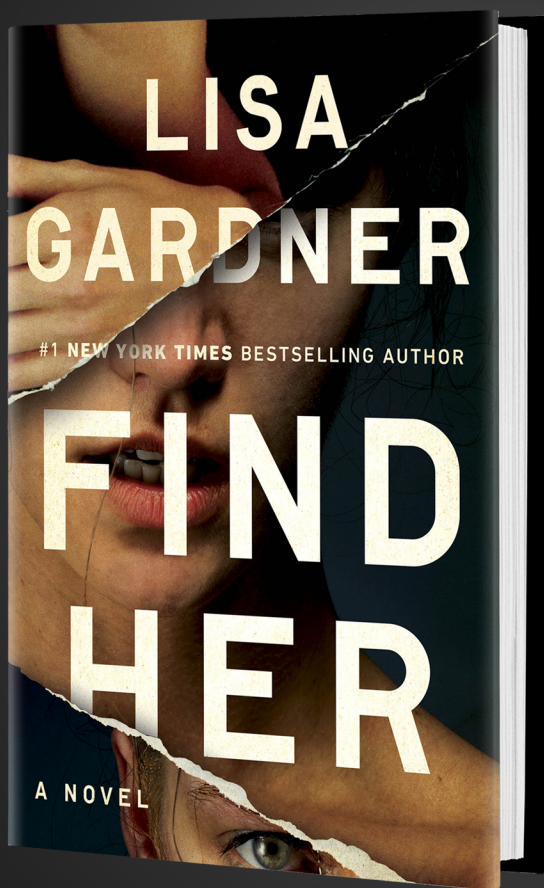
She had a thought. Fleeting. Faint. Maybe the secret to understanding the universe. But then it was gone.

And much like Mr. Haven’t I Seen You Around Here Before, she ceased to exist.

Friday night. End of a long week. She’d earned this.

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