

AVAILABLE
1/31/17

AMAZON

BARNES & NOBLE

BOOKS-A-MILLION

INDIEBOUND

ITUNES

READ THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS ▼

Prologue

*H*AD A FAMILY ONCE.

Father. Mother. Sister. Lived in our very own double-wide. Brown shag carpet. Dirty gold countertops. Peeling linoleum floors. Used to race my Hot Wheels down those food-splattered countertops, double-loop through ramps of curling linoleum, then land in gritty piles of shag. Place was definitely a shit hole. But being a kid, I called it home.

Mornings, wolfing down Cheerios, watching Scooby-Doo without any volume so I wouldn't wake the 'rents. Getting my baby sister up, ready for school. Both of us staggering out the front door, backpacks nearly busting with books.

Important to read. Someone told me that. Mom, Dad, grandparent, teacher? Don't remember now, but somewhere I got the message. Book a day. Like an apple. So after school I headed off to the library, sister still in tow. Read some books, 'cause God knows we didn't have any fruit.

I liked Choose Your Own Adventures. Each scene had a cliffhanger ending, where you had to decide what would happen next. Turn left in the forbidden temple or turn right? Pick up the cursed treasure or walk on by? In the Choose Your Own Adventure books, you were always the one in control.

Then I'd read Clifford the Big Red Dog to my little sis. Not old enough to read yet, she'd point and laugh at the pictures.

Sometimes, the librarian would sneak us snacks. She'd say stuff

like, Someone left behind their bag of chips. Would you like them? I'd say, Nah. She'd say, Go on, better you than me. Potato chips aren't good for my girlish figure.

Eventually my sister would grab the chips, eyes greedy. She was always hungry back then. We both were.

After library, home.

Sooner or later, always had to go home.

My mom had this smile. When she was in the right mood, having a "good day," oh, that smile. She'd ruffle my hair. Call me her little man. Say how proud she was of me. And hug me. Big, strong hugs, envelopes of cigarette smoke and cheap perfume. I loved that smell. I loved the days my mother smiled.

Sometimes, if things were going really well, she'd fix dinner. Spaghetti noodles with ketchup—that'll leave a stain, she'd cry gaily, slurping up noodles. Ramen noodles with scrambled eggs—dinner for fifteen cents, now we're living the dream, she'd declare. Or my favorite, Kraft macaroni and cheese—it's the nuclear orange color that makes it special, she'd whisper.

My little sister would giggle. She liked my mother in this mood. Who wouldn't?

Dad was usually at work. Bringing home the bacon. When he had a job. Gas station attendant. Night clerk. Warehouse stocker.

Stay in school, he'd tell me, afternoons when we came home in time to watch him button up yet another grimy uniform. Fucking real world, he'd tell me. Fucking bosses.

Then off he'd go. And my mom would appear from the hazy cloud of their bedroom to start dinner. Or the door would never open, and I'd get out a can opener instead. Chef Boyardee. Campbell's soup. Baked beans.

My sister and I didn't talk those nights. We ate in silence. Then I'd read her more Clifford, or maybe we'd play Go Fish. Quiet games for quiet kids. My sister would fall asleep on the sofa. Then I'd pick her up, carry her off to bed.

“Sorry,” she’d say sleepily, though neither of us knew what she was apologizing for.

Had a family once.

Father. Mother. Sister.

But then the father worked less and less and drank more and more. And the mother . . . Dunno. Drugs, booze, her own foggy mind? Parental units appeared less and less to cook, clean, work. More and more to fight, scream, yell. Mom, hurling plastic plates across the kitchen. Dad, punching a hole through the cheap drywall. Then both would guzzle more vodka and do the whole thing all over again.

Sister took to sleeping in my room, while I sat by the door. ’Cause sometimes, the parents had guests over. Other boozers, druggies, losers. Then all bets were off. Three, four, five in the morning. Locked doorknob rattling, strange voices crooning, “Hey, little kids, come out and play with us. . . .”

My sister didn’t giggle anymore. She slept with the light on, ragged copy of Clifford clutched in her hands.

While I kept watch with a baseball bat balanced across my knees.

Then, morning. House finally quiet. Strangers passed out on the floor. As we crept around them, stealing into the kitchen for the Cheerios box, then grabbing our backpacks and tiptoeing out the door.

Rinse, spin, repeat.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

Had a family once.

But then the father drank or shot up or snorted too much. And the mom started to scream and scream and scream. While my sister and I watched wide-eyed from the sofa.

“Shut up, shut up, shut up,” the father yelled.

Scream. Scream. Scream.

“Fucking bitch! What’s wrong with you?”

Scream. Scream. Scream.

“I said, SHUT UP!”

Kitchen knife. Big one. Butcher knife, like from a slasher film. Did she grab it? Did he? Don't remember who had it first. Can only tell you who had it last.

My father. Raising the knife up. Bringing the knife down. Then my mother wasn't screaming anymore.

"Shit!"

My father, turning to my sister and me. Bloody knife, drip, drip, drip. And I knew then, what he'd do next.

"Run," I told my little sister as I dragged her off the sofa, shoved her toward the hall.

The shag carpet slowed him down. But the peeling linoleum tripped us up. As we raced through the double-wide, silent in our terror, I passed my sister, scooped her up, little legs still churning through the air.

I could hear him, right behind me. I could feel his breath on my neck, already picture the blade slicing between my bony shoulder blades. I threw my sister into my bedroom.

"Lock the door!"

Then sprinting down the hall, my father and his bloody knife close behind.

I bolted into my parents' bedroom. Leapt onto the bed.

"Fucking kid. Stay still, stay still, stay still."

Knife going up, knife going down. Shredding the bedding. Tearing into the mattress.

I jumped down the other side. Grabbed anything I could find from the top of the bureau. Empty wine bottles, beer cans, perfume. Hurling them into my father's beet-red face.

"Shit shit shit."

Then, as he staggered, I jumped back over the bed, whirling around him. I heard the slash of the knife. Felt the burning pain in my shoulder. But then I was clear, hammering down the hall. If I could make it out the front door, into the yard, cry for the neighbors . . .

And leave my little sister behind?

Then she was there. Standing in my bedroom doorway. Holding out the baseball bat.

I didn't hesitate. I grabbed the wooden bat. I raced into the family room, turning at the last second, assuming the proper stance.

My father. Wild eyes. Flushed face. Lights on, I thought, but no one home.

He raised the bloody knife.

I swung with all my might. Felt the connection, a solid, wet smack, as I knocked it out of the park. My father, falling down, down, down, knife dropping into the carpet.

And still I swung the bat. Bam. Bam. Bam.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

My little sister, suddenly appearing beside me.

"Telly, Telly, Telly."

Myself, looking up. Wild eyes. Flushed face. Lights on but no one home.

"Telly!" my baby sister cried one last time. As I lifted the bat.

Had a family.

Once.

Chapter 1

SHERIFF SHELLY ATKINS wasn't supposed to be in the law enforcement business anymore. Ten years after a fire had left her torso, upper shoulder, and neck a ropey mess of scars, not to mention ruined her hip, she'd hung up her hat, so to speak. Taking up an anonymous benefactor's offer of a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Paris (retired FBI agent Pierce Quincy, she remained certain), she'd initially salved her wounds with French crepes, French wine, and French museums.

Then she came home. Set herself up with a steady schedule of walking the beach, hiking the woods, keeping herself busy. Her replaced hip did best when in motion, the soreness of an active day far better than the knifing ache of idleness. And roaming the great outdoors, she was less likely to remember. A woman with her number of scars was definitely best off not remembering.

Then two years ago, the sitting county sheriff, an outsider whom the locals had never quite taken to, had resigned abruptly. Some whispers of impropriety, but nothing the DA could prove. Either way, the county found itself sheriff-less. And Shelly . . .

She wasn't a beautiful woman. Not even pretty, and that was before the fire had turned half her body into a Picasso painting. She had the solid build of a plow horse and the kind of no-nonsense face that invited men to talk to her at bars while still eyeing the prettier girl three seats down.

She had no family, no children, not even a pet goldfish, because she was never entirely certain she wouldn't take off again.

Basically, eight years after the fire had nearly killed her, Shelly had managed to add nothing and no one to her life. Mostly, she missed her job like hell. Not to mention the people she'd once worked with.

So she'd run for sheriff. And given that she was still remembered as something of a hometown hero for saving a federal agent from that fire, the locals had enthusiastically voted her back into office, bum hip, scarred torso, and all.

Which meant, Shelly reminded herself now as she drove, lights flashing, that she had only herself to blame. A report of shots fired this time of year? Not good for the local sheriff, nor the business leaders who counted on the quaint coastal town's sleepy reputation to remain, well, sleepy.

Hour was still early, just after eight, which argued for either cranky good old boys who were still half-skunked from their excesses the night before, or disillusioned tourists who'd finally figured out that camping in a heat wave wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Normally, August in these parts wasn't so bad, especially with the ocean breeze helping keep temperatures reasonable. But the mercury had been topping a hundred for the past five days and bringing tempers with it.

In a rural community of five thousand, where the number of guns probably did outnumber the total population, maybe a report of shots fired had been only a matter of time. Dispatch had provided the address, a gas station/convenience store at the edge of town, and Shelly had personally taken charge. Both her deputies had already logged overtime working the normal summertime nuisance calls, so she felt it was the least she could do. And while she wasn't happy about gunshots in her town, she wasn't terribly concerned. Overall, Bakersville, Oregon, was most famous for its cheese, trees, and ocean breeze. Sure, it also had a growing meth problem, but policing in these parts was hardly big-city stress.

Headed north, having already made it through the blink-or-

you'll-miss-it downtown, Shelly was approaching the county's biggest claim to fame: the cheese factory. Even with lights flashing, she had to blare her horn to weave her way through the thick line of RVs and campers already stacked up, waiting to turn into the parking lot. Given the already hotter-than-hell morning, most of the tourists were probably planning on ice cream for breakfast. When she completed this call, Shelly might join them. Community policing. Eat ice cream, mingle with locals. Sounded like a plan to her.

North of the factory, traffic died down and Shelly picked up speed. Road was narrower here, winding through sharp bends as it twisted its way along the rocky coast. Then, five miles after a turn-in for yet another campground, Shelly arrived at her location: the EZ Gas.

Shelly swung in, killing the lights while appraising the scene. She saw one truck parked in front of the twin gas pumps, a battered Ford that had seen better days. Otherwise the place appeared quiet. Shelly got on her radio, alerted dispatch that she'd arrived. Then, picking up her broad-brimmed hat from the seat beside her, she placed it on her head and climbed out of her white sheriff's SUV.

First thing that struck her: the absence of sound. That, much as anything, set her nerves on edge. In a hot, hazy August, when the local businesses were as busy as they were gonna get, the quiet here . . . It wasn't a good kind of quiet. Shelly's hand went to her holster. She automatically shifted her stance sideways, making herself less of a target, as she approached the front of the worn-looking convenience store.

Smell hit her next. Coppery, thick. An odor even a small-town sheriff knew better than she would've liked.

The faded red pickup, midnineties, was to her left, the open glass door to the small convenience store to her right. Shelly paused, considering. Vehicle appeared unoccupied, which left the store as the main area of concern. She moved closer to the exterior wall, bottom half

blocked by giant coolers of ice, upper windows plastered with various posters advertising cheap beer. Hand still on her holster, she tucked herself beside the ice coolers and peered through the open door.

Nothing to see. And again, nothing to hear. Not the ring of the cash register. Not the murmur of voices as the clerk rang up the sale from the truck owner. Just that smell. Thick and pungent in sweltering August heat.

Then, a sound did reach her ears: soft, steady.

The drone of flies. Lots and lots of flies.

Shelly knew then what she'd be finding inside.

A brief pause while she did the smart thing and radioed dispatch for backup. Then, shoulders squared, she unsnapped her holster, removed her Glock 22.

Entered the store.

First victim had gone down ten feet inside the entrance. Body was on its back, spread-eagle, a bag of chips just beyond the twenty-something male's out-flung hand. Local, was Shelly's first guess, as she eyed the worn jeans, unlaced boots, grime-smear'd T-shirt. Probably a farm boy, she thought, then caught an extra whiff of something rotten and quickly changed her mind. Fishing. Definitely a boat hand or a particularly pungent job like that. Maybe he'd just gotten in from an early morning haul and had come dashing in for a snack. Now he bore a single shot to the forehead, more bloody holes in the chest. Given the slack features, chances were the kid had never even seen it coming.

Next body was behind the counter. Female this time. Eighteen, nineteen? Second victim. Or certainly shot after the salt-jonesing customer, because the female *had* seen it coming. Body had fallen in a twisted hump, as if she'd turned, tried to run, only to remember she was boxed in, imprisoned by the counter in front and a wall of tobacco products to the back. She'd gotten a hand up. Shelly could see the bullet hole straight through the palm.

She didn't need to see the rest of the damage to know it'd been fatal.

Inside, the sound was louder. The damn flies, drawn by the smell of blood, and now concentrated on twin targets.

It's funny, the things that can get to a woman. Shelly had seen terrible auto accidents, hunting tragedies, even a few combine incidents. She knew gore and dismemberment. Small towns were hardly the idyllic sanctuaries portrayed on TV. And yet the flies.

The damn flies . . .

She focused on breathing through her mouth. Slow, deep breaths. Procedure. Now, more than ever, protocol mattered. She needed to alert her detectives unit, plus the county DA and ME's office. Calls to make, work to do.

A movement to her left.

Shelly whirled, hands together, arms straight, already raising her Glock. End of the candy aisle, right before the wall of cold drinks, she spotted some kind of wire rack, quivering. She tucked closer to the wall making herself less of a target.

She headed down the outer aisle, where she could come at her target from the side. She was sweating profusely, the beads of moisture stinging her eyes. Flies. The drone of flies, interrupted only by the shuffling of her heavy-soled boots against the linoleum floor. Despite her best intentions, her breathing was too loud, ragged in the unnaturally still air.

She wasn't wearing a vest. Too hot, too uncomfortable. And even responding to a call of shots fired . . . Bakersville wasn't that kind of town. Not that kind of community.

She of all people should've known better.

End of aisle, she slowed. Rack wasn't moving anymore. She strained for the sound of movement—say, an unknown shooter creeping down the other side of the aisle or sneaking up behind her.

Nothing.

Deep breath in. Release slowly.

One, two, three.

Sheriff Shelly Atkins pivoted sharply, Glock straight ahead, homing in on the target.

But the aisle was empty, the wire rack of snack bags still. No movement from anywhere in front of the wall of refrigerators housing cold drinks.

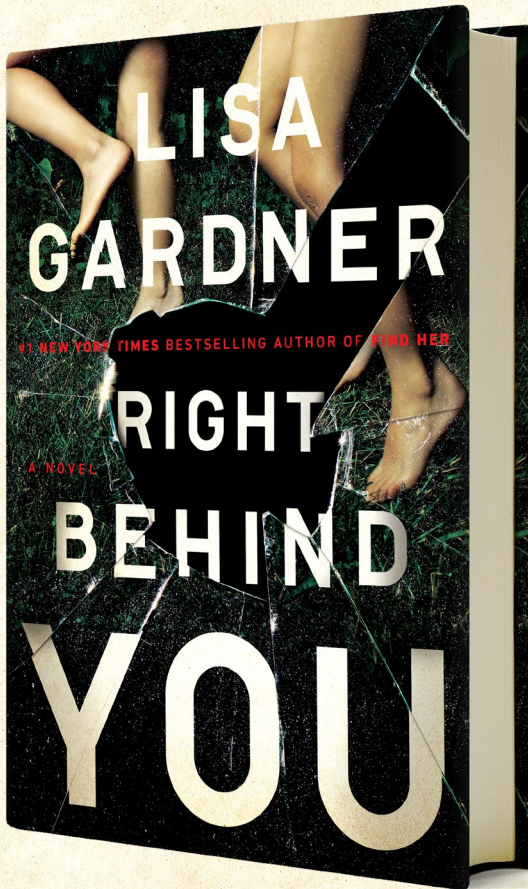
Shelly straightened slowly. Aisle by aisle now, step by step.

But whatever had caused the disturbance was long gone. Maybe just an errant breeze or Shelly's own nerves.

Either way, she stood alone in the store. Two bodies. The endless drone of flies. The stench of fresh blood.

Shelly unclipped her radio from her shoulder, preparing to get on with the business of next steps. Just as her gaze came up, she spotted the third victim.

AVAILABLE 1/31/17



AMAZON

BARNES & NOBLE

BOOKS-A-MILLION

INDIEBOUND

ITUNES

GET THE LATEST UPDATES ON LISA GARDNER
AND *RIGHT BEHIND YOU* AT LISAGARDNER.COM

 LISAGARDNERBKS

 LISAGARDNERBKS