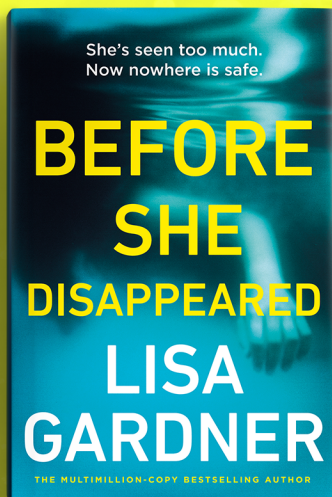


U.S. JANUARY 19, 2021



U.K. JANUARY 26, 2021

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START READING



1

T*he water feels like a cold caress against my face. I kick deeper down into the gloom, my long hair trailing behind me like a dark eel. I'm wearing clothes. Jeans, tennis shoes, a T-shirt topped with an open windbreaker that wings out and slows my descent. My clothing grows heavier and heavier till I can barely flutter my legs, work my arms.*

Why am I in clothes?

Wet suit.

Oxygen tanks.

Thoughts drift through my mind but I can't quite grab them.

I must reach the bottom of the lake. Where the sunlight no longer penetrates and sinuous creatures lurk. I must find . . . I must do . . .

My lungs are now as heavy as my legs. A feeling of pressure builds in my chest.

An old Chevy truck. Dented, battered, with a cab roof

sun-bleached the color of a barely lit sky. This image appears in my mind and I seize it tightly. That's why I'm here, that's what I'm looking for. A sliver of silver in the lake's muck.

I started with sonar. Another random thought, but as I sink lower in the watery abyss, I can picture that, too. Me, piloting a small boat that I'd rented with my own money. Conducting long sweeps across the lake for two days straight, which was all I could afford, working a theory everyone else had dismissed. Until . . .

Where is my wet suit? My oxygen tank? Something's wrong. I need . . . I must . . .

I can't hold the thought. My lungs are burning. I feel them collapsing in my chest and the desire to inhale is overwhelming. A single gasp of dark, cloudy water. No longer fighting the lake, but becoming one with it. Then I won't have to swim anymore. I will plummet to the bottom, and if my theory is right, I will join my target as yet another lost soul never to be seen again.

Old truck. Cab roof sun-bleached the color of a barely lit sky. Remember. Focus. Find it.

Is that a glimpse of silver I see over there, partially hidden by a dense wall of waving grasses?

I try to head in that direction but get tangled in my flapping windbreaker. I pause, treading my legs frantically while trying to free my arms from my jacket's clinging grip.

Chest, constricting tighter.

Didn't I have an oxygen tank?

Wasn't I wearing a wet suit?

Something is so very wrong. I need to hold the thought, but the lake is winning and my chest hurts and my limbs have grown tired.

The water is soft against my cheek. It calls to me, and I feel myself answer.

My legs slow. My arms drift up. I succumb to the weight of my clothes, the lead in my chest. I start to sink faster. Down, down, down.

I close my eyes and let go.

Paul always said I fought too much. I made things too hard. Even his love for me. But of course, I didn't listen.

Now, a curious warmth fills my veins. The lake isn't dark and gloomy after all. It's a sanctuary, embracing me like a lover and promising to never let go.

Then . . .

Not a spot of silver. Not the roof of an old battered truck that was already a hundred thousand miles beyond its best days. Instead, I spy a gouge of black appearing, then disappearing amid a field of murky green. I wait for the lake grasses to ripple left, then I see it again, a dark stripe, then another, and another. Four identical shapes resting at the bottom of the lake.

Tires. I'm looking at four tires. If I wasn't so damn tired, I'd giggle hysterically.

The sonar had told the truth. It had sent back a grainy image of an object approximately the right size and shape resting at the bottom of the deep lake. It just hadn't occurred to me that the said object might be upside down.

Pushing through my lethargy now, urgency sparking one last

surge of determination. They'd told me I was wrong. They'd scoffed, the locals coming out to watch with rolling eyes as I'd awkwardly unloaded a boat I had no idea how to captain. They called me crazy to my face, probably muttered worse behind my back. But now . . .

Move. Find. Swim. Before the lake wins the battle.

Wet suit. The words flutter through the back of my mind. Oxygen tank. This is wrong. Wrong, wrong, wrong. But in my befuddled state, I can't make it right.

I push myself forward, fighting the water, fighting oxygen deprivation. They're right: I am crazy. And wild and stubborn and reckless.

But I'm not broken. At least, not yet.

I reach the first tire. Grab onto the slimy rubber to get my bearings. Quick now, not much time left. Rear tire. I crab my way along the algae-covered frame till I finally reach the front cab.

Then I simply stare.

Lani Whitehorse. Twenty-two years old. Waitress, daughter, mother of a three-year-old. A woman with an already long history of bad taste in men.

She'd disappeared eighteen months ago. Runaway, the locals decided. Never, her mother declared.

And now she was found, trapped at the bottom of the lake that loomed next to the hairpin turn she drove each night after the end of her two a.m. bartending shift. Just as I had theorized while poring over months of interviews, maps, and extremely thin police reports.

Had Lani misjudged the corner she'd driven so many times before? Startled at a crossing deer? Or simply nodded off at the wheel, exhausted by a life that took too much out of her?

I can't answer all the questions.

But I can give her mother, her daughter, this.

Lani dangles upside down, her face lost inside the floating halo of her jet-black hair, her body still belted into the cab she'd climbed into eighteen months ago.

My lungs are no longer burning. My clothes are no longer heavy. I feel only reverence as I curl my fingers around the door handle and pull.

The door opens easily.

Except . . . doors can't open under water. Wet suit. Oxygen tank. What is wrong, what is wrong . . . My brain belatedly sounds the alarm: danger! Think, think, think! Except I can't, I can't, I can't.

I am inhaling now. Breathing in the lake. Welcoming it inside my lungs. I have become one with it, or it has become one with me.

As Lani Whitehorse turns her head.

She stares at me with her empty eye sockets, gaping mouth, gleaming white skull.

"Too late," she tells me. "Too late."

Then her bony arm thrusts out, snatches my wrist.

I kick, try to pull back. But I've lost my grip on the door handle. I have no leverage. My air is gone and I'm nothing but lake water and weedy grasses.

She pulls me into the truck cab with unbelievable strength.

One last scream. I watch it emerge as an air bubble that floats up, up, up. All that is left of me.

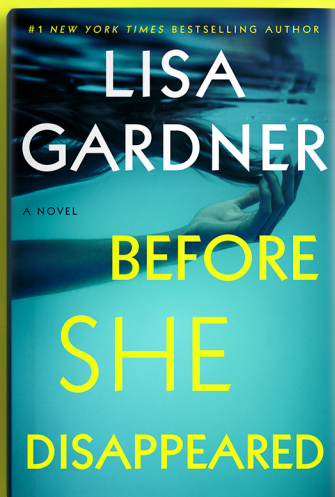
Lani Whitehorse slams the door shut.

And I join her forever in the gloom.

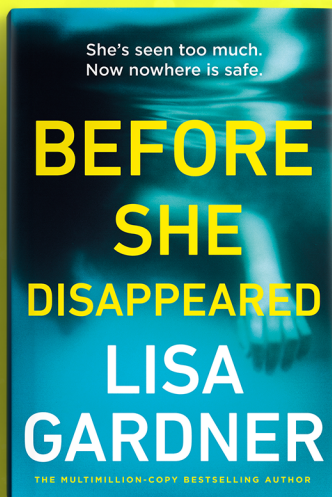
RUMBLE. SCREECH. A sudden booming announcement: “South Station, next stop!”

I jerk awake as the train lurches to a halt, blinking my eyes and looking down at my perfectly dry clothes.

A dream. Nightmare. Something. Not the first nor the last in my line of work. It leaves me with a film of dread as I grab my single bag and belatedly follow the rest of the passengers off the train.



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