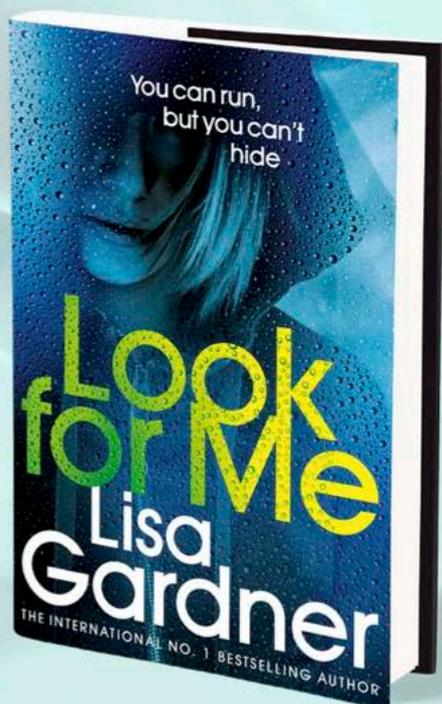
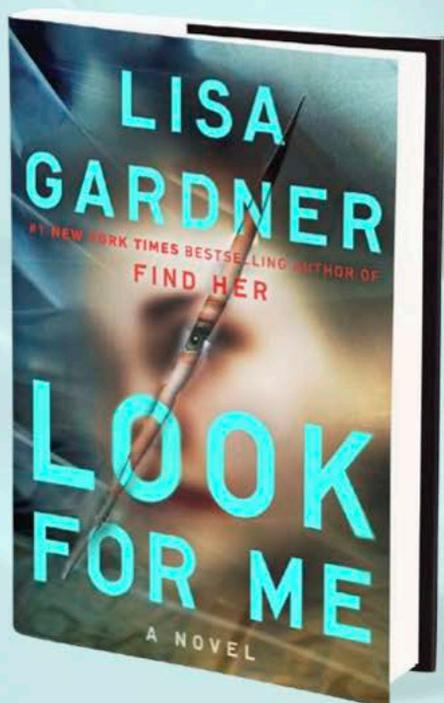


COMING TO THE US
FEB. 6, 2018

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FEB. 8, 2018



AMAZON (US)

INDIEBOUND

BOOKS-A-MILLION

BARNES AND NOBLE

IBOOKS (US)

AMAZON (UK)

WATERSTONES

HIVE

IBOOKS (UK)

START READING ↘

Prologue

A year later, what Sarah remembered most was waking up to the sound of giggling.

“Shhh. Not so loud! My roommates hate it when I bring boys home. Prudes need beauty sleep.”

“So, no making noises? Like this?” A wolf howl from outside Sarah’s bedroom door.

Fresh giggling. Then loud thumps, as someone, probably Heidi, ran into the coffee table, the couch, the standing lamp.

“Oh well,” Heidi announced gaily. “Quiet was never gonna happen. I’m a screamer and proud of it.”

A man’s voice: “Knew I picked the right girl at the bar. I like screamers. Always have.”

More giggling, more thumps.

Sarah groaned, rolled facedown on her tiny mattress and pulled her pillow over her head. On the opposite side of the wall, no doubt Christy and Kelly were doing the same. Heidi Raepuro had been a last-minute addition to their apartment. A friend of a friend of a friend, qualified mostly by the fact Heidi was willing to pay extra for her own bedroom, and Sarah, Christy, and Kelly, who’d known each other since freshman year, had really wanted the three-bedroom unit. Walking distance to Boston College, bay windows, hardwood floors, crown moulding. When Sarah had first walked into the space, she’d felt like a grown-up. No more

mini-fridge, no more standing-room-only dorm room. No more bare mattress shared with two younger siblings in an overcrowded slumlord's paradise.

The long nights studying when the rest of her friends had been out partying or repeating their parents' drug-fueled mistakes had finally paid off.

Which was the other reason she'd fallen in love with the brightly lit apartment. Because after spending her entire childhood sharing, sharing, sharing, this place offered her the greatest luxury imaginable: her own room. Granted, it was barely the size of a twin mattress, more a closet than a bedroom, most likely converted by an enterprising landlord looking to charge a three-bedroom price for what was originally a two-bedroom unit, but Sarah didn't care. Tiny fit her budget. And with Christy and Kelly able to split the largest room, and silly, vapid Heidi cashing out the other main sleeping space, everyone was happy. Especially Sarah, ensconced in her minuscule slice of paradise.

Except for nights like tonight.

More crashing—then moaning. Good God, didn't Heidi ever get enough?

A curious scrape.

"Hey now." Heidi's voice, hiccupping slightly as she panted from exertion.

Sarah rolled her eyes, pulled the pillow tighter around her ears.

"Wait . . . I don't want . . . No!"

Sarah sat up just as Heidi screamed. Loud, pitching, and . . .

Do screams have a taste? Fire? Ash? Red-hot cinnamon candies, which as a little girl Sarah liked to let melt on the tip of her tongue?

Or is it more that screams have a color? Green and gold giggles, purple and blue cackles, or this? Molten white. Melt your eyeballs, singe the hair on your arms, bright, bright, white? A color too brilliant for nature, searing straight to the core.

That's what Heidi screamed. Molten white.

It pierced the thin walls, threatened to blow out the windows. It jolted Sarah, sitting bolt upright.

And completely, totally, unable to move.

This was the part she still didn't remember well. Not even a year later. The police asked her about the details, of course. Detectives, a forensic nurse, later more investigators, crime-scene specialists.

All she could tell them was that the night started with green and gold giggles and ended with molten-white screams. Heidi's the whitest and brightest but also blessedly short.

Christy and Kelly. Two girls in one room. Best friends, members of the lacrosse team. Forewarned, forearmed, they fought. They hurled trophies. Was the sound of crashing metal a taste or a color? No, just a crash. Followed by screams, all kinds of colors and flavors. Fear, rage, anguish. Determination as one nailed him with a lacrosse stick. Horror as he came back with his blade.

He got Kelly right in the gut (Sarah read the report later) but Kelly got him by the ankles. She rolled herself into him, around him, a human armadillo. And he slashed and he slashed, glancing blows off her ribs, which allowed Christy time to grab the comforter from the lower bunk bed and to throw it at him, tangle up his arms.

“Sarah!” they were screaming. “Help, Sarah! Nine-one-one, nine-one-one!”

Sarah called. Another one of those things she didn’t remember but later she listened to at her own request. A recording of her voice, trembling, barely a whisper, as she reached the dispatch center: “Help us, please help us, he’s killing them. He’s going to kill us all.”

She left her room. It had to be done. In her tiny room, she’d be trapped, the proverbial fish in a barrel. She had to get out, to open ground.

To protect herself?

To save her roommates?

She didn’t know. A question to ask herself during all the sleepless nights to come.

She left her room.

She went toward her roommates’ bedroom. She saw an open hand through the doorway, Kelly’s splayed fingers, and without thinking Sarah grabbed it. Was she going to pull her roommate to safety? Man up and carry each and every one of them out to the hall? No time to think. Just do. So she grabbed Kelly’s hand and pulled hard.

And found herself holding an arm. Just . . . an arm.

Because apparently, when a girl armadilloed herself around a mad-man’s ankles, sooner or later he got tired of slashing his victim and simply dismantled her instead.

Screams ahead of her, Christy, still fighting. Followed by a plea behind her.

“Sarah . . .”

She didn’t know which way to turn. These sounds, these sights, this

night, it didn't register for her. Couldn't.

Slowly she twisted toward the voice behind her, holding Kelly's warm, wet arm tight against her chest. She found herself face to face with Heidi. The girl had crawled from her bedroom. The skin of her naked shoulders appeared silver in the glow of lights through the windows. Unmarred, untouched. But the blonde was hunched forward awkwardly, cradling her stomach, and already Sarah could pick up the whiff of perforated bowels.

More screaming from the bedroom. Not molten white. Lava red. Pure rage from a star athlete, refusing to be cut down in the prime of her life.

And Sarah knew then what she had to do. She turned away from beautiful, stupid, gutted Heidi. She tightened her grip on poor Kelly's arm, and she joined the fray.

Christy, backed into a corner against the bunk bed, armed with her lacrosse stick. Madman, freed from the comforter, dancing around the body splayed at his feet, enjoying himself, taking his time.

"Excuse me," Sarah said.

He darted toward Christy. She swung her stick down. Last minute, he twirled left, jabbed the blade into the soft spot beneath her ribs. A wet, squishing sound, followed by Christy's hollow grunt. She jerked the stick back, tapped him on the side of his head. Not hard, but he retreated.

No screaming now. Just the sound of exertion. Everyone breathing hard.

"Excuse me," Sarah said again.

For the first time, the blade man stilled. He turned slightly, a frown on his blood-flecked face. Sarah stared at him. She felt as if she needed

to see him. Needed to register him. Or none of this could be real. Especially not this moment, when she held out her hands and offered her friend's severed arm to the man who'd murdered her.

Dark hair. High cheekbones. Sculpted face. Exactly the kind of guy Heidi would bring home from a bar. Exactly the kind of guy who would forever be out of Sarah's league.

"You forgot this," she said, still holding out the arm.

("What?" the first officer had interrupted. "You said what?")

"I had to." Sarah tried explaining to the woman.

Except maybe there was no explaining such a thing. She just knew she had had to do something. Stop him. Interrupt. Make all those red and white screams go away. So she'd walked into the room, and she'd offered up the only thing she had: Kelly's bloody arm.)

He came for her then. Turned fully, blade dripping at his side, lips peeled back from his teeth.

She watched him advance. She didn't move. She didn't scream. She felt like a little girl, standing in the kitchen as her father picked up the boiling tea kettle. What the fuck, you stupid-ass woman? When I ask you for my money, you give me my money! I'm the one in charge here. Now do as I say, or I'll throw this whole damn pot into your bitch-ugly face. Then we'll see who's willing to take care of you after that!

Don't look away, don't make a sound. This is what she'd learned from her mother over the years. If they're going to hurt you, make them do it while staring you in the eye.

Madman halted directly in front of her, blade at his side. She could smell the blood on his cheeks, the whiskey on his breath.

He said to her: "Scream."

As slowly, so slowly, he lifted the knife. Up, up, up.

Behind him, Christy fumbled with her lacrosse stick. Tried to move. Tried to take advantage. But the stick fell from her trembling fingers. It clattered as she slid down the wall, sank to the floor. A sigh in the distance: no more rage from the star athlete. Just acceptance. So this is what it felt like to die.

“Scream,” he whispered again.

Sarah stared at him, and in his gaze, she knew exactly what he was going to do. He was not her loser father. Not subject to a quick temper or drunken rages. No, the hunting knife in his hand, the blood on his face. He liked it. Felt no shame, no remorse. Heidi’s screams, Christy’s fight, her own silent stand—this was the most fun he’d had in years.

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” she heard herself whisper, “I will fear no evil.”

Then she closed her eyes and clutched this last piece of Kelly close, as with a laugh, a chortle of glee, he slashed the knife straight down toward her chest.

An explosion. Two, three, four, five. More pain, her shoulder, her chest, her throat. He’d stabbed her, she thought, as she collapsed to the ground. No, he’d shot her. But that didn’t make sense . . .

A ragged sob behind her, followed by the stench of death, growing ever closer. Heidi dragged herself across the hardwood floor.

Holding a small pistol, Sarah noticed now. Heidi had a gun.

“I’m sorry,” Heidi whispered. She was crying, tears mixing, smearing with the blood on her cheeks. “Never . . . shoulda . . .”

“Shhh,” Sarah said.

Heidi put her head on Sarah’s shoulder. Sarah winced; Heidi had

shot her while shooting him. But it hardly seemed to matter now. Blood pooling on her throat, blood dripping from her back, so much pain, and yet it seemed far away, abstract.

The madman was still. The molten screams had ended. Now, there was just this. A final moment.

Sarah and Heidi both placed their hands on Kelly's arm.

"I'm sorry," Heidi mumbled again.

As Sarah listened to her last gurgling breath.

"I will fear no evil," she whispered in the ensuing silence. "I will fear no evil, fear no evil, fear no evil."

The police finally burst through the front door. The EMTs rushed to their rescue.

"Jesus Christ," the first cop said, coming to a halt in the middle of the apartment.

"I will fear no evil," Sarah told the woman.

And once more, offered up Kelly's severed arm.

A year later, what she remembered most was waking up to the sound of giggling.

Do screams have a taste? Fire? Ash? Red-hot cinnamon candies, which as a little girl Sarah liked to let melt on the tip of her tongue?

"Excuse me. You forgot this."

Sound of giggling. Molten-white screams.

I will fear no evil . . .

One year later, one year later, one year later . . .

A knock at the door. Hard. And then again.

Sarah bolted awake in her tiny studio apartment. Drenched in sweat, breath ragged. She lay perfectly still, ears straining. Then it came again. Knocking. Pounding. Someone demanding entrance.

Slowly, she reached for the top drawer of her nightstand. No stashed knife. She couldn't even look at a blade. No gun. She'd tried, but her hands shook too much. So a canister of pepper spray. Meant to chase off bears when hiking in the woods and available at any outdoor gear or camping store. She had the canisters stashed all over her single-room apartment, in every bag she carried.

She drew out the canister, sliding off the mattress as the knocking started again.

She stank. Could smell the reek of her own sweat and terror. Night after night after night.

Screams *did* have a color. It was the only thing she truly understood anymore. Screams had a color, and she was now intimately familiar with all the shades of despair.

"I will fear no evil," Sarah told herself, as she put her eye to the peephole and gazed into the dimly lit hall.

A lone woman. Late twenties, early thirties, maybe. Dressed casually in jeans and a sweatshirt, she looked like someone Sarah should know. Had maybe met once upon a time. Then again, two A.M. was a strange time for a social call.

“It’s okay,” the woman spoke up, no doubt sensing Sarah’s gaze on her. She held up both hands, as if to prove she was unarmed. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Who are you?”

“Honestly? You’re gonna have to open up to find out. That’s part of the deal. I’m here to help you, but you gotta take the first step.”

“I will fear no evil,” Sarah said, clutching her bear spray tightly.

“That’s stupid,” said the woman. “World is full of evil. Fear is what keeps us safe.”

“Who *are* you?”

“Someone who’s not going to stand here forever. Make your choice, Sarah. Hide behind platitudes or make the world a better place.”

Sarah hesitated. But then, her fingers landed on the first bolt lock. Then the second. The third. There was something about this woman. Not what she said so much as the way she stood.

Christy, she found herself thinking. The woman stood like Christy had, once upon a time. A challenger, ready to take on the world.

Slowly, very slowly, Sarah eased open the door, until she stood face to face with her unexpected guest.

“Nice pepper spray,” the woman commented. She strode into Sarah’s tiny apartment. Rotated a full circle, looking all around. Nodded once to herself, as if all was what she expected.

She turned, faced Sarah directly, and stuck out a hand.

“My name is Flora Dane,” she announced. “A year ago, you survived. Now I’m gonna teach you how to live again.”

Chapter 1

Perfect fall day. That was the problem. Boston Sergeant Detective D. D. Warren knew from past experience that perfect days were never to be trusted. And yet, with her five-year-old son, Jack, giggling excitedly as he pulled on his sweatshirt, and her crime-scene-expert husband, Alex, all smiles as he dug out an L.L. Bean canvas bag from their closet, it was hard not to get into the spirit of things. Apple picking. One of those crazy domestic things other families did, and now she and her family would do. Apple picking first thing this bright, crisp morning, to be followed by a long-awaited visit to the humane society.

Dog.

With a capital *D*.

Jack had been begging for one since he could talk. In the past six months, Alex had suddenly taken his side.

“Pets are good for kids,” he’d explained patiently to D.D. “They teach responsibility.”

“We’re never home. How responsible can we be, if we’re never home?”

“Correction. *You* are never home. Jack and I, on the other hand . . .”

Low blow, D.D. had thought at the time. Though the truth was often like that. So: Project Dog. For her over-the-moon beautiful little boy. And her quite charming and still-had-the-moves husband. Fine print: they all had to agree on the mutt in question.

Personally, D.D. had no interest in a cute, squirmy puppy that would

eat everything in sight. A mature, solemn-eyed pit bull, however . . . She admired their loyalty and fierce spirit. A female pit bull, two to three years of age, she'd already decided. Young enough to play with Jack and bond with the family, old enough to understand her immediate responsibilities to serve and protect. D.D. pictured herself and this theoretical pit bull reaching a silent agreement on how to guard the boy at all times.

Perfect fall day. Apple picking to be followed by dog adoption to be followed by complete madness and mayhem, which was about exactly right for a family with a five-year-old boy.

Meaning, she'd no sooner reached for her favorite caramel-colored leather jacket than her BPD-issued cell phone sounded. Then her personal one. She glanced at her department issue first, then her private mobile.

“Sh—” She caught herself. “Shrimp.”

Jack stilled in their tiny foyer, lower lip already jutting out mutinously. Alex's look was more sympathetic.

“Red ball,” she mouthed to him. The text on her professional phone—homicide speak for all hands on deck. As in, whatever bad thing had happened at the address already being transmitted to her cell required every single Boston homicide detective in immediate attendance.

In this day and age, her first thought was terrorism. Her one-time squad mate and now reporting detective, Phil, however, had sent a corresponding text to her personal phone. A note of warning and empathy from one parent to another.

Domestic, he'd typed. Then, more pertinently: *kids*.

Perfect fall day.

She should've known better.

D.D. sent off Alex and Jack to do the apple picking, Dog selecting. Which, of course, would now be one more addition to a family that was never quite hers. Because even after falling in love, and then, surprise of surprises, giving birth, she remained at heart the woman she'd always been: a homicide detective, wedded first and foremost to her job.

Alex, older and wiser when they'd met, swore he understood. Claimed to love her just the same. Little boys, D.D. was coming to learn, were harder to convince. Jack didn't have years of experience to fall back on. He was five, he loved his mother, he hated it when she left.

The promise of Dog had headed off most of his tantrum, which should've made D.D. feel better but only made her feel worse. That she could be replaced so easily. That this Saturday would be yet one more day her husband and son would experience together, while she got to view the photos later.

Whoever said you couldn't have it all had been telling the truth.

And yet . . .

Yet she felt her pulse quickening as she headed, lights on, straight into Brighton, Mass. There was dread, yes, because now that she was a mom, anything involving kids was that much harder to take. But it was a red ball. A call demanding all hands on deck, meaning by definition it had to involve more than just a potential family annihilation or murder-suicide, whatever phrase the criminologists were using. Red ball meant large scope, urgent deadline. A crisis still in the making.

She couldn't help herself. As Alex understood and appreciated, she *lived* for this shit.

Saturday traffic in Boston was notoriously thick. Exiting the Mass

Pike into the winding streets of densely populated Brighton required gratuitous use of her horn and flashing lights to get anyone to budge. Even then, several of the other drivers (Massholes, they were rightly called) flipped her off.

D.D. worked her way past street after street of tightly packed row houses and apartment buildings. Brighton had once been known as the Little Cambridge of Boston. Even now, it was mostly white, fairly young, and well-educated. And yet, like all overcrowded urban environments, it was also a micro-climate of winners and losers. From tree-lined streets of restored townhouses that went for seven figures to dilapidated triple-deckers, sagging on their foundations and sliced into tiny apartments that still probably went for two to three times D.D.'s mortgage out in the burbs.

The heart of the area was St. Elizabeth's Medical Center, which D.D. drove toward now. One more left turn, and then the pile-up of police cruisers and detectives' vehicles marked her destination. She didn't even bother to turn down the narrow street. A uniformed patrol officer was already standing in the intersection, directing traffic. She pulled up, flashed her shield.

"Next block over," he advised. "Take any available sidewalk space."

D.D. nodded. Sidewalk parking was a time-honored tradition for Boston cops.

She hit the next street, wedged in between two police cruisers, then took one last moment. Deep breath in, deep breath out.

Whatever she was about to see, it was not her job to feel. It was her job to fix.

She popped open her door and got on with it.

The house in question was easy to find. The yellow crime-scene tape being one hint. The ME's vehicle parked directly in front being the other. In the winners' and losers' department, the house wasn't coming out on top. A small two-story, with faded green vinyl siding, it was dwarfed on both sides by more impressive homes. The property was hemmed in by chain link, a rarity in these parts given the microscopic yards. The fence featured multiple signs declaring "Beware of Dog."

Great, she thought; now her day had a theme.

She had to wade through a crowd of milling gawkers, then presented her credentials a second time to the uniformed patrol officer standing outside the rusted chain link. He dutifully logged her into the murder book. Phil was already waiting for her, standing just inside the open front door.

"Family of five," he announced the second she was close enough to him for her to hear. "Two adults, three kids, two dogs. Call came in shortly after nine, reports of shots fired. Responding officers found four bodies. Oldest kid, a sixteen-year-old female, and two dogs, still unaccounted for."

"Maybe the girl took the dogs for a walk?" D.D. asked with an arched brow. "That's why they're missing?"

"Possible, though it's now been a bit for a girl and two dogs to be taking a stroll. I issued a BOL for the girl, Roxanna Baez, five one, Hispanic, long black hair. And what the hell, the dogs as well, two elderly Brittany spaniels, which, just to keep things interesting, are both reported

to be blind.”

D.D. blinked. “Okay.” She glanced at her watch. Nearly ten A.M. now, almost an hour since the initial call of shots fired. Did seem a long time for a teenager and two old blind dogs to be walking. Let alone you’d think all the police cruisers and flashing lights might catch the girl’s attention.

“Uniforms are canvassing the streets,” Phil continued. “Looking for the girl and dogs, while all detectives have been assigned to door-to-door sweeps. You know how it goes.”

D.D. did. In a situation like this one, with a missing youth who might have simply stepped out or might have been abducted, they had to cover all bases as quickly as possible. The uniforms would be their foot soldiers on the ground, looking for a teenager who might be walking her dogs, might be hanging with friends, might be whatever. While the detectives had the trickier job of knocking on doors and politely but firmly demanding entrance for a quick visual search. Anyone who refused would be marked for further investigation later. Assuming, of course, the girl didn’t magically reappear, wondering what the police were doing in her home.

And D.D.’s job in this madness? To assess and strategize. Did they have a contained situation, where four members of a family had been tragically murdered while the fifth luckily escaped? Or did they have an on-going crisis, four dead, one abducted—in which case Phil’s “Be on the Lookout” would be escalated to a full Amber Alert, with every law-enforcement agent in New England joining the fray?

The scene was an hour old. Meaning D.D. was already sixty minutes behind.

She followed Phil into the home. The foyer was five feet deep and crowded with a dark red bench covered in a pile of coats and shoes. More coats hung on the wall, while a high shelf held wicker baskets most likely filled with hats and gloves. Small home for such a large family, and the entryway looked it. She had to step over a pair of kids' sneakers, navy blue, with the blinky lights on the side. Jack would love those sneakers.

Not the kind of the thing to think about now.

They stepped into a larger sitting area straight ahead. D.D. noted gleaming hardwood floors—obviously recently refinished—a fairly new flat-screen TV, and a dark gray L-shaped sectional dotted with bright-red accent pillows. Sitting on the sofa was a middle-aged male, head slumped forward, three blooms of red across his chest in macabre coordination with the decorative pillows.

A crime-scene photographer stood to their left, snapping away. D.D. raised a hand in greeting. The photographer nodded once, kept working.

“Charlie Boyd,” Phil informed her, gesturing toward the body. “Forty-five, local contractor and current homeowner. According to the neighbors, he bought the place a couple of years ago and has been fixing it up.”

“Explains the floors,” D.D. said. She approached close enough to inspect for signs of powder burns around the wounds, while trying to keep out of the photographer's way. No speckling on the skin, no handgun conveniently dangling from the dead man's fingers. Though last she knew, it was pretty hard to commit suicide by shooting yourself three times in the chest.

Phil kept walking, she kept following. They passed through a cutout to a tiny kitchen, big on white-painted cabinets and short on counter

space. They had to squeeze their way around a rectangular table that was definitely too big for the kitchen and probably too small for a family of five. The table was currently covered in a vibrant floral tablecloth and mounds of groceries.

Which brought them to body number two. Middle-aged female, gunned down to the left of the table, just before an open cabinet. She'd fallen on her side, a can of cream of mushroom soup inches from her fingers. Also multiple entry wounds, also no sign of powder burns, so the shooting hadn't been up close and personal.

"Juanita Baez, thirty-eight, worked as a night nurse at St. Elizabeth's," Phil rattled off. "Moved in with Charlie last year. Mom to the three kids."

D.D. nodded. She noted an assortment of details in no particular order. That even dead, Juanita Baez had the kind of glossy black hair and fine bone structure that marked her as a looker. That the house had a half-windowed back door with a bolt lock, currently undone. That Juanita's gunshot wounds were to her chest, not to her back, as if at the last minute she'd turned away from the open cabinet, can of soup in hand, and faced her killer.

Also that the woman's black leather purse sat next to the collection of groceries, zipped up tight and presumably untouched. Much like the collection of high-end electronics in the family room.

Phil gestured to their right, where a flight of stairs led up to the second floor. They resumed their tour.

"At one point," he informed her, as they hiked up, "the residence was split into two one-bedroom apartments, one up, one down. Apparently, first thing Boyd did was convert it back to a single unit. Handy,

given that he then hooked up with a woman with three kids.”

D.D. nodded. She had to breathe through her mouth now, the smell stronger as they crested the stairs. And not just blood, which was thick and cloying, but a tinge of ammonia as well. Urine. Because when people said things like, I was scared enough to pee my pants, they weren’t kidding. D.D. had worked enough crime scenes to know.

More activity up here. The sound of low voices from a back bedroom: the medical examiner, Ben Whitley; or Phil’s squad mates, Neil and Carol; or miscellaneous evidence techs. The scene was quiet, all things considered, though D.D. suspected that had taken no small effort on Phil’s part. In a space this tight, with four bodies and countless time-sensitive questions, it was tempting to throw everything and everyone at it—which inevitably led to issues with possible cross contamination later on.

The first open doorway revealed a queen-size bed covered in a mound of blankets, bed lamps beside it, an overcrowded bureau across from it. The parents’ bedroom, D.D. figured, given the fact that Phil didn’t linger.

Next, a modest bath, also recently refinished, then two more doorways. The sound of voices grew louder. A woman’s voice. Detective Carol Manley, D.D. guessed, who’d taken D.D.’s place on the three-person squad when D.D. had been wounded on the job and relegated to management. D.D.’s left arm throbbed at the memory, and she felt her jaw tighten reflexively. Manley was a perfectly good detective. And yet, given the circumstances, D.D. knew she’d never like her.

Phil bypassed the doorway on the right. D.D. took a quick peek: twin bed, jumbled blue comforter, clothes, and toy cars.

Then, end of the hall. Larger room, obviously shared by two girls, with one narrow bed pushed against a pink wall to the right and one narrow bed pushed against a purple wall to the left. The smell of blood and urine was strongest in here.

Neil looked up when D.D. entered. Carol raised a hand in greeting. No one spoke.

At first D.D. didn't get it. Where were the remaining two bodies? Then she noticed what appeared to be laundry at the foot of the pink bed. Except it wasn't a pile of clothes, but one body folded around another.

A girl, young, wrapped around a boy, even younger.

"Lola Baez, thirteen," Phil said quietly. "Manny Baez, nine."

"We're waiting for the photographer," Neil said. "We didn't want to move them till then. Ben's already been up to assess. He's trying to figure the best way to remove the bodies without inciting a media circus."

D.D. nodded. Given the nature of the crime and the crowd of gawkers outside, the ME's job wouldn't be an easy one. Nothing about this case, she already had a feeling, would be easy.

Carol cleared her throat. "Other half of the room belongs to sixteen-year-old Roxanna Baez." She gestured to the purple side, where the wall had a poster featuring the *Amazing World of Books* and a dog calendar. Brittany spaniels, D.D. would presume, based on the featured dog's shaggy white-and-brown-spotted coat.

In contrast, Lola Baez's pink-painted wall was covered in theater posters, everything from *Wicked* to *Romeo & Juliet* to *Annie*.

"There's a laptop on the desk," Neil said. "Not password protected. Browser history shows Instagram, Tumblr, the usual. Last person to log on used it around eight thirty this morning to watch videos on YouTube.

No recent messages from family or friends. Certainly nothing inviting Roxanna to a meeting.”

“Cell phone?” D.D. asked.

“There’s one cell phone on the desk, but it requires a passcode. Not sure yet if it belongs to Roxanna or her younger sister, Lola. Should be easy enough to figure out which carrier, put in a request for records.”

D.D. nodded. In this day and age, it seemed all kids had phones, meaning she’d expect two phones for two girls. Given only one was present, maybe Roxanna had taken her phone with her. If only they’d be so lucky.

“Where’s the dog stuff?” she asked. “You said two elderly, blind dogs,. Brittany’s aren’t that small. Seems there should be beds, bowls, leashes.”

“We found dog bowls on the back stoop. Looks like they fed them out there,” Carol offered.

“Leashes?”

The three detectives shrugged.

“In other words,” D.D. thought out loud, “Roxanna could have taken the leashes. She really is out walking the dogs.”

Phil glanced at his watch. “An hour and fifteen minutes later?” he asked softly. “And still out of sight of dozens of patrol officers?”

He was right. D.D. didn’t like it either.

“Dogs could’ve run off,” Neil suggested. “Spooked by the shooting. Being blind and all, maybe they’re hunkered down under someone’s front porch, hiding.”

“And the sixteen-year-old?” D.D. asked.

Once again, no one had an answer.

“All right.” D.D. looked around the space. Still assessing. Still trying to understand. “Eight times out of ten in a case like this, the father is the perpetrator,” she stated. “Murders the wife and kids, then shoots himself. Given the three shots to the chest, however, I think we can safely rule out Charlie Boyd as a suicide.”

The detectives nodded.

“In the ninth instance, it’s a stranger crime. Say, a perpetrator caught breaking and entering, shoots the family to cover his tracks. But nothing appears missing.”

“Plus, no sign of forced entry,” Phil added. “Responding officers discovered the front door unlocked, same with the rear entrance. Though the neighbors claim they never saw anyone exiting the property after the sound of gunshots. So it’s a good bet that even if the shooter entered through the front, he exited through the back.”

“Drugs?” D.D. asked. “Any rumors, evidence that Charlie Boyd or Juanita Baez were into illegal activities?”

“Juanita has a history of DUIs, and court-mandated rehab five years back. Alcohol,” Neil said. “Charlie Boyd’s record is clean.”

“No hidden stash of drugs or cash,” Carol added. “Also, no alcohol in the kitchen, which would indicate Juanita was still on the wagon.”

D.D. sighed, glanced at her watch again. Time to make a decision.

“There is another scenario,” she said. “Not as common, but it happens. Whole family is murdered; teenaged daughter goes missing. Sometimes, that means the daughter *is* the target—the perpetrator murders the family so he can kidnap the girl.”

“And other times?” Neil asked.

“The daughter is the perpetrator,” D.D. said bluntly. “Abused,

pissed off, doesn't really matter. But the girl decides the only solution is to kill them all and run away."

Unbidden, their gazes turned to the sad remains of Lola and Manny Baez, the older girl still cradling her younger brother's lifeless form.

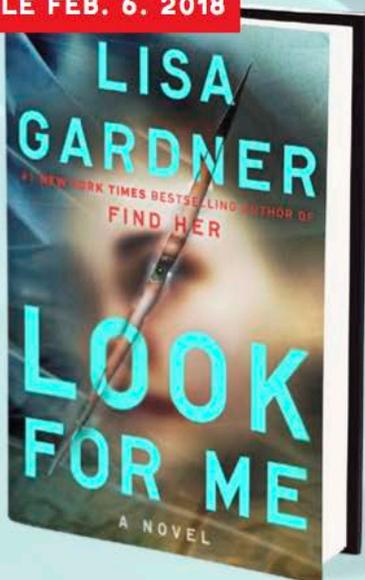
Phil, father of four, cleared his throat roughly. D.D. understood.

"Either way," she stated quietly, "the key to this puzzle is Roxanna Baez. We find her, we get our answers. Issue the Amber Alert. Then prepare for the onslaught."

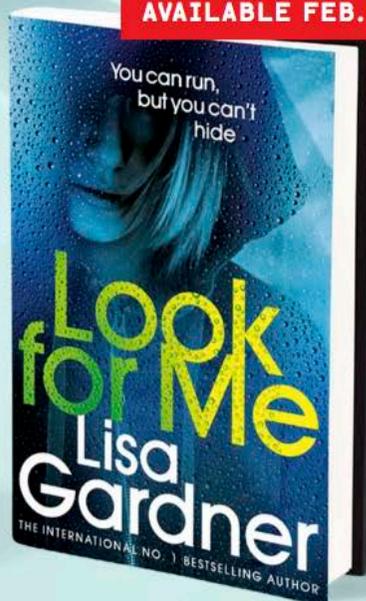
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