

PROLOGUE

“In the U.S., the dangerous spiders include the Widows and the Recluse Spiders.”

From “Spiders and Their Kin,” by Herbert W. and Lorna R. Levi, a Golden Guide from St. Martin’s Press, 2002

He was moaning, a guttural sound in the back of his throat as his fingers tightened their grip in her hair. She curled her lips over her teeth, applying more pressure. His hips surged and he started with the usual stream of nonsense boys liked to murmur during a time like this:

“Sweet Jesus... oh, God. Don’t stop. You’re so beautiful. OhmyGod, ohmyGod. You are the best! Oh Ginny, Ginny, Ginny. Sweet Ginny...”

She wondered if he could hear himself speak, if he had any idea of what he said. That sometimes he compared to her saints. That he told her she was gorgeous, beautiful, a dark Georgian rose. That once, he’d even told her he loved her.

A guy would say anything at a time like this.

Lisa Gardner

The gear shift was digging into her hip, starting to hurt. She moved her right hand to the top of his jeans, and worked them lower on his thighs. Another small shift here, the boy now made a gurgling sound as if he were dying.

“Holy mother of God! Jesus, Ginny. Beautiful, beautiful, Ginny. Sweet...mother...pretty...lovely... You are killing me! You are killing me! YOU ARE KILLING ME!”

Oh for heaven's sake, she thought, *get on with it*. A bit more maneuvering, a bit more pressure applied by her mouth, followed by a bit more pressure applied by her hand...

Tommy was a panting, happy boy.

And little Ginny would finally get a treat.

She retreated to the other side of the truck, turning her head slightly so he wouldn't see her wipe her mouth with the back of her hand. Bottle of Jim Beam was where they'd left it, rolling on the floor beneath her feet. She picked it up, took a swig, passed it to Tommy.

He still had his pants tangled around his knees and a dazed look on his Captain-of-the-Varsity-Football team face.

“Shit, Ginny, now you *are* trying to kill me.”

She laughed, took another swig herself, so big she did gag and her eyes burned and she told herself it was the whiskey and nothing else.

Tommy went to work on his clothing. Pulled up tighty whities first, following by his jeans, then buckled his belt. He did it matter of factly, with none of the awkwardness girls generally felt. It's why Ginny preferred front-seat blow jobs to back-seat sex. Sex took longer and involved more logistics. Blow jobs, on the other hand, kept things simple and with most boys, quick.

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Tommy wanted the sour mash now. She handed him the bottle. Watched his Adam's apple bob above the collar of his letterman's jacket as he drank. He dragged his hand over his mouth, then handed the bottle back to her.

"Sex and whiskey. Doesn't get any better than this!" he said with a grin.

"Not bad for a Tuesday night," she granted.

He reached over, stealing his hand beneath her shirt, cupping her breast. His fingers found her left nipple, squeezing experimentally.

"You're sure...?"

She batted his hand away. "Can't. Gotta get home. Mama said if I broke curfew one more time, she was locking me out."

"Your mama? Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

Ginny let that comment pass. "Sides, don't you gotta catch up with your posse? Or maybe swing by *Darlene's*? She probably can't sleep without one last glimpse of Loverboy."

She started the comment playfully, ended with an edge. Just because you knew your place in the world, didn't mean you had to be happy about it.

Beside her, Tommy had grown quiet. He reached over, stroked her cheek with his thumb. It was a strange gesture coming from him. Almost tender.

"I got something for you," he said abruptly, withdrawing his hand, going to work in his front denim pocket.

Ginny frowned at him. Of course he had something for her. That's how these things worked. White-trash girl fucks the brains out of rich, handsome quarterback and in return, he gives her pretty sparkling gifts. Because all boys had needs, but not all boys could get what they needed from their uptight girlfriends.

Lisa Gardner

Tommy was staring at her. Ginny looked down belatedly at his offered hand, and realized with genuine shock that he was holding out his class ring.

“What the hell is that?” she blurted out.

Tommy recoiled, but quickly caught himself. “I know you’re surprised...”

“Darlene will carve out your heart with a spoon if she sees me wearing that.”

“Darlene doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Since when?”

“Since Saturday night, when I broke up with her.”

Ginny stared at him. “Why the hell would you do such a stupidass move like that?”

Tommy’s face darkened. He clearly hadn’t anticipated this reaction, but once again, he forged ahead. “Ginny, darlin’, I don’t think you understand...”

“Oh, I understand just fine. Darlene is beautiful. Darlene has pretty clothes and her daddy’s money and perfect lipstick, which naturally, she doesn’t want to smudge going down on her hunky boyfriend.”

“You don’t need to put it that way,” Tommy said tightly.

“Put it what way? That precious little Darlene won’t swallow? So now you’ve convinced yourself you’re in love with Little Miss White Trash?”

“Don’t say that—”

“Say what? The truth? I know who I am. Only one with shit for brains in this truck is you. Now, I wanted a gold necklace and you promised me!”

“So that’s it? It’s all about the necklace?”

“Course it is.”

Lisa Gardner

He studied her, working his jaw. “You know, Trace tried to warn me about you. He said you had a mean streak, the soul of a snake. I told him he was wrong. You’re not your mother, Ginny. You could be...you are, someone special. At least,” he squared his shoulders, “to me.”

“*What the fuck is wrong with you!*” She couldn’t stand it anymore. She popped open the door, hopped out of the truck. She heard him scrambling to get out the other side, maybe thinking he’d better stop her before she did something stupid.

They were parked off a logging road in the woods, the area deserted, the ground hard and uneven beneath her feet. For one impulsive moment, she wanted to run. She’d just take off, racing down the long blue tunnel spinning out between the tall Georgian pines.

She was young and strong. Girl like her could run a long time. God knows, she’d had the practice.

“Ginny, talk to me.”

Tommy’s voice from behind her. Still earnest, but giving her space. Heaven help her, the boy had probably taken a poetry class, or started listening to Sarah McLachlan or some such shit. Everyone wanted everyone to have depth these days. Didn’t they realize that clichés were much easier to manage?

She took a deep breath, tilted her head up, stared up at the stars. *When life gives you lemons*, she thought, *make lemonade*. The pure absurdity of the thought made her want to laugh, or maybe it was cry. So she did what she did best. She fisted her hands and worked the angles. Despite what people thought, a girl like her couldn’t afford to be cheap.

“Well, Tommy,” she announced. “I gotta be honest: you’ve taken me by surprise.”

“Well, yeah. Took myself by surprise, too. Wasn’t like I *meant* this to happen.”

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“This’ll hurt you, you know. I wear that ring, kids at school, they’ll say some awful things.”

“Let ‘em.”

“Four more months, you graduate, you’re done. Come on, Tommy, you don’t need this shit.”

“Ginny—” he started urgently again.

She placed her finger over his lips. “I’ll take your ring, Tommy.”

“You will?” Hopeful now. Earnest. Goddamn Sarah McLachlan.

“Did you bring the necklace?”

“Well, I did, just in case, but—”

“Gimme the necklace. I’ll wear the ring on it, beneath my shirt. It’ll be our secret, something just the two of us know, at least until school is out. I don’t need a big show to know you care. Already, this moment, what you’ve managed to do...” Her voice was growing edgy again. She forced herself to finish more brightly: “It means so much that you thought to do this.”

Tommy’s face lit up. He dug around in his pocket, finally producing a tiny ziplock bag containing the necklace. He’d probably bought it at Wal-Mart. Fourteen carats. It would turn the skin on her neck green.

Damn, all that for this?

She took the chain, looped it through the band of the ring, gave him a reassuring smile.

He grabbed her for a hard kiss. She let him. But then he started fondling her again, obviously intending to cement their new relationship with a rut in the woods.

Christ, she was tired.

Lisa Gardner

With a bit of effort, she pushed him back, having to strain against one hundred and eighty pounds of testosterone. “Tommy,” she admonished, panting. “Curfew, remember? Let’s not start our new relationship with me grounded.”

He grinned, his color high. “Yeah, okay, guess not. But Lord, Ginny...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Back in the truck, Big Boy. Let’s see how fast you can drive.”

Tommy could drive fast. But they still didn’t make it to her house until ten minutes after eleven. Front porch light was on, but nothing moved behind the shades.

With luck, her mother was out and would never know. After the night she’d had, Ginny felt she deserved a break.

Tommy wanted to watch until she was safe inside her house. She assured him that would make it worse, her mom might come out, make a scene. More coaxing. The cost of five valuable minutes, he finally drove off.

Her hero, she thought ironically, and turned toward her home.

It was small and gray, with no excuse for a lawn. Dull outside, even duller inside. But hey, as the saying went, it was home. And at least it wasn’t a trailer park. See, once Ginny’d had a dad. And he’d been tall and handsome, with this big booming laugh and thick strong arms he’d use to swing her up into the air as he walked through the door after a long day at work.

Her daddy had died one day. Coming home from a dry-walling job, catching his front tires on black ice. Insurance money had paid for the house.

Her mother had turned to other activities to pay for the rest.

Ginny tried the door. It was locked. She shrugged philosophically, headed round the back. It was locked, too. She tried the windows, but already knew they wouldn’t budge. Her

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mom liked to lock up tight. Maybe their neighborhood had been blue collar once, but that had been about ten years and one economic class ago.

Ginny knocked on the door. Rang the doorbell. Not even a shade twitched.

Her mama had done it. Ginny had broken curfew, and her damn mama, who seemed convinced Ginny could do better if she'd just straighten up her act, had locked her out.

Fuck it. She'd go for a walk. Maybe in an hour or two, her mother would decide she'd made her point.

Ginny headed down her dark street, passing tiny home after tiny home. Folks who used to make a living. A lot that didn't anymore.

She'd just hit the intersection with the rural road when the black SUV zipped by. She saw the brake lights flare up, dragon eyes, as the SUV screeched to a halt twenty yards away. A head poked out the driver's side, too dark to see much other than the outline of a baseball cap. A heavy male baritone inquired, "Need a lift?"

It took Ginny only a moment to decide. The vehicle looked expensive, the voice sounded deep. It appeared that her night was finally looking up.

Ginny realized her mistake five minutes later. After she'd climbed into the throaty SUV, running her hand over the soft, tanned leather. After she'd giggled and told the man, middle-aged, trim, that her car had run out of gas. After, with another giggle, she had suggested he could give her a ride around the block.

He didn't say much. Just took another left, another right, before abruptly pulling behind the giant self-storage warehouse and killing the engine.

Lisa Gardner

Ginny felt the first shiver then. With a total stranger, there was always that initial moment, when you were almost afraid. Before you remembered, you didn't have to be scared anymore because there wasn't anything some asshole could take that you hadn't already given away.

But then he turned and she found herself staring into a flat, unsmiling face. Hard square jaw, tight lips, eyes oversized pools of unending black.

And then, almost as if he knew how she would react, as if he wanted to savor the moment the expression crossed her face, he slowly pushed up the brim of his baseball cap and showed her his forehead.

Inside the pocket of her denim jacket, Ginny's fingers wrapped tight around Tommy's ring. For she only needed one look at what the man had done to reach several realizations at once: Her mother wouldn't have to worry about curfew anymore. And young, lustful Tommy would never need to be embarrassed in front of his friends.

Because this man was never, ever letting her go home.

Some girls were smart. Some girls were fast. Some girls were strong. Ginny, poor Ginny Jones had already learned four years ago, when her mother's boyfriend first appeared in her bedroom, that she had only one way of saving herself.

"All right," she said briskly. "Let's cut to the chase: Why don't you tell me exactly what you want me to do, and I'll start stripping off clothes."

ONE

These are the things that no one tells you, that you must experience in order to learn:

It only hurts the first few times. You scream. You scream and you scream and you scream until your throat is raw and your eyes swollen and you taste a curious substance in the back of your throat that is like bile and vomit and tears all rolled into one. You cry for your mother. You beg for God. You don't understand what is happening. You can't believe it is happening.

And yet, it is happening.

And so, bit by bit, you fall silent.

Terror doesn't last forever. It can't. It takes too much energy to sustain. And in truth, terror occurs when confronted with the unknown. But once it has happened enough, you have been systematically violated, beaten, cowed, it's not unknown is it? The same act that once shocked you, hurt you, shamed you with its perversity, becomes the norm. This is your day now. This is the life you lead. This is who you have become.

A specimen in the collection.