

**LISA
GARDNER**

**the Third
Victim**

headline

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Tuesday, May 15, 1:25 P.M.

Officer Lorraine Conner was sitting in a red vinyl booth at Martha's Diner, picking at her tuna salad and listening to Frank and Doug gossip, when the call first came in. She was sitting alone in the booth, eating salad because she'd just turned thirty-one and was beginning to notice that the pounds didn't magically melt away the way they had when she was twenty-one, or hell, even twenty-seven. She could still run a six-minute mile and slip into a size 8, but thirty-one was fundamentally different from thirty. She spent more time arranging her long chestnut hair to earn those second glances. And for lunches, she traded in cheeseburgers for tuna salad, five days a week.

Rainie's partner that day was twenty-two-year-old volunteer police officer Charles Cunningham, aka Chuckie. Known in the lingo of the tiny police department of Bakersville, Oregon, as a 'green rookie', Chuckie hadn't yet gone to the nine-month-long training school. That meant he was allowed to look but not touch. Full authority would come when he completed the required academy courses and received his certificate. In the meantime, he got to gain experience by going on patrols and

writing up reports. He also got to wear the standard tan uniform and carry a gun. Chuckie was a pretty happy guy.

Before the call came in, he was up at the lunch counter, trying to work some magic on a leggy blond waitress named Cindy. He had his chest puffed out, his knee crooked forward, and his hand resting lightly on his sidearm. Cindy, on the other hand, was trying to serve up slices of Martha's homemade blueberry pie to six farmers at once. One cantankerous old man muttered at the rookie to get out of the way. Chuckie grinned harder.

In the booth behind Rainie, retired dairymen Doug Atkens and Frank Winslow started placing their bets.

'Ten dollars says she caves,' Doug announced, slapping a crumpled bill on the pink Formica table.

'Twenty says she dumps a glass of ice water over Romeo's head,' Frank countered, reaching for his wallet. 'I know for a fact that Cindy would rather earn good tips than Clark Gable's heart.'

Rainie gave up on her salad and turned around to face the two men. It was a slow afternoon and she had nothing better to do with her time, so she said, 'I'll take a piece of that.'

'Hello there, Rainie.' Frank and Doug, friends for nearly fifty years, smiled as a single unit. Frank had bluer eyes in his sun-weathered face, but Doug had more hair. Both men wore red-checked western shirts with pearl snaps – their official dress shirts for an afternoon spent out on the town. In the winter, they topped their shirts with brown suede blazers and cream-colored cowboy hats. Rainie once accused them of trying to impersonate the Marlboro Man. At their ages, they took that as a compliment.

'Slow day?' Doug asked.

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‘Slow month. It’s May. The sun is out. Everyone is too damn happy to fight.’

‘Ahh, no juicy domestic disputes?’

‘Not even a quibble over whose dog is depositing what souvenirs in whose yard. If this good weather continues, I’m gonna be out of a job.’

‘A beautiful woman like you doesn’t need a job,’ Frank said. ‘You need a *man*.’

‘Yeah? And after thirty seconds, what would I do?’

Frank and Doug chortled; Rainie winked. She liked Frank and Doug. Every Tuesday for as long as she could remember, she would find them sitting at that booth in this diner at precisely one P.M. The sun rose, the sun set. Frank and Doug ate Martha’s Tuesday meatloaf special. It worked.

Now Rainie tossed ten bucks into the pot in Chuckie’s favor. She’d seen the young Don Juan in action before, and Bakersville’s young ladies simply loved his dimpled smile.

‘So what d’you think of the new volunteer?’ Doug asked, jerking his head toward the lunch counter.

‘What’s there to think? Writing traffic tickets isn’t brain surgery.’

‘Heard you two had a little encounter with a German shepherd last week,’ Frank said.

Rainie grimaced. ‘Rabies. Damn fine animal too.’

‘Did he really charge Romeo?’

‘All ninety pounds.’

‘We heard Chuckie ’bout peed his pants.’

‘I don’t think Chuckie likes dogs.’

‘Walt said you took the shepherd out. Clean shot to the head.’

‘That’s why they pay me the big bucks – so I can counsel drunks and shoot household pets.’

‘Come on, Rainie. Walt said it was a tough shot. Those dogs move *fast*. Chuckie indebted to you now?’

Rainie eyed the rookie, still puffed up like a rooster at the lunch counter. She said, ‘I think Chuckie’s scared *shitless* of me now.’

Frank and Doug laughed again. Then Frank leaned forward, a gleam in his old blue eyes as he started fishing for real gossip.

‘Shep must like having more help,’ he said meaningfully.

Rainie eyed the bait, then refused the offer. ‘All sheriffs like getting people willing to work for free,’ she said neutrally. It was true enough. Bakersville’s modest budget allowed for only one full-time sheriff and two full-time officers – Rainie and Luke Hayes. The other six patrolmen were strictly volunteers. They not only donated their time for free, but they paid for their own training, uniforms, vests, and guns. Lots of small towns used this system. After all, the majority of calls dealt with domestic disputes and crimes against property. Nothing a few good people with level heads couldn’t handle.

‘I hear Shep is cutting back his hours,’ Doug prompted.

‘I don’t keep track.’

‘Come on, Rainie. Everyone knows Shep and Sandy are having their differences. Is he working on patching things up? Getting more comfortable with his wife having a job?’

‘I just write up civil incidents, Frank. No spying for the taxpayers here.’

‘Ahh, give us a hint. We’re going to the barbershop next, you know. Walt gives free haircuts if you provide fresh news.’

Rainie rolled her eyes. ‘Walt already knows more than I do. Who do you think *we* call for information?’

‘Walt does know everything,’ Frank grumbled. ‘Maybe we should open up a barbershop. Hell, any kind of moron oughtta be able to cut hair.’

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Rainie looked down at the two men's hands, twisted from a lifetime of hard work and swollen by a decade of arthritis. 'I'd come in,' she said bravely.

'See there, Doug. We could also pick up chicks.'

Doug was impressed. He began contemplating the details, and Rainie decided it was time to exit stage right. She swiveled back around in her booth with a parting smile, then glanced at her watch. 1:30 P.M. No calls coming in, no reports from the morning to be written up. An unusually slow morning in an already slow town. She looked at Chuckie, whose cheeks had to be aching from that smile.

'Wrap it up, rookie,' she muttered, and drummed her fingertips restlessly.

Unlike Charles Cunningham, Rainie had never planned on becoming a cop. When she'd graduated from Bakersville High School, her first thought had been to get the hell out of dairyland. She'd had eighteen years of claustrophobia building up inside her and no family left to keep her chained. Freedom, that's what she needed. No more ghosts, or so she'd thought.

Rainie had boarded the first bus to Portland, where she'd enrolled at Portland State University and studied psychology. She'd liked her classes. She'd liked the young city brimming with cooking schools and art institutes and 'alternative lifestyles'. She'd gotten involved in a heady affair with a thirty-four-year-old assistant district attorney who'd driven a Porsche.

Nights spent taking over the wheel of the high-performance vehicle with all the windows rolled down. Putting the pedal to the metal and streaking up the sharp corners of Skyline Boulevard with the wind in her hair. Climbing higher, higher, higher, pushing harder, harder, harder. Searching for... something.

Then, when they finally crested the top of the hill, the city spreading out like a blanket of stars, pulling over and stripping off clothes as they furiously fucked amid gear-shifts and bucket seats.

Later, Howie would drive Rainie home, where she'd pop open a six-pack of beer alone, though she of all people knew better.

Rainie glanced at her watch again. 'Come on, Chuckie. It's not like Cindy's going anywhere.'

The radio on Rainie's belt crackled to life. Finally, she thought with genuine relief, some action.

'One-five, one-five. Calling one-five.'

Rainie picked up the radio, already sliding out of the booth. 'One-five here, go ahead.'

'We have a report of an incident at the K-through-eight school. Wait . . . hang on.'

Rainie frowned. She could hear noises in the background, as if dispatch had her own radio up very high or a phone next to the radio receiver. Rainie heard static and shouts. Then she heard four distinct popping sounds. Gunshots.

What the hell?

Rainie strode toward Chuck, turning him around just as dispatch came on again. For the first time in eight years, Linda Ames sounded frazzled.

'All units, all units. Reports of gunfire from Bakersville's K-through-eight. Reports . . . blood loss . . . blood in the halls. Calling six-oh . . . six-oh . . . Walt, bring the damn ambulance! I'm securing channel three. I think it's a school shooting. Oh my God, we're having a school shooting!'

Rainie got Chuck out of the diner. He looked pale and shocked. She waited to feel something but came up empty. There was a faint ringing in her ears. She ignored it as she slid

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into the old police sedan, buckled up, and reached automatically for the sirens.

‘I don’t understand,’ Chuckie murmured. ‘A school shooting? We don’t have school shootings.’

‘Keep the radio on channel three. That’s the designated channel, and all information will pass through there.’ Rainie slammed the car into gear and pulled out. They were on Main Street, a good fifteen minutes away from Bakersville’s K–8, and Rainie knew that a lot could happen in fifteen minutes.

‘We can’t be having a school shooting,’ Chuckie continued, babbling. ‘Hell, we don’t even have gangs, or drugs, or . . . or *homicides*, for that matter. Dispatch must be confused.’

‘Yeah,’ Rainie said quietly, though the ringing was growing in her ears. It had been years since she’d heard that sound. Years since she’d been a little girl, coming home from school and knowing from the first step into the doorway, the first note of foreboding in her eardrums, that her mother was already drunk and this was going to be bad.

You’re a cop now, Rainie. You’re in control.

Suddenly, she desperately needed to hold a bottle of beer.

The radio crackled again. Sheriff Shep O’Grady’s voice came on as Rainie cleared the first light on Main Street. ‘One-five, one-five, what is your position?’

‘Twelve minutes out,’ Rainie responded, weaving sharply around one double-parked car and barely squeaking by the next.

‘One-five, switch to channel four.’

Rainie looked at Chuckie. The rookie made the switch to the private channel. Shep’s voice returned. He didn’t sound as calm anymore. ‘Rainie, you gotta get here faster.’

‘We were at Martha’s. I’m coming as fast as I can. You?’

‘Six minutes out. Too damn far. Linda sent the rest of the

officers scrambling, but most gotta run home for their vests and sidearms. Nearest county officer is probably twenty minutes away, and state a good thirty to forty minutes. If this really is a major incident . . .’ His voice trailed off; then he said abruptly, ‘Rainie, you need to be the primary.’

‘I can’t be the primary. I don’t have any experience.’ Rainie glanced at Chuck, who appeared equally confused. The sheriff was always the primary on the case. That was procedure.

‘You have more experience than anyone else,’ Shep was saying.

‘My mother doesn’t count—’

‘Rainie, I’m not sure what’s really going down at the school, but if it’s a shooting . . . My kids are there, Rainie. You can’t ask me not to think about my children.’

Rainie fell silent. After eight years of working with Shep, she knew his two children as well as a favorite niece and nephew. Eight-year-old Becky was horse crazy. Thirteen-year-old Danny loved to spend free afternoons at the tiny police station. Once, Rainie had given the boy a plastic sheriff’s star. He’d worn it for nearly six months and demanded to sit beside Rainie whenever she came over to dinner. They were great kids. Two great kids in a building filled with two hundred and fifty other great kids. Not one above the age of fourteen . . .

Not in Bakersville. Chuckie was right: These things couldn’t be happening in Bakersville.

Rainie said quietly, ‘I’ll be the primary.’

‘Thanks, Rainie. Knew I could count on you.’

The radio clicked off. Rainie hit another red light and had to tap the brakes to slow. Fortunately, cross-traffic saw her coming and halted right away. She was vaguely aware of the other drivers’ concerned expressions. Police sirens on Main

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Street? You never heard police sirens on Main Street. They still had a good ten-minute drive, and now she was genuinely concerned that that might be too long . . . too late.

Two hundred and fifty little kids . . .

‘Turn back to channel three,’ she told Chuckie. ‘Order the medics docked.’

‘But there’s a report of blood—’

‘Medics are docked until the scene is secured. That’s the drill.’

Chuck did as he was told.

‘Get dispatch on. Request full backup. I’m sure the state and county boys have heard, and I don’t want there to be any confusion – we’ll take all the help we can get.’ She paused, sifting through her memory to classes taken eight years ago in a musty classroom in Salem, Oregon, where she had been the only woman among thirty men. Full-scale mobilization. Procedure for possible large-scale casualties. Things that had seemed strange to be studying at the time.

‘Ask local hospitals to be on alert,’ she murmured. ‘Tell the medics to contact the local blood bank in case they need to boost supply. Linda needs to request SWAT coverage. Oh, and tell the state Crime Scene Unit to be ready to roll. Just in case.’

Dispatch returned before Chuckie could pick up the radio. Linda sounded shrill. ‘We have calls of shots still being fired. No information on shooter. No information on casualties. We have reports of a man in black at the scene. Shooter may be in the area. Proceed with caution. Please, please, proceed with caution.’

‘A man?’ Chuck said hoarsely. ‘I thought it would be a student. It’s always a student.’

Rainie finally hit the rural highway on the edge of downtown

and opened the car up to eighty miles per hour. They were on their way now. Seven minutes and counting. Chuck picked up the radio and ran through the list of orders.

Rainie started thinking of the other communities and schools she'd seen in the news without completely understanding. Even Springfield, Oregon, had seemed far away. It was a city, and everyone knew cities had their problems. That's why people moved to Bakersville. Nothing bad was ever supposed to happen here.

But you already knew better, didn't you, Rainie? You of all people should've known.

Chuckie was done with the radio. Now his lips moved in silent prayer. Rainie had to look away.

'I'm coming,' she murmured to the children she could see clearly in her mind. 'I'm coming as fast as I can.'

On Tuesday afternoon, Sandy O'Grady was trying hard to get some market-research reports done and was failing miserably. Sitting in a small corner office – a former bedroom of a converted Victorian home – she spent more time gazing out the window than at the stack of reports piled high on her scarred oak desk.

The day was beautiful, not a cloud in sight. A true rarity in a state with so much rain that the locals affectionately referred to it as liquid sunshine. The temperature was mild too. Not as cool as it could be in spring, but not so warm that it started pulling in all the tourists and spoiling the mood.

The day was perfect, a rare treat for all of Bakersville's citizens, who endured all the other days too – the rainy autumns, the icy winters, the mudslides that sometimes closed the mountain passes, and the spring floods that threatened to destroy all the fertile fields. One good day out of a hundred,

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her daddy would have noted ironically. But he would've been the first to say it was enough.

Sandra had lived in Bakersville all her life, and there was no other place she'd want to raise her family. Nestled between Oregon's Coastal Range on the east and the Pacific Ocean on the west, the valley boasted lush, rolling hills dotted by black and white Holsteins and ringed by towering green mountains. The dairy cows outnumbered the people two to one. The family farm still endured as a way of life. People knew one another and took part in their neighbors' lives. There were beaches for summer fun and hiking paths for fall glory. For dinner, you could have freshly caught crab, followed by a bowl of freshly picked strawberries topped off with freshly made cream. Not at all a bad life.

In the end, the only complaint Sandra had ever heard about her community was the weather. The endlessly gray winters, the thick, pea-soup fog that seemed to weigh some folks down. Sandy, however, even loved the gray, misty mornings when the mountains barely peeked over their flannel shrouds and the world was wrapped in silence.

When she and Shep had been newlyweds, they would go on walks in the early morning hours, before he had to report for duty. They'd layer up in barn coats and black rubber boots and wade through dew-heavy fields, feeling the fog like a silky caress against their cheeks. Once, when Sandy was four months pregnant and her hormones were raging out of control, they'd made love in the mist, rolling beneath an old oak tree and soaking themselves to the bone. Shep had looked at her with such awe and wonder. And she had wrapped her arms tight around his lean waist, listening to his fast-beating heart and daydreaming about the child growing in her belly. Would it be a boy or a girl? Would it have her curly blond hair or Shep's

thick brown locks? How would it feel to have a tiny life nursing at her breast?

It had been a magic moment. Unfortunately, their marriage had not seen many of those since.

A knock at her door. Sandy pulled her gaze guiltily from the window and saw her boss, Mitchell Adams, leaning against the old bull's-eye molding. He had his ankles crossed and his hands thrust deep into the pants pockets of a three-thousand-dollar charcoal-colored suit. Dark hair just brushed his collar in the back, and his lean cheeks were freshly shaved. Mitchell Adams was one of those men who always looked good, whether he wore Armani or L. L. Bean. Shep had hated him on sight.

'How are those reports coming?' Mitch asked. In spite of Shep's concern, Mitchell was one-hundred-percent business. He had not hired Sandy because she remained lithe and beautiful even at forty. He had hired her because he'd realized that the former homecoming queen had a brain in her head and a need to succeed. When Sandy had tried explaining this to Shep, he simply hated Mitchell more.

'The meeting with Wal-Mart is tomorrow,' Mitch was saying. 'If we're really going to convince them to move into our town, we have to have our numbers in order.'

'So I'd better get the numbers in order.'

'How far along are you?'

She hesitated. 'I'm getting there.' Code for she hadn't gotten a damn thing done. Code for she'd had another big fight with Shep last night. Code for she'd be staying late to get the reports done, and that would generate yet another argument with her husband, and she didn't feel as if she could win anymore. But she was too Catholic to do anything different, and so was Shep.

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They just kept going around and around, and now Becky was spending all her time sequestered in her room with an army of stuffed animals she believed could talk, while Danny spent more and more time playing on the Internet in the school's computer room. He'd told Sandy that he was earning extra credit from Miss Avalon. But both Sandy and Shep suspected that their son didn't want to come home anymore. Then last month there had been the incident with the lockers . . .

Sandy was unconsciously rubbing her temples. Mitchell took a small step into the room, then caught himself and moved back.

'By tomorrow morning,' he said quietly.

'Absolutely. First thing in the morning. I know how important the meeting is.'

He finally nodded, though Sandy could tell he wasn't satisfied. She didn't know what else she could say. That was her life these days. No one was completely satisfied – not her boss, her husband, or her kids. She kept telling herself that if she could just hang in there a little longer, things would work out. The meeting with Wal-Mart was something they'd been working on for nine months. Keeping late hours, burning the midnight oil. But if it went well, a lot of money would be pouring in. The commercial real estate company could finally hire more employees. Sandy would probably take home a nice-size bonus. Shep might finally notice she had real abilities and ambitions, just like him.

One forty-five P.M. Sandy got up and closed the blinds on her window, hoping that would help her focus. She poured herself a glass of water, picked up a pen, and prepared to get serious.

She'd just started reviewing the market data when the phone

at her elbow rang. She picked it up absently, one half of her mind still processing numbers. She was not prepared for what she heard.

Lucy Talbot sounded hysterical. ‘Sandy, Sandy! Oh thank God I reached you! There’s been a shooting, at the school. Some man, they claim he’s run away. I heard it on the radio. There’s blood in the halls. Students, faculty, I don’t know who. People are running in from everywhere. You gotta get there quick!’

Sandy didn’t remember hanging up or grabbing her purse or yelling to Mitchell that she had to go.

What she remembered was running. She had to get to the school. She had to get to Danny and Becky.

And she remembered thinking for the first time in a long time that she was glad Shep O’Grady was her husband. Their children needed him.