

## THE THIRD VICTIM

### CHAPTER ONE

**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.

"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."

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.

© 2001 by Lisa Gardner  
All Rights Reserved