

The Survivors Club

Lisa Gardner

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

I

Jersey

The blonde caught in the sights of the Leupold Vari-X III 1.5-5 x 20mm Matte Duplex Illuminated Reticle scope didn't seem to fear for her life. At the moment, in fact, she was doing her hair. Now she had out a black compact and was checking her lipstick, a light, pearly pink. Jersey adjusted the Leupold scope as the reporter pursed her lips for her own reflection and practiced an alluring pout. Next to her, her cameraman let his heavy video equipment fall from his shoulder to the ground and rolled his eyes. Apparently, he recognized this drill and knew it would be a while.

Ten feet away from the blonde, another reporter, this one male – WNAC-TV, home of the Fox *Futurecast*, because heaven forbid anyone call it a *forecast* anymore – was meticulously picking pieces of lint off of his mud-brown suit. His cameraman sat in the grass, sipping Dunkin' Donuts coffee and blinking sleepily. On the other side of the stone pillar that dominated the sprawling World War Memorial Park, a dozen other reporters were scattered about, double-checking their copy, double-checking their appearance, yawning tiredly, then double-checking the street.

Eight-oh-one A.M., Monday morning. At least twenty-nine minutes until the blue van from Adult Correctional Institutions (ACI) was due to arrive at the Licht Judicial Complex in downtown Providence and everyone was bored. Hell, Jersey was bored. He'd been camped out on the roof of the sprawling brick courthouse since midnight last night. And damn, it got *cold* at night this early in May.

Three Army blankets, a black coverall, and black leather Bob Allen shooting gloves and he still shivered until the sun came up. That was a little before six, meaning he'd had two and a half more hours to kill and not even the chance to stand up and stretch without giving his position away.

Jersey had spent the night – and now the morning – hunkered behind a two-foot-high decorative-brick trim piece that lined this section of the courthouse's roof. The faux railing afforded him just enough cover to remain invisible to people in the courtyard below, and more importantly, to the reporters camped in the grassy memorial park across the street. The railing also offered the perfect rifle stand, for when the moment came.

Sometime between 8:30 and 9:00 A.M., the blue ACI van would pull up. The eight-foot-high wrought-iron gate that surrounded the inner courtyard of the judicial complex would open up. The van would pull in. The gate would swing shut. The van doors would open. And then . . .

Jersey's finger twitched on the trigger of the heavy barrel AR15. He caught himself, then eased his grip on the assault rifle, slightly surprised by his antsiness. It wasn't like him to rush. Calm and controlled, he told himself. Easy does it. Nothing here he hadn't done before. Nothing here he couldn't handle.

Jersey had been hunting since the time he could walk, the scent of gunpowder as reassuring to him as talcum. Following in his father's footsteps, he'd joined the Army at the age of eighteen, then spent eight years honing his abilities with an M16. Not to brag, but Jersey could take out targets at five hundred yards most guys couldn't hit at one hundred. He was also a member of the Quarter Inch Club – at two hundred yards, he could cluster three shots within a quarter-inch triangulation of one another. His father had been an American sniper in 'Nam, so Jersey figured that shooting was in his genes.

Five years ago, seeking a better lifestyle than the Army could afford him, he'd opened shop. He used a double-blind policy. The clients never knew his name, he never knew

theirs. A first middleman contacted a second middleman who contacted Jersey. Money was wired to appropriate accounts. Dossiers bearing pertinent information were sent to temporary P.O. boxes opened at various MAIL BOXES ETC. stores under various aliases. Jersey had a rule about not hitting women or children. Some days he thought that made him a good person. Other days he thought that made him worse, because he used that policy to try to prove to himself that he did have a conscience when the bottom line was, well, you know – he killed people for money.

If his father knew, he definitely wouldn't approve.

This gig had come along five months ago. Jersey had been instantly intrigued. For one thing, the target was a genuine, bona fide rapist, so Jersey didn't have to worry about his conscience. For another thing, the job was in Providence, and Jersey had always wanted to visit the Ocean State. He'd made four separate trips to the city to scope out the job, and thus far, he liked what he saw.

Providence was a small city, bisected by the Providence River, where, no kidding, they ran gondola rides on select Friday and Saturday nights. The slick black boats looked straight out of Venice, and the mayor even had a bunch of good ol' Italian boys manning the vessels in black-striped shirts and red-banded strawhats. Then there was this thing called WaterFire, where they lit bonfires in the middle of the river. You could sit out at your favorite restaurant and watch the river burn while tourists bounced around the flames in gondolas. Jersey had been secretly hoping someone would catch on fire, but hey, that was just him.

The city was pretty. This courthouse, on the east side of the river, was an impressive red-brick structure with a soaring white clock tower that dominated an entire city block. Old world colonial meets new world grandeur. The front of the courthouse sat on Benefit Street, which seemed to be a mile-long advertisement for old money – huge historical homes featuring everything from Victorian turrets to Gothic stone, interspersed with green lawns and neatly constructed brick walls. The back of the courthouse, where Jer-

sey was, overlooked the sprawling memorial park, the grassy expanse littered with dignified bronze sculptures of soldiers and significantly less dignified pieces of modern art. The modern art carried over to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), with its urban campus stretching alongside the courthouse.

Rhode Island didn't have much in the way of violent crime. Thirty homicides a year, something like that. Of course, that would change today. The state was better known for its long history of financial crimes, Mafia connections and political corruption. As the locals liked to say, in Rhode Island it isn't what you know, but who you know. And in all honesty, everyone did seem to know one another in this state. Frankly, it freaked Jersey out.

Jersey started to yawn again, caught it this time and forced himself to snap to attention. Eight twenty-one A.M. now. Not much longer. On the grass across the street, the various news teams were beginning to stir.

Last night, before coming to the courthouse, Jersey had sat in his hotel room and flipped back and forth between all the local news shows, trying to learn the various media personalities. He didn't recognize the pretty blonde down below, though her cameraman's shirt indicated that they were with WJAR, News Team 10, the local NBC affiliate. Network news. That was respectable. Jersey was happy for her.

Then he wondered if the woman had any idea just how big her morning was about to become. His target, Eddie Como, aka the College Hill Rapist, was major news in the Ocean State. Everyone was here to cover the start of the trial. Everyone was here to capture shots of slightly built, hunch-shouldered Eddie, or maybe get a glimpse of one of his three beautiful victims.

These reporters didn't know anything yet. About Jersey. About his client. About what was really going to happen this sunny Monday morning in May. It made Jersey feel benevolent toward all the bored, overhyped, overgroomed individuals gathered on the grass below. He had a treat for

them. He was about to make one of them, some of them, very special.

Take this pretty little blonde with the pearly pink lips. She was up first thing this morning, armed with canned copy and thinking that at best, she'd get a shot of the blue ACI van for the morning news at her station. Of course, the other twenty reporters would shoot the same visual with pretty much the same copy, nobody being any better than anyone else, and nobody being any worse. Just another day on the job, covering what needed to be covered for all the enquiring minds that wanted to know.

Except that someone down in that park, sitting on the grass, surrounded by war memorials and freakish exhibits of modern art, was going to get a scoop this morning. Someone, maybe that pretty little blonde, was going to show up to get a routine clip of a blue ACI van, and come away with a picture of a hired gun instead.

There was no way around it. The only time Jersey would have access to Eddie Como was when the alleged rapist was moved from the ACI to the Licht Judicial Complex on the opening day of his trial. And the only time Jersey would have access at the Licht Judicial Complex was when Eddie was unloaded from the ACI van within a fenced-off drop-off roughly the size of a two-car garage. And the only way Jersey could shoot into a drop-off zone enclosed by an eight-foot-high fence was to shoot down at the target.

The massive red-brick courthouse took up an entire city block. Soaring up to sixteen stories high with swooping red-brick wings, it towered above its fellow buildings and zealously protected its back courtyard and the all-important drop-off zone. So Jersey's options had been clear from the beginning. He would have to access the courthouse itself, easily done in the cover of night once he learned the routine of the Capital Security guards.

He would have to take up position on the sixth-story roofline immediately overlooking the drop-off point to have a clean shot down into the fenced-off area. He would have to line up the shot in the cover of darkness. And then,

when the van finally arrived sometime between 8:30 and 9:00 A.M., he would have five seconds to stand, blow off the top of Eddie Como's head and start running.

Because while the state marshals who escorted the inmates probably wouldn't be able to see him – the angle would be too steep – and while the prisoners themselves wouldn't be able to see him – they would probably be too busy screaming at all the brains now sprayed in their hair – the reporters, every single greedy, desperate-for-a-scoop reporter camped across the street – they would have a clear view of Jersey standing six stories up. Jersey firing a rifle six stories up. Jersey running across the vast roofline six stories up.

The shot itself was going to be easy. A mere seventy feet. Straight down. Hell, Jersey should forget the assault rifle and drop an anvil on the guy's head. Yeah, the shot itself was downright boring. But the moments afterward . . . The moments afterward were going to be really entertaining.

A disturbance down the street. Jersey flicked back to the pretty blonde in time to see her drop her lipstick and scramble forward. Show time.

He glanced at his watch. Eight thirty-five A.M. Apparently, the state marshals didn't want to keep the reporters waiting.

Jersey brought his rifle back down against him. He adjusted the scope to 1.5, all he would need for a seventy-foot head shot. He checked the twenty-cartridge magazine, then chambered the first round. He was using Winchester's .223 Remington, a 55-grain soft-point bullet, which according to the box was best for shooting prairie dogs, coyotes and woodchucks.

And now, the College Hill Rapist.

Jersey got on his knees. He positioned the rifle along the top of the rail, then placed his eye against the scope. He could just make out the street through the stone archways lining the outer courtyard. He heard, more than saw, the black wrought-iron fence of the inner courtyard swing open. Calm and controlled. Easy does it. Nothing here he

hadn't done before. Nothing here he couldn't handle.

He flexed his fingers. He listened to the reassuring crinkle of his black leather shooting gloves . . .

The prisoners would be shackled together like a chain gang. Most would be in khaki or blue prison overalls. But Eddie Como would be different. Facing the first day of trial, Eddie Como would arrive in a suit.

Jersey waited for the barking sound of a state marshal ordering the unloading of the van. He felt the first prick of sweat. But he didn't pop up. He still didn't squeeze the trigger.

Twenty reporters and cameramen across the street. Twenty journalists just waiting for their big break . . .

“Courtyard secure! Door open!”

Jersey heard the rasp of metal as the van door slid back. He heard the slap of the first rubber-soled shoe hitting the flagstone patio . . .

One, two, three, four, five . . .

Jersey rocketed up from his knees and angled the AR15 twenty-two degrees from vertical. Searching, searching . . .

The dark head of Eddie Como emerged from the van. He was gazing forward, looking at the door of the courthouse. His shoulders were down. He took three shuffling steps forward –

And Jersey blew off the top of his head. One moment Eddie Como was standing shackled between two guys. The next he was folding up silently and plummeting to the hard, slate-covered ground.

Jersey let the black-market rifle fall to the roof. Then he began to run.

He was aware of so many things at once. The feel of the sun on his face. The smell of cordite in the air. The noise of a city about to start a busy workweek, cars roaring, cars screeching. And then, almost as an afterthought, people beginning to scream.

“Gun, gun, gun!”

“Get down, get down!”

“Look! Up there. On the roof!”

Jersey was smiling. Jersey was feeling good. He clam-

bered across the courthouse roof, the gummy soles of his rock-climbing shoes finding perfect traction. He turned the corner and rounded the center clock tower, which rose another several stories. *Now you see me. Now you don't.*

Shots fired. Some overpumped state marshals shooting their wad at an enemy they couldn't see.

Jersey's smile grew. He hummed now as he stripped off his gloves and cast them behind him. Almost at the rooftop door. He grabbed the front of his black coveralls with his left hand and popped open the snaps. Three seconds later, the black coveralls joined his discarded rifle and gloves on the rooftop. Five seconds after that, Jersey had replaced his rock climber's shoes with highly polished Italian loafers. Then it was a simple matter of reclaiming the black leather briefcase he'd left by the rooftop door. Last night, the briefcase had contained the dismantled parts of an AR15. This morning, it held only business papers.

From world-class sniper to just one more guy in a suit in five minutes or less.

Jersey pulled open the rooftop door. He'd jammed the lock with wire last night so it would be ready for him. Moments later, he was down the stairs and joining the main traffic flow, just another harried lawyer too busy to look anyone in the eye.

Capital Security guards and state marshals rushed by. People inside the courthouse were looking around, becoming increasingly aware that something had happened but not sure what. Jersey, following their example, pasted a slightly puzzled expression on his face as he journeyed forth.

Another gray-clad marshal sprinted by him, voices screaming from the radio at the man's waist. He hit Jersey's shoulder, knocking him back. Jersey spluttered, "Excuse me!" The state marshal kept running for the stairs leading to the roof.

"What happened?" a lady walking next to Jersey asked.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Must be something bad."

They exchanged vigorous nods. And thirty-two seconds later, Jersey was out the front door, taking a left and heading

back down steeply pitched College Street toward the memorial park. He resumed humming now, in the homestretch. Even if some police officer stopped him, what would the officer find? Jersey had no weapons, no trace of gunpowder on his hands or clothes. He was just a businessman, and he always carried valid ID.

The screech of sirens abruptly split the air. The city wasn't big and the Providence Police had their headquarters downtown. Cops would be streaming in from all over, roadblocks just a matter of time. Jersey picked up his step but remained calm. His thoughtful client, no doubt familiar with the parking crunch in downtown Providence, had sent Jersey a RISD visitor's pass for the parking lot just across the street. The cops would be here in two minutes. Jersey would be gone in one.

The sirens roared closer. Jersey arrived at the tiny college parking lot at the base of College Street and South Main. Found his key for the blue rental car. Unlocked the doors, threw in his briefcase, slid into the seat.

Calm and controlled. Easy does it. Nothing here he hadn't done before. Nothing here he couldn't handle.

Jersey turned the key in the ignition. And then, he heard the *click*.

One frozen instant in time. His eyes widening, his bewilderment honest. But, but, the double-blind policy. Nobody knew his name. He never knew theirs. How could, how could . . .

And then his eyes went to the red visitor's parking pass hanging from his rental-car mirror, the lone visitor's pass in a minuscule city parking lot of only twenty vehicles.

His client's thoughtfulness . . .

Calm and controlled, Jersey thought helplessly. Easy does it. Nothing here he hadn't done before. Nothing here he couldn't handle . . .

The current from the car's starter box hit the electrical ignition switch of the custom-made bomb, and Jersey's rental car exploded into the bright morning sky.

*

A dozen city blocks away, on Hope Street, the well-groomed patrons of the trendy restaurant rue de l'espoir – made even trendier by its all-lowercase name – looked up from their decadent business breakfasts of eggs Benedict and inch-thick slices of French toast. Sitting in comfy booths, they now gazed around the rich, earthy interior where the walls were the same color as aged copper pots and the booths were decorated in hues of red, green, brown and eggplant. The tremor, though slight, had been unmistakable. Even the waitresses had stopped in their tracks.

“Did you feel that?” one of the servers asked.

The people in the chic little restaurant looked at each other. They had just started to shrug away the minor disturbance when the harsh sound of screaming sirens cut the air. Two cop cars went flying down the street. An ambulance roared by in their wake.

“Something must have happened,” someone said.

“Something big,” another patron echoed.

Sitting at a small table tucked alone in the far corner, three women finally looked up from their oversized mugs of spiced chai. Two were older, one was younger. All three had caused a minor stir when they had walked through the door. Now the women looked at one another. Then, simultaneously, they looked away.

“I wonder,” said one.

“Don't,” said another.

And that was all they said.

Until the cops came.