

# Two

Cool under pressure. If they posted employment ads for hitmen, that'd be the number two requirement, right after detail-oriented. A good hitman must possess the perfect blend of personality type A and B traits, a control freak who obsesses over every clothing fiber yet projects the demeanor of the most laid-back slacker. After pulling a hit, I can walk past police officers without so much as a twitch in my heart rate. I'd love to chalk it up to nerves of steel, but the truth is I just don't rattle that easily.

But driving up to the U.S./Canada border that morning, I was so rattled I could hear my fillings clanking. How could Moretti's hit be mistaken for the work of some psycho? Any cop knows the difference between a professional hit and a serial killing.

Had I unintentionally copied part of the killer's MO? The case had been plastered across the airwaves and newspapers for a week now, but I'd behaved myself. If an update came on the radio, I'd changed the station. If the paper printed an article, I'd flipped past it. It hadn't been easy. Few aspects of American culture are as popular with the Canadian media as crime. We lap it up with equal parts fascination and condescension: "What an incredible case. Thank God things like that hardly ever happen up here." But I no longer allowed myself to be fascinated. In

hindsight, it was a choice that warranted a special place on the overcrowded roster of “Nadia Stafford’s Regrettable Life Decisions.”

I’d driven all night, as I always did, eager to get home as soon as my work was done. It was just past seven now, with only a few short lines of early morning travelers at the border. As the queue inched forward, I rolled down my window, hoping the chill air would freeze-dry my sweat before I reached the booth. Somewhere to my left, a motorcycle revved its engine and my head jerked up.

Normally, crossing the border was no cause for alarm. Even post-9/11, it’s easy enough, so long as you have photo ID. Mine was the best money could buy. Half the time, the guards never gave it more than the most cursory glance. I’m a thirty-two-year-old, white, middle-class woman. Run me through a racial profile and you get “cross-border shopper.”

In light of the Helter Skelter killings, they’d probably look closer at everyone, but I had nothing to hide. I’d switched my New York-plated rental for my Ontario-plated one. I’d disposed of my disguise in New York. The Tomassinis paid me in uncut gemstones, which are small enough that I could hide them in places no border agent would normally look.

I pulled forward. Second in line now.

It would be fine. Let’s face it, how many terrorists enter Canada from the U.S.? Even illegal immigrants stream the other way. Yet even as I told myself this, the agent manning my booth waved the vehicle in front of me over to the search area. It was a minivan driven by a white-haired woman who could barely see over the steering wheel.

I assessed my chances of jumping into another line, where the agent might be in a better mood, but nothing says smuggler like lane-jumping.

I removed my sunglasses and pulled up to the booth.

The agent peered down from his chair. “Destination?”

“Heading home,” I said. “Hamilton.”

I lifted my ID, but didn’t hand it to him. Prepared, but not overeager.

“Where are you coming from?”

“Buffalo.”

“Purpose?”

“Shopping trip.”

“Length of stay?”

“Since Tuesday. Three days.”

Now, I could have easily combined all this information in one simple sentence, but I never liked to display too much familiarity with the routine.

“Bring anything back with you?”

I lifted a handful of receipts, all legitimate. “A couple of shirts, two CDs and a book. Oh, and a bottle of rum.”

The agent waved away the receipts, but did accept the proffered driver’s license. He looked at it, looked at me, looked back at it. It was my photo. A few years old but, hell, the last time I’d changed my hairstyle was in high school. I didn’t exactly ride the cutting edge of fashion.

“Passport?” he asked.

“Never had any use for one, I’m afraid. This is about as far from home as I get.” I dug into my purse and pulled out three other pieces of fake ID. “I have a library card, my health card, Social Insurance number . . .”

I held them up. The agent lifted his hand to wave the cards away, then stopped. The wordless mumbling of a distant radio announcer turned into clear English.

“—fifth victim of the Helter Skelter killer,” the DJ said.

“Sorry,” I murmured, and reached for my radio volume, only to find it already off.

The agent didn't hear me. He'd turned his full attention to the radio, which seemed to be coming from the truck on the other side of the booth. As the announcer continued, in every booth, every car, the occupants seemed locked in a collective pause, listening.

“Police are searching for a suspect seen in the vicinity. The suspect is believed to be a white male . . .”

I exhaled so hard I missed rest of the description.

“Although police are treating Dean Moretti's death as a homicide, they are dismissing rumors that he was the Helter Skelter killer's fifth victim. Yet speculation continues to mount after a witness at the scene claimed to have seen the killer's signature . . .”

The announcer's voice faded as the truck pulled away. I strained to hear the rest, but my agent had already turned back to me again.

I held up my fake ID, gripping them tightly to keep my hand steady. “Did you want to see . . .?”

The agent shook his head. “That's fine. You might want to think about getting a passport, though.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

The agent leaned out from his booth to check the backseat, gaze traveling over the crunched-up drive-through bag. Necessary cover. A spotless car can seem as suspicious as one piled hip high in trash.

I held my breath and waited for him to tell me to pull over.

“Have a nice day,” he said, and handed me my fake license.

In Fort Erie, I swapped the rental car for my own. Then I headed to the QEW, drove through Hamilton and kept going. My real destination was four hours away—past Toronto, past the suburbs, past the outlying cities.

I found CBC on my radio dial and kept it there, waiting for news of the Moretti case or the Helter Skelter killer in general. As I listened, my heartbeat revved as every news item concluded, certain the next one would be what I wanted.

For two weeks, this killer had been splashed across the news, even in Canada, and I'd been so damned good. I'd slammed the door shut, as I did on news of any particularly vicious or noteworthy crime, anything that might set a fresh match to that tamped-down fire in my gut.

But now I had an excuse to listen. An excuse to delve into the details of these crimes--and it was like a recovering alcoholic handed a champagne flute at a wedding and expected to offer a toast.

So I listened. And heard bitching about the softwood lumber dispute, bitching about the Kyoto Accord, bitching about the education funding formula, bitching about the provincial government, bitching about the federal government . . . No wonder immigrants landed here and hightailed it to the U.S. Our national broadcasts scared them away.

I stopped in Oshawa and grabbed a jumbo bag of Skittles, something sweet to keep my hands and mouth busy. Finally, as I got back into the car, the ten o'clock morning news brought word of the Moretti case.

“It is expected that police will provide a description of the man wanted in connection with yesterday’s subway killing. Authorities stress that the man is wanted only for questioning. He is not considered a suspect, but police believe he may have witnessed . . .”

Amazing how that “wanted for questioning” line actually works. I’ve known perps who’ve shown up at the station, thinking they’re being smart, then been genuinely shocked when the interview turns out to be an interrogation.

Unless they really were looking for a witness . . . What if someone had seen me? No. It had been a good hit, a clean hit.

The newscaster continued, “Yesterday’s subway killing is believed by some to be the fifth in a series of murders that began two weeks ago.”

Okay, here it comes. The recap. I turned up the volume another notch.

“The last confirmed victim was sixty-eight-year-old Mary Lee, who was found strangled in her Atlanta convenience store yesterday morning. Up next, a panel discussion on the problems with health care in this country . . .”

I whacked the volume button so hard it flew off and rolled under my feet.

Four killings in two weeks, in different states, seemed more like a cross-country spree killer than a serial killer. How were the police connecting the murders? Why would they think the hit on Moretti was part of the series? An elderly woman strangled in her shop and a Mafioso punk injected with potassium chloride in a subway? How did you connect those?

I spun the radio dial, searching for more information, but, for once, the media was silent.

In Peterborough, I stopped at my storage shed and dropped off my subcompact workmobile. A few blocks away, I picked up my regular wheels: an ancient Ford pickup. Then I left the city and drove north until the beautiful fall foliage ceased seeming jaw-droppingly spectacular and became merely monotonous. Ontario cottage country. My year-round home.

I slowed near a rough-hewn sign proclaiming Red Oak Lodge: No Vacancy. Well, that was a surprise. This time of year, the lodge was rarely at more than half-occupancy, even on weekends. Not that the lodge would make me rich anytime soon. It had yet to break even. In fact, my contract work with the Tomassinis was the only thing that kept it open.

Three years ago, I'd almost declared bankruptcy, hanging on for months fueled by a nearly irrational desperation. I'd destroyed my life once. To rebuild it only to lose it again?

When that first job offer from the Tomassinis came, under circumstances I can only chalk up to fate, I took it, and the lodge and I survived.

Distant staccato cracks of gunfire sent a pair of pheasants jetting into the sky. Red Oak used to be a hunting lodge. But hunting for sport went against my admittedly warped code of morality, so under my ownership, the lodge had been reborn as a wilderness retreat and state-of-the-art shooting club. I still played host to hunters—that was unavoidable if I wanted to stay afloat—but they had to bag their prey elsewhere.

I signaled my turn, but before I could steer into the lane, the roar of tires accelerating on dirt sounded behind me. I glanced in my rearview mirror to see a car pulling out to pass me. A small car, which around here meant tourists. I grimaced. Why come up for the autumn colors if you're not going to slow down enough to see them?

As the car zoomed up beside mine, gravel clinked against my fender. I raised my hand—my whole hand, not just my middle finger. Being semidependent on tourists for your livelihood means you can't afford to make obscene gestures, no matter how justifiable.

In midwave, I caught a glimpse of the driver. Dark-haired. Male. Features shaded into near-obscurity by the tinted glass, but the shape of his face familiar enough to warrant a double-take. The man leaned toward the window, so I could see him better.

“Jack?” I mouthed.

He nodded. I stopped the truck, but he'd already pulled away, message conveyed. He wanted to talk to me, but no such conversation would take place until the sun set.

Jack. Most professional killers prefer a nom de guerre with a bit more pizzazz. I swear, every frigging predator that survived the flood has a hitman namesake. A few years back there was one who called himself the Hornet. Didn't last long. In my profession, it's never a good omen to name yourself after something with a short life span. Most people assume Jack is short for something, maybe Jackal, but I figure Jack is exactly what it sounds like--the most boring code name the guy could think up.

In the world of professional killers, there are a million shades of mysterious. In my own zeal for secrecy, I'd be considered borderline paranoid. Compared to Jack, though, I might as well be advertising in the Yellow Pages with a photo. In the past two years, Jack had visited me over a dozen times and I'd never seen him in daylight. If he wanted to come by, he'd phone pretending to be my brother, Brad, which worked out well, since Brad himself last called me in '99. For Jack to just show up meant something was wrong, and I was sure that “something” had to do with the Moretti hit.