

# Mary

Mary Lee pushed open the shop door. A wave of humid heat rolled in. Another hot Atlanta night, refusing to give way to cooler fall weather.

Her gaze swept the darkened street, lingering enough to be cautious but not enough to look nervous. Beyond a dozen feet, she could see little more than blurred shapes. At Christmas, her children had presented her with a check for a cataract operation, but she'd handed it back. Keep it for something important, she'd said. For the grandchildren, for college or a wedding. So long as she could still read her morning paper and recognize her customers across the store counter, such an operation was a waste of good money.

As for the rest of the world, she'd seen it often enough. It didn't change. Like the view outside her shop door tonight. Though she couldn't make out the faces of the teenagers standing at the corner, she knew their shapes, knew their names, knew the names of their parents should they make trouble. They wouldn't, though; like dogs, they didn't soil their own territory.

As she laid her small trash bag at the curb, one of the blurry shapes lifted a hand. Mary waved back.

Before she could duck back into her store, Mr. Emery stepped from his coffee shop. His wide face split in a Santa Claus grin, a smile that kept many a customer from complaining about stale bread or cream a few days past its "best before" date.

"Going home early tonight, Miz Lee?" Emery asked.

“No, no.”

His big stomach shuddered in a deep sigh. “You gotta start taking it easy, Miz Lee. We’re not kids anymore. When’s the last time you locked up and went home at closing time?”

She smiled and shrugged . . . and reminded herself to take out the garbage earlier tomorrow, so she could be spared this timeworn speech. She murmured a “good night” to Mr. Emery, and escaped back into her shop.

Now it was her time. The customers gone, the shop door locked, and she could relax and get some real work done. She flipped on her radio, and turned up the volume.

Mary took the broom from behind the counter as “Johnny B Goode” gave way to “Love Me Tender.” Crooning along with Elvis, she swept a path through the faint pattern of dusty footprints.

Something flickered to her left, zipping around the side of her head like a diving mosquito. As her hand went up to swat it, she felt the prick at her throat, but it was cool, almost cold. A sharp pain, followed by a rush of heat. At first, she felt only a twinge of annoyance, her brain telling her it was yet another hiccup of age to add to her body’s growing repertoire. Then she couldn’t breathe.

Gasping, her hands flew to her throat. Sticky wet heat streamed over them. Blood? Why would her neck be—? As she bent forward, she noticed a reflection in the glass lid of the ice cream freezer. A man’s face above hers. His expression blank. No, not blank. Patient.

Mary opened her mouth to scream.

Darkness.

He lowered the old woman's body to the floor. To an onlooker, the gesture would seem gentle, loving, but it was just habit, putting her down carefully so she didn't fall with a thud. Not that anyone was around to hear it. Habit, again. Like unplugging the security camera even though, when he'd been surveying the shop, he'd noticed there was no tape in the recorder.

He left the wire embedded in the old woman's throat. Standard wire, available at every hardware store in the country, cut with equally standard wire cutters. He double- and triple-checked the paper overshoes on his boots, making sure he hadn't stepped in the puddle of blood and left a footprint. Not that it mattered. The boots would be gone by morning, but he looked anyway. Habit.

It took all of thirty seconds to run through the dozens of checks in his head, and reassure himself that he'd left nothing behind. Then he reached his gloved hand into his pocket and withdrew a square of plastic. He tore open the plastic wrapper and pulled out a folded sheet of paper within. Then he bent down, lifted the old woman's shirttail and tucked the paper inside her waistband.

After one final look around the scene, he walked past the cash register, past the bulging night-deposit bag, past the cartons of cigarettes and liquor, and headed out the back door.

# One

I twisted my fork through the blueberry pie and wished it was apple. I've never been fond of blueberry, not even when the berries were wild and fresh from the forest. These were fresh from a can.

Barry's Diner advertised itself as "home of the best blueberry pie in New York City." That should have been the tip-off, but the sign outside said only Award-Winning Homemade Pie." So I'd come in hoping for a slice of fresh apple pie and found myself amidst a sea of diners eating blueberry. Sure, the restaurant carried apple, but if everyone else was eating blueberry, I couldn't stand out by ordering something different. It didn't help that I had to accompany the pie with decaf coffee—in a place that seemed to brew only one pot and leave it simmering all day.

The regular coffee smelled great, but caffeine was off my menu today, so I settled for inhaling it as I nibbled the crust on my pie. At least that was homemade. I shifted on my seat, the vinyl-covered stool squeaking under me, the noise lost in the sounds of the diner—the clatter of china and silverware, the steady murmur of conversation regularly erupting in laughs or shouts. The door behind me opened with a tinkle of the bell, a gust of October air and a belch of exhaust fumes that stole that rich scent of fresh coffee.

A man in a dirt-encrusted ball cap clanked his metal lunch box onto the counter beside my plate. “He got another one last night. Number four. Police just confirmed it.”

I slanted my gaze his way, in case he was talking to me. He wasn’t, of course. I was invisible . . . or as close to it as a nonsuperhero could get, having donned the ultimate female disguise: no apparent makeup and thirty-five pounds of extra padding.

“Who’d he get this time?” the server asked as she poured coffee for the newcomer.

“Little old Chinese lady closing up her shop. Choked her with a wire.”

“Garroted,” said a man sitting farther down the counter.

“Gary who?”

The other man folded his newspaper, rustling it with a flourish. “Garroted. If you use something to strangle someone, it’s called garroting. The Spanish used it as a method of execution.”

I glanced at the speaker. A silver-haired man in a suit, manicured fingernails resting on his Wall Street Journal. Not the sort you’d expect to know the origin of the term “garroted.” Next thing you know, his neighbors would be on TV, telling the world he’d seemed like such a nice man.

They continued talking. I struggled to ignore them. Had to ignore them. I had a job to do, and couldn’t allow myself to be sidetracked, not by this.

It wasn’t easy. Words and phrases kept tumbling my way. Killer. Victim. Police. Investigation. No leads. I could, with effort, block the words, remind myself that they had nothing to do with me, but the voices weren’t so easy to push aside. Sharp with excitement, as if this was something they’d seen in a movie and the victims were nothing more than actors who,

when the credits rolled, would stand up, wash off the fake blood and grab a cigarette before heading home to their families.

The Helter Skelter killer. Even the name was catchy, almost jocular. I bet he was proud of it. He'd risen from the ranks of the unnamed and now he was someone--the Helter Skelter killer. I pictured him sitting in a coffee shop like this, eavesdropping on a conversation like this one, his heart tripping every time he heard his new name.

My hand tightened on my fork. A burr on the handle dug in. I let it, squeezed until pain forced my thoughts back on track. Then I took a deep breath and relaxed my grip.

It wasn't my concern. There were dozens of killers all across the continent, plotting crimes just as ruthless. Nothing to be done about it, and I was no longer in a position to try.

I took a swig of coffee. Bitter and burned, foul on my tongue, acid in my stomach. I took another gulp, deeper, almost draining the mug. Then I pushed it aside with my half-eaten pie, got to my feet and walked out.

I stood in the subway station and waited for Dean Moretti.

Moretti was a Mafia wannabe, a small-time thug with tenuous connections to the Tomassini crime family. Three months earlier, he had decided it was time to strike out on his own, so he'd made a deal with the nephew of a local drug lord. Together they'd set up business in a residential neighborhood previously untapped—probably because it was under the protection of the Riccio family.

When the Riccios found out, they went to the Tomassinis, who went to the drug lord, who decided, among the three of them, that this was not an acceptable entrepreneurial scheme. The

drug lord's nephew had caught the first plane to South America and was probably hiding in the jungle, living on fish and berries. Moretti wasn't so easily spooked, which probably speaks more to a lack of intelligence than an excess of nerve.

While I waited for him, I wandered about the platform, taking note of every post, every garbage can, every doorway. Busywork, really. I'd already scouted this station so well I could navigate it blindfolded, but I kept moving, checking and double-checking.

My stomach fluttered. Not fear. Anticipation. I kept moving, trying to work past it. There was no more room here for anticipation than there was for fear. It was a job. It had to be approached with cool, emotionless efficiency. You cannot enjoy this work. If you do, you step onto the fast slide to a place you'll never escape, become something you swore you'd never be.

I kept my brain busy with last-minute checks. There was one security camera down here, but an antiquated one, easy to avoid. I'd heard rumors of post-9/11 upgrades, but so far, this station had avoided them. Though I hadn't seen a uniformed transit cop, I knew there could be a plainclothes one, so I spotted the most likely suspects and stayed out of their way. Not that it mattered—in addition to the extra padding I was wearing a wig, colored contacts, eyeglasses and makeup to darken my skin tone.

I'd spent three days watching Moretti, long enough to know he was a man who liked routines. Right on schedule, he bounced down the subway steps, ready for his train home after a long day spent breaking kneecaps for a local bookie.

Partway down the stairs he stopped and surveyed the crowd below. His gaze paused on anyone of Italian ancestry, anyone wearing a trench coat, anyone carrying a bulky satchel, anyone who looked . . . dangerous. Too dumb to run, but not so dumb that he didn't know he was in deep shit with the Tomassinis. At work, he always had a partner with him. From here,

he'd take the subway to a house where he was bunking down with friends, taking refuge in numbers. This short trip was the only time he could be found alone, obviously having decided that public transit was safe enough.

As he scouted the crowd from the steps, people jostled him from behind, but he met their complaints with a snarl that sent them skittering around him. After a moment, he continued his descent into the subway pit. At the bottom, he cut through a group of young businessmen, then stopped beside a gaggle of careworn older women chattering in Spanish. He kept watching the crowd, but his gaze swept past me. The invisible woman.

I made my way across the platform, eyes straining to see down the tunnel, pretending to look for my train, flexing my hands as I allowed myself one last moment of anticipation. I closed my eyes and listened to the distant thumping of the oncoming train, felt the currents of air from the tunnel.

It was like standing in an airplane hatch, waiting to leap. Everything planned, checked, rechecked, every step of the next few minutes choreographed, the contingencies mapped out, should obstacles arise. Like skydiving, I controlled what I could, down to the most minute detail, creating the ordered perfection that set my mind at ease. Yet I knew that in a few seconds, when I made my move, I left some small bit to fate.

I inhaled deeply and concentrated on the moment, slowing my breathing, my pulse. Focusing.

No time to second-guess. No chance to turn back.

At the squeal of the approaching train, I opened my eyes, unclenched my hands and turned toward Moretti.



I quickened my pace until I was beside him. Tension blew off him in waves. His right hand was jammed into his pocket, undoubtedly fondling a nice piece of hardware.

The train headlights broke through the darkness.

Moretti stepped forward. I stepped on the heel of the woman in front of me. She stumbled. The crowd, pressed so tightly together, wobbled as one body. As I jostled against Moretti, my hand slid inside his open jacket. A deft jab followed by a clumsy shove as I “recovered” my balance. Moretti only grunted and pushed back, then clamored onto the train with the crowd.

I stepped onto the subway car, took a seat at the back, then disembarked at the next stop, merging with the crowd once again.

Job done. Payment collected. Equipment discarded. Time to go home . . . almost.

Outside the city, I sat in my rented car, drinking in my first unguarded moment in three days. Although the scent of the city was overpowering, I swore I could detect the faint smell of dying leaves and fresh air on the breeze. Wishful thinking, but I closed my eyes and basked in the fantasy, feeling the cold night air on my face.

This was my first hit without a gun. Distance shooting was my specialty, but my mentor, Jack, had been pushing me to try something else. Carrying a gun these days wasn't as easy as it had been five years ago, and there were times when using one just wasn't feasible. So he'd trained me in poison—which to choose, how to deliver it, how to carry the syringe and poison disguised as insulin. Then he'd encouraged me to find an excuse to try it. With Moretti, it hadn't been so much an excuse as a necessity.

The Tomassinis had confirmed that Moretti had suffered a fatal heart attack on the train. There had been some commotion and the police had been summoned, probably because Moretti had realized in his final moments that he'd been poisoned. That, Jack said, was a chance you took using concentrated potassium chloride in a public place, on a victim who knew he was a target. It didn't matter. With Moretti, the Tomassinis wanted to send a message, and it was clearer if his death wasn't mistaken for natural causes.

As for what else I felt after killing Moretti, I suppose there are many things one should feel in the aftermath of taking a life. Dean Moretti may have earned his death, but it would affect someone who didn't deserve the pain of loss—a mother, brother, girlfriend, someone who cared.

I knew that. I'd been there, knocking on the door of a parent, a spouse, a lover, seeing them crumple as I gave them the news. Your father was knifed by a strung-out junkie client. Your daughter was shot by a rival gang member. Your husband was killed by a man he tried to rob. I'd seen their grief, the pangs made all the worse by knowing they'd seen that violent end coming . . . and been unable to stop it.

Yet in this case, it was the other victims I saw—the teens Moretti sold drugs to, the lives he'd touched. Killing him didn't solve any problems, not on the scale they needed to be solved. It was like scooping water from the ocean. Yet, the next time the Tomassinis called, if the job was right, I'd be back. I had to.

It was the only thing that kept me sane.

On my way out of the city, as the lights of New York faded behind me, the radio DJ paused his endless prattle with a "special bulletin," announcing that the Helter Skelter killer may have struck again, this time in New York City. "Speculation is mounting that the Helter Skelter killer is responsible for the rush-hour subway death of Dean Moretti . . ."

My calm shattered and I nearly ran my car off the road.

# 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.