

# One

Below the belfry, the city sparkled, the late afternoon sun glinting off the skyscrapers, every surface dripping from a brief shower. A spectacular view...even through the scope of a sniper's rifle.

A pigeon landed on the ledge beneath the belfry, squawking about the rain. My eye still fixed to the scope, I reached into my pocket and tossed a handful of dried corn into the courtyard below. A flapping of wings told me he'd gone for it. The pigeons were one drawback to this perch. Fortunately, I'd noticed them when scouting and came prepared. I didn't want a sudden flurry of birds from the belfry telling onlookers exactly where the shot had come from.

The doors below opened onto the quiet side street and out at exactly five-thirty, walked Grant Beecham. A creature of habit, like most people. He was alone. I expected that, but found myself instinctively looking for bodyguards or well-armed friends. I was used to Mafia thugs who knew there was a mark on their heads, and never set foot outside alone.

But Beecham had no reason to think his life was in danger. He was just a pharmaceutical company researcher. Yes, he'd suppressed reports of fatalities in a new multiple sclerosis drug

study. But his confession came only after evidence was found in an illegal search, so it'd been ruled inadmissible, the case thrown out. He hadn't even been fired; he was too valuable.

Yes, there were devastated families who'd lost loved ones, but this wasn't the Wild West. Injured parties seek financial restitution through the courts, and you take the money and shut up. You don't use your payoff to hire a hitman.

Beecham's car rounded the corner. A Lincoln with a driver to take him to his big house in Forest Hill, maybe with a stop along the way to convince another desperate family that he could provide—under the table and for the right price—the suppressed miracle drug.

I pulled the trigger. The bullet passed through the base of his skull, killing him instantly.

I didn't wait to see him crumple to the sidewalk. Or to watch passersby look over warily, assessing the cut of his suit before deciding he wasn't drunk. By the time someone took out a cell phone, I would be halfway down the belfry stairs.

I moved as quickly and silently as I could. Not easy when the steps were so ancient each one protested under my weight.

Dust whirled in my wake. I was wearing disposable booties, the kind considerate furniture deliverers wear. They'd eliminate prints, but did nothing for the dust reaching my nose and eyes. At my second stifled sneeze, a head popped around the bottom flight. Quinn AKA the Boy Scout—though the latter wasn't used by anyone who wanted to get on his good side.

Beecham was Quinn's job. Vigilante work was the only kind he did, hence the unflattering alternate nom de guerre. Among professional killers, a vigilante—even one as solid as Quinn, is viewed with the same disdain a veteran beat cop has for an idealistic, college educated young detective. A prissy boy who wants to do a man's job without getting his hands dirty.

At six foot two, with a solid linebacker's physique, square face, stubborn jaw, and piercing eyes, Quinn didn't fit anyone's image of a "prissy boy." But few of the hitmen who scorned him had ever seen him. Like me, Quinn kept to himself, and for good reason. Killing criminals wasn't the only way Quinn pursued justice. He was a Federal agent. What branch, I had no idea. I didn't ask.

Most people in my profession would have a problem partnering with a cop, even one moonlighting as a hitman. I didn't. I came from a long line of law-enforcement officers. My life goal had been to join that family tradition. And I had . . . until seven years ago, when I shot a suspect pointblank, made national headlines and saw my life crash and burn.

As I rounded the last flight, Quinn backed inside. Gaze still fixed on the barren, trash-cluttered courtyard, he unbuttoned his dark overcoat to reveal a suit. I passed him the fake briefcase that housed my takedown rifle. As I tugged off my shoes, he backed in another step and gave me his arm for support. Off with the sneakers; on with pumps more suited to my slacks and blazer. There was more to our disguises than clothing, but that was all we changed.

I let go of his arm, then slung my leather knapsack of gear onto my shoulder. Quinn took my hand. We walked quickly through a narrow alley, then slowed to a stroll we stepped into a paved passage between office towers. At the end, we merged with the commuter crowd heading to the subway.

As we stepped onto the subway stairs, the distant wail of sirens was almost swallowed by the roar of rush hour traffic.

There are many names for what I do. Want to channel your inner Godfather? Go for hatchet man or hired gun. Prefer an air of legitimacy? Try professional killer or contract killer. Add an air of mystery and intrigue? Use assassin. I like it plain and simple. Hitman. Hitwoman or even hit-person, if one wants to be p.c., but if you ask me, “politically correct” and “killer” are two phrases never meant to go together.

I moonlight as a hitman to keep my business--a wilderness lodge--open. After the crash of my life seven years ago, the lodge is my lifeline to sanity and if killing traitors for a small New York crime family keeps it running, then that’s fine with me. I know it shouldn’t be. But it is.

Quinn doesn’t need the money; he needs to scratch the itch that can come with immersing yourself in a justice system that doesn’t always see justice done. I exploded on the job and watched my career implode. Quinn found a better way.

I met him six months ago. My mentor, Jack, put together a team to go after a hitman whose foray into serial-killer-hood put us at risk. He’d invited Quinn to keep us abreast of the Federal investigation.

Quinn and I had exchanged almost weekly e-mails since. Then, two weeks ago, he said he had a job in Toronto, could use a second pair of hands and eyes and, knowing I lived somewhere in Ontario, would I be interested?

I’d insisted on taking the shot. I’d been distance shooting since high school and narrowly missed being on the Olympic team. Quinn had started three years ago. When he balked, I’d reminded him that he was risking my safety on his marksmanship. That made him back down.

“Hey, there’s the CN Tower,” he said as we emerged from the subway. “Earlier it was hidden in the fog.”

“Smog.”

“I didn’t think you got that up here.”

“We get everything up here. Except HBO.”

He peered up at the tower as we moved away from the commuter crowd. “Nice and clear now, though. Good night to eat in that revolving restaurant.”

I made a face. “Overpriced tourist food.”

He went quiet. I looked over to see him scratching his chin.

“Unless you want to, of course,” I said quickly. “You are a tourist. It might be tough without reservations . . .” I caught his look. “You made reservations.”

“Kind of. Yeah.”

“Shit. I’m sorry. Really, I’d love to try it. I’ve just never had the cash to go.”

“I should have asked you first. You’re the local. I wanted to take you someplace nice, to say, you know . . .”

“Thanks for pulling my hit?”

A sharp laugh. “Yeah. I tried finding a Hallmark. They say they have a card for every occasion, but they seem to have missed that one. I thought we could have a quiet dinner, maybe talk about that thing I mentioned.”

“Sure.”

When I’d arrived, Quinn had announced he needed to talk to me about something personal. I knew it was almost certainly about where our relationship was heading. Now, even as he mentioned it, my heart thumped double-time. With anticipation or dread? I honestly wasn’t sure. Fear probably covered it either way.

Last year, Quinn had made it clear he was interested in me. Very clear and very interested. Stoked by the case, I’d reciprocated. He was fun and sexy and we had a lot in common. And,

yes, I'll admit it, I'd been flattered. I'm a thirty-three year old wilderness lodge proprietor. The closest thing I get to a pass these days is married guys with beer-breath cornering me in the boathouse and saying they think I'm "kinda cute."

After the job ended, we had to go our separate ways, so we'd stepped back into friendship.

Months passed and, as much as we communicated, there'd been no whiff of anything but friendship. Maybe I should have been disappointed. But I wasn't. I was almost . . . relieved.

I have an odd relationship with risk. I grew up looking each way twice before crossing the road. Then, after my life crashed, one day I found myself perched at the hatch of an airplane, parachute on my back. Today, I couldn't live without the adrenaline rush of white water rafting or rappelling down a cliff. But I still look both ways--twice--before crossing. I have tidy boxes for the risk in my life, and Quinn doesn't fit into them.

I like him. I think we could have something. As weird as it sounds, he could be exactly what my life needs. But even now, walking with him, enjoying his company, sneaking peeks and liking what I see, I can't feel what I want to feel. I'm sure it will come. I just don't want to rush into a decision. So I'm praying whatever he needs to talk about, it isn't that.

We were still in disguise at dinner. That's the downside of socializing with colleagues in this job. You can never just be yourself. Quinn had briefly seen me without a disguise last fall accidentally, but that was no excuse to leave it off now. With Quinn, I wasn't Nadia, I was "Dee." Yes, that was my nom de guerre. I'd have preferred one with a little more flair, but Jack had picked it. Jack didn't do flair.

We'd just stepped inside the base of the CN Tower when Quinn's cell phone buzzed. I wandered over to read one of the displays while he took the call. Likely business—the legitimate kind. He'd arranged the Beecham hit to coincide with a work trip. I wasn't sure that was wise, but trusted he knew what he was doing.

When he was done with his call, we went up the tower, where I was pleasantly surprised to find that the “revolving restaurant” didn't revolve very fast. I don't know what I expected: a merry-go-round? It moved so slowly you didn't notice until you looked up and realized the view had changed. And it was a good thing the motion didn't cause queasiness, because the prices certainly did. After I choked on the thought of paying fourteen dollars for a Caesar salad, Quinn confiscated my menu and read me my choices.

Through the appetizers and into the entrees we talked about our ski seasons, comparing stories and injuries.

“I have to admit,” Quinn said. “When I first mentioned getting together, that's what I had in mind. A ski trip. I had a place in Vermont picked out. Even scanned a brochure to e-mail you. Then I chickened out.”

“How come?”

He stabbed a pearl onion with his fork, his gaze fixed on his plate. “I guess I took another look at the brochure—couples in hot-tubs, couples sipping hot chocolate, couples in front of blazing fires—and it just seemed so . . . couple-ish.”

“Which isn't what you had in mind.”

“I know I rushed things last time. The job was so intense, and that spilled over.”

“No kidding, huh?” I gave a small laugh. “Look, I totally understand--”

I broke off as his cell rang again. A murmured apology to me and he pulled it out. A matron at the next table shot me a glare, as if to say I shouldn't tolerate such behavior from a man on a date. Obviously she'd never dated a cop.

"Work," he said as he glanced at the display.

"I'll go to the wash—"

He laid his hand on my arm as I rose. "Sit. Eat while it's warm. If I need to, I'll step outside, but it's probably the same as last time. He can't find a file."

I'd rather have had the excuse to leave for a minute, gather my thoughts, prepare for what was coming. Because I knew now, it wasn't good.

Since we'd met that morning, he hadn't flirted, hadn't even given me one of his sexy grins. That was not the Quinn I remembered. I'd thought he was just trying to play it cool until after the job, having been chewed out by Jack last year for acting unprofessional. But now, with his admission about the ski lodge, I realized. I was about to get the infamous "Maybe we should just be friends" speech.

I should have been happy. Hadn't I been thinking the same thing? But it still stung. To have a guy be interested, then back off once he got to know me better? I only wish I could say it was the first time that ever happened.

Quinn's brows furrowed as he listened. "What?"

Pause.

"When?"

Pause.

"Goddamn it!"



A furtive look my way, then a slight rise in color as he caught the glower of the woman beside us. He mouthed an apology.

I tried not to eavesdrop, focusing my attention on his free hand, drumming the table. He had square hands, big and broad. Smooth, but with ghosts of calluses and tiny scars, as if he'd worked with them once, maybe teen summers in construction.

He'd stopped drumming now, fingers gone still, tips raised a quarter-inch above the table, as if halted mid-tap. His fingers curled under, clenching as his voice went brittle before his fingers unfolded and collapsed, palm flat, to the table cloth.

It took a moment to realize he'd hung up and was watching me, waiting until he had my attention. When I looked over, the crease between his brows was still there, now joined by faint lines at the corners of his mouth.

"You have to go," I said.

He tried to smile, couldn't manage it. "Good guess. It's a case. I'm booked on a flight in two hours."

"Should we get the bill?"

"No, no. We're finishing. I get through security a little faster than the average tourist."

We ate for another five minutes before I said, "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

He moved a mushroom aside. "It wasn't important."

Before I could prod, he launched into the story of getting snowbound driving to a ski hill, and I realized I wasn't getting a better answer. Not tonight.