

Grayson Adams

### The Wrong Path

Man, he was glad— after what felt like forever, he was finally assigned some amusing prey. The hitman lay back on the gritty, worn city brick of a back alley, taking a long drag of his cigarette and letting it out with a greedy smile. Hearing the news had put him in a particularly good mood. He had been asked to kill a 13-year-old girl.

In front of the hitman, the seedy businessman who ordered the hit couldn't stop his beady little eyes from flicking back and forth, constantly scanning the area. The risk of getting caught talking to a hitman weighed heavy on his mind, and it showed. He kept adjusting his \$10 Walmart tie, unsure if he wanted it slackened or tightly drawn around his neck. This was far from the first time a pathetic prune of a man ordered a hit unimaginable to most of society. These types of guys had inferiority complexes like rats had diseases, but it appeared from his trembling hands that this was his first time ordering a hit. *Baby*.

"So are ya gonna tell me where she's stayin' or what?" The hitman asked.

"Y-yes, uh, she's staying at the Goldmont Hotel, room 505. She has long black hair, brown eyes, about 5', and just flew in alone to stay with some of her crazy rich relatives and—"

"Got it. I don't need anythin' more than that." The hitman blew some smoke directly into the other man's face, curious to see if he'd start coughing. He did. *Baby*. "Did ya bring the money? I take the first half up front like we discussed."

Droplets of sweat ran down the businessman's wrinkly face as he opened his briefcase. He looked both ways before handing the hitman a fat wad of bills, damp from his slippery hands. Gross. The hitman didn't want to touch the money— the man looked like the type of guy who would jack off to some woman on PornHub or OnlyFans with big tits and a horribly cliché name

like “Mandi Goodhead” whose specialty was— well, you already know— in the office bathroom and not wash his hands afterward.

But money is money, and the hitman gave it a glance, thinking it was probably about the right amount before stuffing it in the innermost pocket of his black leather jacket.

“You know what’ll happen if I find out you’re shortchangin’ me, right?”

“I would never dream of—”

The hitman took a step forward, and the businessman took a step back, starting to panic. Taking in the horror on the other man’s made an easy smirk appear on his face. He was at least a head taller than the businessman, maybe more. 6’ had never felt so good. If only it didn’t come from being *that man’s* son.

The hitman bent down so he could see the other eye to eye, lips parting to show the perfectly straight, white teeth *that man* paid for. *That man* never knew he was throwing away money for an asset that would later be used to intimidate spineless men in piss-scented alleyways.

“You wouldn’t dream of it, huh?” the hitman stepped forward again, pinning the balding office worker to the filthy wall, getting his secondhand, so *obviously* last season suitcoat dirty.

“Good boy,” the hitman smiled, putting out his cigarette directly beside the man’s head. He let out a whimper.

Satisfied, the hitman didn’t linger in the moment a second longer. He turned away and held up a hand in farewell as he strode toward the main street. “I’ll let ya know when it’s done. See ya.”

As he left, the middle-aged man let out a huff.

“Asshole!”

Yeah, the hitman was an asshole, but at least he wasn't the shitty type of guy who tried to hide it. After all, from birth, being an asshole had always been in his blood.

He came out of his mother's womb in an expensive, private hospital room with plush down pillows and tacky velvet curtains reserved for the highest paying patients imaginable. His mom sobbed, and not because of the crippling pain she went through to push the baby out of her stuffy cunt. No, his mom ugly-cried because he didn't look like the perfect fucking Gerber baby that her other high-society friends had given birth to. She hadn't expected her son to come out as a blotchy red demon with scraggly black hair, screaming and covered in blood and other grotesque birthing fluids. She felt like she had been lied to.

All of her friends' babies came out as pristine little angels, or so their professional post-birth photos portrayed. Their infants bore twinkling blue eyes like their Northern European parents— precious tiny jewels— and the hitman had amber ones, like the type of cheap-ass souvenir pieces you get at gas stations or truck rest stops with scorpions and ants stuck in them. He failed to inherit his mother's iconic golden hair as well. Everyone in the Van Doren family had that hair.

They had completely struck out in the genetic lottery.

Trying to reassure his wife, *James Van Doren*, who had recently become the head of the famous banking household, patted his wife on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, honey, we can always try again.” And they did— eight years later.

As he walked by skyscrapers and apartment buildings, the hitman thought of the businessman's terrified face and laughed. He loved it when people made faces like that at him.

After all, he wasn't just an asshole—he was a *professional* asshole. He killed people for a living. In big cities where endless hatred dwells, hitmen were in short supply. It used to be just for kicks, but if you're good at something, you should charge for it, right? Turns out he made quite the reputation for himself, too.

If someone wanted their guy fucked up, like *really* fucked up, like tortured and sliced into tiny pieces and poured into a vat of acid fucked up, they came to him. He had no reservations about who he would and wouldn't kill, either. Most of the hitmen in the city had a little something called "ethics", as ironic as it was, but not him. He'd kill anyone his client wanted him to—if he could make it messy. He loved messy. Like the day he was born, he never felt more at ease than when he was covered with someone else's blood.

And god, those expressions. Those eyes. You don't know how thrilling it is to hold someone's life in your hands until they're screaming—sobbing—falling apart in front of you. Nothing in this fucked up world could compare to coaxing out those pointless pleas for mercy. If he couldn't have a happy little family that cared for him, why should anyone? By losing those they loved right in front of them, his victim could understand him, if even for just a moment.

When the hitman made it to the main street, he sought out his car, a black 1969—yes, 69 *on purpose*—Thunderbird he had restored himself. It was the only thing he still had with him from the time he lived in the Van Doren household. As he popped the trunk to get out his pistol and silencer, his mind wandered to those insufferable days.

In high school, the hitman had been a serious problem child. Once he heard his mother call him a "monster" for spilling his tomato-basil bisque all over the million-dollar Chinese rug

at age seven, and again when he ruined his father's multi-thousand dollar suit by having a bloody nose while standing next to him for a family photo, he was determined to become one. If living his life made him a monster in his parents' eyes, he'd show them just how bad he could be.

One night, he got absolutely shitfaced with a couple of his drop-out buddies and decided to race the car his parents had begrudgingly bought for him to take to school. Man, what a terrible fucking idea. Maybe it was for the thrill, or maybe he just wanted to see what it would be like to die, but for whatever reason, his alcohol addled 17-year-old brain told him it would be fun.

As he was about to pass his opponent's car, he lost control of the wheel, and the 2012 Audi A4 with its custom black leather interior flipped, rolling about 3 or 4 times until it finally came to a stop.

Fuck, was he bloody. Way bloodier than the kids he had beat up in middle school when they taunted him for his last name, for being a "rich boy". So bloody he thought that he was going to die. He laughed and passed out.

The doctors said it was a miracle he had survived, and mostly in one piece. Most of his bones were broken, and he had a deep horizontal gash across his back that would no doubt later become a scar, but his vital organs remained intact. Severely bruised and drugged up on Vicodin, the teen wouldn't even be able to remember the first few days in the hospital, but when he became lucid, he whined at the nurses for cigarettes.

He stayed in the hospital for a month until most of his broken bones were on the mend, but during that whole time, neither Van Doren parent came to visit. Honestly, he hadn't expected they would since his sorry state was the result of his own dumb ass, but god, did he want them to. If they had come to see him, if they had patted his head while he groaned in pain or even just

yelled at him for being irresponsible, perhaps he would've turned out better, but that dream was over before it began.

Afterward, the hitman no longer stayed up late at night, desperately seeking the acceptance and love of his parents or thinking of what it would take to receive it. Instead, ran away to be out on his own and had been since running from their obnoxious, multi-million dollar mansion on Huntington Beach since soon after recovering from his accident.

The hitman inspected the gun and silencer before putting it back in his car with a rueful smile. There was no way he needed a gun to kill a 14-year-old girl. Instead, he let his fingers slide along the array of knives stashed in the trunk before he selected a bowie knife from his collection and concealed it inside his jacket. Out of all the dangerous jobs he had taken, this sure as hell wouldn't be one of them.

Yeah, being a hitman was dangerous, but it didn't really matter to a nihilistic 21-year-old who was constantly seeking the adrenaline thrill on the divide between life and death. A few times, he had been captured by angry one night stands or the mafia or whoever had their dearest lover or relative fucked or killed by him. Or fucked *and* killed. Being tortured in damp basements was miserable and hurt like a bitch, but not nearly as painful as the time had seen his *own* death on the news.

Two months into his runaway, the 18-year-old-now-thief-not-yet-hitman had been eating shitty Panda Express orange chicken— if it was even chicken— with hard grains of white rice out of the take-out pail in front of a TV in his disgusting, undoubtedly semen-crusted motel room when he saw his own face on the news. At first, he was terrified that his parents had put out a

bounty for anyone who could bring him home. But no, it was much worse. The headline underneath his photo read: "Global Bank Inc. CEO's son found dead in the woods."

It felt like someone had served him a nasty sucker punch straight to his gut. He'd been in enough street fights now to know what that felt like. A mixture of shame and heart-retching pain caused his eyes to fill with tears. To make it worse, it rubbed in the fact that he still cared about the parents he had sworn he didn't care about anymore.

Instead of trying to find their delinquent son, they thought it would be easier and more beneficial to pronounce him as legally dead instead. Yes, it wrapped up the problem of their unwanted son perfectly. Much easier than he ever wanted it to be for them. His stomach knotted as a reporter interviewed his father, asking him for a statement.

"Unfortunately, these things happen. My son was hardly in his right mind. He almost killed himself with his shenanigans earlier this year, so it didn't come as a surprise to my wife or me."

He felt bile rising in his throat and staggered to the bathroom, emptying his stomach of its contents as he knelt on the icy linoleum floor over the toilet. He could never eat orange chicken again. His parents brought him into this world against his will, and they had, in a way, taken him out of it, too. It was more than they ever deserved.

But now he was living a life of his own making and genuinely didn't care about them anymore. He locked his car after closing the trunk with a slam. It was time to do what he did best. As he walked to the Goldmont Hotel, he felt the adrenaline high begin. A slight tingle began in his fingertips and crawled up his arms to his shoulder blades. He threw his head back and shuddered, a dark grin at home on his face. Oh, how he wanted to run and cut her down right

this second, but he had to keep from attracting too much attention. He passed high fashion stores adjacent to the unkept, cracked concrete he walked on at a brisk pace, their storefront windows reflecting his father's face back at him. If he wasn't in such a good mood, he would've been tempted to come back and shatter the glass into a million pieces later.

Getting into the Goldmont Hotel was much easier than it should've been. For a five star hotel, it had little to no security. He just waited until a guest dressed in the latest Gucci suit left through one of the many shiny golden side doors and slipped through.

What was it about being rich that made all the VIP guests so easy to fool? A whole pack of them had let him right into the mirrored elevator with a Swarovski crystal chandelier, even complimenting the hitman on his "punk rock style statement" or whatever the hell they said. He barely survived his time in the Van Doren household, but he knew how to deal with the 1%, as much as he hated them.

By the time he got to the fifth floor, the gaggle of nepo babies were asking him if he wanted to join them to snort some of their high-quality coke, but he declined. As much fun as that sounded, he was working.

The hitman stepped out of the elevator, scanning the dim, mood light-lit hallway with gold room numbers illuminated from the back by soft LEDs. Movement caught his eye further down the dim hallway. From where he stood, he could barely see the face of a girl around 13 with long black hair leaving her room and turning away from him to take an elevator closer to her.

No one else was in the hallway. It was the perfect time to strike. Walking fast but without sound, he closed the distance between them within moments. He drew his knife, the shivers of adrenaline reaching its peak. Fuck, this was so easy. How was he being paid for this?

Roughly, he grabbed her shoulder with one hand while another slid the bowie knife across her throat. The girl let out a muted scream, and he felt a thick, warm liquid running down her neck. Now came his favorite part—watching her expression as the life left her eyes.

But as he turned her around, the hitman's eyes widened.

It was her. The sibling, the sister that had been born 8 years after I was.

No. Fuck. Oh no. It was her.

And oh god oh god oh god oh fuck she was bleeding out from her neck now, and as I stood, reeling from the shock, I barely had the mind to press my hand to her throat to stop the bleeding. But couldn't stop the blood from seeping out between my fingers. What could I do? How could I fix this? Repent for this? The one thing that wasn't completely fucking awful in my life in the Van Doren household or otherwise was passing before my eyes and I couldn't save it and I couldn't help her like I should as her older brother and only family member that gave a shit about her. She was always so sweet to me. So kind when she never needed to be. Time and time again, I had saved her from schoolground bullies by bashing their heads in, but in the end, I couldn't even protect her from myself.

“Vanessa, no! Stay with me, please, fuck, stay with me, c'mon, please!” I vomited out words, knowing well that it didn't help in the least. The only person who mattered to me in the 9 billion worthless humans on the planet was dying, and by my own hand.

Even though my sister was dying in my arms, I knew exactly what was going through her head as she placed a tender hand on my face, now spattered with her blood. She hadn't known I

was still alive all this time after my parents paid to have me pronounced dead. Her warm coffee eyes were filled with tears, and she held me so softly like no one else ever would. Such a thoughtless girl, holding my face to comfort me instead of trying to stop the blood from flooding out of her neck.

I could tell she was trying to speak, but I shushed her, tears gathering in my own auric eyes as I kept the pressure on her neck.

“Hey, hey, don’t speak, it’s okay, your big brothers got you, please don’t cry, I’m here,” I said, choking on every other word as they spilled out of my mouth. Then, I turned to a stranger who had just exited their room and happened upon us in the hotel hallway by chance. “What the fuck are you doing!? Call the paramedics *now!*” I screamed at them, hoping, pleading, praying this sin could be remedied somehow.

Vanessa looked up at me from within my arms, still holding on to my face and cupping it, her petite fingers pressing into my skin lightly as if to say, “It’s okay, Kai, I forgive you.”

What a stupid girl. I didn’t deserve her forgiveness. How had the same hellish mother and father that gave life to the devil incarnate given life to something this kind and loving? It made no sense, but that was why I loved her. Somehow, she had kept a hold of her humanity in that household. She was my opposite. If I was death, she was life. If I was the moon, she was the sun after an endless night. She was stronger than I ever could be.

After seeing her again, I knew I needed her in my life. I needed her love and warmth more than I needed oxygen. I was starved for it. Yet now, she was slipping through my fingers just like her blood.

“I’m so sorry, Vanessa, please don’t leave me, please stay with me, I need you.” Tears streamed down my cheeks unchecked as I barely registered the stranger behind me on the phone

with the paramedics. Once they got here, what would I say? That I was hired to kill her but hadn't realized it was the only person I had ever cared about? That I was a contract killer that killed everything in his way as violently as possible?

Fuck.

When did I take the first step on this road? When had I sealed this fate for both me and her, my beloved little sister, the only treasure this world ever offered? Was it when I spilled my tomato bisque on the Chinese rug? Was it when I ran away and started to steal for a living? Was it when I found out I was legally dead? Was it when I decided killing people was fun? Was there anything that could've kept me from this path, or was I destined to end up here? Was it simply my nature to hurt and kill and maim and torture?

Regardless, I was here now.

I was hitman who had carried out his job successfully.