

Sins of the Father by Kerry Hammond

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I sat in the wooden chair on the hotel balcony and leaned my head back, turning my face toward the sunshine. I closed my eyes and listened to a string quartet play Autumn from Vivaldi's Four Seasons. It has always been one of my favorite pieces of classical music.

When I'd first arrived in Italy, I was hesitant; I wasn't sure what to expect. Was it really all pizza and pasta? Now that I'd been here for six months, I could easily see why people loved spending time in this part of the world. My new employer wanted me here, at least for now, so I decided to give in and enjoy it. I was kind of in his debt, so I had every reason to go along with his wishes. Maybe once he came back from his honeymoon we could re-evaluate. I'd been thinking about retirement anyway.

I honestly hadn't anticipated a problem with the job I came to do, but hindsight analysis had shown a few yellow, if not red, flags. I had underestimated the man I had been paid to kill and I hadn't listened to my inner voice, two very dangerous things. Maybe it was because business had been slow and maybe I was just getting tired of the rat race—in my line of work, forty-three can be considered old. Either way, things had nearly ended badly for me.

Six months ago, I had walked out of Rome's Fiumicino Airport into the bright sunshine and immediately reached in my bag for my sunglasses. I had never set foot in Italy, but had come prepared. I had everything I needed to blend in as a tourist: sunglasses, shorts, sandals, and a mobile phone to use as a camera. I knew some tourists would have hefty, digital cameras, but in this day and age, using a phone to take photos helped you blend in better. I wanted to look like a tourist, but not a memorable one.

I have always been great at languages and prior to my arrival I took an online course in Italian. I would pretend no knowledge of the language, but in order to do the job I came to do, I would need to understand it. After only six weeks of study, my comprehension was great and I found myself eavesdropping on conversations just to test myself.

I walked up to the taxi stand pulling my nondescript black suitcase behind me, feeling a trickle of sweat as it made its way down the small of my back. I said the obligatory, ‘I’m sorry, I don’t speak Italian, do you speak English?’ before directing my driver in my practiced flat and unrecognizable mid America accent to take me to my hotel. He nodded and pulled out into traffic, as uninterested in conversation as I was.

The hotel I’d chosen was within walking distance to everything I needed. It was important that there be no record of a cab ride, other than back and forth to the airport. My check in experience was a breeze and I handed the clerk a credit card and passport in the name of Teresa Baker. Not as nondescript as Jane Smith, but less memorable because of it. When I got to my room, I pulled out the phone I bought at the TIM Tourist shop at the airport. I bought it specifically for this job, a prepaid smart phone with an Italian telephone number and enough data to get me through the long weekend.

I kicked off my shoes and dialed my client’s number from memory. I rarely, if ever, wrote any pertinent information down. A good memory—and mine was near photographic—was a must in my line of work. “Hello, Mr. Ferrari,” I said when I heard the familiar voice answer. My client was a bit less creative on the code name front, but it wasn’t a problem since he was only using it to stay anonymous to anyone who might be listening in. I knew his real name, but he would never learn mine.

“Hello Miss Baker,” he said, in heavily accented English. “I assume that you are calling to tell me you have arrived in Rome.”

I told him that I had indeed arrived and would follow the schedule to pick up the package at the location as planned. The schedule was this afternoon at two o’clock, the package was a Glock 9mm handgun, and the location was behind a pizzeria next to a trash can. I already had the address.

Everything seemed to be in order and I hung up after promising to call one more time, from the airport before my flight out. Two phone calls were as much communication as I was willing to allow. One to make sure I was still comfortable that the job wasn’t a setup and that the Carabinieri weren’t going to be waiting for me at the drop point, and then one to let the client know that the job was done and the final payment could be wired to my offshore account. If a client made additional contact it would be to warn me off or cancel the transaction. In the latter case, their first payment would be non-refundable.

I had a few hours to kill before the pick-up time, but I needed to get some supplies; I never traveled with any tools of the trade. I kept the prepaid phone in a hidden pocket I had specially sewn into my favorite jacket. If I was ever stopped and searched on my way, there would be nothing to tie me to my client or the target. The phone was securely stowed, but could easily be pulled out to take a photo of some landmark, in the event I needed to blend in with the other tourists.

The research I did ahead of time told me there was a store located four blocks from my hotel that sold the items I needed. It was a combination of a grocery store and a hardware store. It was located in a touristy area, so one more American wandering around the aisles wouldn’t look out of place.

As I walked, I enjoyed the warmth of the afternoon and noticed that I wasn't the only one wearing jeans. Mission accomplished. What people don't realize is that wearing the wrong clothing is the easiest way to stand out in a crowd. Before I go anywhere for a job, I scour the internet for street cameras in the neighborhood I will be visiting. I take note of how people are dressed in the daytime, nighttime, weekends, and weekdays. It's the best way to prepare.

As I walked, I thought through the plan for the job I was there to complete, something I would do a couple of hundred times before tomorrow night.

Much like an athlete pictures the game winning shot over and over in order to increase the chances of actually making it, I visualize myself completing every step of a job over and over to ensure that there are no glitches in my plan. When I finally perform the work, it will go as smoothly as it has in my head.

Once I purchased the items I needed, I headed back to the hotel for a nap. I usually power through jetlag, but I have a hard time sleeping on airplanes and was in need of some rest.

At the allotted hour, I walked the seven blocks to the pizzeria, which was busy enough that I felt comfortable walking past it twice before I slipped into the alley behind the building and located the dirty duffle bag tucked away behind the trash can next to an even dirtier rolled up sleeping bag. I had instructed that the scene be set in just this way. I found that people were loath to touch anything they thought was left by someone living on the street.

No one was around, so I slipped on a pair of gloves from my bag, stepped behind one side of the large trash can, grabbed the duffle, and exited the other side in one smooth movement. I peered inside and saw both the gun and a box of ammunition. I slipped them inside my shoulder bag and threw the duffle in the trash a block away. I made my way back to the hotel feeling confident that everything was in place and that no one had given me a second glance. I

am a very average looking woman, not too young and not too old. I am neither pretty nor homely, short nor tall. My looks suit my career just fine and I have never been hindered by them; not turning heads is an asset in this line of work.

By that evening, I had run through the logistics in my head so many times I could do it in my sleep. Before bed I took some time to run through my client's information and our contact thus far. I like to make sure I am comfortable with everything before I figuratively, and literally, pull the trigger. I want to make sure that there is not a shred of doubt in my mind that the job is legitimate. I can't afford to make a mistake. It would not only end my career, but could get me thrown in prison, or killed.

Mr. Ferrari contacted me through the usual channels. When asked, he provided me with a reference: the name of the person who had recommended me. I did my due diligence into his background and everything I found checked out. He was the only child of a wealthy and elderly Italian businessman. He would inherit his father's entire estate when he died since his mother had been dead for ten years and his father had never shown interest in remarrying. Until now.

There had always been women sniffing around dear old Papa, it happens when a widower is rich. But just last month the old man had announced that he intended to marry the most recent sniffer and change his will, leaving her everything. Since Mr. Ferrari was heavily in debt from some bad business deals, this was not an ideal situation for him. Papa had lived a long life and his son was ready for that life to come to an end. That's where I came in.

Some people think that hired killers will take any job and kill anyone. I wasn't so much picky about the *who*, but I did have some rules when it came to the *how*. Many in my line of work have their specialties, and mine was what I liked to call the robbery gone wrong, or RGW. There are acronyms for everything, so why not? I had perfected the break in, steal a few items,

and kill the homeowner job. This way no suspicion falls on the family members, who are usually the ones who hire me.

I re-analyzed the financial portion of the transaction; it had gone smoothly. Half the money had been paid up front, wired to my offshore account and then moved to my other offshore account to keep it safe. The second half would be wired after my airport call. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was still something that just didn't sit right and my Spidey senses got a slight tingle. It was low intensity and I suspected that it stemmed from the fact that my client was a slimy individual and rubbed me the wrong way. It happens. Since it was such a low intensity tingle, I had to make a call and I chose to ignore it.

The next morning was my workday. I went through my usual ritual; I got up at six o'clock in the morning and ran five miles. I showered, drank an espresso, ate breakfast and then meditated. I don't like to be pigeonholed. Hired professionals aren't just gritty, dirty men who smoke cigars and drink too much. Some of us are health-conscious people who like a little bit of Zen in our lives.

The deal was set to go down at ten o'clock that night. At that time my client's father would be pouring a Scotch and ready to sit in front of his fireplace to read the paper at his villa in a swanky part of the city. I would make it look like a robbery gone wrong, and the police would find not only a dead body but a missing Rolex watch and a few other trinkets of my choice. Junior would then be the heir to Papa's wealth, his debts would be paid off and his own trophy wife kept happy enough to stay married to him.

At nine o'clock I put on my black leggings and sweater. The sweater was baggie enough that it hid the tool belt I wore around my waist. This was my most precious possession and the items I stored on it had gotten me out of quite a few tight spots. Without tools, it looked like a

designer belt that could be worn over a long shirt. The fact that it could be camouflaged underneath an oversized garment was another bonus to being female.

Getting into the old man's house wasn't difficult. I'd been picking locks since I was ten years old. It's what happens when you grow up in a dysfunctional family with an uncle who is a con man and a father who is a thief. Junior had assured me that his father walked his Chihuahua at exactly ten o'clock every night and came in and fed him a snack immediately afterward, not turning the alarm on until after he took care of the little canine, poured his drink, and lit his cigar. I had a small window, but it was enough.

After some quick recon, I chose to enter via the French door in the study. Not only would that room be dark and empty, but French doors are the easiest to pick. This model was clearly lacking a deadbolt—the nicest ones always are. I slipped in and closed the door behind me. I stood just inside for a beat of ten while I listened. My hearing has always been the strongest of my five senses. It was unfortunate in my childhood because it meant I heard every argument my parents ever had, in detail. After my father left, I then heard everything my mother did in her bedroom with her long string of boyfriends. Just the thought made me shudder.

Hearing nothing, I crept through the study, admiring a large floor model globe in the corner, the old guy had taste. The door to the hallway was open and I could see a light was on at the end. Junior had given me a detailed sketch of the floorplan and I knew the light came from the kitchen where the dog was eating his late-night snack. I reminded myself how happy I was that the dog in question was a Chihuahua and not a Doberman.

I wasn't rushed, but I didn't have all the time in the world either. I needed to finish the job before the old man had a chance to activate the alarm. Walking on the balls of my feet, I made my way down the hallway. I knew my target would be in the living room choosing which

cigar to smoke; I was told it was his evening habit. I pulled out the Glock, made sure the safety was off, and rounded the corner.

Standing by the built-in humidor was the old man I recognized from the photo. His grey hair was so thin that you could see his scalp beneath it. He wore a Mister Rogers cardigan sweater that looked rather tatty considering his net worth, and he had a newspaper under his right arm. He also had a gun in his hand. It was aimed at me.

“I did not expect you would be a woman,” he said in English. “I did not think Terry was your real name, but I thought that it would be a nickname for Terrance.”

His choosing to use English told me he had done his homework. The fact that his English was flawless left no room for misunderstanding. “Why don’t you sit down, Terry.” It was an order, not an offer.

I have to admit that I was stunned to find the old man not only expecting me, but armed. I didn’t have many options, so I sat. I have one of the best poker faces around, and it has come in handy. On one specific occasion it had saved my skin by leading the police in the wrong direction. ‘I’m sorry officer, I didn’t get a good look at the man who ran past me. I just know that he had brown hair and a gun.’

As good as I was, I couldn’t help my surprised reaction to what he did next. He offered me a glass of Scotch. I accepted, if only to delay things a bit. He got up from his chair with the ease of a fifty-year-old rather than the eighty-two that I knew he was. He poured me two fingers of single malt, handed it over, and returned to his chair.

“I know my son paid you to kill me.” There would be no beating around the bush with this guy. “I also know why,” he continued. “I plan to get married and he will not be inheriting my money. That makes him very angry.”

“Now, I am a reasonable man. I was willing to continue to support the lifestyle of my son, including some of his bad habits. But when my son tries to have me killed. This is where I need to draw the line.” I really couldn’t blame him on that count. I sipped my Scotch and let him talk. I honestly didn’t feel I had much to add.

What came next shouldn’t have shocked me, but it did. “I don’t put the blame on you Terry, I really don’t. You are a businessman, excuse me, businesswoman. And this, for you, is a business transaction. I did not get to be as rich as I am without understanding the business transaction.” He paused to sip from his own glass. “I also understand that not every transaction needs to be, how do you say, strictly legal.”

I couldn’t help myself. “That’s putting it mildly,” I said. At this he smiled, and it appeared to be a genuine smile. I decided I liked the old guy.

“I won’t continue to beat about the bush my dear.” This guy really had a handle on his idioms. “I will tell you the business proposition I have for you. But I will warn you, it’s non-negotiable.” He smiled and waited while this last part sank in. “The reasons for this should be understandable to you,” he said. I nodded.

When he finished laying out his terms, I didn’t hesitate. You might think it was because I had no choice, but the deal was actually fair. The smirk on his face as I paused before accepting told me that he knew what I was thinking. He knew he’d given me an offer I couldn’t refuse and he enjoyed watching me realize it.

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Unlike his father, when I broke into Junior’s house to kill him, he wasn’t expecting me. The look on his face was priceless and I couldn’t help telling him who I was, why I was there, and whose payroll I was now on. His shock turned to anger right before he launched himself out

of bed and took the bullet I'd brought for him. His reaction actually played into my plans to make the whole scene look like a robbery gone bad.

I had been instructed to schedule the job on a night when Junior was supposed to be attending a charity gala with his wife. The old man knew that his son wouldn't show, but anyone following what passes for a society column in Italy would have expected him to be there, so planning to rob him that night was understandable. I guess the guy's bad habits really did get him in the end.

The wedding was postponed while Junior's father grieved the loss of his only child, but only by a few months. It really was a nice ceremony. I kept my distance, but followed it in the aforementioned society pages. He spent his honeymoon traveling through Europe and riding the Orient Express, but before he left, we negotiated an extension of my contract to keep an eye on his businesses while he was gone. I was enjoying my extended stay in Italy, as well as the healthy increase to my bank account.

If junior had known that he and his father were so similar, perhaps their relationship would have taken a different turn. As it was, I was happy to have been in the right place at the right time.

Now, about that retirement.

The End