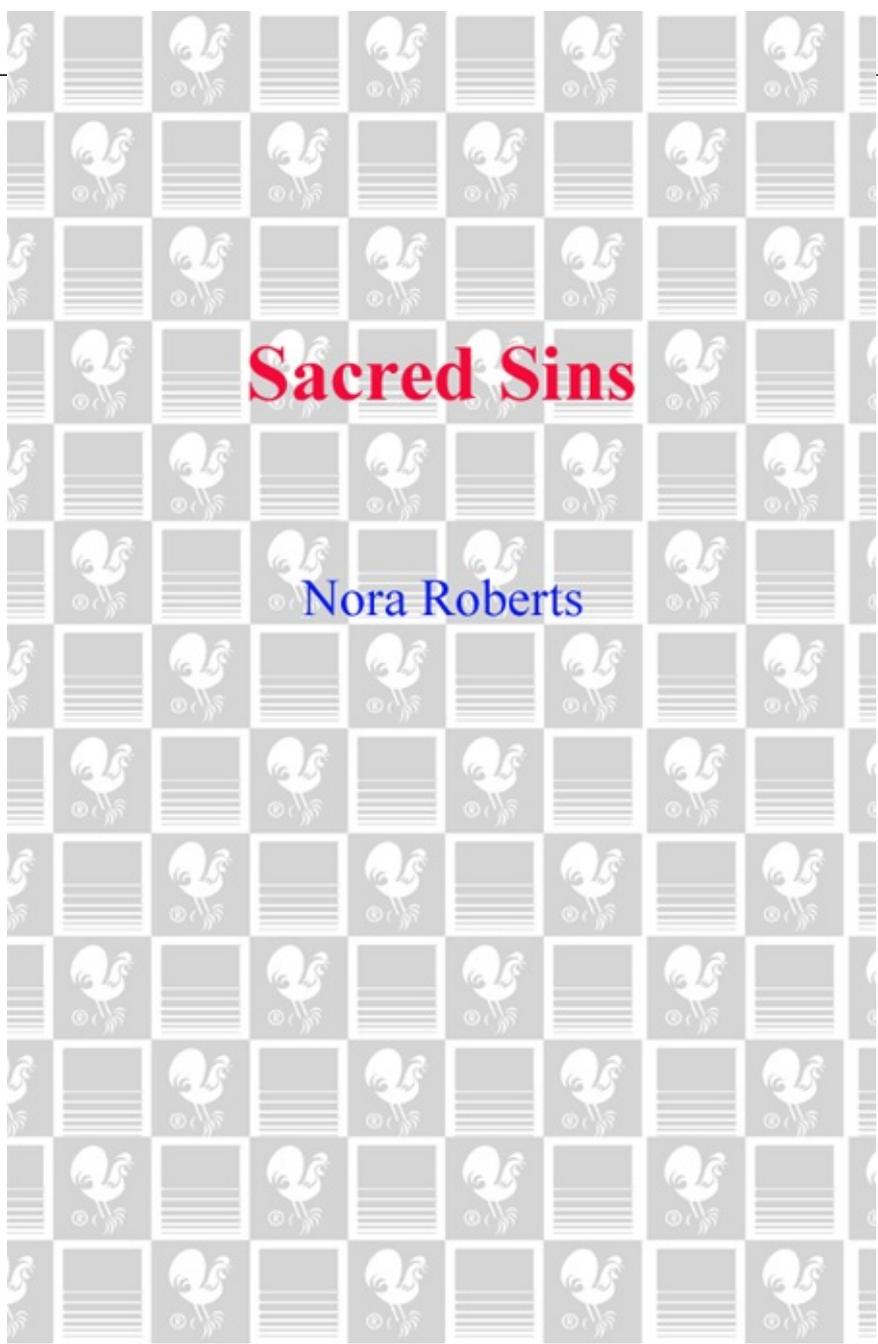


Sacred Sins

Nora Roberts



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Nor did the man who watched her. He'd known she'd come. Hadn't he been told to keep watch? Wasn't his head, even now, almost bursting from the pressure of the Voice? He'd been chosen, given the burden and the glory.

"Dominus vobiscum," he murmured, then gripped the smooth white material of the priest's amice tightly in his hands.

And when his task was complete, he felt the hot rush of power. His loins exploded. His blood sang. He was clean. And so, now, was she. Slowly, gently, he took his thumb over her forehead, her lips, her heart, in the sign of the cross. He gave her absolution, but quickly. The Voice had warned him there were many who wouldn't understand the purity of the work he did.

Leaving her body in the shadows, he walked on, eyes bright with the tears of joy and madness.

Bantam Books by Nora Roberts

BRAZEN VIRTUE

CARNAL INNOCENCE

DIVINE EVIL

GENUINE LIES

HOT ICE

PUBLIC SECRETS

SACRED SINS

SWEET REVENGE

NORA
ROBERTS



SACRED
SINS

BANTAM BOOKS

For my mother,

with thanks for the encouragement to tell this story



AUGUST FIFTEENTH. IT WAS a day following other days of sweat and hazy skies. There were no puffy white clouds or balmy breezes, only a wall of humidity nearly thick enough to swim in.

Reports on the six and eleven o'clock news glumly promised more to come. In the long, lazy last days of summer, the heat wave moving into its second, pitiless week was the biggest story in Washington, D.C.

The Senate was adjourned until September, so Capitol Hill moved sluggishly. Relaxing before a much touted European trip, the President cooled off at Camp David. Without the day-to-day shuffle of politics, Washington was a city of tourists and street vendors. Across from the Smithsonian, a mime performed for a sticky crowd that had stopped more to catch its collective breath than in appreciation of art. Pretty summer dresses wilted, and children whined for ice cream.

The young and the old flocked to Rock Creek Park, using the shade and water as a defense against the heat. Soft drinks and lemonade were consumed by the gallon, beer and wine downed in the same quantity, but less conspicuously. Bottles had a way of disappearing when park police cruised by. During picnics and cookouts people mopped sweat, charred hot dogs, and watched babies in diapers toddle on the grass. Mothers shouted at children to stay away from the water, not to run near the road, to put down a stick or a stone. The music from portable radios was, as usual, loud and defiant; hot tracks, the deejays called them, and reported temperatures in the high nineties.

Small groups of students drew together, some sitting on the rocks above the creek to discuss the fate of the world, others sprawled on the grass, more interested in the fate of their tans. Those who could spare the time and the gas had fled to the beach or the mountains. A few college students found the energy to throw Frisbees, the men stripping down to shorts to show off torsos uniformly bronzed.

A pretty young artist sat under a tree and sketched idly. After several attempts to draw her attention to the biceps he'd been working on for six months, one of the players took a more obvious route. The Frisbee landed on her pad with a plop. When she looked up in annoyance he jogged over. His grin was apologetic, and calculated, he hoped, to dazzle.

"Sorry. Got away from me."

After pushing a fall of dark hair over her shoulder, the artist handed the Frisbee back to him. "It's all right." She went back to her sketching without sparing him a glance.

Youth is nothing if not tenacious. Hunkering down beside her, he studied her drawing. What he knew about art wouldn't have filled a shot glass, but a pitch was a pitch. "Hey, that's really good. Where're you studying?"

Recognizing the ploy, she started to brush him off, then looked up long enough to catch his smile. Maybe he was obvious, but he was cute. "Georgetown."

"No kidding? Me too. Pre-law."

Impatient, his partner called across the grass. "Rod! We going for a brew or not?"

"You come here often?" Rod asked, ignoring his friend. The artist had the biggest brown eyes he'd ever seen.

"Now and again."

"Why don't we—"

"Rod, come on. Let's get that beer."

Rod looked at his sweaty, slightly overweight friend, then back into the cool brown eyes of the artist. No contest. "I'll catch you later, Pete," he called out, then let the Frisbee go in a high, negligent arch.

"Finished playing?" the artist asked, watching the flight of the Frisbee.

He grinned, then touched the ends of her hair. "Depends."

Swearing, Pete started off in pursuit of the disk. He'd just paid six bucks for it. After nearly tripping over a dog, he scrambled down a slope, hoping the Frisbee wouldn't land in the creek. He'd paid a lot more for his leather sandals. It circled toward the water, making him curse out loud, then hit a tree and careened off into some bushes. Dripping sweat and thinking about the cold Moosehead waiting for him, Pete shoved at branches and cleared his way.

His heart stopped, then sent the blood beating in his head. Before he could draw breath to yell, his lunch of Fritos and two hot dogs came up, violently.

The Frisbee had landed two feet from the edge of the creek. It lay new and red and cheerful on a cold white hand that seemed to offer it back.

She had been Carla Johnson, a twenty-three-year-old drama student and part-time waitress. Twelve to fifteen hours before, she had been strangled with a priest's amice. White, edged with gold.



DETECTIVE Ben Paris slumped at his desk after finishing his written report on the Johnson homicide. He'd typed the facts, using two fingers in a machine gun style. But now they played back to him. No sexual assault, no apparent robbery. Her purse had been under her, with twenty-three dollars and seventy-six cents and a MasterCard in it. An opal ring that would have hocked for about fifty had still been on her finger. No motive, no suspects. Nothing.

Ben and his partner had spent the afternoon interviewing the victim's family. An ugly business, he thought. Necessary, but ugly. They had unearthed the same answers at every turn. Carla had wanted to be an actress. Her life had been her studies. She had dated, but not seriously—she'd been too devoted to an ambition she would never achieve.

Ben skimmed the report again and lingered over the murder weapon. The priest's scarf. There had been a note pinned next to it. He'd knelt beside her himself hours before to read it.

“Amen,” Ben murmured, and let out a long breath.



It was after one A.M. on the second week of September when Barbara Clayton cut across the lawn of the Washington Cathedral. The air was warm, the stars brilliant, but she wasn't in the mood to enjoy it. As she walked she muttered bad-temperedly. She'd give that ferret-faced mechanic an earful in the morning. Fixed the transmission good as new. What a crock. Damn good thing she only had a couple more blocks to walk.

Now she'd have to take the bus to work. The ugly, grease-smearing sonofabitch was going to pay. A shooting star exploded and trailed across the sky in a brilliant arch. She never even noticed.

Nor did the man who watched her. He'd known she'd come. Hadn't he been told to keep watch? Wasn't his head, even now, almost bursting from the pressure of the Voice? He'd been chosen, given the burden and the glory.

“*Dominus vobiscum,*” he murmured, then gripped the smooth material of the amice tightly in his hands.

And when his task was complete, he felt the hot rush of power. His loins exploded. His blood sang. He was clean. And so, now, was she. Slowly, gently, he ran his thumb over her forehead, her lips, her heart, in the sign of the cross. He gave her absolution, but quickly. The Voice had warned him there were many who wouldn't understand the purity of the work he did.

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“THE media's crawling up our backs with this one.” Captain Harris slammed a fist on the newspaper spread over his desk. “The whole goddamn city's in a panic. When I find out who leaked this priest business to the press ...”

He trailed off, drawing himself in. It wasn't often he came that close to losing control. He might sit behind a desk, but he was a cop, he told himself, a damn good one. A good cop didn't lose control. To give himself time, he folded the paper, letting his gaze drift over the other cops in the room. Damn good ones, Harris admitted. He wouldn't have tolerated less.

Ben Paris sat on the corner of the desk, toying with a Lucite paperweight. Harris knew him well enough to understand that Ben liked something in his hands when he was thinking. Young, Harris reflected, but seasoned with ten years on the force. A solid cop, if a bit loose on procedure. The two citations for bravery had been well earned. When things were less tense, it even amused Harris that Ben looked like the Hollywood screenwriter's version of an undercover cop—lean-faced, strong-boned, dark, and wiry. His hair was full and too long to be conventional, but it was cut in one of those fancy little shops in Georgetown. He had pale green eyes that didn't miss what was important.

In a chair, three feet of leg spread out before him, sat Ed Jackson, Ben's partner. At six-foot and two hundred fifty pounds, he could usually intimidate a suspect on sight. Whether by whim or design, he wore a full beard that was as red as the curly mane of hair on his head. His eyes were blue and friendly. At fifty yards he could put a hole in the eagle of a quarter with his Police Special.

Harris set the paper aside, but didn't sit. "What've you got?"

Ben tossed the paperweight from hand to hand before he set it down. "Other than build and coloring, there's no connection between the two victims. No mutual friends, no mutual hangouts. You've got the rundown on Carla Johnson. Barbara Clayton worked in a dress shop, divorced, no kids. Family lives in Maryland, blue collar. She'd been seeing someone pretty heavily up to three months ago. Things fizzled, he moved to L.A. We're checking on him, but he looks clean."

He reached in his pocket for a cigarette and caught his partner's eye.

"That's six," Ed said easily. "Ben's trying to get under a pack a day," he explained, then took up the report himself.

"Clayton spent the evening in a bar on Wisconsin. Kind of a girls' night out with a friend who works with her. Friend says Clayton left about one. Her car was found broken down a couple blocks from the hit. Seems she's been having transmission problems. Apparently, she decided to walk from there. Her apartment's only about half a mile away."

"The only things the victims had in common were that they were both blond, white, and female." Ben drew in smoke hard, let it fill up his lungs, then released it. "Now they're dead."

In his territory, Harris thought, and took it personally. "The murder weapon, the priest's scarf."

"Amice," Ben supplied. "Didn't seem too hard to trace. Our guy uses the best—silk."

"He didn't get it in the city," Ed continued. "Not in the past year anyway. We've checked every religious store, every church. Got a line on three outlets in New England that carry the type."

"The notes were written on paper available at any dime store," Ben added. "There's no tracing them."

"In other words, you've got nothing."

"In any words," Ben drew smoke again, "we've got nothing."

Harris studied each man in silence. He might have wished Ben would wear a tie or that Ed would trim down his beard, but that was personal. They were his best. Paris, with his easygoing charm and surface carelessness, had the instincts of a fox and a mind as sharp as a stiletto. Jackson was as thorough and efficient as a maiden aunt. A case was a jigsaw puzzle to him, and he never tired of shifting through the pieces.

Harris sniffed the smoke from Ben's cigarette, then reminded himself that he'd given up smoking for his own good. "Go back and talk to everyone again. Get me the report on Clayton's old boyfriend and the customer lists from the religious outlets." He glanced toward the paper again. "I want to take this guy down."

"The Priest," Ben murmured as he skimmed the headline. "The press always likes to give

psychos a title.”

“And lots of coverage,” Harris added. “Let's get him out of the headlines and behind bars.”



HAZY after a long night of paperwork, Dr. Teresa Court sipped coffee and skimmed the *Post*. A full week after the second murder and the Priest, as the press termed him, was still at large. She didn't find reading about him the best way to begin her day, but professionally he interested her. She wasn't immune to the death of two young women, but she'd been trained to look at facts and diagnose. Her life had been dedicated to it.

Professionally, her life was besieged by problems, pain, frustrations. To compensate, she kept her private world organized and simple. Because she'd grown up with the cushion of wealth and education, she took the Matisse print on her wall and the Baccarat crystal on the table as a matter of course. She preferred clean lines and pastels, but now and again found herself drawn to something jarring, like the abstract oil in vivid strokes and arrogant colors over her table. She understood her need for the harsh as well as the soft, and was content. One of her top priorities was to remain content.

Because the coffee was already cold, she pushed it aside. After a moment she pushed the paper away as well. She wished she knew more about the killer and the victims, had all the details. Then she remembered the old saying about being careful what you wished for because you just might get it. With a quick check of her watch, she rose from the table. She didn't have time to brood over a story in the paper. She had patients to see.



EASTERN cities are at their most splendid in the fall. Summer bakes them, winter leaves them stalled and dingy, but autumn gives them a blast of color and dignity.

At two A.M. on a cool October morning Ben Paris found himself suddenly and completely awake. There was no use wondering what had disturbed his sleep and the interesting dream involving three blonds. Rising, he padded naked to his dresser and groped for his cigarette. Twenty-two, he counted silently.

He lit one, letting the familiar bitter taste fill his mouth before he went to the kitchen to make coffee. Turning on only the fluorescent light on the stove, he kept a sharp eye out for roaches. Nothing skidded into cracks. Ben set the flame under the pot and thought the late extermination was still holding. As he reached for a cup he pushed away two days' worth of mail he'd yet to open.

In the harsh kitchen light his face looked hard, even dangerous. But then, he was thinking about murder. His naked body was loose and rangy, with a leanness that would have been gaunt without the subtle ridges of muscle.

The coffee wouldn't keep him awake. When his mind was ready, his body would just follow suit. He'd trained himself through endless stakeouts.

A scrawny dust-colored cat leaped on the table and stared at him as he sipped and smoked. Noting he was distracted, the cat readjusted her idea about a late-night saucer of milk and s

down to wash.

They were no closer to finding the killer than they had been the afternoon the first body was discovered. If they'd come upon something remotely resembling a lead, it had fizzled after the first miles of legwork. Dead end, Ben reflected. Zero. Zilch.

Of course, there had been five confessions in one month alone. All from the disturbed minds that craved attention. Twenty-six days after the second murder and they were nowhere. And every day that went by, he knew, the trail grew colder. As the press petered out, people began to relax. He didn't like it. Lighting one cigarette from the butt of another, Ben thought of calm before storms. He looked out into the cool night lit by a half-moon and wondered.



DOUG's was only five miles from Ben's apartment. The little club was dark now. The musicians were gone and the spilled booze mopped up. Francie Bowers stepped out the back entrance and drew on her sweater. Her feet hurt. After six hours on four-inch heels, her toes were cramping inside her sneakers. Still, the tips had been worth it. Working as a cocktail waitress might keep you on your feet, but if your legs were good—and hers were—the tips rolled in.

A few more nights like this one, she mused, and she might just be able to put a down payment on that little VW. No more hassling with the bus. That was her idea of heaven.

The arch of her foot gave out a sweet sliver of pain. Wincing at it, Francie glanced at the alley. It would save her a quarter mile. But it was dark. She took another two steps toward the streetlight and gave up. Dark or not, she wasn't walking one step more than she had to.

He'd been waiting a long time. But he'd known. The Voice had said one of the lost ones was being sent. She was coming quickly, as if eager to reach salvation. For days he had prayed for her, for the cleansing of her soul. Now the time of forgiveness was almost at hand. He was only an instrument.

The turmoil began in his head and spiraled down. Power rolled into him. In the shadows he prayed until she passed by.

He moved swiftly, as was merciful. When the amice was looped around her neck, she had only an instant to gasp before he pulled it taut. She let out a small liquid sound as her air was cut off. As terror rammed into her, she dropped her canvas bag and grabbed for the restriction with both hands.

Sometimes, when his power was great, he could let them go quickly. But the evil in her was strong, challenging him. Her fingers pulled at the silk, then dug heavily into the gloves he wore. When she kicked back, he lifted her from her feet, but she continued to lash out. One of her feet connected with a can and sent it clattering. The noise echoed in his head until he nearly screamed with it.

Then she was limp, and the tears on his face dried in the autumn air. He laid her gently on the concrete and absolved her in the old tongue. After pinning the note to her sweater, he blessed her.

She was at peace. And for now, so was he.

“THERE'S no reason to kill us getting there.” Ed's tone of voice was serene as Ben took the Mustang around a corner at fifty. “She's already dead.”

Ben downshifted and took the next right. “You're the one who totaled the last car. *My* last car,” he added without too much malice. “Only had seventy-five thousand miles on it.”

“High-speed pursuit,” Ed mumbled.

The Mustang shimmied over a bump, reminding Ben that he'd been meaning to check the shocks.

“And I didn't kill you.”

“Contusions and lacerations.” Sliding through an amber light, Ben drove it into third. “Multiple contusions and lacerations.”

Reminiscently, Ed smiled. “We got them, didn't we?”

“They were unconscious.” Ben squealed to a halt at the curb and pocketed the keys. “And I needed five stitches in my arm.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch.” With a yawn Ed unfolded himself from the car and stood on the sidewalk.

It was barely dawn, and cool enough so you could see your breath, but a crowd was already forming. Hunched in his jacket and wishing for coffee, Ben worked his way through the curious onlookers to the roped-off alley.

“Sly.” With a nod to the police photographer, Ben looked down on victim number three.

He would put her age at twenty-six to twenty-eight. The sweater was a cheap polyester and the soles of her sneakers were worn almost smooth. She wore dangling, gold-plated earrings. Her face was a mask of heavy makeup that didn't suit the department-store sweaters and corduroys.

Cupping his hands around his second cigarette of the day, he listened to the report of the uniformed cop beside him.

“Vagrant found her. We got him in a squad car sobering up. Seems he was picking through the trash when he came across her. Put the fear of God into him, so he ran out of the alley and nearly into my cruiser.”

Ben nodded, looking down at the neatly lettered note pinned to her sweater. Frustration and fury moved through him so swiftly that when acceptance settled in, they were hardly noticed. Bending down, Ed picked up the oversized canvas bag she'd dropped. A handful of bus tokens spilled out.

It was going to be a long day.

Six hours later they walked into the precinct. Homicide didn't have the seamy glamor of Vic but it was hardly as neat and tidy as the stations in the suburbs. Two years before, the walls had been painted in what Ben referred to as apartment-house beige. The floor tiles sweat

the summer and held the cold in the winter. No matter how diligent the janitorial service was with pine cleaner and dust rags, the rooms forever smelled of stale smoke, wet coffee grounds, and fresh sweat. True, they'd taken up a pool in the spring and delegated one of the detectives to buy some plants to put on the windowsills. They weren't dying, but they weren't flourishing either.

Ben passed a desk and nodded to Lou Roderick as the detective typed up a report. This was a cop who took his caseload steadily, the way an accountant takes corporate taxes.

"Harris wants to see you," Lou told him, and without looking up, managed to convey a touch of sympathy. "Just got in from a meeting with the mayor. And I think Lowenstein took a message for you."

"Thanks." Ben eyed the Snickers bar on Roderick's desk. "Hey, Lou—"

"Forget it." Roderick continued to type his report without breaking rhythm.

"So much for brotherhood," Ben muttered, and sauntered over to Lowenstein.

She was a different type from Roderick altogether, Ben mused. She worked in surges, stop and go, and was more comfortable on the street than at a typewriter. Ben respected Lou's preciseness, but as a backup he'd have chosen Lowenstein, whose proper suits and trim dresses didn't hide the fact that she had the best legs in the department. Ben took a quick look at them before he sat on the corner of her desk. Too bad she was married, he thought.

Poking idly through her papers, he waited for her to finish her call. "How's it going, Lowenstein?"

"My garbage disposal's throwing up and the plumber wants three hundred, but that's all right because my husband's going to fix it." She spun a form into her typewriter. "It'll only cost us twice as much that way. How about you?" She smacked his hand away from the Pepsi on her desk. "Got anything new on our priest?"

"Just a corpse." If there was bitterness, it was hard to detect. "Ever been to Doug's, down by the Canal?"

"I don't have your social life, Paris."

He gave a quick snort then picked up the fat mug that held her pencils. "She was a cocktail waitress there. Twenty-seven."

"No use letting it get to you," she murmured, then seeing his face, passed him the Pepsi. "Always got to you. Harris wants to see you and Ed."

"Yeah, I know." He took a long swallow, letting the sugar and caffeine pour into his system. "Got a message for me?"

"Oh, yeah." With a smirk, she pushed through her papers until she found it. "Bunny called. When the high, breathy voice didn't get a rise out of him, she sent him an arch look and handed him the paper. "She wants to know what time you're picking her up. She sounded really cute, Paris."

He pocketed the slip and grinned. "She is real cute, Lowenstein, but I'd dump her in a minute if you wanted to cheat on your husband."

When he walked off without returning her drink, she laughed and went back to typing on

the form.

“They're turning my apartment into condos.” Ed hung up the phone and went with Ben toward Harris's office. “Fifty thousand. Jesus.”

“It's got bad plumbing.” Ben drained the rest of the Pepsi and tossed it into a can.

“Yeah. Got any vacancies over at your place?”

“Nobody leaves there unless they die.”

Through the wide glass window of Harris's office they could see the captain standing by his desk as he talked on the phone. He'd kept himself in good shape for a man of fifty-seven who'd spent the last ten years behind a desk. He had too much willpower to run to fat. His first marriage had gone under because of the job, his second because of the bottle. Harris had given up booze and marriage, and now the job took the place of both. The cops in his department didn't necessarily like him, but they respected him. Harris preferred things that way. Glancing up, he signaled for both men to enter.

“I want the lab reports before five. If there was a piece of lint on her sweater, I want to know where it came from. Do your job. Give me something to work with so I can do mine. When he hung up, he went over to his hot plate and poured coffee. After five years he still wished it were scotch. “Tell me about Francie Bowers.”

“She's been working tables at Doug's for almost a year. Moved to D.C. from Virginia last November. Lived alone in an apartment in North West.” Ed shifted his weight and checked his notebook. “Married twice, neither lasted over a year. We're checking out both exes. She worked nights and slept days, so her neighbors don't know much about her. She got off work at one. Apparently she cut through the alley to get to the bus stop. She didn't own a car.”

“Nobody heard anything,” Ben added. “Or saw anything.”

“Ask again,” Harris said simply. “And find someone who did. Anything more on number one?”

Ben didn't like victims by numbers, and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Carla Johnson's boyfriend's in L.A., got a bit part on a soap. He's clean. It appeared she'd had an argument with another student the day before she was killed. Witnesses said it got pretty hot.”

“He admitted it,” Ed continued. “Seems they'd dated a couple of times and she wasn't interested.”

“Alibi?”

“Claims he got drunk and picked up a freshman.” With a shrug, Ben sat on the arm of a chair. “They're engaged. We can bring him in again, but neither of us believes he has anything to do with it. He's got no connection with Clayton or Bowers. When we checked him over, we found out that the kid's the all-American boy from an upper-middle-class family. Lettered in track. It's more likely Ed's a psychotic than that college boy.”

“Thanks, partner.”

“Well, check him out again anyway. What's his name?”

“Robert Lawrence Dors. He drives a Honda Civic and wears polo shirts.” Ben drew out a cigarette. “White loafers and no socks.”

“Roderick'll bring him in.”

“Wait a minute—”

“I'm assigning a task force to this business,” Harris said, cutting Ben off. He poured second cup of coffee. “Roderick, Lowenstein, and Bigsby'll be working with you. I want the guy before he kills the next woman who happens to be out walking alone.” His voice remained mild, reasonable, and final. “You have a problem with that?”

Ben strode to the window and stared out. It was personal, and he knew better. “No, we don't want him.”

“Including the mayor,” Harris added with only the slightest trace of bitterness. “He wants to be able to give the press something positive by the end of the week. We're calling in a psychiatrist to give us a profile.”

“A shrink?” With a half laugh, Ben turned around. “Come on, Captain.”

Because he didn't like it either, Harris's voice chilled. “Dr. Court has agreed to cooperate with us, at the mayor's request. We don't know what he looks like, maybe it's time we found out how he thinks. At this point,” he added with a level glance at both men, “I'm willing to look into a crystal ball if we'd get a lead out of it. Be here at four.”

Ben started to open his mouth then caught Ed's warning glance. Without a word they strode out. “Maybe we should call in a psychic,” Ben muttered.

“Close-minded.”

“Realistic.”

“The human psyche is a fascinating mystery.”

“You've been reading again.”

“And those trained to understand it can open doors laymen only knock against.”

Ben sighed and flicked his cigarette into the parking lot as they stepped outside. “Shit.”



“SHIT,” Tess muttered as she glanced out her office window. There were two things she had a desire to do at that moment. The first was battling traffic in the cold, nasty rain that had begun to fall. The second was to become involved with the homicides plaguing the city. She was going to have to do the first because the mayor, and her grandfather, had pressured her to do the second.

Her caseload was already too heavy. She might have refused the mayor, politely, even apologetically. Her grandfather was a different matter. She never felt like Dr. Teresa Court when she dealt with him. After five minutes she wasn't five feet four with a woman's body and a black-framed degree behind her. She was again a skinny twelve-year-old, overpowered by the personality of the man she loved most in the world.

He'd seen to it that she'd gotten that black-framed degree, hadn't he? With his confidence, she thought, his support, his unstinting belief in her. How could she say no when he asked her to use her skill? Because handling her current caseload took her ten hours a day. Perhaps it was time she stopped being stubborn and took on a partner.

Tess looked around her pastel office with its carefully selected antiques and watercolor. Hers, she thought. Every bit of it. And she glanced at the tall, oak file cabinet, circa 1920. It was loaded with case files. Those were hers too. No, she wouldn't be taking on a partner. In a year she'd be thirty. She had her own practice, her own office, her own problems. That's just the way she wanted to keep it.

Taking the mink-lined raincoat from the closet, she shrugged into it. And maybe, just maybe, she could help the police find the man who was splashed across the headlines day after day. She could help them find him, stop him, so that he in turn could get the help he needed.

She picked up her purse and the briefcase, which was fat with files to be sorted through that evening. "Kate." Stepping into her outer office, Tess turned up her collar. "I'm on my way to Captain Harris's office. Don't pass anything through unless it's urgent."

"You should have a hat," the receptionist answered.

"I've got one in the car. See you tomorrow."

"Drive carefully."

Already thinking ahead, she walked through the door while digging for her car keys. Maybe she could grab some take-out Chinese on the way home and have a quiet dinner before—

"Tess!"

One more step and she would have been in the elevator. Swearing under her breath, Tess turned and managed a smile. "Frank." And she'd been so successful at avoiding him for nearly ten days.

"You're a hard lady to pin down."

He strode toward her. Impeccable. That was the word that always leaped to Tess's mind when she saw Dr. F. R. Fuller. Right before boring. His suit was pearl-gray Brooks Brothers and his striped tie had hints of that shade and the baby pink in his Arrow shirt. His hair was perfectly and conservatively groomed. She tried hard to keep her smile from fading. It wasn't Frank's fault she couldn't warm to perfection.

"I've been busy."

"You know what they say about all work, Tess."

She gritted her teeth to keep herself from saying no, what did they say? He'd simply laugh and give her the rest of the cliché. "I'll just have to risk it." She pressed the button for down and hoped the car came quickly.

"But you're leaving early today."

"Outside appointment." Deliberately she checked her watch. She had time to spare. "Running a bit late," she lied without qualm.

"I've been trying to get in touch with you." Pressing his palm against the wall, he leaned over her. Another of his habits Tess found herself detesting. "You'd think it wouldn't be a problem since our offices are right next door."

Where the hell was an elevator when you needed it? "You know what schedules are like with Frank."

“Indeed I do.” He flashed his toothpaste smile and she wondered if he thought his cologne was driving her wild. “But we all need to relax now and again, right, Doctor?”

“In our own way.”

“I have tickets to the Noel Coward play at the Kennedy Center tomorrow night. Why don't we relax together?”

The last time, the only time, she'd agreed to relax with him, she'd barely escaped with the clothes on her back. Worse, before the tug-of-war, she'd been bored to death for three hours. “It's nice of you to think of me, Frank.” Again she lied without hesitation. “I'm afraid I'm already booked for tomorrow.”

“Why don't we—”

The doors opened. “Oops, I'm late.” Sending him a cheery smile, she stepped inside. “Don't work too hard, Frank. You know what they say.”

Due to the pounding rain and traffic, she ate up nearly all of her extra time driving to the station house. Strangely enough, the half-hour battle left her rather cheerful. Perhaps, she thought, because she had escaped so neatly from Frank. If she'd had the heart, and she didn't, she would simply have told him he was a jerk and that would be the end of it. Until he pushed her into enough corners, she'd use tact and excuses.

Reaching beside her, she picked up a felt hat and bundled her hair under it. She glanced in the rearview mirror and wrinkled her nose. No use doing any repairs now. The rain would make it a waste of time. Still, there was bound to be a ladies room inside where she could dig into her bag of tricks and come out looking dignified and professional. For now she was just going to look wet.

Pushing open the door of the car, Tess grabbed her hat with one hand and made a dash for the building.

“Check this out.” Ben halted his partner on the steps leading to headquarters. They watched, heedless of the rain, as Tess jumped over puddles.

“Nice legs,” Ed commented.

“Damn. They're better than Lowenstein's.”

“Maybe.” Ed gave it a moment's thought. “Hard to tell in the rain.”

Still running, head down, Tess dashed up the steps and collided with Ben. He heard her swear before he took her shoulders, pulling her back just far enough to get a look at her face.

It was worth getting wet for.

Elegant. Even with rain washing over it, Ben thought of elegance. The slash of cheekbone was strong, high enough to make him think of Viking maidens. Her mouth was soft and moist, making him think of other things. Her skin was pale, with just a touch of rose. But it was her eyes that made him lose track of the glib remark he'd thought to make. They were big, cool, and just a bit annoyed. And violet. He'd thought the color had been reserved for Elizabeth Taylor and wildflowers.

“Sorry,” Tess managed when she got her breath back. “I didn't see you.”

“No.” He wanted to go on staring, but managed to bring himself around. He had

reputation with women that was mythical. Exaggerated, but based on fact. “At the rate you were traveling, I'm not surprised.” It felt good to hold her, to watch the rain cling to her lashes. “I could run you in for assaulting an officer.”

“The lady's getting wet,” Ed murmured.

Until then Tess had only been aware of the man who held her, staring at her as though she'd appeared in a puff of smoke. Now she made herself look away and over, then up. She saw a wet giant with laughing blue eyes and a mass of dripping red hair. Was this a police station, she thought, or a fairy tale?

Ben kept one hand on her arm as he pushed open the door. He'd let her inside, but he wasn't going to let her slip away. Not yet.

Once in, Tess gave Ed another look, decided he was real, and turned to Ben. So was he. And he was still holding her arm. Amused, she lifted a brow. “Officer, I warn you, if you arrest me for assault, I'll file charges of police brutality.” When he smiled, she felt something click. So he wasn't as harmless as she'd thought. “Now, if you'll excuse me—”

“Forget the charges.” Ben kept his hand on her arm. “If you need a ticket fixed—”

“Sergeant—”

“Detective,” he corrected. “Ben.”

“Detective, I might take you up on that another time, but at the moment I'm running late. If you want to be helpful—”

“I'm a public servant.”

“Then you can let go of my arm and tell me where to find Captain Harris.”

“Captain Harris? Homicide?”

She saw the surprise, the distrust, and felt her arm released. Intrigued, she tilted her head and removed her hat. Pale blond hair tumbled to her shoulders. “That's right.”

Ben's gaze skimmed the fall of hair before he looked back at her face. It didn't fit, he thought. He suspected things that didn't fit. “Dr. Court?”

It always took an effort to meet rudeness and cynicism with grace. Tess didn't bother to make it. “Right again—Detective.”

“You're a shrink?”

She gave him back look for look. “You're a cop?”

Each might have added something less than complimentary if Ed hadn't burst out laughing. “That's the bell for round one,” he said easily. “Harris's office is a neutral corner.” He took Tess's arm himself and showed her the way.



FLANKED ON EITHER side, Tess walked down the corridors. Now and then a voice barked or a door opened and closed hollowly. The sound of phones ringing came from everywhere once; they never seemed to be answered. Rain beat against the windows to add a touch of gloom. A man in his shirtsleeves and overalls was mopping up a puddle of something. The corridor smelled strongly of Lysol and damp.

It wasn't the first time she'd been in a police station, but it was the first time she'd come so close to being intimidated. Ignoring Ben, she concentrated on his partner.

"You two always travel as a pair?"

Genial, Ed grinned. He liked her voice because it was pitched low and was as cool as a sherbet on a hot Sunday afternoon. "The captain likes me to keep an eye on him."

"I'll bet."

Ben made a sharp left turn. "This way—Doctor."

Tess slanted him a look and moved past him. He smelled of rain and soap. As she stepped into the squad room, she watched two men drag out a teenage boy in handcuffs. A woman sat in a corner with a cup in both hands and wept silently. The sounds of arguing poured in from out in the hall.

"Welcome to reality," Ben offered as someone began to swear.

Tess gave him a long steady look and summed him up as a fool. Did he think she'd expected tea and cookies? Compared to the clinic where she gave her time once a week, this was a garden party. "Thank you, Detective..."

"Paris." He wondered why he felt she was laughing at him. "Ben Paris, Dr. Court. This is my partner, Ed Jackson." Taking out a cigarette, he lit it as he watched her. She looked as out of place in the dingy squad room as a rose on a trash heap. But that was her problem. "We'll be working with you."

"How nice." With the smile she reserved for annoying shop clerks, she breezed by him. Before she could knock on Harris's door, Ben was opening it.

"Captain." Ben waited as Harris pushed aside papers and rose. "This is Dr. Court."

He hadn't been expecting a woman, or anyone so young. But Harris had commanded so many women officers, too many rookies, to feel anything but momentary surprise. The mayor had recommended her. Insisted on her, Harris corrected himself. And the mayor, no matter how annoying, was a sharp man who made few missteps.

"Dr. Court." He held out his hand and found hers soft and small, but firm enough. "I appreciate you coming."

No, she wasn't quite convinced he did, but she had worked around such things before.

hope I can help.”

“Please, sit down.”

She started to shrug out of her coat, and felt hands on her arms. Taking a quick look over her shoulder, she saw Ben behind her. “Nice coat, Doctor.” His fingers brushed over the lining as he slipped it from her. “Fifty-minute hours must be profitable.”

“Nothing's more fun than soaking patients,” she said in the same undertone, then turned away from him. Arrogant jerk, she thought, and took her seat.

“Dr. Court might like some coffee,” Ed put in. Always easily amused, he grinned over at his partner. “She got kind of wet coming in.”

Seeing the gleam in Ed's eyes, Tess couldn't help but grin back. “I'd love some coffee, Black.”

Harris glanced over at the dregs in the pot on his hot plate, then reached for his phone. “Roderick, get some coffee in here. Four—no three,” he corrected as he glanced at Ed.

“If there's any hot water...” Ed reached in his pocket and drew out an herbal tea bag.

“And a cup of hot water,” Harris said, his lips twisting into something like a smile. “Yeah, for Jackson. Dr. Court...” Harris didn't know what had amused her, but had a feeling it had something to do with his two men. They had better get down to business. “We'll be grateful for any help you can give us. And you'll have our full cooperation.” This was said with a glance, a telling one, at Ben. “You've been briefed on what we need?”

Tess thought of her two-hour meeting with the mayor, and the stacks of paperwork she had taken home from his office. Brief, she mused, had nothing to do with it.

“Yes. You need a psychological profile on the killer known as the Priest. You'll want an educated, expert opinion as to why he kills, and to his style of killing. You want me to tell you who he is, emotionally. How he thinks, how he feels. With the facts I have, and those you'll give me, it's possible to give an opinion... an opinion,” she stressed, “on how and why and who he is, psychologically. With that you may be a step closer to stopping him.”

So she didn't promise miracles. It helped Harris to relax. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Ben watching her steadily, one finger idly stroking down her raincoat. “Sit down, Paris,” he said mildly. “The mayor gave you some data?” he asked the psychiatrist.

“A bit. I started on it last night.”

“You'll want to take a look at these reports as well.” Taking a folder from his desk, Harris passed it to her.

“Thank you.” Tess pulled out a pair of tortoiseshell glasses from her bag and opened the folder.

A shrink, Ben thought again as he studied her profile. She looked like she should be leading cheers at a varsity game. Or sipping cognac at the Mayflower. He wasn't certain why both images seemed to suit her, but they did. It was the image of mind doctor that didn't. Psychiatrists were tall and thin and pale, with calm eyes, calm voices, calm hands.

He remembered the psychiatrist his brother had seen for three years after returning from Vietnam. Josh had gone away a young, fresh-faced idealist. He'd come back haunted and

belligerent. The psychiatrist had helped. Or so it had seemed, so everyone had said, Jos included. Until he'd taken his service revolver and ended whatever chances he'd had.

The psychiatrist had called it Delayed Stress Syndrome. Until then Ben hadn't known just how much he hated labels.

Roderick brought in the coffee and managed not to look annoyed at being delegated gofer.

"You bring in the Dors kids?" Harris asked him.

"I was on my way."

"Paris and Jackson'll brief you and Lowenstein and Bigsby in the morning after roll call. He dismissed him with a nod as he dumped three teaspoons of sugar in his cup. Across the room Ed winced.

Tess accepted her cup with a murmur and never looked up. "Should I assume that the murderer has more than average strength?"

Ben took out a cigarette and studied it. "Why?"

Tess pushed her glasses down on her nose in a trick she remembered from a professor at college. It was meant to demoralize. "Other than the marks of strangulation, there weren't any bruises, any signs of violence, no torn clothing or signs of struggle."

Ignoring his coffee, Ben drew on the cigarette. "None of the victims were particularly hefty. Barbara Clayton was the biggest at five-four and a hundred and twenty."

"Terror and adrenaline bring on surges of strength," she countered. "Your assumption from the reports is that he takes them by surprise, from behind."

"We assume that from the angle and location of the bruises."

"I think I follow that," she said briskly, and pushed her glasses up again. It wasn't easy to demoralize a clod. "None of the victims was able to scratch his face or there'd have been cellulose of flesh under their nails. Have I got that right?" Before he could answer, she turned pointedly to Ed. "So, he's smart enough to want to avoid questionable marks. It doesn't appear he kills sporadically, but plans in an orderly, even logical fashion. Their clothing," she went on. "Was it disturbed, buttons undone, seams torn, shoes kicked off?"

Ed shook his head, admiring the way she dove into details. "No, ma'am. All three were neat as a pin."

"And the murder weapon, the amice?"

"Folded across the chest."

"A tidy psychotic," Ben put in.

Tess merely lifted a brow. "You're quick to diagnose, Detective Paris. But rather than *tidy*, I'd use the word *reverent*."

By holding up a single finger, Harris stopped Ben's retort. "Could you explain that to the Doctor?"

"I can't give you a thorough profile without some more study, Captain, but I think I can give you a general outline. The killer's obviously deeply religious, and I'd guess trained traditionally."

“So you're going for the priest angle?”

Again she turned to Ben. “The man may have been in a religious order at one time, or simply have a fascination, even a fear of the authority of the Church. His use of the amice is a symbol, to himself, to us, even to his victims. It might be used in a rebellious way, but I don't rule that out by the notes. Since all three victims were of the same age group, it tends to indicate that they represent some important female figure in his life. A mother, a wife, lover, or sister. Someone who was or is intimate on an emotional level. My feeling is this figure failed him in some way, through the Church.”

“A sin?” Ben blew out a stream of smoke.

He might've been a clod, she mused, but he wasn't stupid. “The definition of a sin varies, she said coolly. “But yes, a sin in his eyes, probably a sexual one.”

He hated the calm, impersonal analysis. “So he's punishing her through other women?”

She heard the derision in his voice, and closed the folder. “No, he's saving them.”

Ben opened his mouth again, then shut it. It made a horrible kind of sense.

“That's the one aspect I find absolutely clear,” Tess said as she turned back to Harris. “I see it in the notes, all of them. The man's put himself in the role of savior.

From the lack of violence, I'd say he has no wish to punish. If it were revenge, he'd be brutal, cruel, and he'd want them to be aware of what was going to happen to them. Instead, he kills them as quickly as possible, then tidies their clothes, crosses the amice in a gesture of reverence, and leaves a note stating that they're saved.”

Taking off her glasses, she twirled them by the eyepiece. “He doesn't rape them. More than likely he's impotent with women, but more important, a sexual assault would be a sin. Possibly, probably, he derives some sort of sexual release from the killing, but more of a spiritual one.”

“A religious fanatic,” Harris mused.

“Inwardly,” Tess told him. “Outwardly he probably functions normally for long periods of time. The murders are spaced weeks apart, so it would appear he has a level of control. He could very well hold down a normal job, socialize, attend church.”

“Church.” Ben rose and paced to the window.

“Regularly, I'd think. It's his focal point. If this man isn't a priest, he takes on the aspects of one during the murders. In his mind, he's ministering.”

“Absolution,” Ben murmured. “The last rites.”

Intrigued, Tess narrowed her eyes. “Exactly.”

Not knowing much about the Church, Ed turned to another topic. “A schizophrenic?”

Tess frowned down at her glasses as she shook her head. “Schizophrenia, manic depression, split personality. Labels are too easily applied and tend to generalize.”

She didn't notice that Ben turned back and stared at her. She pushed her glasses back on their case and dropped them in her purse. “Every psychiatric disorder is a highly individual problem, and each problem can only be understood and dealt with by uncovering its dynamic sources.”

"I'd rather work with specifics myself," Harris told her. "But there's a premium on them in this case. Are we dealing with a psychopath?"

Her expression changed subtly. Impatience, Ben thought, noting the slight line between her brows and a quick movement of her mouth. Then she was professional again. "If you want a general term, *psychopathy* will do. It means mental disorder."

Ed stroked his beard. "So he's insane."

"*Insanity* is a legal term, Detective." This was said almost primly as Tess picked up the folder and rose. "Once he's stopped and taken to trial, that'll become an issue. I'll have a profile for you as soon as possible, Captain. It might help if I could see the notes that were left on the bodies, and the murder weapons."

Dissatisfied, Harris rose. He wanted more. Though he knew better, he wanted A, B, and C and the lines connecting each. "Detective Paris'll show you whatever you need to see. Thank you, Dr. Court."

She took his hand. "You've little to thank me for at this point. Detective Paris?"

"Right this way." With a cursory nod he led her out.

He said nothing as he took her through the corridors again and to the checkpoint where they signed in to examine the evidence. Tess was silent as well as she studied the notes and the neat, precise printing. They didn't vary, and were exact to the point that they seemed almost like photostats. The man who'd written them, she mused, hadn't been in a rage or in despair. If anything, he'd been at peace. It was peace he sought, and peace, in his twisted way, he sought to give.

"White for purity," she murmured after she'd looked at the amices. A symbol perhaps, she mused. But for whom? She turned away from the notes. More than the murder weapons, the amices chilled her. "It appears he's a man with a mission."

Ben remembered the sick frustration he'd felt after each murder, but his voice was cool and flat. "You sound sure of yourself, Doctor."

"Do I?" Turning back, she gave him a brief survey, mulled things over, then went on an impulse. "What time are you off duty, Detective?"

He tilted his head, not quite certain of his moves. "Ten minutes ago."

"Good." She pulled on her coat. "You can buy me a drink and tell me why you dislike my profession, or just me personally. I give you my word, no tabletop analysis."

Something about her challenged him. The cool, elegant looks, the strong, sophisticated voice. Maybe it was the big, soft eyes. He'd think about it later. "No fee?"

She laughed and stuck her hat in her pocket. "We might have hit the root of the problem."

"I need my coat." As they walked back to the squad room, each of them wondered what they were about to spend part of their evening with someone who so obviously disapproved of who and what they were. But then each of them was determined to come out on top before the evening was over. Ben grabbed his coat and scrawled something in a ledger.

"Charlie, tell Ed I'm engaged in further consultation with Dr. Court."

"You file that requisition?"

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