



Carnal Sin (Seven Deadly Sins)

By Allison Brennan

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Racing to L.A., Moira discovers that the City of Angels is fast becoming the demon Lust's decadent playground. She suspects another coven is at work, aided indirectly by her diabolical mother, the powerful witch Fiona. But when Moira's unwanted psychic powers intensify, she fears her connection to the underworld is putting everyone she cares about in grave danger.

As supernatural war erupts, Moira and smoldering, seductive Rafe Cooper are caught in the crossfire. Cornered by mortal and unearthly enemies, they must master all their own powers to survive—and to understand if the intensely passionate feelings that bind them are Lust's demon magic or true desire.

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Carnal Sin (Seven Deadly Sins) By Allison Brennan Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1152300 in Books
- Published on: 2010-06-22
- Released on: 2010-06-22
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.89" h x 1.16" w x 4.18" l, .48 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 448 pages

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Allison Brennan is the *New York Times* bestselling author of many romantic thrillers, including *Kiss Me*, *Kill Me*; *Love Me to Death*; *Sudden Death*; and *Killing Fear*. A five-time RITA finalist and Daphne du Maurier Award winner, Brennan enjoys spending her free time reading, playing games, watching high school sports, and researching her novels. A member of Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, and International Thriller Writers, Allison Brennan lives in Northern California with her husband, Dan, and their five children.

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ONE

Present Day

Moira O'Donnell woke up with blood on her hands.

Her heart raced as she sat upright in the strange bed, staring at the dark-red blood drip, drip, dripping onto the white sheets, disappearing as each thick drop spread. She swallowed the scream that fought to escape.

She blinked and the blood was gone. The panicked rage faded. She almost—almost, but not quite—forgot the feeling of her hand clenching the heavy, balanced dagger. Almost forgot the sickening sound of the blade slicing through tendons, hitting bone, cutting out an invisible soul and throwing it to demons that tore it to shreds, feeding.

It's not real. It's not real. It's not real.

She repeated the mantra, reminding herself that it was only a nightmare, that she'd certainly never killed a person.

The fear from the dream stayed; it always did. Moira lived with fear day in and day out, sometimes buried so deep she almost could believe it was gone. When she lied to herself.

As the nightmare faded, her vision blurred. The dim early-morning light coming from the edges of the closed blinds looked cloudy and surreal, like her nightmare. She felt a vision coming on . . . but that wasn't possible. She'd never been fully awake for a vision before; they'd always hit her in the moment of unease immediately following a nightmare, before she could claw her way back to consciousness.

She was awake—knew she was awake—but everything around her was foggy, while her mind started a movie she didn't want to see. Moira's gut reaction was to stop the onslaught of images, but she couldn't even if she'd tried. In a rush, her mind flooded with thoughts not her own, sights she'd never witnessed, feelings she'd never had. No vision had ever been anything like this. Not this physical sense of evil seeping into every pore, filling her until she wanted to scream.

She flew across the continent and back, tired. Bored. Frustrated. There were many places she could stay, but none of them appealed to her. It was all too easy. The desires of the body were weak, and she was anything but weak. She wanted freedom, but wasn't free. She wanted vengeance, and she could have it—have

everything—when she was free.

Freedom! Her time was now. She grew stronger with each passing day.

Yet, her spirit was caught by something stronger than she. She resisted, angry. But she was tied to the earth, and the harder she fought, the weaker she became. Spinning, spinning, spinning out of control, shrinking . . .

A weak, dark-haired woman sat in the circle, waiting for her. She fought the entrapment, but she'd been in the astral plane, and her anchor had called her back.

Someone trapped her! She stretched and fought and vowed revenge on her captor. The mind that shared this body was foolish. She suppressed it. Brutally, without remorse.

Moira screamed as pain filled her head. For a split second, she thought she was possessed. She tasted the hot sulphur on her tongue, felt an evil presence under her skin; then it was gone. The vision, the pain, everything. Everything but the fear.

Her body shook violently. From the corner of her eye she saw movement—something was in her room. She jumped out of bed, knife in hand without even thinking about reaching under her pillow for her weapon. She held it in front of her to ward off dark magic or a demon, making quick, confident strides toward the enemy.

“Moira!”

Rafe. She swallowed, blinked, tried to regain her focus as she wobbled on her feet. He grabbed her wrist and her vision cleared. She had been inches from him. What if she'd hurt him? What if she'd been trapped in a vision and killed him?

“You were looking right at me, but you didn't see me,” he said quietly.

She shook her head to clear her foggy mind and sat back heavily on the edge of her bed.

She had to get her mind wrapped around what had just happened. The nightmare, waking up, the vision—being only inches from Rafe before she recognized him.

Maybe she had been asleep. That made her more dangerous to those she cared about.

She'd been in Santa Louisa for nearly a month, but the last two weeks she'd been doing nothing. Anthony Zaccardi, Santa Louisa's own resident demonologist, had his books and research, trying to track down the Seven Deadly Sins. Rafe had his physical therapy and retraining. And what did she have? Exercise until her body ached. Nightmares that reminded her of her deadly flaws. Visions almost daily for the past two weeks that left her drained and on edge. And still no trace of her mother, Fiona O'Donnell, or Fiona's lover, Matthew Walker. In the last seven years she'd never stayed in any one place this long, except when training to become a demon hunter at Olivet. At least there she'd worked her ass off, too exhausted to go stir-crazy.

“I'm okay,” she said, but not fast enough.

Rafe didn't believe her, but he didn't need words to ask. He never did. His dark, bottomless blue eyes questioned her, compelling the truth from her lips.

“I had another vision,” she admitted.

That she could say it out loud showed she’d accepted the fact she was a freak. She’d always known it, but now? Well, it sounded even crazier. But Rafe didn’t think so, which was both comforting and scary as hell. They were so much alike . . . yet so different. She was scared to death of what might happen if she dropped her shields. There was no future for her; she couldn’t lose her focus.

“I think . . .” How could she explain? “One of them—one of the demons—found a host.” That wasn’t quite right, but she didn’t understand everything she’d felt and heard and thought. “Or something like that.” It sounded lame. It was lame.

“Anthony doesn’t believe they’re seeking to possess anyone.”

“Anthony doesn’t know everything,” she snapped.

Rafe walked over to the dresser and leaned against it, crossing his arms over his chest. Already, two weeks after he miraculously awakened from his coma—if that’s what it was that had kept him unconscious for ten weeks—he’d regained his color and much of his strength. They were staying at Anthony and Skye’s place—hardly big enough for the four of them—with Rafe sleeping on the couch. She needed to get out of this place. Not just because she itched to find her mother again, but because the close proximity to Rafe was too distracting. Not to mention Anthony’s need to control both of them day and night, and Skye’s constant questions. Moira liked the cop, but there were some things better left outside of the law. If Sheriff Skye McPherson knew even half the laws Moira had broken . . .

Rafe still didn’t say anything. Damn, how annoying was that? He just pinned her with his sharp eyes, his unshaven square jaw locked, waiting for her to tell him the truth.

“I know it’s not possible,” she began—hoping it wasn’t possible—“I just—it felt—” She hesitated, then said what she truly feared. “It felt like I was looking through the demon’s eyes. I tasted Hell on my tongue, my blood burned. But—I think—” She bit her lip.

“What?”

“She was pure evil, Rafe. Powerful. And really pissed off. She felt trapped, and somehow she blamed me.” She gave him a half-smile. “Stupid, I know.”

Rafe didn’t smile, nor did he say anything—why was he always so damn quiet? Why couldn’t he get angry like Anthony or frustrated like Skye? Instead, he was calm.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you, demon or human.”

He barely whispered, but she heard every word as if his voice etched them directly onto her bones. Every hair on her skin rose. He appeared unflappable, but his stoicism was a ruse—he was a tightly controlled bundle of energy, his restlessness tangible but unseen. His words had movement and weight. He never had to raise his voice to be heard, and everyone listened.

She wanted to believe him. He meant what he said, but he wasn’t strong enough to protect her—or anyone—from the Seven. Neither was she; none of them were. They’d nearly died battling the demon Envy, and they had even lost one of their own. A loss she feared would be repeated until there was no one left

standing.

Despair had moved in with her fear, but she fought it, questioning whether they were her own feelings or left from residual contact with the Seven. Was their power still present even though they had long left Santa Louisa?

All but the demon Envy, trapped in a tabernacle at St. Francis de Sales in downtown Santa Louisa, in a vault that Moira had commented was the supernatural equivalent of Fort Knox. Anthony hadn't been amused. He never was.

But Rafe had smiled at her joke behind Anthony's back, and winked at her, another reason why she was drawn to him. He liked her quick wit, and he made her smile.

"For nearly two weeks, I've been doing nothing but waiting for something we can't even identify," she said. "How can we stop the Seven Deadly Sins if we don't know where they are? Do we have to wait until someone drops dead? Do we have to wait until we hear on the news that Greed is working its evil magic on Wall Street or people are dying because they're too slothful to eat? And dammit, where did Fiona go? I can't feel her magic anymore. They're just gone, and I'm waiting for them to come after me! And what if—"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Maria Gardner:

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