

Deadly Sins – Deadly Secrets Book Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Sunday morning

A menacing vortex surrounded Ned Durwood. It felt as though Satan himself had tried to claim his reward, but only managed one last shuddering breath before banishment back from whence he had come. Regardless, hell's horrors still filled the room.

Abe and Cherrie Collins lay sprawled across their queen-sized bed in their own blood. Abe's hairy arms were crumpled to his chest against a tee-shirt and blue boxers, both now coated bright red. Cherrie lay beside her husband, her skirt yanked up to her waist exposing short thick thighs shoved into pantyhose, now laddered with runs.

Ned Durwood waited, hoping against hope that Abe and Cherrie were not as dead as they looked, certain that they were. The stench of excrement and slit-open intestines sickened him. He forced the bile back down his throat, willing himself not to throw up.

Get out of here, cried a voice in his head.

He hurled the butcher knife across the room, turned, and skidded out the bedroom like the Foul Fiend from Gehenna was now after him.

Down the short hallway, to the kitchen, through the back door.

Outside, the cold temperature raised goose bumps on his damp skin. He shivered as he pulled a dingy handkerchief out of his back pocket, stopping just long enough to wipe the doorknob clean before he charged across the large cedar deck.

Mid-way across, the fact hit him. Oh God—the knife...

He stopped, half-turned toward the house. He had to go back and clean it, else they'd know he'd been there—have evidence to—

Fear clamped his feet to the deck while rational thinking urged him back inside to wipe his fingerprints from the knife handle. As time warped, stopped, then sped up again, Ned heard the pounding of a judge's gavel in his head. But when tires crunched on the oyster-shell driveway beside the house, the spell broke, and Ned realized it had only been the sound of his heartbeat pounding in his ears.

However, someone had driven up to the front of the house, and they'd find the bodies *and* the knife.

Tucking his head between his shoulders, he fled down the steps and into the backyard, feet moving faster than the drumbeat in his chest. He retraced his path through the soupy fog to the railroad tracks behind the house.

But the sight of the couple still burned behind his eyes, and half-blinded by the image, Ned didn't see the train—stopped dead on the tracks—until he almost ran into it.

“Dammit.” Pungent creosote vapors from the railroad ties tingled his nose. He swiped it with the back of his hand and looked farther down the tracks, not believing his rotten luck.

Then he saw his escape route—two of the boxcars sat unhitched, with just enough space between the couplings for him to slip through. Ned sprinted down the tracks toward the opening, breathing hard, feet skidding on the gravel. He stumbled, regained his footing and pushed harder, faster.

At last, he stepped between the unbuckled boxcars, but as he did, a rumble startled him. He stopped, jerked his head to listen. There it was again, a slight jolt, then another.

Just as he recognized the sound, the couplings on the two boxcars banged shut, and the two parts of the train became one again. But the movement smashed Ned in half.

Blue peeled off his clothes in the kitchen and stuffed them into a black plastic bag, relieved Ella had already left for church.

Bare-ass naked, he slipped into the garage and dumped the bag into the trash can, glad tomorrow was collection day. Beneath mounds of refuse at the landfill, the soiled clothes might as well be on another planet.

Upstairs, he turned on the shower and adjusted the temperature to one notch below scalding and stepped inside. While the hot water pounded on his head he prayed that the heat burned iniquity from his soul.

But when he stepped out and towel-dried his reddened skin, flashes of the early morning horror returned as real as ever. He'd never meant to go that far—to—to...

He tossed the towel to the floor, went into his bedroom closet and selected a charcoal-gray suit. Then, pushing the early-morning images to the back of his mind while he dressed, he focused his thoughts on the upcoming worship service. He could pull this off, all he had to do was ask God's help.

Decked out in dark suit and white shirt, he looked in the mirror one last time, admiring the man who smiled back at him. He did a three-quarter turn, glanced back at his reflection, and clicked his heels. Perfect. Folks said he looked like a preacher—dammit, he did, a good-looking one at that.

Straightening his dark red tie one last time, he headed out the door into the cool morning air, righteousness hastening his steps across the early-spring grass. A sudden gust of wind blew his jacket open and as he glanced down to button it, he saw dew-soaked grass clinging to his freshly polished Cole Hahn shoes. Shit. He was going to be late. He'd never been late for church before.

He pulled a handkerchief out of his back pocket and swiped the grass off of his expensive new shoes.

To be honest, he'd bought them because they looked like something a famous television evangelist might wear, but give him a few more years, and he'd be in their league anyway.

Tucking his handkerchief in his back pocket, he strode up the sidewalk to the church. Just as he reached the door, a hand grabbed his shoulder, and for an instant he feared he'd been caught.

"Can I talk to you a minute before you go inside?" a deep voice asked.

Blue turned, relieved to see it was only Clarence Clark. He glanced back toward the building as the clarion bells pealed. "Clarence, good morning. What can I do for you?"

Blue shook the proffered hand of the pot-bellied man, both relieved and irritated at the interruption. He'd hoped for a few minutes to collect his thoughts, to pray. Frustration itched around the starched collar of his dress shirt.

"Sorry to bother you, but I'm heading up a fundraiser to restore the old lighthouse out at Sabine Pass. I know you've opposed the restoration before. Just wanted to see where you stood on it now. With you fighting it, I doubt we'll make much headway."

A flood of childhood memories washed over Blue. They always did—every time anyone mentioned the lighthouse. He thought he'd killed any plans of restoration the last time they tried. "I can't support the project, Clarence. I've told you that before. My mind's made up, and I'm not going to change it."

"But you know the place is a historical landmark. I can't understand why you oppose the repair." The man rubbed the back of his neck. "Makes *no* sense to me."

"Well, it does to me," Blue snapped. "Now if you'll excuse me, Clarence, I'm rather busy at the moment."

Blue snatched open the door, slipped inside and closed it behind him, leaving the other man standing with his hands on his hips.

He glanced at his watch and listened. *Amazing Grace* resonated from the sanctuary.

Good, he had a few more minutes.

Easing to his knees, he bowed his head and prayed for forgiveness.

But his mind wandered from God to events earlier that morning. What would the congregation think if they knew what he'd been doing while they sat in Sunday School?

Regardless of whether they knew the truth or not, God did. But maybe righteousness sometimes strayed from its usual path. After all, there was no law that said it couldn't. Even Abraham had been ordered to kill his own son. Maybe what he had done had indeed been God's will—else why would he have done it?

“Amen.” With that, Blue closed his mind to all doubt.

He rose to his feet, dusted off his pants legs and sat at his desk. Shoulders high and proud, he flipped open his Bible to Ezekiel, Chapter Seven.

While he scanned the scripture, he kept an eye on the clock. When the hands on the timepiece jumped another couple minutes, he closed the book, stood and squared his tie, walked through the sanctuary door and stepped onto the platform.

The Very Reverend Humble Bluett—Blue to his friends, and Brother Blue to his congregation—sat on the preacher's bench, crossed his legs and straightened the crease down the front of his trouser leg, and then scrutinized his congregation.

Once again, Ian Meade, the professor from Lamar University, sat on the back row flaunting his full head of wavy dark hair and blue eyes. Blue felt himself hardening, so he shifted in his seat and adjusted his trousers, forcing his eyes and thoughts away from the man's chiseled good looks. If it weren't for God's grace, he, the most reverend Brother Blue, would long ago have burned in the flames of hell.

After the collection, the congregation stood and sang the Doxology, a short praise hymn rendered—after the collection of the money—in every Baptist church he'd ever attended, which was legion.

After the congregation sat, a young woman strode to the pulpit and sang the special music. *“I’m pressing on the upward way...”* she declared, hands folded in prayer, eyes focused on the ornate ceiling. At the conclusion of the song several men in the congregation voiced a hearty “Amen” while the woman reclaimed her seat in the choir loft behind Blue.

The sanctuary grew quiet except for a fussy child and the thud of a hymn book dropped in the rack.

Blue waited.

The room grew quieter still.

This was the moment Blue lived for, this in-between time, when the whole congregation waited, hushed eagerness settling them down even more. Many times he’d wished this feeling could be captured on DVD. Perhaps by replaying it, the persistent shadows of doubt resident within him might be banished.

Blue stood, cleared his throat and stepped to the pulpit. He tugged on his tie, jutted his chin, and opened his Bible.

The Gift slid down from Heaven.

“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,” his voice boomed. Two women on the front row stopped whispering and sat up straight. So did the child in the rear. The stillness grew deeper. If it hadn’t been for plush burgundy carpet, a pin would have sounded like a cannon ball when it hit the floor.

Once again, he held them in the palms of his hands.

But only by the grace of God, he reminded himself.