

## Sins

By Paula Howard

I'm a killer. That doesn't mean I'm a bad guy. I'm not. Really. I wasn't born a killer. I didn't come out of my mother with a gun glued to my tiny fingers. I was the kid who helped little old ladies across the street and nursed injured strays back to health. I was a computer geek with a plan to finish high school and go onto college to learn how to program. I was nice. Normal.

I didn't discover my true nature until I joined the military. They're the ones who gave me the gun. The moment I had that sleek, well-oiled devil in my hands, I found my destiny. A killer was born.

I prefer to think of myself as a Robin Hood of sorts. I take the lives of the oppressors and save the lives of the oppressed. I am still helping the little old ladies and injured strays in my own unique way. God, I love my job!

I love it even more now that I'm no longer in the employ of the U.S. government. About the time I discovered most of the "oppressors" I killed for my country turned out to be more about political posturing and positioning than it did for any altruistic reasons, the witch hunts against homosexuals in the military started. I quit before they threw me out.

I like men. Sexually. Always have. Always will. I used to be ashamed of it. I bought into that whole idea that it was a disease and curable like any other mental illness. Truth be told, I joined the Marines because of what I thought of back then as my perversions. It didn't help. When I finally just accepted my preferences, life became both easier and more difficult. Easier because I no longer stressed over the fact I thought my spotter, Nick, attractive. What can I say? I have a thing for dark hair, dark eyes, and a swimmer's physique. Even so, I wasn't about to advertise that fact to Nick or

anyone else on the base. Contrary to popular heterosexual belief—or maybe it's hubris—we homos aren't looking to lure straight men into our camp. Hets are no fun. They always want to top.

Imagine both our surprise when we happened to see each other in a gay bar soon after I'd left the Marines. He'd quit the Corps, too, for much the same reasons I did. We talked about our life after the military. I'd gone into office work. I spent the entire day telling computer illiterate people to try rebooting to see if it fixed their problem before calling technical support. A tedious, thankless, soul-sucking job. I hated it. Nick hadn't fared much better. The man was an amazing tactician, a fact lost on the marketing firm that employed him. Instead of killing bad guys, we both willingly allowed a corporation to slowly bore us to death.

We started dating and within two months we moved in together. Nick and I fit together like two puzzle pieces. Interlocking parts that bond to make a coherent picture. He is my light and my love and I wouldn't know what to do without him. On a personal level, I found a happiness I didn't think I had the capacity for. I would leave the house every morning with a goofy, love-smitten grin on my face. The minute I hit the office it flipped over into a scowl.

"We're better than this," Nick said one night when I came home in a particularly foul mood. "We should quit working for those pansies and work for ourselves, instead."

"What do you mean?" I asked hopefully. Nick was a great idea man. If he had a plan, I knew it would probably work.

"I've, uh, been doing some research."

I didn't quite like the sound of that. As much brainpower as Nick possessed, sometimes his ideas—though great—weren't conducive to my continuing good health. "What kind of research?"

He bit his full bottom lip. I stared, mesmerized. He really knew how to reel me in when his idea was iffy.

“We could do some free-lance work. There are tons of jobs out there just waiting for men with our special skills to take them. With your marksmanship and my brains, we’d clean up.”

“I’m assuming you mean free-lance as innnn . . . what? Assassination?”

He shrugged with a nonchalance that probably only I could see through. “What do you think?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek while I thought of his proposal. Had to admit. It sounded tempting. “State of the world these days, we could probably pick and choose which bad guys we wanted to help eliminate.”

He smiled and my world became a little brighter. He had that effect on me.

“I would think so.”

I grinned, his excitement spilling onto me. “Why not? It can’t be worse than what I’m doing now.”

“Great!” He tossed me a packette trussed with plastic wrap. “Here’s our first target.”

As I’ve mentioned . . . perhaps a few times . . . Nick is a strategic genius. If he plans it, it goes off without a hitch. He has the ability to see absolutely every contingency and plan around it. I don’t know how he does it, but when Nick is in full planning mode, it’s a sight to behold.

So Nick plans. I execute. Literally. We’re good and we’re highly sought after. We’re also highly selective. We check our proposed targets and if we feel they deserve death, I have no problem dealing it to them. I’ll admit, we did have to do a few jobs we both found morally questionable at first, but as our reputation grew, so did our ability to turn down the more unsavory contracts.

It wasn’t always smooth sailing, especially at the beginning. For one thing, as good as I was with guns and knives, I had some gaps in my education when it came to the kind of wet-work I now performed. Sometimes a man just needed to be poisoned. If he was a real asshole, I wanted to be able to use one that would kill him slowly and painfully.

I took a class in herbology so I could learn all about poisonous plants. Never mind the teacher just pointed them out so we wouldn't gather a killing weed rather than a healing one. It gave me the basic knowledge I needed. From there I had to find things out on my own. It is amazing what one can find on the internet. I knew enough about computers so no one—i.e. Homeland Security—could track my research back to me. They tend to frown on people learning how to use poisons.

Understand, the people we take out rape and kill children, destroy entire villages, engage in mass genocide, that sort of thing. If they end up on our scope, they are the most evil and vile scum of the Earth and everyone is the better for their demise.

One of those bastards was the reason I now found myself in a gay bar in, of all places, Arkansas. There aren't a lot of gay bars in this state, but it just so happened our target knew where they all were and frequented a number of them. As I said, I like men and I enjoy looking at them, but I've never been into mindless sex. Especially not when I had a beautiful man waiting for me at home.

But Nick's plan called for me to put the moves on this guy so that's what I did. I flirted with him just enough to get him interested but managed to sidestep his more aggressive advances. I bought him beer after beer until his body finally processed all that liquid and he excused himself to go to the restroom. I put my internet education to work and spilled a few drops of a very potent, reasonably fast-acting poison that mimics a heart attack into my target's drink.

I waited until he returned and handed him the new and improved beer with a lecherous smile. "Drink up, handsome." I leaned in and whispered into his ear. "As soon as you finish this one I'll give you a reward."

He perked up from his inebriated slouch and leered at me. He chugged the beer and slammed the bottle onto the counter. "Let's go, baby!"

I looked at my watch. "Sorry. Gotta go. My boyfriend's waiting for me."

"What?" he sputtered. "Wait!"

I turned and made my way to the front door. Didn't want to be too close when he went heels up. I heard him staggering behind me, cussing me the entire time.

I stepped out of the noise of the bar and into the noise of a protest. People of all ages lined the sidewalk carrying signs with sayings like, "God hates gays!" and "Gay's will burn forever!" Even young children barely old enough to walk much less read held signs in their fat little fists. They had no idea what they held. These beliefs couldn't be theirs, at least not at their age. Yet the very people who were supposed to protect them from exploitation exploited them to spew their hate-filled rhetoric.

Disgusting. I memorized the faces of the adults in the hope that one day their picture would show up as a possible target. I'd take that job without even thinking about it. I dismissed them but kept an eye on them as I turned to walk past them in the direction of my car.

A woman stepped right in my path. My instinct was to lash out and break her scrawny neck. My training tends to take over if I'm not paying attention. I managed to stop myself from causing her bodily harm, though. Pity.

"You're going to hell for what you did in that bar!" she screamed.

I stopped, startled. What did she know about my mission in the bar? I tensed, thinking furiously of the best way to silence her for good while she stood in a crowd of people when she stepped closer and shook her "*God hates gays!*" sign in my face. I relaxed, realizing she meant because I'd been in a gay bar. Didn't make me want to kill her any less, but I refrained.

"Homosexuality is an abomination!" she screeched, her voice frenzied and eyes glimmering with a bunch of crazy. Her fetid breath blew my longish blond hair from my face. What the hell had she eaten for lunch? Whatever it was, I wanted to avoid it.

"Says who?" I asked mildly. I know. I needed to get out of there. Sometimes, though, I liked the thrill of cutting my timing close. I think it's because I love the adrenaline high it gives me. Nick says it's because I'm nuts.

Her face screws up in disgust. "The Bible says!" She held up a book in the hand not holding the sign. "Homosexuality is an abomination against the Lord and you will burn in hell for being a homosexual!"

I couldn't help thinking about all the things I've done in my life. About all the people I'd killed in the name of country and political grandstanding. Of those I'd killed in the name of my own judgment which, although I feel it is a positive thing, might actually be a sin in the eyes of God. I thought of all the pain some of what I'd done brought to innocent people. Of the man who would dying in the bar behind me within the next few minutes. Because I'm a killer.

Then I thought of Nick. Sweet, loving, handsome, heartbreakingly wonderful Nick. The only bright spot of a life lived in darkness. A man who still helped old ladies across the street and nursed injured animals back to health. The kind of love we shared was celebrated in the Bible and simply could not be a sin in the eyes of a God as loving as the Christians declared him to be.

Her companions started crowding in on me. I didn't care for that. Not at all.

Still I stood my ground. "I'm sure you're right that I will end up in hell," I told them. "But it will not be because of who I loved."

At that moment the soon-to-be dead man staggered from the bar clutching his chest. The ghouls with the signs focused their crazed stares on him, excited to see a sinner die right in front of them and vindicate their hatred.

I walked away with a shake of my head. And people thought I was evil. The true evil resided in the hearts of people like them.

I made my peace long ago with the idea of going to Hell for my sins. I am, after all, a killer. I have no doubt, however, the so-called zealots like the sign carriers will be right there with me.

I can't wait to see the look of surprise on their faces.