



Original Sin (Seven Deadly Sins)

By Allison Brennan

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Tormented by his own terrifying past and driven by powers he can't explain, ex-seminarian Rafe Cooper joins Moira's dangerous quest. But Fiona is one devilish step ahead. Hungry for greater power, eternal youth, and stunning beauty, the sorceress is unleashing upon the mortal world the living incarnations of the Seven Deadly Sins.

Together with a demonologist, a tough female sheriff, and a pair of star-crossed teenagers, Moira and Rafe are humanity's last chance to snatch salvation from the howling jaws of damnation.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Allison Brennan is the *New York Times* bestselling author of twelve romantic thrillers, including **The Prey**, **Speak No Evil**, **Killing Fear** and **Sudden Death**. **Original Sin** launches her new supernatural thriller series based on the Seven Deadly Sins. Prior to her writing career, she worked for thirteen years as a consultant in the California State Legislature. She lives in Northern California with her husband, Dan, and their five children. A member of Romance Writers of America, International Thriller Writers and the Horror Writers Association, when she's not writing or reading, Allison enjoys playing video games and attending her kids sporting events.

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Chapter One

Present Day

It was the darkest hour of the night.

Fiona stood within the protective double circle that framed the perfect hexagram within a perfect triangle. Bowls of incense burned within triangles, six of which were perfectly and evenly cast between the inner and outer circles at the apex of each point of the hexagram, smoke slowly rising. Only when the fumes breached the invisible shield did the wind carry them off, swirling violently into the black night. The laws of physics did not apply to Hell's gateway.

As it is below, so it is above.

The seventh bowl sat in the center, at the base of the altar. The trap was complete.

Her filmy, translucent white gown was unique in its meticulous and detailed silver embroidery. Woven through Fiona's fiery hair was a knotted scarlet rope. Flames from the black candles at each point of the hexagram were virtually still, a testament to her careful preparation and growing power.

Seven of her coven stood sentry beside the seven triangles. They, too, wore white gowns with nothing beneath. Her obedient daughter Serena was at her left hand. Three men guarded the altar. And the key to the gateway to Hell lay naked upon the altar, covered with only a sacred red sheet. Abby was a beautiful sacrifice, her long, golden hair fanned out beneath her. She had no fear. She'd been taught well.

Fiona listened to Serena speak the ancient words from the *Conoscenza*, murmuring as if speaking to a lover. She'd searched her entire life for this book of knowledge, the book so many believed to have been destroyed. Fiona had never lost hope, never given up. And now it was hers.

Nine days of fasting, nine days of purification, nine days of denial culminating in tonight and the fulfillment of her promise. With power comes responsibility, and Fiona kept her word. With the knowledge contained in the *Conoscenza*, her gain would be far greater control and power over the elements, the spirits, the universe. One step closer to immortality. She saw it, tasted it, reveled in the electricity of the forces within her and around her.

As Serena spoke, her servants chanted their response. As she incanted, their voices swelled, fueling Fiona's power. The energy grew, pulled into their sacred circle. She commanded the wind, she would command all!

This was only the beginning, and there was to be no end.

"Anoint our vessel," Fiona commanded the three men.

Serena handed Garrett a gold chalice with a mixture of herbs, resins, and human blood. As he dipped his left thumb into the cup, Serena began to turn the supernatural key by reciting from the book. Garrett marked the vessel, ensuring that the Seven would soon be under Fiona's command.

"As it is below, so it is above," Fiona intoned. "For every good there is an evil, for every virtue there is a vice."

Garrett put his thumb on the vessel's forehead and drew a triangle. One of the women entered the inner circle and lit one of the seven candles, reciting a prayer of obedience.

Fiona continued the ritual, moving from triangle to triangle, with Garrett anointing and Serena reading from the book. He looked at Fiona over the cup, his eyes on fire. His lust, his fever, inspired her and she summoned each woman in turn, each a chosen guardian of one of the Seven.

Serena stepped away from the altar in the middle of the ritual and Fiona whirled around. "No one breaks the circle!"

"She's here."

Fiona looked upon her coven, smiling victoriously. She'd told them the arca would come.

—And the blood of the virtuous will seal the seven, and thee who seals the arca will rule—

Lily Ellis stood outside the double circle. Her long, pale red hair whipped about her face, her fair skin nearly translucent. She was rail thin, a wisp of a girl, but with the power of virtue and a soul dedicated to this moment. Fiona knew the girl's inner strength would be strong enough, as she had been prepared as the vessel had been. If not, she'd die tonight, and Fiona would find another arca. There were others who had been dedicated; others who could serve her purpose. But the signs weren't wrong: Lily Ellis was the one.

Fiona whispered to Serena, "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Bring her forth."

Serena walked to the edge of the circle. She'd been cleansed and could not break the circle without harm, but Fiona was certain Lily Ellis did not know this, nor that once Lily entered the circle she would not be allowed to leave until the ritual was complete. And when the Seven were trapped, Fiona would have the power of legions of demons on her side, and elevate herself to a mortal god. Closer to victory over death, victory over age, victory over humanity.

"We will not harm you."

Lily said, her voice shaking, “Pul-please let her go.”

“You would take her place?” Serena asked.

Serena understood the power of words. Would take her place was not an offering or an exchange, it was a question. Because no one could save Abby. She was the sacrifice through which the Seven would come forth; Abby was the key that unsealed the prison. She had been recruited because she was the arca’s closest friend and blood relative, a cousin. Both only daughters of witches who were only daughters of witches. Not necessary for the ritual, but Fiona preferred balance and rhythm in her rituals, and Lily and Abby provided a nice, even canvas.

The girl’s lips trembled. She had not dressed for the chill, her arms pulling her thin sweater tight around her. The fog rose from the ocean, rolling over the edge of the cliffs toward their circle. “Please—”

“Would you?” Serena asked.

Tears glistened in the candlelight. “Y-Yes.”

Serena put out her hand, palm up.

Lily hesitated. Fiona closed her eyes and pictured the surroundings. She sent out her Third Eye, her psychic self, looking for anyone lurking in the cypress. Beyond that was open space, cliffs, and the highway more than a mile to the west. Open space protected them. There was no one to stop her. She’d know long before anyone could get close. Victory was in her grasp. Power swelled in her breast.

Lily had to cross the circle of her own free will.

She had to agree to taste the forbidden fruit.

Lily looked around at the cloaked men and women. Nervous, scared, uncertain. Fiona nodded to Garrett. He pushed back his hood and turned to face Lily.

The arca gasped. “Pastor Garrett—”

“Come, child.” He opened his arms to her, palms up like Serena. Welcoming. Benign. His strikingly handsome face seduced women of all ages to do exactly what he wanted.

Lily swallowed, then stepped into the circle. She stopped, her face twisted in fearful confusion as the stillness of the air within the circle surprised her.

Serena removed the extra gown from her shoulders and said, “Wear this.”

Lily looked around, her eyes darting nervously from Garrett to the other men.

Serena laughed lightly. “Would you like them to close their eyes?”

She nodded, shaking. Fiona put up her hand and nodded to the men. “The arca commands privacy.”

Ian and Richard closed their eyes. Garrett smiled at Fiona as he put his hood back on, then closed his as well.

She allowed him to gloat. Fiona had been skeptical of a seventeen-year-old virgin, but Garrett was never wrong about these things.

The girl took off her clothes, not meeting the eyes of the women who watched. Abby, a willing participant only because she didn't know that her death was required, said, "Lily, there's nothing to be scared about."

"Abby—" Lily glanced around, her big, brown eyes wide, the reflection of the candles making them seem bottomless. "Please, let's go."

"No," Abby said, irritated. "I thought you wanted to share this with me."

Lily opened her mouth to speak, but Fiona could not allow her to cast doubt within Abby. Fiona said, "Relax, Abby, you need to be perfectly calm in order to achieve your elevated state."

"Yes, medea."

"The anointing," Fiona said.

Serena had a small gold triangle-shaped box in her hand. The box contained a resin, made in part with blood of a newborn goat, olive oil, scammony, myrrh, and civet. The recipe came from the Conoscenza to aid the Seven in finding the arca once they were released. Serena marked Lily with the seven signs, on her forehead, each hand, her heart, her stomach, her pubis, and her left hip. There was an opening in the gown at each point so the mark wouldn't be concealed. At each step, Serena whispered the commands, in Latin so the girl wouldn't be afraid.

Garrett handed Serena a closed ball of simmering henbane. Serena opened it, allowing the hallucinogenic fumes to flow into Lily's senses. One. Two. Three.

She closed the ball, handed it back to Garrett, and took Lily's hand. The henbane would keep her compliant, for Fiona couldn't have her fight back now. The wine she would soon drink—willingly or not—would attract the Seven to her, like a bitch in heat attracts a male dog. If the Seven escaped the arca it would be impossible to recapture all of them. At this momentous time, there was no room for error.

Serena brought Lily to the altar and laid her on her back, the top of her head touching Abby's head. One was a vessel through which the demons would enter the world, the other was a container where they would be trapped.

It was perfect.

"Abby," Lily whispered.

"Silence," Fiona ordered. "It has begun."

She continued the ritual she'd begun before the arca arrived, the growing tension and excitement filling her with physical and spiritual power.

Fiona would succeed where other, weaker magicians had failed. For centuries, individual witches and covens had attempted to locate the Conoscenza and failed. Attempted to find the Tree of Life and failed. Many had died in their failures.

Fiona would not fail. She would not die.

She would live forever.

Users Review

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