



Shades of Passion (Hqn)

By Virna DePaul

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Shades of the Past

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Shades of Intrigue

Determined to outrun the grief over her sister's death, Dr. Nina Whitaker reluctantly agrees to use her training to help the police. Despite Detective Granger's disdain for her profession, she believes she can change his mind. But then a grieving father begins a deadly game of revenge, threatening Nina's life, challenging her beliefs and drawing Nina and Simon together in an explosive endgame of intrigue...and unstoppable passion.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Sexy, page-turning excitement!" -New York Times bestselling author Lori Foster on Shades of Desire

About the Author

VIRNA DEPAUL was an English major in college who somehow ended up with a law degree. For ten years, she was a criminal prosecutor for the state of CA. Now, she's thrilled to be writing stories about complex individuals who overcome incredible odds for love. A national bestselling author, Virna's blessed to write for HQN and Harlequin's Romantic Suspense line. Virna also writes paranormal romantic suspense. She loves to hear from readers at www.virnadepaul.com.

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Simon Granger's father had always measured a man's worth by his ability to man up. Didn't matter how tired or angry or sick or sad he was—a man did what he had to. Otherwise, he was worthless. No, less than worthless. He was nothing but a bag of bones taking up space.

That's why, the day after his ex-girlfriend Lana Hudson was murdered by a serial killer, Simon showed up for work just like always.

Now, six months later, he still worked. He testified in court. Occasionally he even socialized with the other members of the Special Investigations Group, a division of the California Department of Justice.

He did what he had to. No complaints. No excuses.

But this...

This was harder. Much harder. So hard that he'd put it off.

So hard that he wasn't sure he could actually do it. But his father's voice prodded him.

Don't be a wuss, Simon. All that counts in this world is a man's actions. Do the right thing and it doesn't matter what you feel. You, the man, what you do—that's what counts. That's what's real.

As usual, playing back his father's words spurred him into action. This time, he didn't stop until he stood by the grave site. He studied it with an odd combination of regret and relief.

It was in a good spot, in the shadow of a willow tree, covered with the thick green lawn that sprawled across the cemetery grounds. The place emanated peace. He could almost feel Lana standing beside him, her hand on his shoulder, a soft smile on her face as she thanked him for coming.

The gravestone suited her. It was polished. An elegant marbled cream. The epitaph, however, made him flinch. Underneath her birth and death dates, it read:

Lana Hudson Beloved Daughter Taken by a Soul in Pain but One Better for Having Met Her

He wanted to wipe out any mention of the "soul" that had taken Lana from them. It seemed obscene that a

tribute to Lana's life would include any mention of the man who'd killed her. But the epitaph hadn't been his call. As a man Lana had briefly dated, Simon had no right to override her parents' wishes. That was especially true given he couldn't dispute the epitaph's overall message—that Lana had blessed every life she'd touched, no matter how dark that life had been.

"Hi, Lana. Sorry it's taken me so long to visit. Things have been busy at work and..." He cringed, imagining how Lana would have called him out for his lameness if she'd still been alive. "Yeah. Well, you know why I haven't come by. I was pissed as hell at you. I—I still am. But I loved you, babe. And I miss you. I couldn't let another day go by without telling you that."

A faint breeze encircled him and he closed his eyes, imagining her arms holding him close. They'd fought before she'd been killed. Fought because she'd taken risks to help a criminal and Simon hadn't approved. Hadn't understood. He still didn't.

But that didn't matter. Not anymore.

Lana was gone. She'd taken part of Simon's heart with her. Without it, there was no joy in life. No hope for it.

Still, he'd do what he had to. He'd do his job.

Whether he did it from a desk or on the streets, he'd do his part to make sure that men like the one who killed Lana got what they deserved. A fast-track ticket to hell.

The breeze that had wound around him suddenly stopped, and he heard its absence as a sigh of disappointment. He imagined Lana's voice chiding him. Urging him to be compassionate. To understand that not all killers were evil. That bad things sometimes happened due to pain, not hate.

As he always did, Simon tried to hear the truth behind her words. But he couldn't. Like the soul immortalized in her epitaph, he was better for having met Lana. Yet even *she* hadn't been able to work miracles.

Crouching, he placed the flowers he'd brought against her tombstone.

And as he walked away, he was bleakly aware that he hadn't felt that gentle breeze again.

Two days later, Simon sat on a wooden bench in the foyer of the Welcome Home homeless shelter in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, waiting for the director, Elaina Scott, to come out of a meeting. To pass the time, he opened the file he held, reviewing what he knew about the victim, a previous resident of the shelter.

It wasn't much.

Three days ago, Louis Cann had been stabbed to death in Golden Gate Park. Normally, the homicide would have been handled by the San Francisco Police Department. In fact, SFPD had already conducted most of the preliminary investigation. Yesterday, however, things had changed. And that was putting it mildly, Simon thought with a mental snort. Now, a prostitute named Rita Taylor claimed she'd seen Cann's killer walking away from the crime scene—wearing a patrol cop's uniform.

Talk about a conflict of interest.

Which was why SIG had been assigned the case. SIG was the state equivalent of the FBI, with jurisdiction over every law enforcement agency in California. The team of five special agents assisted with some of the most complex investigations, but one of their primary duties was to handle cases that other agencies couldn't due to some kind of conflict.

Unfortunately, even with the preliminary work conducted by SFPD, the meager contents of the file Simon held were just that. In addition to Rita Taylor's statement, he knew the victim's identity and that Cann had often stayed at Welcome Home. He also knew that Cann had once served in the military, that he'd fought in Desert Storm and that at the end of his tour he'd managed a fast-food restaurant. Within a year, he'd been living on the streets. He'd been doing so for over ten years and would probably have continued right on doing so if he hadn't been killed.

He didn't have a record of significant problems with the police, and the few volunteers and street people that had known him had denied knowledge of anyone wanting to hurt him. In fact, every person that had been interviewed had said the same thing: Cann kept to himself. He didn't have friends. He didn't want them. He talked to no one. Who would want to kill someone like that, especially when that person had nothing worth stealing?

In other words, everything in Simon's file amounted to a major dead end.

There was no reason to believe that interviewing the shelter director would result in anything new, but this was his case now and Simon wanted to make sure nothing important had been overlooked the first time around. After he was done here, he'd reinterview Rita Taylor, check with SFPD about patrol officers on duty near Golden Gate Park three days ago and then spend the next few days conducting even more interviews—of patrol officers, park vendors or other employees who might have been in a position to see anything, and anyone else he could think of. A whole lot of legwork for what was probably not going to be a lot of payoff.

Didn't matter. His job was to pursue every lead, weak as it may be, and that's what he was going to do.

He flipped through the crime scene photos, settling on the close-up shot of the Semper Fi tattoo on Cann's left biceps. He couldn't help thinking how pathetic it was that Cann, a man who'd once served his country, had ended up living on the streets. Dirty. Wizenened.

Dead.

Bags of bones taking up space.

It's what Simon's father would have said if he was here. And despite knowing it was wrong—or at the very least, politically incorrect—Simon would have had to agree with him. He wasn't exactly proud of his thoughts, but he wasn't a fraud and he wasn't a liar, either. While it was true that justice should be blind, that didn't mean it had to be ignorant, too. Even so, any personal feelings he might harbor about individual weakness didn't affect the way Simon did his job.

Simon sought justice for a lot of people and that included the ones he didn't necessarily like, as well as the ones he'd privately characterize as weak. To Simon's way of thinking, homelessness was the ultimate sign of weakness. Criminals were weak, too, but at least criminals still fought for something, even if it was something selfish or depraved. The homeless no longer fought for anything, even their own dignity.

Or did they?

Had Cann fought for his life in the end?

If so, they'd found no evidence of it. No defensive wounds to indicate he'd resisted his attacker. Which meant he'd most likely been taken unawares. Even the expression on his face at the time his body had been found suggested it. He looked slightly surprised. As if he couldn't quite believe what had happened to him. But in that startled gaze, Simon saw something else. An unspoken plea for justice. A haunted yearning for Simon to find his killer.

That desperate, desolate expression was something Simon had long ago become familiar with. He'd seen the same expression on the faces of every murder victim he'd ever encountered. He'd even seen it on Lana's face, too, he thought grimly, blinking rapidly to drive the disturbing memory away.

And damn it, he didn't want to see it anymore.

Not like that. Not like this, he thought as he shut the file with a snap.

Hopefully he wouldn't have to. Not once he closed this case, anyway.

Visiting Lana's grave had helped him make the decision he'd been struggling with.

He couldn't do this much longer. One way or another, Simon's days of working the streets were coming to an end. His choices were either early retirement or a move to management, and despite everything, he wasn't ready to leave the job altogether. Then again, he could always do private security. A lot of former cops did, including Lana's father, and they made an extremely good living doing it, too. Gil Archer had made it clear that Simon could work for him anytime he wanted, but Simon wanted balance. Off the streets but not *completely* off the streets. That left management, only this time—unlike eight months ago, when he'd walked away from a captain position because it hadn't been exciting enough—he'd have to make it stick. If he could convince the brass to give him another shot, that is.

Understandably, Commander Stevens was reluctant to stick his neck out for Simon again, especially when so many other qualified applicants were jonesing for a cushier gig with increased pay. Still, Simon figured if he solved this case, Stevens would owe him big-time. Hell, the mayor would probably be so grateful he'd speed the promotion along, cutting through all the civil service bureaucratic red tape Simon had had to navigate last time.

Unfortunately, closing this case wasn't exactly going to be a walk in the park. So far, they'd managed to keep Rita Taylor's accusations locked down, but that wasn't going to last long. While he was trying to win over Stevens and the mayor, Simon's actions would be scrutinized like crazy—by a public wanting to make sure a guilty cop didn't get away with murder, and by his fellow officers who'd be judging his loyalty and his ability to protect one of his own. And that wasn't even counting the press. The minute Rita Taylor's statement got leaked, the higher-ups would have a shitload of reporters riding their asses.

And that meant they'd be riding Simon's ass, too.

Hard.

A homeless man—a homeless *ex-marine*—dead. The only suspect a possible cop.

Things weren't looking good for a city that was already suffering negative publicity from recent police encounters with the homeless. Simon's involvement would either make him a scapegoat or a hero. It was up to him to make sure the latter occurred.

A minute later, a sound made him look up.

A bewhiskered man wearing a filthy khaki jacket and equally dirty green-and-white-checkered golf pants made his way down the hall, coming toward him, placing each foot in front of the other equidistance, murmuring numbers to himself. After a moment, Simon realized the man was counting steps, making certain not to step on the black tiles and only stepping on the white ones. Even with twenty feet between them, the man stank—the perpetual stench of homelessness.

Each city's homeless had a particular odor. New York's stank of the subway—engine grease and urine. In San Francisco, the pungent odor that surrounded the homeless had a different scent—urine and pine. Probably because so many hung out in Golden Gate Park, and despite what had happened to Cann, that wasn't likely to change.

The man drew closer and Simon wanted to pull back, away from the increasing wave of stench, but the slats of the bench kept him trapped. When the man reached Simon, he stopped walking. Stopped counting. As if waiting for something. But what?

At first, Simon thought the guy had made him for a cop. That he was going to ask him a question. Maybe even share something about Cann. But then...

Oh, hell.

Simon lifted his foot from the white tile.

"Forty-two," the man murmured as he stepped on the tile, then continued walking and counting, reaching fifty before opening the outer door and leaving the building.

After the man left, Simon stood to stretch his legs and scanned a large bulletin board on the wall. It was covered with flyers announcing everything from AA meetings to pleas for volunteers to an upcoming fundraising gala to benefit the mentally ill. The price of admission? Four hundred dollars a plate. It was being put on by the San Francisco Golf Club and Simon had seen the same flyer before—at work. The event would be attended by some of the city's wealthiest philanthropists and politicians, and Commander Stevens had mentioned that with all the bad PR the police had been receiving lately, the mayor wanted a few officers to sit at his table. Free of charge, of course, but Simon still wondered how many volunteers Stevens had managed to line up. Most cops Simon knew, Simon included, would hate putting on a monkey suit and rubbing elbows with a bunch of socialites, even if it was for a good cause. But because Simon wanted Stevens and the mayor on his side come hiring time, because he wanted that captain position, he'd volunteered anyway.

Still, something about seeing the fundraising flyer here—in a homeless shelter, for God's sake—bothered him. It didn't take a genius to figure out why. Hell, the residents who stayed here could probably live a year on the cost of one night's admission to the gala. Even worse, most of the money raised wouldn't go directly to places like this shelter, but toward providing a bunch of rich people a gourmet meal and a night's entertainment.

It just seemed wrong somehow. But, he reminded himself, it was a good cause and the homeless would benefit to some degree. It wouldn't make a bit of difference in the grand scheme of things, of course, but—

The door next to the bulletin board opened and a pretty Asian woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties stepped out. Wearing a skirt and an ivory blazer, she looked as overdressed in these surroundings as Simon did in his slacks, button-down shirt and suit jacket. She smiled, nodded at Simon, then walked away.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Nancy Sanchez:

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Playing with family in a very park, coming to see the water world or hanging out with pals is thing that usually you will have done when you have spare time, in that case why you don't try thing that really opposite from that. One activity that make you not sensation tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you already been ride on and with addition of knowledge. Even you love *Shades of Passion* (Hqn), it is possible to enjoy both. It is excellent combination right, you still wish to miss it? What kind of hang-out type is it? Oh occur its mind hangout men. What? Still don't obtain it, oh come on its called reading friends.

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