

# Original Sins

ERIN YOUNG



**HODDER &  
STOUGHTON**

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Hodder & Stoughton  
An Hachette UK company

1

Copyright © Robyn Young 2024

The right of Erin Young to be identified as the Author  
of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be  
reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form  
or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher,  
nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other  
than that in which it is published and without a similar condition  
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance  
to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 77781 9  
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 77782 6  
ebook ISBN 978 1 444 77784 0

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable  
and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.  
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental  
regulations of the country of origin.

Hodder & Stoughton Ltd  
Carmelite House  
50 Victoria Embankment  
London EC4Y 0DZ

[www.hodder.co.uk](http://www.hodder.co.uk)

# 1

----

**T**he city was sullen in the last of the light. The clouds—rolling in on a raw wind that whipped the waters of the Des Moines River into peaks—had swallowed the gold dome of the capitol and were engulfing the tops of the skyscrapers downtown. Here and there lights still glowed, winking through the murk.

Hayley Abbot wrapped her arms around herself as she waited by her car, frowning at the sky. The weather forecaster had said it wouldn't snow today, but she could feel the threat of it in the air that sliced through her thermals and tore tears from her eyes.

A black pickup streaked with dirt pulled into the lot. The vehicle jolted through puddles, ice splintering beneath snow chains. A man climbed out. He looked over at her standing there alone, shivering in her windbreaker.

Hayley pulled her cell phone from her pocket. No messages. She'd tugged off a glove with her teeth and was scrolling through her contacts, fingers clumsy with cold, when she heard a shout behind her. Something slammed into her back, knocking the phone from her hand. She stumbled against the door of her car as something thrust intrusively between her legs.

“Banjo! Goddamn!”

Hayley straightened to find an Irish setter bounding around her. She pushed the dog's eager nose away.

The man from the pickup came over, hood held up against the wind. “Banjo, *get here!*”

Hayley bent to pick up her fallen glove, reeling from the dog’s tongue as it curled toward her face. Meaty breath moistened her cheek. She snatched her phone from a puddle. The dog jumped up as she stood, planting muddy paws on her leggings.

The man grabbed the animal’s collar. “Sorry, sweetheart,” he said, glancing sideways at her.

*He should be on a leash*, she wanted to say. “No problem,” she said instead.

As the man hauled Banjo toward the dog park, Hayley brushed the mud from her thighs. Her phone rang and she exhaled as she saw the name. “Tara! Where are you?”

“Hayley, don’t hate me. My sitter’s gone and canceled on me again.”

“What? You’re not coming?”

“I can’t!” A child was screaming in the background. “Look, I’ll speak to you tomorrow, OK? I’m sorry!”

The call cut off.

Hayley swore at the screen. Turning, she scanned the riverside path that curved out of sight beneath an overpass. A man was sprinting along it alone. He was overtaken by a couple of cyclists racing past in RAGBRAI jerseys. There were a few people in the dog park, swaddled in winter coats. Banjo was streaking circles around a lumbering pit bull. In the distance, cars streamed along the Grand Avenue and Locust Street bridges, headlights tracing through the gloom.

Scenes from the recent press conferences flashed in her mind. The cops grim-faced on the evening news.

*Be vigilant.*

But she’d left work early, driven all the way across town. It wasn’t late—the darkness just storm.

Stuffing her phone into her pocket with a curse for Tara’s useless babysitter, Hayley left the parking lot and set off at a jog along the path, skirting icy puddles that looked like cracked glass. Her muscles were stiff, but she quickened her pace as she entered the dank shad-

ows beneath the interstate bridge, filled with the muffled thunder of trucks.

The squat concrete piers of the overpass were swirled with manic loops of graffiti—MAGA shouted scarlet among faded scrawls. There was a poster from the recent presidential campaign, peeling in the damp. On it, the president-elect's mouth had been sprayed with a wide black slash. A mask or a muzzle.

Emerging into the dim daylight, Hayley headed for the pale arch of the Iowa Women of Achievement Bridge. Built in honor of female civil rights leaders, scientists, and war veterans, it pinched the east and west sides of Des Moines together like a delicate brooch. The wind picked up, unsettling the river.

She ran faster, past the Wells Fargo Arena, fronted with a billboard for the Iowa Wolves. *HOWL ALL SEASON LONG!* The air filled with a freezing mist of drizzle. She tugged her pink beanie over her ears, nodding to the few joggers and walkers she passed who'd braved the wild evening. Her annoyance at being stood up by Tara dropped away, along with other worries and frustrations of the day: her mom's frantic call about her dad, who might need his operation sooner than expected, her boss's demand she work this weekend. Yards became miles.

Down by Principal Park, where the Des Moines and Raccoon Rivers converged, the trail continued, snaking toward a wooded area. A group of young men were loitering on a patch of snow-mottled wasteland. A couple of them straddled bikes. The rest hunched together, hoods up, cigarettes smoldering between clenched fingers. Heads turned to Hayley as she approached. An inaudible comment from one was followed by laughter from the others.

She slowed, sweat stinging her eyes. The trail beyond the youths ran on, empty, to a dark line of trees hissing in the wind. She and Tara would normally continue for another few miles. But it really was getting dark now and she was tired. At least, that's what she told herself as she turned and ran back the way she'd come. She heard more laughter behind her, felt the familiar prickle in her spine.

She had started running a year ago, after all the shit that went down

with Bret Childs. It had helped with the stress, pounding out her anger beneath her feet, each mile a challenge she could overcome. But, in time, she discovered her new hobby came with its own issues. Sometimes, men would whistle from their cars or shout obscene things. Tara usually flipped them off, but Hayley had been wary ever since a man once followed her in his pickup on a lonely stretch of road, never speaking, just the low shudder of his engine over her running footsteps.

Once back alongside the main roads, puddled by streetlights, she shrugged off her unease and focused on the return stretch, pushing her legs into a sprint, lungs burning. The rain turned to sleet. The thought of a hot shower and a guilt-free glass of wine glowed in her mind. Under the bridges, back past the arena, its bank of windows reflecting the glowering sky. She could see the lights of the parking lot, her car a distant smudge of blue in the frozen rain. The overpass was coming up, a slab of shadow widening to receive her.

It came from the left—sharp and sudden—a flash of movement in the darkness of the pass. Something slammed into her stomach. Hayley doubled over and dropped to her knees, all the wind knocked out of her. She fell forward on her hands, ice and grit spiking through her gloves. She tried to drag in a breath, but pain had squeezed her lungs into an airless knot. Frantic thoughts scatter-gunned. Her nostrils flared, filling with a briny whiff of urine and river mud. Something loomed over her. *Someone.*

“Please!” The word wheezed out of her.

She caught a glitter of eyes in the shadows of a hood. There was darkness where a face should be. No, not darkness—a mask—some sort of symbol on it, red and sinuous, distorted by the curves of nose and jaw. There was something long and slender brandished in the figure’s fists. She was struck by an image of her father on a baseball field in soft summer light, calling her to pitch the ball.

As the bat swung toward her, Hayley’s cry was lost in the heedless roar of traffic on the interstate above.

## 2

----

**T**he northeastern suburbs scrolled slowly across the cab's grime-smearred window. Riley Fisher watched the streets thread past, eyes fixing on scenes that lingered in the stop-start of morning traffic. Children dashing across an intersection, book bags bouncing on their backs. The dark opening of a body shop, spit of sparks within. The bare scar of a railroad yard crowded with rusting tank cars, power lines drooping overhead. Everywhere, sidewalks were banked with dirty heaps of snow, the last fall four days ago, and more to come.

On the cab's radio, a Christian rock ballad faded into a commercial for a free prayer app. "Hold salvation in the palm of your hand!"

The driver reached out and twisted the dial. The cab filled with the strident voice of a morning news anchor. "Coming up, after the weather, we bring you more on that breaking story of the young woman believed to be the latest victim. Hayley Abbot remains in critical condition at MercyOne. Her parents, keeping vigil at her bedside, have demanded answers from the police. The same question is surely on all our minds—how many more must fall prey to this monster before he is caught? Now, Chuck, with the forecast . . ."

Another twist and the voice was replaced by Johnny Cash's deep-down drawl.

In the window, the timber-fronted houses and railroad crossings of the suburbs jumbled into fast-food joints and motels. Beyond, in gaps between the buildings, Riley caught glimpses of the capitol, its dome a dull yellow in the winter light. The imposing structure—political and judicial heart of Iowa for nearly one hundred and fifty years—glowered over modern-day Des Moines, from the taprooms and boutiques of the East Village to the glass and steel high-rises of downtown.

It was twenty-six years since Riley had left this city and moved with her family to Cedar Falls. At the sight of the towering blocks of the Financial Center and the Plaza Building, memories stirred and whispered. Dinner with her parents at some fancy top-floor restaurant, her father entertaining clients; she and her brother, Ethan, pressing their noses to the glass over the plunging view. Walking hand in hand with her mom through the hazy humidity of the botanical gardens. A school trip to the State Historical Museum, tracing the changing city from the Sac and Fox Nation to the first European settlers and its beginnings as a railroad hub and powerhouse of coal mining. Through the expansion years when skyscrapers rose from the riverbanks and Des Moines shook itself from the smoke and dust of industry, transformed into a center for giants of finance and insurance.

Those memories belonged to another her. Another life. Before Hunter and that night at the state fair that shattered her childhood. Before those lost months in California, salt breeze and surging ocean. Before the car wreck that killed her parents, and Ethan's downward spiral. Long before Iowa's disgraced former governor, Bill Hamilton, her father's old boss, was caught at the heart of a national scandal. A scandal that almost cost Riley her career and, very nearly, her life.

As the cab swung into a line of traffic, she had a last clear view of the capitol. The puckered scar in her shoulder twinged as she turned to look. The surgeon who'd removed the bullet had proclaimed she was fully healed, but even now, two years later, it ached whenever she was tense.

"That's where it happened." The driver's voice came muffled through his mask.



“I’m sorry?”

“The attack. That young woman.” He nodded toward the window. They were on the interstate, crossing the river. “Down there. My wife has a friend at MercyOne. A nurse. Said she’d never seen injuries like it. Girl was beat to a pulp.”

Riley glimpsed figures in the shadows of an underpass. The familiar yellow line of crime scene tape that always opened a pit in her stomach. A satellite van emblazoned with the logo of a local news station. A single latex glove snagged in a patch of weeds, limp blue fingers waving up.

“The cops should set a curfew,” said the driver, putting his foot on the gas. “No good just telling women to be vigilant when some crazy son of a bitch is on the loose. Out alone, down there? She was asking for trouble.” He glanced at Riley in the mirror, waiting for her to agree. When she returned her gaze to the window, he sniffed and turned up the radio.

Fifteen minutes later, they were in West Des Moines—Des Moines’s well-heeled neighbor. An out-of-date magazine Riley had found in her apartment informed her it had been voted one of the top one hundred hippest places to live in America. There were golf courses, a country club, and smart corporate hotels; a weekly farmers market, and a state park that cast a dark green web along the banks of the Raccoon River. It felt a long way from Black Hawk County—from cornfields and small-town manners, back roads and endless skies.

Following the GPS, the driver entered a labyrinthine business park, where the broad, tree-lined streets all looked the same. Offices of Realtors and insurers rose from snow-stippled lawns. It was early, but many of the parking lots were already full. Every look-alike corner had some sort of eatery. A Red Lobster and a Panda Express, an Irish tavern called Molly Malone’s, an Italian deli called Gio’s. You could feast your way around the world without ever leaving Iowa.

“This is it,” said the driver, pulling into the entrance of one precinct, bordered by two fountains. “So, what is it you do here?” He peered up at the faceless brown building, with its tinted wraparound windows that showed only reflections of the outside world—ashen sky, bare trees, lifeless flag.

Riley said the first thing that came to mind. “I’m not sure.”

It was also the truest thing.

After the cab’s stuffy interior, the air was a shock. The mercury had plunged below freezing a week ago and showed no sign of slowing its descent. Meteorologists reckoned this winter could break records of previous years when it hit forty below, turning water in toilets to ice, freezing people’s clothes and hair, and killing thirteen across the Midwest.

The cab pulled away, leaving Riley alone. She straightened the jacket of her new gray suit, which felt stiff and formal—a far cry from her old uniform of polo shirts and cargo pants. As she made her way toward the entrance, her black leather ankle boots crunched in rock salt. Maddie had helped her pick them out in T.J. Maxx a week ago, in the whirlwind of her departure. Afterward, Riley had taken her niece to Wendy’s. Their last meal together.

Maddie had been unusually talkative, gabbling through mouthfuls of fries about coming to stay with her over Thanksgiving; how they could go ice-skating and to the Christmas markets. Riley had nodded silently through the conversation. Maddie had been so upset on learning of her move to Des Moines that, in a fit of guilt, Riley had painted a glittering picture of all the fun they could have in the city, without—until that moment—any thought of the practicalities.

New boots, new suit. New job. New life.

The only old thing about her was the long, black wool coat that had belonged to her mother. She’d come across it in a closet while packing. The inside pocket contained a one-cent coin, dated the year her mom died. Riley had left it in there.

She paused before the front doors, greeted by her reflection. Her mind swarmed with the events that had brought her here—from the phone call two years ago, standing in her backyard, Logan at her side, looking quizzical as she turned away, Elijah Klein’s voice on the line. All those months of doubt and indecision, Klein’s letter of recommendation sitting on her desk, greeting her each morning with the same question.

At last, the decision. Followed by the punishing interviews, the forms and tests. The confines of the lie-detector room: blood pressure cuff squeezing her arm, metal plates clamped on her fingers. The conversation she'd had to have with her family—Ethan stony and silent, Maddie in tears, Aunt Rose putting on a brave face.

Then, just when she thought she was ready, she'd faced some of the toughest months of her life, where all the questions that had dogged her from the start had been ground down—through relentless weeks of training and study, each day a wheel of exertion and exhaustion—to a single one.

*What the hell are you doing here?*

As she reached for the door and her reflection reached for her, Riley felt a lurch inside like vertigo.

Hot air billowed as she entered. There were plants and chairs along one wall, an elevator, and a set of stairs marching up. Most of the space was taken up by a long desk. Two receptionists wearing headsets sat behind plastic screens. A security guard observed Riley as she walked to the desk, gun on display at his hip. A phone shrilled.

Behind her, the door opened again, the frigid draft teasing her hair. A young man in old-fashioned thick-rimmed glasses and an olive green trench coat struggled through, Starbucks cup in one hand, a laptop and a black file squeezed under his arm. Before she could help, he stumbled in, cursing as he slopped coffee on the floor. He wiped ineffectively at the spill with a polished brogue.

“How can I assist you?”

Riley turned back at the receptionist's question. “I'm here to see Connie Meadows.”

“Riley Fisher?” The voice came from behind. The young man in glasses approached. He went to offer his hand, then laughed apologetically as he held out his coffee cup. “Noah Case.” He spoke over Riley's shoulder to the receptionist. “I can take her down.” He nodded Riley toward the elevator. “Some weather we're having, Henry?”

“Colder than a well digger's feet,” agreed the security guard.

Noah Case called the elevator, outside which were signs with the

names and logos of the various businesses that occupied the building. Riley didn't see the one she was looking for. She noticed the file the man was clutching was in fact a slim bag with a lock on the zipper. Up close, he was younger than she'd first thought and the glasses she'd taken for old-fashioned were Tom Ford. A paisley-print silk scarf was ruched at his neck. He looked nothing like most of the men she'd worked with over the years—all buzz cuts, mirrored shades, and gun-toting attitude. Even in her new suit, Riley felt dowdy and awkward in comparison, like she was playing dress-up for a role she hadn't fully understood.

"After you," said Noah, gesturing with his cup as the doors opened. Once they were in, he pressed a button with his knuckle and the elevator slid smoothly down. "Oh, and you can take that off here. Meadows hates them. Says they're a license for criminals and a hindrance for law enforcement. How can you read a face if you can't see it?"

Riley hesitated, then peeled off her mask and stuffed it in the pocket of her mother's coat.

"What a year, huh?" Noah breathed, shaking his head.

The question was too big to answer and there was no time as the elevator doors opened.

Noah smiled brightly. "Welcome to the dungeon."

Riley stepped out into a short corridor with a door at the end. On the door was a seal—a blue circle adorned with thirteen gold stars. Scales for justice, laurel leaves for honor, red and white stripes for courage and valor, and a scroll with the motto FIDELITY, BRAVERY, INTEGRITY. As she got closer, the words that circumscribed the seal became clearer.

DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE  
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

# 3

----

**T**he two men and the woman passed through the police barricade, ignoring the camera crew and calls from reporters. Dog walkers peered down from the grassy bank above the closed-off path. A couple had cell phones out. Traffic juddered across the interstate bridge, drivers slowing to rubberneck as they caught sight of the array of police vehicles on the riverside. Squad cars, unmarked SUVs, and the DCI Crime Scene Unit van.

Fogg pulled on a pair of gloves as he approached the underpass with his two colleagues, who were dressed in full protective suits. Fogg's eyes fixed on the figure trudging through the mud to meet them. The gold badge on Mike Whitfield's black cap marked his rank in Des Moines PD. He'd moved up a rung on the ladder since Fogg had been at the department. The sky was the color of milk and the sergeant's face was wan in the curdled light. His jawline was a shade darker with nightshift shadow.

"Morning, Fogg."

"Morning, Mike."

They nodded to one another in that new, awkward way, handshakes now problematic.

Whitfield lifted the caution tape. He tilted his head toward the reporters. "Been on the news all goddamn morning. They're claiming it's another before we've even worked the scene."

Fogg ducked under the yellow line with a grunt of effort. His younger colleagues followed, agile despite the bulky equipment cases they carried. “Is the officer here?”

“Yup.” Whitfield motioned to the underpass, where two cops guarded a barrier.

There was no white tent at least. No body. Not yet. Fogg knew the young woman’s injuries from the doctor he’d spoken to in the dawn hours at MercyOne—that it was still touch and go.

*He’s escalating.*

“Your girls back for Thanksgiving?” Whitfield asked.

“Sherri’s here. Keira’s back from grad school next week.”

“She’s doing law, isn’t she?” Whitfield smiled when Fogg nodded. “My boys are back tomorrow. My wife’s been cooking up a storm.” He led them beneath the bridge. Scraps of trash left by the paramedics drifted in the weeds. “Sure gonna be good to have them home.”

“Sure is,” echoed Fogg, scanning the squalid shadows. Graffiti and broken glass. Footprints in the dirt. Muddy scuff of wheels from a gurney. Heavy boom of traffic overhead, shuddering through the concrete.

Whitfield called to the cops at the barrier. One of them came over. His eyes went from Fogg to the two crime scene technicians, who’d set down their equipment cases. The woman crouched and pulled out a camera. There were dark spatters on the path ahead. As she took a test photograph, the flash lit them up in shocks of red.

“Officer Emery here was first on scene,” Whitfield told Fogg.

Fogg nodded to the young man, who looked like he’d walked right out of training. “I’m Detective Julius Verne, from the Division of Criminal Investigation. My colleagues here are from the crime lab. While they work, perhaps you could walk me through what happened?”

Whitfield’s radio crackled, a voice breaking through the static. He nodded to Fogg as he answered, moving back out into the cold morning light.

Fogg gestured Emery down to the waterside, away from the intrusive flash of the camera. The shallow bank was treacherous with ice, and his knees protested at the shift in weight. Everything seemed a little

bit harder these days—putting on shoes, emptying the trash, climbing out of his car. His body, which had always been taut on his tall frame, was slowing and softening. Marcia had taken to playfully tweaking the doughy fold around his waist. It was done with a teasing grin and love in her eyes, but somewhere in Fogg's mind it had set a clock ticking. The mirror each morning, razor blade scraping away more white than black. Words like *retirement*, *pension*, *downsizing* nudging their way into thoughts and conversations.

“What time did you get the call?”

Emery pulled a notebook from his pocket and flipped it open. Fogg caught a glimpse of neatly joined-up writing. Conscientious. Eager. *Rookie*.

“I was on patrol downtown. Arrived just after the paramedics.” Emery glanced at his pad. “Five fifteen. The um . . . the victim was being tended to.”

“Was she conscious?”

“Barely.” The young man's eyes drifted to the spot where blood stained the path. “She was . . .” He trailed off, shaking his head.

Fogg recalled the doctor's description of Hayley Abbot's injuries. Multisystem trauma. Broken nose, indirect orbital floor fracture, internal bruising, craniocerebral injury. “I was told a dog walker found her?”

“Yeah. Well, his dog.”

“What's his name?”

“Banjo.”

Fogg smiled slightly. “The owner?”

“Oh. Right.” Emery flicked through his pad, blushing. “Bob Slater. Said he'd seen her about an hour earlier, in the parking lot.” The officer pointed beyond the police barrier, back the way Fogg had come. “Her car's still there.”

“Did Mr. Slater see anyone else in the area?”

Emery reeled off a list—dog owners Slater knew by name, others he knew by sight. Random joggers and cyclists. “It's a well-used area.”

Fogg nodded. That meant he might actually have some witnesses to this one. It would also mean a lot of interviews and legwork. He

thought of Marcia's excitement about Thanksgiving. First time in a while they'd had both their daughters back. Thought of the conversation he would have to have.

His wife had always understood there were three of them in the relationship. That the job was an insatiable mistress. But something about this past year—the world turned upside down—had made her less amenable to the long hours and unexpected late shifts. Maybe it wasn't even the pandemic. Maybe it was just this investigation.

Fogg knew she could see how it was eating him, however much he tried to hide it from her. He'd seen other detectives, over the years, pushed into a hole of horror by some monster that lurked out of reach. Part of them still trapped down there, even after they retired. Haunted by the victims they hadn't been able to save, shattered lives in their rear-view like wrecks on a highway. He'd been determined he wouldn't be like them. Assured himself he was good at his job, good at compartmentalizing. But these past months—his boss's breath hot on his neck and the feverish media coverage—this investigation had been compelling him, inch by inch, toward that dark edge.

"Was the victim able to tell you anything?"

"She indicated her attacker took something from her. She kept touching her head, so I think it might have been a hat. Weird thing is, she still had her cell phone on her. Worth at least a few hundred dollars. But the psycho takes a hat?"

*Trophy.*

"You think it's the same guy?" asked Emery, in Fogg's silence. "The one who attacked those other women?"

"It's too early to say."

Emery was back to looking at his notebook. "Oh, yeah, one of the paramedics told me she was saying something when they first arrived. He wasn't sure, but he thought it sounded like—*my sorrows?*"

Fogg felt the chill go right through him. "Thy sorrows," he murmured.

"Hey, Fogg!"

They both looked around as the female technician called out. She



was standing a little way up the bank, where mud rose in a wave of black to meet the bridge. Her camera was slack in her hands. She was staring at one of the piers. Fogg made his way to her, Emery following.

Behind the pier, where the concrete was scrawled with old graffiti, a symbol had been sprayed in red. It was fresh, still tacky, paint bleeding down the wall. It looked like the letter *S*. But Fogg had seen it enough times—in old photographs—to know it was meant to be a serpent.

His mind flooded with images. A bloody nightdress. A knife-nick in bone. A red fray of rope. Women lying in hospital beds and on mortuary slabs. And, always, that sinuous, blood-bright swerve on the walls of deserted parking lots and back alleys. A driveway. A bedroom.

A lot of cops in this city had retired since those days, a youthful parade marching in to take their places, but Fogg remembered. Back then, he'd been fresh out of the Iowa Law Enforcement Academy, years before he'd risen through the ranks of Des Moines PD to run homicide, before he met Marcia, then joined the DCI, felt the age in his bones. Over the past months of this investigation, those echoes had begun calling down the years, faint but familiar, each new scene of a woman's torment itching fingers up his spine.

He'd not been certain—not enough to push his chief to reveal his growing suspicions to the media or the public. But, now, as he stared at that serpentine sweep of red, there could be no denying it.

He had returned.