

BROTHERS IN
BETRAYAL

BOOK ONE
THE SINS OF THE FATHERS

HEIDI SUTHERLIN



BROTHERS IN BETRAYAL

by
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Brothers in Betrayal
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Dedication

To my mom, Lory Sutherlin:

You see me exactly as I am and love me anyway.

To my dad, Howard Sutherlin:

Because you said, "Why don't you?" and meant it.

And to my grandmother, Ruth Landrum:

For giving me my first Romance novel and starting it all.

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BROTHERS IN BETRAYAL

Prologue

“I believe you are displaying the classic signs of paranoid schizophrenia. I hope you don't mind my personal interference, but as a mental health professional I took an oath to assist those in need, and I just couldn't resist when I began to notice your symptoms.” The small man peered through his thick glasses at the silent man behind the desk. The cold, black obsidian of the desktop stretched between them.

“Not at all, please continue,” came the soft reply. The good doctor was oblivious to the distant and dangerous amusement twisted through the words.

“I couldn't help but notice some small but clearly intriguing symptoms in your behavior that indicated you were battling your schizophrenic tendencies. It wasn't difficult to piece together how far the disorder has advanced.”

“Intriguing?” The silky words interrupted the doctor's almost cheerful rush.

“Oh, certainly. Yes, indeed. You clearly demonstrate some of the classic symptoms of what could easily turn into a full blown schizophrenic episode, and yet you are the most controlled person that I have come across. I mean, really, you are a walking contradiction, and certainly, almost inevitably, a danger to yourself and others.”

The doctor was pacing now, not in agitation, but in the absorbed way that those who lose themselves in their work are oft to do. Unaware that the man behind the desk had risen, he was only a little startled to turn and find him standing over him. Even then, he failed to sense the threat.

“Doctor, I commend your observational skills.” The danger in the silky tone began to slowly penetrate the doctor's enthusiasm and he experienced a brief sense of unease.

“I would be very interested to hear more of your,” the pause was nearly undetectable, “diagnosis. Why don't we move this conversation to the patio, and I will have Sarina send in some lunch. I'm most interested in discussing your findings at length.”

The doctor felt a moment of indecision before his professional intrigue again took control.

“Wonderful! I have some questions I would like to ask. I also have some suggestions for a treatment that I think would be beneficial for you. I would also like your permission to share this case with some of my colleagues, anonymously, of course.”

His rush of words halted abruptly as his body came into contact with the railing that surrounded the patio. He felt a sense of disorientation as he realized they were no longer in the office but had passed through the patio doors and were standing outside. The roar of the ocean below startled him, and he looked hastily over his shoulder and down the sheer rocky cliff to the waves that crashed violently below. He'd always felt uneasy around the ocean and had never been comfortable with heights. The sudden shudder that went through him was impossible to suppress. It chilled him even as he felt the cold of the railing against his hip. The thick plexiglass was pristine and clear, providing no sense of visual security. For the first time, he began to feel fear. His clinical interest disappeared under the watchful gaze of a predator.

“Doctor, I applaud your enthusiasm.”

Again the doctor shuddered, this time his fear had nothing to do with the three hundred feet that separated him from the jagged rocks and water below and everything to do with the man who stood three inches from him. There was menace and calm calculation on his features, but that was not what chilled the doctor most. It was the light of exhilaration shining from the oddly colored eyes, one blue and one brown, that terrified him.

“However, I'm afraid that I won't be needing your services after all.”

With one smooth motion, an elegant hand shot out and pushed. There was no resistance, the surprise was simply too great.

The tall, cold man turned without watching the doctor's fall. The screams of terror were eventually swallowed completely by the roar of the ocean below. He reached up, touching a finger to the small tic at the corner of his eye. Smoothing it out with a practiced motion, he avoided contact with the unfamiliar skin of his face. Closing the door and the sounds of the ocean behind him, he moved gracefully around the desk and sank into his chair. With a long steady finger he reached over to press the intercom button on his phone.

“Sarina, I'm afraid the doctor won't be joining me for lunch. Could you send in a tray for one? I'm ravenous.”

CHAPTER ONE

The little yellow car sped smoothly down the freeway, merging and passing other sleepy cars as if they were standing still. Aggressive music streamed from the open windows. The woman behind the wheel seemed to take an inordinate amount of pleasure in the combination of smooth bursts of speed and the rushing morning air blasting through the windows.

Short, jet black hair smoothly punctuated each word with a quick swing as she sang loudly along with the music throbbing through the car. Straight, blunt bangs hung suspended over eyes that missed nothing as the car swerved and wove across lanes with the skill and ease of a seasoned getaway driver. As such, she made quick work of the trickle of traffic beginning to flow onto the freeway.

“The Germans make a great car,” she sighed to herself as she swung the little car into the parking garage and then into the space marked G. Mason.

G. Mason twisted her small frame gracefully out of the little compact. Her outfit was rather jarring when compared to the decisive hair and makeup that she wore. The perfectly made up eyes and expensive haircut were at war with the decidedly frumpy gray business suit that gamely attempted to hug her frame in all the wrong places. The military style boots, however, standing to attention all the way to her perfect little knees made a strange kind of sense. Anyone looking at her might get the distinct impression that the suit was almost a drop cloth, and

that one need only remove it to see the complete picture underneath. If G. Mason had any inkling that this was the impression her outfit made, she would have burned that suit and the fifteen just like it hanging in her closet at home.

Pulling the black messenger style bag from the passenger seat, she reached into the front pocket, quickly snagging her ID hanging from its long cord. With a sigh and a grim smile, she closed the car door and turned toward the secure entrance. She found comfort, as she always did, in the muted tweet and the reflected flash of the car’s headlights behind.

She swiped her ID at the first of two security doors. It opened immediately and she strode through.

“Morning, Grace. Looking awfully good for 7 a.m.,” came the ritual greeting.

“Good morning Bill, you’re as handsome as ever,” she said, stopping to sign in at the security desk. Bill’s soft, friendly face beamed up at her from the other side of the desk.

“How are Mary and the girls this fine day?”

“Asleep like angels, they were. Give ‘em another hour and the devil they’ll be at the breakfast

table.” His rolling laughter was as much a part of her morning ritual as the whirlwind drive to work.

“Sorry you’ll be missing it?” she asked as she glanced at her watch for the time.

“Of course.” He paused and then, “Check the log there.”

At her puzzled look he nodded with a wicked grin at the sign in sheet she’d just finished filling in. She ran her finger up the short list of names and then stopped at the third name from the top.

Jude Wilmington and guest.

“He’s back!” she said on a breathless laugh.

“He’s back,” she growled the words out this time. “Did he call ahead to tell you he’d be coming in?”

“Nope. Came in this morning like a wrinkled suit. From the look of him, he probably came right in from the airport. Had a car drop him off. Met a man at the desk here - a,” he paused while he looked into his personal log book, “ah, here it is, a Noah Jeffries. Asked for Mr. Wilmington specifically. I wasn’t halfway through explaining how that wasn’t possible, when Mr. Jude himself strolls in. He may be a bit worn around the gills, but he still stopped with a ‘hi-how-are-ya’ and a word after my Mary and the girls. Nice manners. You could learn a thing or two, Miss Priss.”

“Are you calling me ill-mannered?” she said with mock horror, chin going up to better narrow a stern look at him down her nose.

“Wouldn’t dream of saying it out loud, young lady,” he said with another of his great rolling chuckles. “Off with you now, before you corrupt those of us with some manners left.”

She merely rolled her eyes at him before turning toward the second security point.

“Later Bill!” she called over her shoulder, after swiping her card and disappearing through the heavy gray door.

"Be nice," his voice echoed in the hallway after her just as the heavy door slid shut.

"Not bloody likely."

Grace strode through the main building with the same feeling of breathless wonder that she felt the day they had opened their doors seven years before. While she had attempted to stay mostly out of the management loop, she couldn’t deny the tug of pride she felt from the moment she turned into the front gates until the second she left through them again at the end of each day.

Today, however, she couldn’t hold onto the warm and fuzzy feeling and with a sigh she turned from the path that should be taking her to her office. She could still walk in that direction, of course, but her office was currently being occupied by a venomous, Gucci-bag toting, quasi-managerial, pointy shoe

wearing, lipstick monster.

My office, she thought longingly, and sighed again.

She'd been consigned, instead, to a tiny cubicle where she could “better utilize her skills as a mentor.” For the millionth time, she asked herself why she had allowed it.

Striding through the building, she felt the now familiar impatience and frustration. She molded computer programs, damn it, she wasn't exactly the best suited to molding young minds. In her present state of mind, she was lucky she wasn't considered a walking hazard to the next generation.

Grace continued to experience the growing sense of unease that she'd began feeling at work about two months ago. Jude had taken some time to go home to England to nurse his sick father. Everything had happened so quickly after that. It was difficult to pinpoint the exact beginning of the problems. Worse, because she had kept herself out of much of the decision making, she had literally not seen the writing on the wall until the tiny box had been right under her nose, filled with her stapler and a box of tissues as her office door slammed shut behind her.

Now, *she* was in there.

Grace started to growl under her breath, then stopped herself as a new thought occurred to her. Jude was back. She could do what she wanted and tell her royal pointy-ness exactly what she thought of her. Now that Jude was here to take care of whatever the Hell was going on, she didn't have to feel obligated to hang around and try to keep an eye on the situation. Lately, she had been more of a silent protester, than a defender.

Exactly when had she become completely and utterly helpless?

That's enough, she thought to herself. No more Mister Nice Me. Abruptly, she swung about, turning in the direction of her cubicle.

First things first; time to stow the gear and grab her brass knuckles. So, maybe she didn't have brass knuckles and probably wouldn't know what to do with them if she did. If she was completely honest with herself, which she normal avoided on principle, she had never done anything more violent than give Eddy Bickles a bloody nose in the second grade, and that had been an accident. As she started to pick up speed, she cheerfully brushed that last thought aside and entertained herself with thoughts of her upcoming battle.

CHAPTER TWO

“Daydreaming again?”

Jude's voice shook Noah out of his musings, and he flashed a crooked grin at his oldest friend.

“It's not manly to daydream, I was contemplating the universe.” His grin widened at Jude's burst of laughter.

“Certainly you were,” he agreed in a somber tone that was completely ruined by the smile on his face. “So, are you ready to tell me why you're here? You certainly didn't come to watch me handle meetings and contemplate the state of the universe.” He studied Noah with a knowing look, the hint of Britain slipping out around the words as it often did when he was tired or relaxed.

Noah shrugged, not quite ready to break the light mood with his purpose. “You're always saying how you work for a living, so I thought I'd substantiate the rumors.”

“What you really mean to say, is that you're not ready to tell me why you're really here. Is that it?”

Noah shook his head slowly, remaining silent in the way of those long acquainted.

Noah Jeffries studied the man across from him; Jude Wilmington, CEO and founder of Wilmington Systems, one of the most successful security software firms in the country.

He knew he should keep his mind on the case. He'd read through the file on Grace Mason while in flight to Portland. He was aware that he needed to find a way to explain why he was here. He just needed to tell Jude that his business partner and close personal friend was under federal investigation for her probable involvement in a weapon smuggling ring.

Sure, that would be easy, he thought with a grimace.

He watched as Jude juggled his phone with his day planner while making entries on his computer keyboard. His friend looked tired from his travels, but none of that showed in his voice as he participated in what sounded to Noah like some sort of conference call.

He let his eyes roam over the office, it was elegantly appointed. Noah wasn't surprised and he hid a grin at the expensive throws and pillows placed precisely on the deep cushioned leather couch. There were photos and a variety of certificates and awards lining the one wall that wasn't window. He recognized himself, his brother Gage, Jude and Kyle in many of the photographs. He allowed his mind to skim sadly over Kyle's image, as he did whenever he was faced with a reminder of their friend. Quickly, as was his way, he moved on to the other photos. He noticed, with some surprise, that Grace was included in nearly all of the other photographs on the wall. Business shots, family scenes, some

just for fun, Grace was in almost all of them. While he'd known of Grace, of course, he was shocked at how large a part of Jude's life she was. How had he missed that, he wondered slowly.

She was beautiful, he thought with a detached interest, with that precise cap of inky black hair and those huge jewel toned eyes. He allowed his mind to sift through what he knew of her. He knew the story, of course, first from his association with Jude, and then with the help of the case files to fill in some of the blanks.

Jude, born in England and heir to an old family with even older money, had chosen to receive his education in the U.S. He had met Grace while studying business at Stanford. They'd hit it off and while never becoming intimate, according to Jude, they'd remained friends and relocated north shortly after graduation to start what would turn into an internationally successful software development and design firm.

Wilmington Systems currently held contracts with various governments around the world, including Uncle Sam. They were also on the cutting edge, with their research and design division leading the way in a variety of areas of the industry.

Jude studied Noah for a moment, before deciding to allow his questions to wait. There was something in his oldest friend's face that made Jude uneasy. He knew that patience was the only way to deal with Noah when he was in this particular mood. Decision made, he grinned, his face suddenly looking years younger than the thirty that he'd earned.

“Okay, then. Let's go and I'll show you around the shack, as you put it. I haven't seen Grace yet, and she should be here by now. I can finally introduce the two of you. I'm sure she'd enjoy that immensely.” The last was said with an underlying sarcasm that Noah didn't quite catch. He looked down at himself and wondered what about him Grace could possibly dislike.

“What's wrong with me?” Noah asked, puzzled and a little offended.

Jude paused to study him. He was dressed in the unconsciously expensive wardrobe of someone who had always had money. His perfectly faded jeans were topped with a soft black pullover sweater that was snug without being tight. Military issue boots, shined to gleaming, and an understated, silver Rolex created a rather pleasing contrast. On another man, the outfit would seem drab, but on Noah it was a well fitted uniform and showed off his powerful chest and muscular thighs.

“You're fine, really. I mean we just can't change who we are.” He adopted a very wise look, slowly nodding his head as if thinking deeply. “I think it has to do with recessive genes or something. Don't feel bad, mate, we can't all be flawless.”

Noah narrowed his eyes at him, “Ha, ha. Funny. You're really very funny,”

“Come on, I'll take you around and show you why I have more money than you.”

CHAPTER THREE

With interest, Noah noted that the building they were walking was laid out in a large open format. The quasi-cubicles with their frosted glass walls were chest height. Each work space was laid out in a non regular pattern that managed to be random and still maintain a comfortable flow. The result was a very light and inviting space with privacy, but an overall sense of community.

Noah was suitably impressed.

As they came to a corner office, a shrill shriek reverberated from inside. Just at that moment, the door flew open and slammed shut again. A small black haired female leaned against it breathing hard, her eyes shut and her lips moving silently. The shrieking continued from the other side of the door, and another crash sounded from within. The small female continued to stand there and seemed to be counting under her breath. With a final deep breath, she straightened slowly and opened her eyes. Her quick gasp was followed by an attractive stain of color across her cheeks and highlighted the freckles across the bridge of her nose.

“Grace?! What in the world is going on?” Jude managed to ask before she launched herself across the space and into his arms. He hugged her tightly before she wrenched away from him and began to beat at his chest with her small fists.

“Where have you been?” she demanded between blows. “I have been stuck here dealing with this, and you took away my office and she’s in my chair and they changed the coffee and unplugged the Aliens and moved them into the storage room and where in the Hell have you been?!”

The last was said in a shriek almost as piercing as those that had been issued only moments ago from inside the office. There was a small silence, as all eyes turned to their small group standing in the corner of the large open office space.

Pulling her hands from his jacket, Jude held Grace at arm's length. He looked at her for a long moment in silence. It seemed, to her, that he decided something then and the scary distance she'd thought she detected left his face. He crushed her to him and she burrowed gratefully into his familiar warmth.

“Where have you been?” she asked again, this time in a small and strangely broken voice.

“I think we have a lot to discuss, but that will have to wait.” Again he held her from him. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course,” she began, mystified, “but...”

“Then trust me to figure everything out,” he interrupted her, knowing that if he didn’t he would never be able to extract himself. “We’ll fix everything, I promise, for now, just trust me. Okay?”

With a sigh and the beginning of a pout, which she would have vehemently denied, she nodded her head.

“Now, let me see if I can translate for our friend here,” his brow creased for a moment as he thought. “Someone removed you from your office, changed the coffee in the commissary, there’s a woman using your thinking chair and they put your video game in storage?” He looked at her for confirmation.

“Yes,” she said, “She...”

The word was lost in the roaring of the sudden silence as she looked from Jude to the tall stranger beside him. With wide startled eyes, she had a sense of falling while her vision seemed to expand slowly, her perception revealing one staggering feature at a time.

She was aware first of a deep and chaotic blue, with tiny flecks of silver that flashed behind soft lashes. A single lock of hair the color of deepest mahogany rested just above full eyebrows and teased her fingers nearly into action. She could feel each little digit clench with the desire to touch, tease and stroke. Angular cheekbones and a strong nose stood behind a day's worth of stubble. A jagged scar highlighted one cheekbone, while another, smoother scar, ran the length of a decisive jawbone. Full lips lifted in a crooked grin. It was only when she began to feel lightheaded that she realized she had forgotten to breathe and dragged in a ragged breath.

Amused eyes sparkled down at her ... laughing ... at her.

Oh my God, she thought mortified, jerking back only to realize that she had somehow taken his hand in hers. Feeling stricken and suddenly awkward she tried to extricate herself from his grasp. Her efforts made no effect and she slowly stopped struggling as she stood looking up at him.

“Hi,” Noah said, so softly that only Grace could hear.

“Hi.”

Lost now, she simply stared up at him.

“I know you . . . I mean . . . you're Noah, well, of course, you're Noah, you know that, but I know that too . . . I mean the picture in the office . . .” Mortified, she trailed off as she was again overcome by her reaction to him.

He just grinned down at her, with the same crooked smile he had been wearing since she first gazed up at him. She blushed then, and he was completely charmed.

She finally managed to retrieve her hand. Stepping hastily back, she attempted to recover some of the composure that the last few moments destroyed. Taking a small breath she mentally shook herself.

She glanced at Jude, and suddenly remembering, slanted her eyes and advanced on him, gaining speed in the short distance before she pounced.

“You,” and with that she poked him in the chest, “took away my office! How could you? I have been trying to hold this place together and you take away my office? William’s got me working on random bits of code; he’s taken over my calendar and hired some piece of fluff and teeth to run MY division. He said that you wanted me ‘out among the masses’ where I would do the most good. ‘Inspire the troops’ you said, ‘keep the ball rolling’ you said. I have been waiting,” *poke*, “for all of this,” *poke*, “to become clear,” *poke*, “but I’m in a cubicle working in the dark and she changes my coffee, takes my chair and decommissions my God-damned aliens. Now I’m supposed to be somebody’s freaking idea of a mentor? A mentor! How the Hell am I supposed to work under these conditions?”

Grace turned her head and noticed Noah staring at her now, the perpetually amused grin still dancing around those lips. God, those lips would be the death of her.

For a moment, she almost seemed to stumble, as she stared back at him. He would have been amused at the goofy way she was looking at him, if he hadn’t still been feeling the shock of her electric green eyes.

My God, he thought to himself. So that’s how it felt. In a fraction of a moment, he knew he was lost. He ceded victory to her in a heartbeat and passed his soul along with it. She blinked and looked away. He shook his head slightly and looked around, dazed, for a moment. Narrowing his eyes as he looked at her again, and remembering his purpose, he stepped forward and held out his hand.

“Noah Jeffries.”

Grace looked down at his hand and held her own firmly behind her back. She didn’t want to touch him. She didn’t want to confirm what she knew, what she felt in that first moment. She didn’t want to admit defeat just yet. Tilting her chin up, she nodded slightly in his direction. Then turning her back on him, she dismissed him.

Noah stood there, hand still held out, baffled at the unexpected reaction. Slowly, he lowered his arm, the tic of the small muscle in his jaw the only outward sign of his slowly boiling temper.

“Now Grace, do play nicely,” Jude chided softly.

“Don’t you tell me to play nicely! I want to know what the Hell is going on, and I want to know right now.” She crossed her arms and spread her feet. The image was almost comical. Noah couldn’t help the tiny tug at his lips as he struggled not to smile at the militant picture she made standing before them.

Jude watched the two of them, noticing that the meeting was been unsettling for both of them. Suddenly, quite pleased with the situation, he decided to give them a little push.

“Grace, I can’t explain now, but I will get to the bottom of this, I promise. However, for now I need you to show Noah around.”

Holding up a hand to halt her budding objections, he waited for her mouth to slowly and stubbornly close again, a sure sign that she was once again listening. “I know that things are confused, but I’m certain we’ll sort everything out.” He paused then, angling his head to look into her now petulant eyes.

Knowing that he had won the battle, he swooped in for the kill. “Please Grace, be a good girl and show Noah around for me? It would mean the world to me if my two closest friends could become friends.” He looked at her steadily, consciously softening his gaze into the look that she had yet to resist.

The silence stretched out uncomfortably and Noah was sure that they were in for another explosion when she suddenly capitulated. Surprised, he shot Jude a look filled with respect and no little surprise. Jude simply flashed him a smug little smile, before quickly changing it back to the more successful hang dog face when Grace once again exploded into motion.

“Fine, but you do me a favor. Go in there and introduce yourself to Ursula the Venomous. Then, you’ll see what I’ve been dealing with. I want my chair back and I want it cleaned. Her highness bathes in some nasty French perfume and it makes me gag. I want my aliens back, too. Oh, and whenever you figure out whatever it is you need to ponder, let me know so I can kick William’s ass before you throw him out on it.”

With that she spun around and stomped in the direction they’d just come. “I’ll be drinking lousy coffee. You know where to find me.”

Then she was gone.

The space was strangely empty without Grace standing in it, Noah thought suddenly.

Jude looked over at him and smiled, clearly in a better mood. “God, it’s good to be home.” He pointed into the direction of the now silent office. “Shall we?”

The two men moved forward, steadily approaching the closed door to the now silent office, each uncertain as to what they’d find on the other side.

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