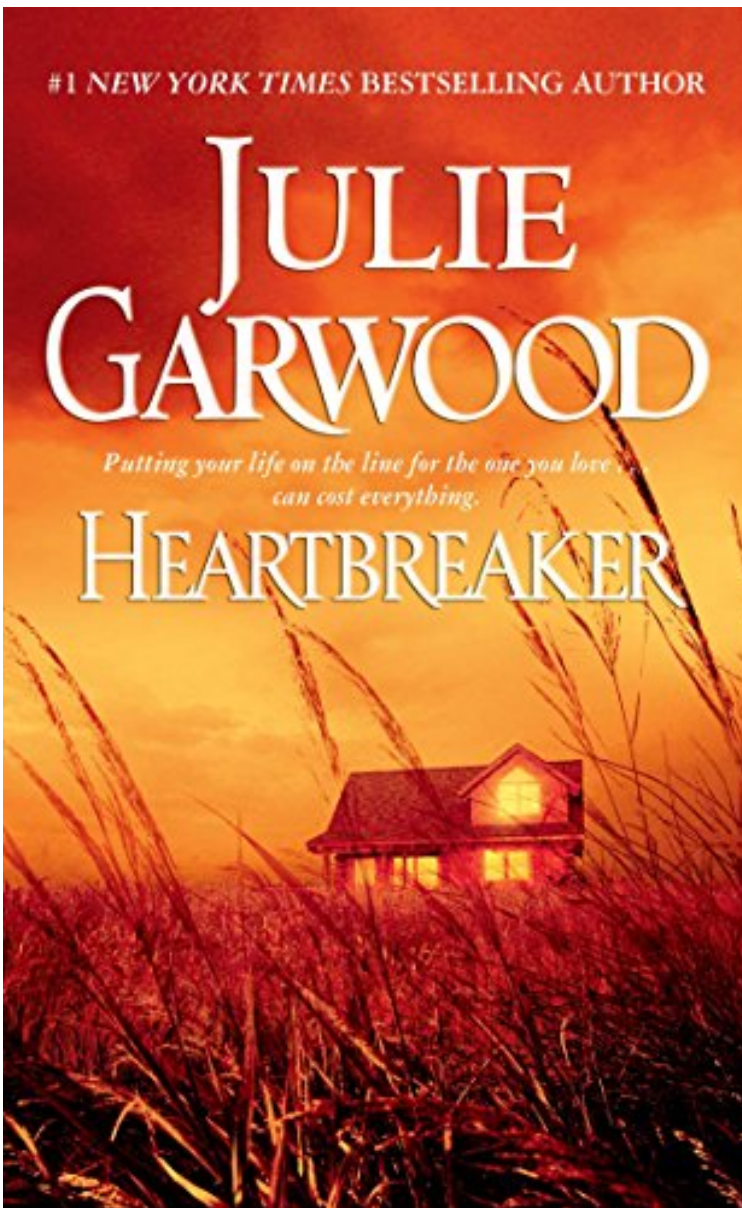


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Heartbreaker



Par Julie Garwood
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur#1 New York Times bestselling author Julie Garwood proves she is a master storyteller in this classic romantic suspense novel featuring FBI agent Nick Buchanan.In the still shadows of the confessional, the penitent kneels and makes a bone-chilling disclosure: Bless me father, for I will sin.... Slowly, tauntingly, the man describes his murderous pasthow he stalked his victim, worked his way into her life, and then took that life in a violent rageand his plan to kill again. Only this time, he has raised the stakes in his twisted game, daring authorities to catch him if they can. And this time, he has revealed the name of his next intended victim. Agent Nick Buchanan has come face-to-face with society's worst monsters and

depraved minds in his work for one of the FBI's most elite units, but The Heartbreaker threatens to hit close to home. The intended victim, Laurant Madden, is his best friend's sister. Soon he is caught up in an intricate chase with one of the most devious psychopaths of his career. But as the danger grows, so does an electrifying attraction between Nick and Laurant. One false move will cost both of them everything that matters.

Chapter One

It was hotter than hell inside the confessional. A thick black curtain, dusty with age and neglect, covered the narrow opening from the ceiling of the box to the scarred hardwood floor, blocking out both the daylight and the air. It was like being inside a coffin someone had absentmindedly left propped up against the wall, and Father Thomas Madden thanked God he wasn't claustrophobic. He was rapidly becoming miserable though. The air was heavy and ripe with mildew, making his breathing as labored as when he was back at Penn State running that last yard to the goalposts with the football tucked neatly in his arm. He hadn't minded the pain in his lungs then, and he certainly didn't mind it now. It was all simply part of the job. The old priests would tell him to offer his discomfort up to God for the poor souls in purgatory. Tom didn't see any harm in doing that, even though he wondered how his own misery was going to relieve anyone else's. He shifted position on the hard oak chair, fidgeting like a choirboy at Sunday practice. He could feel the sweat dripping down the sides of his face and neck into his cassock. The long black robe was soaked through with perspiration, and he sincerely doubted he smelled at all like the hint of Irish Spring soap he'd used in the shower this morning. The temperature outside hovered between ninety-four and ninety-five in the shade of the rectory porch where the thermostat was nailed to the whitewashed stone wall. The humidity made the heat so oppressive, those unfortunate souls who were forced to leave their air-conditioned homes and venture outside did so with a slow shuffle and a quick temper. It was a lousy day for the compressor to bite the dust. There were windows in the church, of course, but the ones that could have been opened had been sealed shut long ago in a futile attempt to keep vandals out. The two others were high up in the gold, domed ceiling. They were stained glass depictions of the archangels Gabriel and Michael holding gleaming swords in their fists. Gabriel was looking up toward heaven, a beatified expression on his face, while Michael scowled at the snakes he held pinned down at his bare feet. The colored windows were considered priceless, prayer-inspiring works of art by the congregation, but they were useless in combating the heat. They had been added for decoration, not ventilation. Tom was a big, strapping man with a seventeen-and-a-half-inch neck left over from his glory days, but he was cursed with baby sensitive skin. The heat was giving him a prickly rash. He hiked the cassock up to his thighs, revealing the yellow and black happy-face boxer shorts his sister, Laurant, had given him, kicked off his paint-splattered Wal-Mart rubber thongs, and popped a piece of Dubble Bubble into his mouth. An act of kindness had landed him in the sweatbox. While waiting for the test results that would determine if he needed another round of chemotherapy at Kansas University Medical Center, he was a guest of Monsignor McKindry, pastor of Our Lady of Mercy Church. The parish was located in the forgotten sector of Kansas City, several hundred miles south of Holy Oaks, Iowa, where Tom was stationed. The neighborhood had been officially designated by a former mayor's task force as the gang zone. Monsignor always took Saturday afternoon confession, but because of the blistering heat, his advanced age, the broken air conditioner, and a conflict in his schedule -- the pastor was busy preparing for his reunion with two friends from his seminary days at Assumption Abbey -- Tom had volunteered for the duty. He had assumed he'd sit face-to-face with his penitent in a room with a couple of windows open for fresh air. McKindry, however, bowed to the preferences of his faithful parishioners, who stubbornly clung to the old-fashioned way of hearing confessions, a fact Tom learned only after he'd offered his services, and Lewis, the parish handyman, had directed him to the oven he would sit in for the next ninety minutes. In appreciation Monsignor had loaned him a thoroughly inadequate, battery-operated fan that one of his flock had put in the collection basket. The thing was no bigger than the size of a man's hand. Tom adjusted the angle of the fan so that the air would blow directly on his face, leaned back against the wall, and began to read the Holy Oaks Gazette he'd brought along to Kansas City with him. He turned to the society page on the back first, because he got such a kick out of it. He glanced over the usual club news and the smattering of announcements -- two births, three engagements, and a wedding -- and then he found his favorite column, called "About Town." The headline was always the same: the bingo game. The number of people who attended the community center bingo night was reported along with the names of the winners of the twenty-five-dollar jackpots. Interviews with the lucky recipients followed, telling what each of them planned to do with his or her windfall. And there was always a comment from Rabbi David Spears, who organized the weekly event, about what a good time everyone had. Tom was suspicious that the society editor, Lorna Hamburg, secretly had a crush on Rabbi Dave, a widower, and that was why the bingo game

was so prominently featured in the paper. The rabbi said the same thing every week, and Tom invariably ribbed him about that when they played golf together on Wednesday afternoons. Since Dave usually beat the socks off him, he didn't mind the teasing, but he did accuse Tom of trying to divert attention from his appalling game. The rest of the column was dedicated to letting everyone in town know who was entertaining company and what they were feeding them. If the news that week was hard to come by, Lorna filled in the space with popular recipes. There weren't any secrets in Holy Oaks. The front page was full of news about the proposed town square development and the upcoming one-hundred-year celebration at Assumption Abbey. And there was a nice mention about his sister helping out at the abbey. The reporter called her a tireless and cheerful volunteer and went into some detail describing all the projects she had taken on. Not only was she going to organize all the clutter in the attic for a garage sale, but she was also going to transfer all the information from the old dusty files onto the newly donated computer, and when she had a few minutes to spare, she would be translating the French journals of Father Henri VanKirk, a priest who had died recently. Tom chuckled to himself as he finished reading the glowing testimonial to his sister. Laurant hadn't actually volunteered for any of the jobs. She just happened to be walking past the abbot at the moment he came up with the ideas, and gracious to a fault, she hadn't refused. By the time Tom finished reading the rest of the Gazette, his soaked collar was sticking to his neck. He put the paper on the seat next to him, mopped his brow again, and contemplated closing shop fifteen minutes early. He gave up the idea almost as soon as it entered his mind. He knew that if he left the confessional early, he'd catch hell from Monsignor, and after the hard day of manual labor he'd put in, he simply wasn't up to a lecture. On the first Wednesday of every third month -- Ash Wednesday he silently called it -- Tom moved in with Monsignor McKindry, an old, broken-nosed, crackled-skinned Irishman who never missed an opportunity to get as much physical labor as he could possibly squeeze out of his houseguest in seven days. McKindry was crusty and gruff, but he had a heart of gold and a compassionate nature that wasn't compromised by sentimentality. He firmly believed that idle hands were the devil's workshop, especially when the rectory was in dire need of a fresh coat of paint. Hard work, he pontificated, would cure anything, even cancer. Some days Tom had a hard time remembering why he liked the monsignor so much or felt a kinship with him. Maybe it was because they both had a bit of Irish in them. Or maybe it was because the old man's philosophy, that only a fool cried over spilled milk, had sustained him through more hardships than Job. Tom's battle was child's play compared to McKindry's life. He would do whatever he could to help lighten McKindry's burdens. Monsignor was looking forward to visiting with his old friends again. One of them was Abbot James Rockhill, Tom's superior at Assumption Abbey, and the other, Vincent Moreno, was a priest Tom had never met. Neither Rockhill nor Moreno would be staying at Mercy house with McKindry and Tom, for they much preferred the luxuries provided by the staff at Holy Trinity parish, luxuries like hot water that lasted longer than five minutes and central air-conditioning. Trinity was located in the heart of a bedroom community on the other side of the state line separating Missouri from Kansas. McKindry jokingly referred to it as "Our Lady of the Lexus," and from the number of designer cars parked in the church's lot on Sunday mornings, the label was right on the mark. Most of the parishioners at Mercy didn't own cars. They walked to church. Tom's stomach began to rumble. He was hot and sticky and thirsty. He needed another shower, and he wanted a cold Bud Light. There hadn't been a single taker in all the while he'd been sitting there roasting like a turkey. He didn't think anyone else was even inside the church now, except maybe Lewis, who liked to hide in the cloakroom behind the vestibule and sneak sips of rot whiskey from the bottle in his toolbox. Tom checked his watch, saw he only had a couple of minutes left, and decided he'd had enough. He switched off the light above the confessional and was reaching for the curtain when he heard the swoosh of air the leather kneeler expelled when weight was placed upon it. The sound was followed by a discreet cough from the confessor's cell next to him. Tom immediately straightened in his chair, took the gum out of his mouth and put it back in the wrapper, then bowed his head in prayer and slid the wooden panel up. "In the name of the Father and of the Son...", he began in a low voice as he made the sign of the cross. Several seconds passed in silence. The penitent was either gathering his thoughts or his courage before he confessed his transgressions. Tom adjusted the stole around his neck and patiently continued to wait. The scent of Calvin Klein's Obsession came floating through the grille that separated them. It was a distinct, heavy, sweet fragrance Tom recognized because his housekeeper in Rome had given him a bottle of the cologne on his last birthday. A little of the stuff went a long way, and the penitent had gone overboard. The confessional reeked. The scent, combined with the smell of mildew and sweat, made Tom feel as though he were trying to breathe through a plastic bag. His stomach lurched and he forced himself not to gag. "Are you there, Father?" "I'm here," Tom

whispered. "When you're ready to confess your sins, you may begin." "This is...difficult for me. My last confession was a year ago. I wasn't given absolution then. Will you absolve me now?" There was an odd, singsong quality to the voice and a mocking tone that put Tom on his guard. Was the stranger simply nervous because it had been such a long time since his last confession, or was he being deliberately irreverent? "You weren't given absolution?" "No, I wasn't, Father. I angered the priest. I'll make you angry too. What I have to confess will...shock you. Then you'll become angry like the other priest." "Nothing you say will shock or anger me," Tom assured him. "You've heard it all before? Is that it, Father?" Before Tom could answer, the penitent whispered, "Hate the sin, not the sinner." The mocking had intensified. Tom stiffened. "Would you like to begin?" "Yes," the stranger replied. "Bless me, Father, for I will sin." Confused by what he'd heard, Tom leaned closer to the grille and asked the man to start over. "Bless me, Father, for I will sin." "You want to confess a sin you're going to commit?" "I do." "Is this some sort of a game or a --" "No, no, not a game," the man said. "I'm deadly serious. Are you getting angry yet?" A burst of laughter, as jarring as the sound of gunfire in the middle of the night, shot through the grille. Tom was careful to keep his voice neutral when he answered. "No, I'm not angry, but I am confused. Surely you realize you can't be given absolution for sins you're contemplating. Forgiveness is for those who have realized their mistakes and are truly contrite. They're willing to make restitution for their sins." "Ah, but Father, you don't know what the sins are yet. How can you deny me absolution?" "Naming the sins doesn't change anything." "Oh, but it does. A year ago I told another priest exactly what I was going to do, but he didn't believe me until it was too late. Don't make the same mistake." "How do you know the priest didn't believe you?" "He didn't try to stop me. That's how I know." "How long have you been a Catholic?" "All my life." "Then you know that a priest cannot acknowledge the sin or the sinner outside of the confessional. The seal of silence is sacred. Exactly how could this other priest have stopped you?" "He could have found a way. I was...practicing then, and I was cautious. It would have been very easy for him to stop me, so it's his fault, not mine. It won't be easy now." Tom was desperately trying to make sense out of what the man was saying. Practice? Practice what? And what was the sin the priest could have prevented? "I thought I could control it," the man said. "Control what?" "The craving." "What was the sin you confessed?" "Her name was Millicent. A nice, old-fashioned name, don't you think? Her friends called her Millie, but I didn't. I much preferred Millicent. Of course, I wasn't what you would call a friend." Another burst of laughter pierced the dead air. Tom's forehead was beaded with perspiration, but he suddenly felt cold. This wasn't a prankster. He dreaded what he was going to hear, yet he was compelled to ask. "What happened to Millicent?" "I broke her heart." "I don't understand..." "What do you think happened to her?" the man demanded, his impatience clear now. "I killed her. It was messy; there was blood everywhere, all over me. I was terribly inexperienced back then. I hadn't perfected my technique. When I went to confession, I hadn't killed her yet. I was still in the planning stage and the priest could have stopped me, but he didn't. I told him what I was going to do." "Tell me, how could he have stopped you?" "Prayer," he answered, a shrug in his voice. "I told him to pray for me, but he didn't pray hard enough, now did he? I still killed her. It's a pity, really. She was such a pretty little thing...much prettier than the others." "Dear God, there were other women? How many others?" "How many crimes have you --" The stranger interrupted him. "Sins, Father," he said. "I committed sins, but I might have been able to resist if the priest had helped me. He wouldn't give me what I needed." "What did you need?" "Absolution and acceptance. I was denied both." The stranger suddenly slammed his fist into the grille. Rage that must have been simmering just below the surface erupted full force as he spewed out in grotesque detail exactly what he had done to the poor innocent Millicent. Tom was overwhelmed and sickened by the horror of it all. Dear God, what should he do? He had boasted he wouldn't be shocked or angered, but nothing could have prepared him for the atrocities the stranger took such delight in describing. "Hate the sin, not the sinner." "I've gotten a real taste for it," the madman whispered. "How many other women have you killed?" "Millicent was the first. There were other infatuations, and when they disappointed me, I had to hurt them, but I didn't kill any of them. After I met Millicent, everything changed. I watched her for a long time and everything about her was...perfect." His voice turned into a snarl as he continued. "But she betrayed me, just like the others. She thought she could play her little games with other men and I wouldn't notice. I couldn't let her torment me that way. I wouldn't," he corrected. "I had to punish her." He let out a loud, exaggerated sigh and then chuckled. "I killed the little bitch twelve months ago and I buried her deep, real deep. No one's ever going to find her. There's no going back now. No, sirree. I had no idea how thrilling the kill was going to be. I made Millicent beg me for mercy, and she did. By God, she did." He laughed. "She screamed like a pig, and oh, how I loved the sound. I got so excited, more excited than I could ever have imagined was possible, and so I

had to make her scream more, didn't I? When I was finished with her, I was bursting with joy. Well, Father, aren't you going to ask me if I'm sorry for my sins?" he taunted. "No, you aren't contrite." A suffocating silence filled the confessional. And then, in a serpent's hiss, the voice returned. "The craving's come back." Goose bumps covered Tom's arms. "There are people who can -- ""Do you think I should be locked away? I only punish those who hurt me. So you see, I'm not culpable. But you think I'm sick, don't you? We're in confession, Father. You have to tell the truth.""Yes, I think you're ill.""Oh, I don't think so. I'm just dedicated.""There are people who can help you.""I'm brilliant, you know. It won't be easy to stop me. I study my clients before I take them on. I know everything about their families and their friends. Everything. Yes, it's going to be much harder to stop me now, but this time I've decided to make it more difficult for me. Do you see? I don't want to sin. I really don't." The singsong voice was back. "Listen to me," Tom pleaded. "Step outside the confessional with me and we'll sit down together and talk this through. I want to help you, if you'll only let me.""No, I needed help before and I was denied, remember? Give me absolution.""I will not." The sigh was long and drawn out. "Very well," he said. "I'm changing the rules this time. You have my permission to tell anyone you want to tell. Do you see how accommodating I can be?" "It doesn't matter if you give me permission to tell or not, this conversation will remain confidential. The seal of silence must be maintained to protect the integrity of the confessional." "No matter what I confess?" "No matter what." "I demand that you tell." "Demand all you want, but it won't make any difference. I cannot tell anyone what you have said to me. I won't." A moment of silence passed and then the stranger began to chuckle. "A priest with scruples. How extraordinary. Hmmm. What a quandary. But don't you fret, Father. I'm ten steps ahead of you. Yes, sirree." "What are you saying?" "I've taken on a new client." "You've already chosen your next -- ""The madman cut him off. "I've already notified the authorities. They'll get my letter soon. Of course that was before I knew you were going to be such a stickler for the rules. Still, it was considerate of me, wasn't it? I sent them a polite little note explaining my intentions. Pity I forgot to sign it." "Did you give them the name of the person you intend to harm?" "Harm? What a quaint word that is for murder. Yes, I named her." "Another woman, then?" Tom's voice broke on the question. "I only take women on as clients." "Did you explain in the note your reason for wanting to kill this woman?" "No." "Do you have a reason?" "Yes." "Would you explain it to me?" "Practice, Father." "I don't understand." "Practice makes perfect," he said. "This one's even more special than Millicent. I wrap myself in her fragrance, and I love to watch her sleep. She's so beautiful. Ask me, and after I've given you her name, you can forgive me." "I will not give you absolution." "How's the chemotherapy going? Are you feeling sick? Did you get a good report?" Tom's head snapped up. "What?" he demanded in a near shout. The madman laughed. "I told you I study my clients before I take them on. You could say I stalk them," he whispered. "How did you know -- ""Oh, Tommy, you've been such a sport. Haven't you wondered why I followed you all this way just to confess my sins to you? Think about it on your way back to the abbey. I've done my homework, haven't I?" "Who are you?" "Why, I'm a heartbreaker. And I do so love a challenge. Make this one difficult for me. The police will come here soon to talk to you, and then you'll be able to tell anyone you want," he mocked. "I know who you'll call first. Your hotshot friend with the FBI. You'll call Nick, won't you? I sure hope you will. And he'll come running to help. You'd better tell him to take her away and hide her from me. I might not follow, and I'll start looking for someone else. At least I'll try." "How do you know -- ""Ask me." "Ask you what?" "Her name," the madman whispered. "Ask me who my client is." "I urge you to get help," Tom began again. "What you're doing -- ""Ask me. Ask me. Ask me." Tom closed his eyes. "Yes. Who is she?" "She's lovely," he answered. "Such beautiful full breasts and long, dark hair. There isn't a mark on her perfect body, and her face is like an angel's, so exquisite in every way. She's...breathhtaking...but I plan to take her breath away." "Tell me her name," Tom demanded, praying to God there was time to get to the poor woman to protect her. "Laurant," the serpent whispered. "Her name is Laurant." Panic hit Tom like a fist. "My Laurant?" "That's right. Now you're getting it, Father. I'm going to kill your sister." Copyright 2001 by Julie Garwood
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