

Bonds of Justice (Psy/Changeling Series Book 8)

By Nalini Singh

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A Psy-Changeling novel from the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Shards of Hope*, *Shield of Winter*, and *Heart of Obsidian*..."the alpha author of paranormal romance" (*Booklist*).

Max Shannon is a good cop, one of the best in New York Enforcement. Born with a natural shield that protects him against Psy mental invasions, he knows he has little chance of advancement within the Psy-dominated power structure.

The last case he expects to be assigned to is that of a murderer targeting a Psy Councilor's closest advisors. And the last woman he expects to compel him in the most sensual of ways is a Psy on the verge of catastrophic mental fracture...

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Editorial Review

Review

"Consistent excellence makes Singh one of today's premier storytellers!" ---Romantic Times

About the Author

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Nalini Singh lives and works in beautiful New Zealand, and is passionate about writing. She also loves chatting to readers. You can find her on Twitter (@nalinisingh) and Facebook (facebook.com/authornalinisingh), and via her website: nalinisingh.com

Nalini's Newsletter: Goes out monthly and includes exclusives for subscribers, including free short stories, sneak peeks, deleted scenes and more. To join, just copy and paste this into your address bar and fill in your name and email address: mad.ly/signups/59681/join

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JUSTICE

When the Psy first chose Silence, first chose to bury their emotions and turn into ice-cold individuals who cared nothing for love or hate, they tried to isolate their race from the humans and changelings. Constant contact with the races who continued to embrace emotion made it much harder to hold on to their own conditioning.

It was a logical thought.

However, it proved impossible in practice. Economics alone made isolation an unfeasible goal—Psy might have all been linked into the PsyNet, the sprawling psychic network that anchored their minds, but they were not all equal. Some were rich, some were poor, and some were just getting by.

They needed jobs, needed money, needed food. And the Psy Council, for all its brutal power, could not provide enough internal positions for millions. The Psy had to remain part of the world, a world filled with chaos on every side, bursting at the seams with the extremes of joy and sadness, fear and despair. Those Psy who fractured under the pressure were quietly “rehabilitated,” their minds wiped, their personalities erased. But others thrived.

The M-Psy, gifted with the ability to look inside the body and diagnose illnesses, had never really withdrawn from the world. Their skills were prized by all three races, and they brought in a good income.

The less-powerful members of the Psy populace returned to their ordinary, everyday jobs as accountants and engineers, shop owners and businessmen. Except that what they had once enjoyed, despised, or merely tolerated, they now simply *did*.

The most powerful, in contrast, *were* absorbed into the Council superstructure wherever possible. The Council did not want to chance losing its strongest.

Then there were the Js.

Telepaths born with a quirk that allowed them to slip into minds and retrieve memories, then share those memories with others, the Js had been part of the world's justice system since the world first had one. There weren't enough J-Psy to shed light on the guilt or innocence of every accused—they were brought in on only the most heinous cases: the kinds of cases that made veteran detectives throw up and long-jaded reporters take a horrified step backward.

Realizing how advantageous it would be to have an entrée into a system that processed both humans, and at times, the secretive and pack-natured changelings as well, the Council allowed the Js to not just continue, but expand their work. Now, in the dawn of the year 2081, the Js are so much a part of the Justice system that their presence raises no eyebrows, causes no ripples.

And, as for the unexpected mental consequences of long-term work as a J . . . well, the benefits outweigh the occasional murderous problem.

CHAPTER 1

Circumstance doesn't make a man. If it did, I'd have committed my first burglary at twelve, my first robbery at fifteen, and my first murder at seventeen.

—From the private case notes of Detective Max Shannon

It was as she was sitting staring into the face of a socio-path that Sophia Russo realized three irrefutable truths.

One: In all likelihood, she had less than a year left before she was sentenced to comprehensive rehabilitation. Unlike normal rehabilitation, the process wouldn't only wipe out her personality, leave her a drooling vegetable. Comprehensives had ninety-nine percent of their psychic senses fried as well. All for their own good of course.

Two: Not a single individual on this earth would remember her name after she disappeared from active duty.

Three: If she wasn't careful, she would soon end up as empty and as inhuman as the man on the other side of the table . . . because the otherness in her wanted to squeeze his mind until he whimpered, until he bled, until he begged for mercy.

Evil is hard to define, but it's sitting in that room.

The echo of Detective Max Shannon's words pulled her back from the whispering temptation of the abyss. For some reason, the idea of being labeled evil by him was . . . not acceptable. He had looked at her in a different way from other human males, his eyes noting her scars, but only as part of the package that was her body. The response had been extraordinary enough to make her pause, meet his gaze, attempt to divine what he was thinking.

That had proved impossible. But she knew what Max Shannon wanted.

Bonner alone knows where he buried the bodies—we need that information.

Shutting the door on the darkness inside of her, she opened her psychic eye and, reaching out with her telepathic senses, began to walk the twisted pathways of Gerard Bonner's mind. She had touched many, many depraved minds over the course of her career, but this one was utterly and absolutely unique. Many who committed crimes of this caliber had a mental illness of some kind. She understood how to work with

their sometimes disjointed and fragmented memories.

Bonner's mind, in contrast, was neat, organized, each memory in its proper place. Except those places and the memories they contained made no sense, having been filtered through the cold lens of his sociopathic desires. He saw things as he wished to see them, the reality distorted until it was impossible to pinpoint the truth among the spiderweb of lies.

Ending the telepathic sweep, she took three discreet seconds to center herself before opening her physical eyes to stare into the rich blue irises of the man the media found so compelling. According to them, he was handsome, intelligent, magnetic. What she knew for a fact was that he held an MBA from a highly regarded institution and came from one of the premier human families in Boston—there was a prevailing sense of disbelief that he was also the Butcher of Park Avenue, the moniker coined after the discovery of Carissa White's body along one of the avenue's famous wide "green" medians.

Covered with tulips and daffodils in spring, it had been a snowy wonderland of trees and fairy lights when Carissa was dumped there, her blood a harsh accent on the snow. She was the only one of Bonner's victims to have ever been found, and the public nature of the dump site had turned her killer into an instant star. It had also almost gotten him caught—only the fact that the witness who'd seen him running from the scene had been too far away to give Enforcement any kind of a useful description had saved the monster.

"I got much more careful after that," Bonner said, wearing the faint smile that made people think they were being invited to share a secret joke. "Everyone's a little clumsy the first time."

Sophia betrayed no reaction to the fact that the human across from her had just "read her mind," having expected the trick. According to his file, Gerard Bonner was a master manipulator, able to read body language cues and minute facial expressions to genius-level accuracy. Even Silence, it seemed, was not protection enough against his abilities—having reviewed the visual transcripts of his trial, she'd seen him do the same thing to other Psy.

"That's why we're here, Mr. Bonner," she said with a calm that was growing ever colder, ever more remote—a survival mechanism that would soon chill the few remaining splinters of her soul. "You agreed to give up the locations of your later victims' bodies in return for more privileges during your incarceration." Bonner's sentence meant he'd be spending the rest of his natural life in D2, a maximum security facility located deep in the mountainous interior of Wyoming. Created under a special mandate, D2 housed the most vicious inmates from around the country, those deemed too high risk to remain in the normal prison system.

"I like your eyes," Bonner said, his smile widening as he traced the network of fine lines on her face with a gaze the media had labeled "murderously sensual." "They remind me of pansies."

Sophia simply waited, letting him speak, knowing his words would be of interest to the profilers who stood in the room on the other side of the wall at her back—observing her meeting with Bonner on a large comm screen. Unusually for a human criminal, there were Psy observers in that group. Bonner's mental patterns were so aberrant as to incite their interest.

But no matter the credentials of those Psy profilers, Max Shannon's conclusions were the ones that interested Sophia. The Enforcement detective had no Psy abilities, and unlike the butcher sitting across from her, his body was whipcord lean. Sleek, she thought, akin to a lithely muscled puma. Yet, when it came down to it, it was the puma who'd won—both over the bulging strength that strained at Bonner's prison overalls, *and* over the mental abilities of the Psy detectives who'd been enlisted into the task force once Bonner's perversions began to have a serious economic impact.

“They were my pansies, you know.” A small sigh. “So pretty, so sweet. So easily bruised. Like you.” His eyes lingered on a scar that ran a ragged line over her cheekbone.

Ignoring the blatant attempt at provocation, she said, “What did you do to bruise them?” Bonner had ultimately been convicted on the basis of the evidence he’d left on the battered and broken body of his first victim. He hadn’t left a trace at the scenes of the other abductions, had been connected to them only by the most circumstantial of evidence—and Max Shannon’s relentless persistence.

“So delicate and so damaged you are, Sophia,” he murmured, moving his gaze across her cheek, down to her lips. “I’ve always been drawn to damaged women.”

“A lie, Mr. Bonner.” It was extraordinary to her that people found him handsome—when she could all but smell the rot. “Every one of your victims was remarkably beautiful.”

“*Alleged* victims,” he said, eyes sparkling. “I was only convicted of poor Carissa’s murder. Though I’m innocent, of course.”

“You agreed to cooperate,” she reminded him. And she needed that cooperation to do her job. Because—“It’s obvious you’ve learned to control your thought patterns to a certain degree.” It was something the telepaths in the J-Corps had noted in a number of human sociopaths—they seemed to develop an almost Psy ability to consciously manipulate their own memories. Bonner had learned to do it well enough that she couldn’t get what she needed from a surface scan—to go deeper, dig harder might cause permanent damage, erasing the very impressions she needed to access.

But, the otherness in her murmured, he only had to remain alive until they located his victims. After that . . .

“I’m human.” Exaggerated surprise. “I’m sure they told you—my memory’s not what it used to be. That’s why I need a J to go in and dig up my pansies.”

It was a game. She was certain he knew the exact position of each discarded body down to the last centimeter of dirt on a shallow grave. But he’d played the game well enough that the authorities had pulled her in, giving Bonner the chance to sate his urges once again. By making her go into his mind, he was attempting to violate her—the sole way he had to hurt a woman now.

“Since it’s obvious I’m ineffective,” she said, rising to her feet, “I’ll get Justice to send in my colleague, Bryan Ames. He’s an—”

“No.” The first trace of a crack in his polished veneer, covered over almost as soon as it appeared. “I’m sure you’ll get what you need.”

She tugged at the thin black leather-synth of her left glove, smoothing it over her wrist so it sat neatly below the cuff of her crisp white shirt. “I’m too expensive a resource to waste. My skills will be better utilized in other cases.” Then she walked out, ignoring his order—and it was an order—that she stay.

Once out in the observation chamber, she turned to Max Shannon. “Make sure any replacements you send him are male.”

A professional nod, but his hand clenched on the top of the chairback beside him, his skin having the warm golden brown tone of someone whose ancestry appeared to be a mix of Asian and Caucasian. While the Asian side of his genetic structure had made itself known in the shape of his eyes, the Caucasian side had won in the height department—he was six foot one according to her visual estimate.

All that was fact.

But the impact was more than the sum of its parts. He had, she realized, that strange something the humans called charisma. Psy professed not to accept that such a thing existed, but they all knew it did. Even among their Silent race, there were those who could walk into a room and hold it with nothing but their presence.

As she watched, Max's tendons turned white against his skin from the force of his grip. "He got his rocks off making you trawl through his memories." He didn't say anything about her scars, but Sophia knew as well as he did that they played a large part in what made her so very attractive to Bonner.

Those scars had long ago become a part of her, a thin tracery of lines that spoke of a history, a past. Without them, she'd have no past at all. Max Shannon, she thought, had a past as well. But he didn't wear it on that beautiful—not handsome, *beautiful*—face. "I have shields." However, those shields were beginning to fail, an inevitable side effect of her occupation. If she'd had the option, she wouldn't have become a J. But at eight years of age, she'd been given a single choice—become a J or die.

"I heard a lot of J-Psy have eidetic memories," Max said, his eyes intent.

"Yes—but only when it comes to the images we take during the course of our work." She'd forgotten parts of her "real life," but she'd never forget even an instant of the things she'd seen over the years she'd spent in the Justice Corps.

Max had opened his mouth to reply when Bartholomew Reuben, the prosecutor who'd worked side by side with him to capture and convict Gerard Bonner, finished his conversation with two of the profilers and walked over. "That's a good idea about male Js. It'll give Bonner time to stew—we can bring you in again when he's in a more cooperative frame of mind."

Max's jaw set at a brutal angle as he responded. "He'll draw this out as long as possible—those girls are nothing but pawns to him."

Reuben was pulled away by another profiler before he could reply, leaving Sophia alone with Max again. She found herself staying in place though she should've joined those of her race, her task complete. But being perfect hadn't kept her safe—she'd be dead within the year, one way or another—so why not indulge her desire for further conversation with this human detective whose mind worked in a fashion that fascinated her? "His ego won't let him hide his secrets forever," she said, having dealt with that kind of a narcissistic personality before. "He wants to share his cleverness."

"And will you continue to listen if the first body he gives up is that of Daria Xiu?" His tone was abrasive, gritty with lack of sleep.

Daria Xiu, Sophia knew, was the reason a J had been pulled into this situation. The daughter of a powerful human businessman, she was theorized to have been Bonner's final victim. "Yes," she said, telling him one truth. "Bonner is deviant enough that our psychologists find him a worthwhile study subject." Perhaps because the kind of deviancy exhibited by the Butcher of Park Avenue had once been exhibited by Psy in statistically high numbers . . . and was no longer being fully contained by Silence.

The Council thought the populace didn't know, and perhaps they didn't. But to Sophia, a J who'd spent her life steeped in the miasma of evil, the new shadows in the Psy-Net had a texture she could almost feel—thick, oily, and beginning to riddle the fabric of the sprawling neural network with insidious efficiency.

“And you?” Max asked, watching her with a piercing focus that made her feel as if that quicksilver mind might uncover secrets she’d kept concealed for over two decades. “What about you?”

The otherness in her stirred, wanting to give him the unvarnished, deadly truth, but that was something she couldn’t ever share with a man who’d made Justice his life. “I’ll do my job.” Then she said something a perfect Psy never would have said. “We’ll bring them home. No one should have to spend eternity in the cold dark.”

Max watched Sophia Russo walk away with the civilian observers, unable to take his attention off her. It had been the eyes that had first slammed into him. *River’s* eyes, he’d thought as she walked in, she had River’s eyes. But he’d been wrong. Sophia’s eyes were darker, more dramatically blue-violet, so vivid he’d almost missed the lush softness of her mouth. Except he hadn’t.

And that was one hell of a kick to the teeth.

Because for all her curves and the tracery of scars that spoke of a violent past, she was Psy. Ice-cold and tied to a Council that had far more blood on its hands than Gerard Bonner ever would. Except . . . Her final words circled in his mind.

We’ll bring them home.

It had held the weight of a vow. Or maybe that’s what he’d wanted to hear.

Wrenching back his attention when she disappeared from view, he turned to Bart Reuben, the only other person who remained. “She wear the gloves all the time?” Thin black leather-synth, they’d covered everything below the cuffs of her shirt and suit jacket. It might have been because she had more serious scars on the backs of her hands—but Sophia Russo didn’t strike him as the kind of woman who’d hide behind such a shield.

“Yes. Every time I’ve seen her.” Frown lines marred the prosecutor’s forehead for a second, before he seemed to shake off whatever was bothering him. “She’s got an excellent record—never fumbled a retraction yet.”

“We saw at the trial that Bonner’s smart enough to fuck with his own memories,” Max said, watching as the prisoner was led from the interrogation room. The blue-eyed Butcher, the media’s murderous darling, stared out at the cameras until the door closed, his smile a silent taunt. “Even if his mind isn’t twisted at the core, he knows his pharmaceuticals—could’ve got his hands on something, deliberately dosed himself.”

“Wouldn’t put it past the bastard,” Bart said, the grooves around his mouth carved deep. “I’ll line up a couple of male Js for Bonner’s next little show.”

“Xiu have that much clout?” The trial of Gerard Bonner, scion of a blue-blooded Boston family and the most sadistic killer the state had seen in decades, would’ve qualified for a J at the trial stage but for the fact that his memories were close to impenetrable.

“Sociopaths,” one J had said to Max after testifying that he couldn’t retrieve anything usable from the accused’s mind, “don’t see the truth as others see it.”

“Give me an example,” Max had asked, frustrated that the killer who’d snuffed out so many young lives had

managed to slither through another net.

“According to the memories in Bonner’s surface mind, Carissa White orgasmed as he stabbed her.”

Shaking off that sickening evidence of Bonner’s warped reality, he glanced at Bart, who’d paused to check an e-mail on his cell phone. “Xiu?” he prompted.

“Yeah, looks like he has some ‘friends’ in high-level Psy ranks. His company does a lot of business with them.” Putting away the phone, Bart began to gather up his papers. “But in this, he’s just a shattered father. Daria was his only child.”

“I know.” The face of each and every victim was imprinted on Max’s mind. Twenty-one-year-old Daria’s was a gap-toothed smile, masses of curly black hair, and skin the color of polished mahogany. She didn’t look anything like the other victims—unlike most killers of his pathology, Bonner hadn’t differentiated between white, black, Hispanic, Asian. It had only been age and a certain kind of beauty that drew him.

Which turned his thoughts back to the woman who’d stared unblinking into the face of a killer while Max forced himself to stand back, to watch. “She fits his victim profile—Ms. Russo.” Sophia Russo’s eyes, her scars, made her strikingly unique—a critical aspect of Bonner’s pathology. He’d targeted women who would never blend into a crowd—the violence spoken of by Sophia’s scars would, for him, be the icing on the cake. “Did you arrange that?” His hand tightened on a pen as he helped Bart clear the table.

“Stroke of luck.” The prosecutor put the files in his briefcase. “When Bonner said he’d cooperate with a scan, we requested the closest J. Russo had just completed a job here. She’s on her way to the airport now—heading to our neck of the woods as a matter of fact.”

“Liberty?” Max asked, mentioning the maximum-security penitentiary located on an artificial island off the New York coast.

Bart nodded as they walked out and toward the first security door. “She’s scheduled to meet a prisoner who claims another prisoner confessed to the currently unsolved mutilation murder of a high-profile victim.”

Max thought of what Bonner had done to the only one of his victims they’d ever found, the bloody ruin that had been the once-gamine beauty of Carissa White. And he wondered what Sophia Russo saw when she closed her eyes at night.

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