

NONE WITHOUT SIN by Michael Bradley

EXCERPT

SATURDAY

CHAPTER 1

The loaf of brown bread looked distinctly out of place resting on the dead man's chest, leaving Candice Miller to wonder if all crime scenes contained such incongruities. She expected blood. Yellow police tape? Definitely. But baked goods? This seemed outrageous even for the most imaginative of minds. Yet, there it was, reminding her of the artisan bread she would get at the steakhouse near the mall. *Never going to eat there again*, she thought.

The scene was not gory, at least not to the degree she had expected. What blood there was had pooled around the man's sternum and left a crimson stain on the front of his white Oxford shirt. The round loaf of bread was split down the middle, and the bottom of each half soaked up enough plasma to darken the crust to almost pitch-black. The corpse of Robbie Reynolds was stretched out on a black leather sofa along the far wall. His face—which was turned toward the door—was pale and lifeless. His vacant eyes stared at her from across the room. A sensation like a cold finger touched the back of her neck for one brief second.

Everything else looked normal. The pool table in the center of the room showed signs of a game in progress, with balls scattered across the green felt. A cue lay nearby on the plush beige carpet, as if it had been dropped on the floor by the dead man. Otherwise, there was no sign of violence. If not for the blood, Candice might have thought Robbie was just napping.

Chief Lyle Jenkins nudged her away from the doorway. "Down here, Reverend." The police chief moved between her and the door—presumably to block her view—and then gestured toward an archway a few steps down the hall.

Candice took one last glance at the dead man. She should have felt a sense of revulsion or been horrified by her first murder scene. But there was only a sense of curiosity, of wonder. *Who killed him? Why leave behind a loaf of bread?*

She stepped from the door and moved along the hall in the direction the police chief had indicated. "Such a shame."

"That's life," Lyle said, his voice deep and brusque.

Her jaw tightened with his words. His callousness angered her, but she knew Lyle Jenkins had a reputation of being an unfeeling hardass. She refused to be goaded by his insensitivity and tried to ignore his remark.

She passed through the archway across the hall into the sprawling living room. The early afternoon sun blazed through high windows, bathing everything in a warm light. Detective Mick Flanagan stood beside a stone fireplace opposite the archway. His ginger hair was tousled, his clothing wrinkled, as if he had dressed haphazardly before rushing to the crime scene. A silver badge dangled on a thin chain from his neck. He smiled momentarily, then his lips sank back into grave frown. He crossed the room to greet Candice.

"How is Andrea?" she asked.

"Not good." Mick ran his hand through his hair. "Thanks for coming."

Chief Jenkins leaned in and asked, "Did she say anything yet?" "Nothing new," Mick said. "Just what she told you earlier."

Candice touched Mick's shoulder. "Let me talk to her. She needs comfort, not questions."

The police chief grunted. "That's all fine and dandy, but we've got a crime scene to process. The sooner we can get the family out of here the better." He turned abruptly and walked from the room.

Mick rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry about that." Candice rolled her eyes and shook her head. "What happened?"

He shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. She found the body when she came home an hour ago. That's all she told us."

"I can't understand why anyone would want to kill him." This seemed like the right thing to say about a murder victim, but Candice knew Robbie Reynolds well enough to know he wasn't without his secrets. In a small city like Newark, rumors were always easy to find.

"He helped my wife and I buy our first home," Mick said. "Give me a few minutes with her."

Candice moved to the long Chesterfield sofa facing the fireplace. Its tan leather was cracked and worn. Andrea Reynolds sat with her head bowed; her shoulders quaking with each sob. Long ash brown hair fell forward and obscured her face from view.

Andrea clutched a balled-up tissue in her hand. She didn't seem to notice Candice's arrival.

Seated at the opposite end of the sofa was Marissa, the Reynolds' pre-teen daughter. Her hands were folded in her lap, and her eyes held a blank stare. The girl's blonde hair looked shorter than it had on Sunday. *Must have got a haircut this week.* The Reynolds family always sat in the front row during Sunday service, and it was hard to miss the beaming smile on Marissa's face. The ten-year-old girl had pushed herself as far into the corner of the sofa as possible, as if trying to escape the horror around her. Marissa glanced up at Candice, then dropped her eyes to the floor.

Candice approached the sofa and took a seat next to Andrea. She wrapped her arm around the shoulders of the grieving woman, who glanced up to give Candice a feeble smile. Bloodshot eyes bore witness to her anguish.

"Oh, Candice." Andrea sniffed, then wiped her nose with the tissue. "Who would do this?" Her voice was broken and soft.

Candice stared at her for a long moment, searching for the right words. Despite her time at seminary and her short experience as an Episcopalian priest, she'd always struggled with providing comfort to grieving families in the wake of a loss. Her words seemed inadequate, even trite. There was nothing she could say that wouldn't sound like a cliché, like some canned response to grief. "Time heals all wounds." "He's in a better place." "God will get you through this." That last one, in particular, had been a source of contention for her lately.

"Andrea, I know it may not seem like it right now, but this pain will pass," Candice said, cringing within as she spoke.

Andrea broke into an uncontrolled sob and buried her face in Candice's shoulder. As the woman cried, Candice glanced at Mick.

He rolled his eyes and folded his arms as a faint sigh slipped from his lips. She suppressed a semi-panicked urge to giggle. *Five years on the force, and he gets more like Chief Jenkins every day.* Then, after a further moment's thought, she caught the irony and chastised herself for her own callousness.

The seemingly endless stream of Andrea's tears dampened the collar of Candice's blouse. When she lifted her head, the woman blotted at her swollen eyes with a tissue. Her face was red and blotchy, with a network of little purple veins on her nose.

"Mick needs to ask you some questions," Candice said. "Do you feel up to talking?"

Andrea blew her nose on the tissue. "I think so."

Candice took hold of Andrea's hand and squeezed it. "I'll be right here beside you."

Mick mouthed a silent "thank you" to Candice, and then said, "Andrea, I know this is a difficult time for you, but the sooner you can tell me what happened—"

Andrea cut him off. “We’d gone up to New York City yesterday.” She gestured to her daughter at the other end of the sofa. “A girls’ night out.”

Andrea dabbed once again at her eyes with a tissue to wipe away fresh tears. “Marissa and I took the train up to see a Broadway show. We had dinner before the show and stayed the night at a hotel on Time Square.”

“When did you return home?” Mick asked.

“About an hour ago,” Andrea replied. “We’d planned to be home earlier, but the train was running late.”

Candice toyed with a hangnail on her right ring finger.

She felt a flutter of guilt for not saying or doing more. But, how to behave at a crime scene had not been part of the curriculum at seminary. *First murder scene and I didn’t even pray with the widow. Way to go.*

She looked toward Marissa. The young girl—wearing pale blue jeans with sequins in the shape of a flower on the right pant leg—hadn’t moved. She looked distant and afraid. Very different from the affable, high-spirited preteen Candice was used to seeing on Sundays. It seemed as if everyone had forgotten Marissa was even in the room. This was not the type of conversation the girl should hear.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Candice said. “What about Marissa? Does she need to be here?”

At the mention of her name, Marissa looked up at them. Her eyes were wide.

“Until we’ve cleared the crime scene, you won’t be able to stay in the house,” Mick said to Andrea. “Do you have someplace the two of you can go?”

Andrea toyed with the tissue in her hand. The flimsy material was creased and shredded. “We can stay at my mother’s house.” She gestured toward Candice. “I called her right after I called you. She can take care of Marissa while I . . .” Her words drifted off.

Candice rose from the sofa. “Why don’t I take Marissa upstairs and help her get a bag packed? You can stay here. Talk to Mick. Do what you need to do.”

Andrea stared at her for a moment. Her eyes welled with tears, and she reached out her hand. “Thank you.”

Candice smiled, took the woman’s hand, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. “Will you be okay?”

“Yeah.” There was some hesitation in Andrea’s voice.

Candice walked to the other side of the sofa and knelt before the young girl. “Marissa, how about you come with me? We’ll go up to your room and pack your suitcase. You’re going to spend a few days at Grandma’s house.”

Marissa didn't move at first.

"Sweetie, go with Pastor Miller," Andrea said.

After a brief glance at her mother, the young girl slipped from the sofa. Candice took the girl's hand and led her from the room. As they moved down the hall toward the stairs, Candice glanced back at the doorway of the room where Robbie Reynolds lay dead. The blood-soaked loaf of bread resurfaced in her memory. That was downright odd. Why would someone leave a loaf of bread on a dead man's chest? Yet, the concept seemed eerily familiar somehow. A distant memory she couldn't quite reach.

The girl's bedroom looked as if every Disney princess movie had detonated within it. Movie posters from *Moana*, *Frozen*, and *Tangled* hung on the walls. Images from *Beauty and the Beast* covered the comforter on the twin bed. Small statuettes of the seven dwarfs lined the top of the nearby bookshelf. Candice hadn't been to Disney World, but she imagined this was what almost every gift shop in the park might look like.

Marissa crossed the room and sat on the bed; her head bowed, staring at her feet. She bit her bottom lip and said nothing. Candice reached over and put her arm around Marissa's shoulders.

The young girl looked up at Candice. Her blue eyes were puffy and bloodshot. "Is Daddy okay?"

The question shocked Candice and left her reeling for an answer. How could Marissa not know her father was dead? Wasn't she in the house when Andrea discovered the body? Candice struggled to find the right words. Talking with children had never been her strength. As an only child, she had never had a younger sibling to bond with. Never learned the art of relating to adolescents. Her jaw tightened at the idea of being the harbinger of tragic news. "Let's not worry about that. Let's pack a few things and get you outside. Your grandma will be here soon."

Marissa didn't move, just turned her gaze to the floor and stared. "I saw the blood. Mommy doesn't think I saw it, but I did." "You saw it?" Candice bit her bottom lip. *She's going to need years of therapy.*

The girl nodded. "She told me not to look, but I did." There was a pause. "Is Daddy dead?"

Candice pulled the girl closer, giving her a comforting squeeze. Marissa stared up at her. A young life untouched by tragedy . . . until now. As much as she wanted to, Candice knew she couldn't shirk this responsibility. "Yes. Your father's dead."

She waited for the girl to break down. To burst into tears. To kick and scream. To run from the room. But nothing happened. Marissa was silent. Her big eyes filled with sadness; her mouth curled down in a frown. But her grief seemed subdued, almost controlled, as if the girl had already come to terms with her father's death. Candice touched the girl's arm. "Let's pack up a few things. Do you have a bag?"

Marissa nodded, then climbed from the bed and drew a small Cinderella suitcase from beneath it. She set it on the bed and flipped open the top.

"Pick out some clothes for an overnight stay," Candice said. "Make that a few days' stay."

Marissa wandered over to the nearby dresser and pulled open the top drawer. The young girl picked through her clothes as if having trouble deciding what to take. Candice allowed her gaze to drift to the end table. A paperback rested face down next to the Little Mermaid bedside lamp. She turned it over and read the title. It was a Nancy Drew mystery. She smiled. *The Mystery at Lilac Inn. I remember that one*, she thought. *Ghostly apparitions. A stolen inheritance. No murder. Just one in a series of stories that always come with a happy ending. No one gets hurt and the world is perfect on the last page.* When she set the book back down on the bedside table, a glint from the nearby bookshelf caught her eye. She spied a small crystal statuette of an angel sitting on the second shelf. Her pulse quickened for an instant.

With the suitcase packed, Candice led the girl from the bedroom and down the stairs. A uniformed police officer waited at the bottom. Two overlapping sheets of plastic had been hung over the doorway leading into the "death" room. The sheets were attached along the edges of the doorframe with yellow tape. Blurred shapes and figures were all that could be seen through the semi-transparent plastic. Candice was grateful Marissa would be spared any further horror. She nodded at the officer, then led Marissa out of the house and into the afternoon sun.

CHAPTER 2

Brian Wilder downshifted and halted for the traffic light at the bottom of the off-ramp. His two-hour drive along Delaware's beach expressway from Rehoboth Beach had been a blur. The Friday night birthday party had gone into the early hours of the morning, forcing him to crash on the couch of Chris Carson, the birthday boy himself.

Amber Fox, morning host at WREB-FM, had thrown a surprise birthday party for her co-host, Chris. Brian had the dubious responsibility of getting him to the Mexican restaurant for the party. He never realized how difficult it would be to keep a surprise from a blind man. They'd only just stepped

across the restaurant's threshold when Chris leaned toward Brian to ask how many people were waiting in the back room for them. It wasn't until later in the evening that Chris explained how he knew.

"Did someone let slip about the party?" Brian had asked.

Chris shook his head. "Not at all. It was a perfectly planned surprise party."

"But, how—"

"How did I know?" said Chris. "Do you remember the loud music playing when we entered the restaurant?"

"Yeah, but what's—"

"What about the soccer game on the bar TV?" "No . . ."

Chris smiled. "And the woman at the bar nagging her husband about his drinking?"

Brian shook his head. "Nope."

"Then, you probably didn't hear Amber in the back room trying to shush everyone when we arrived."

"No." Brian sighed. "Can't say I did."

He had known Chris Carson for years before the accident that robbed the radio DJ of his sight. Chris was just as much a smart-ass now as he had been then. Perhaps more so.

When the light changed, Brian turned left, heading toward downtown Newark. The fifty-plus-year-old car roared up the street and brought a smile to his face. The candy apple-red Mustang was one of the few luxuries he allowed himself. Brian was meticulous in his care and maintenance of the Mustang. If only he'd put that level of care into his relationship with Allison, his daughter. A sense of guilt washed over him.

He glanced at his mobile phone on the passenger seat. He toyed with the idea of calling her, but their last call had ended in a fierce argument, just like so many others. *No point in upsetting her weekend*, he thought.

The car raced across an overpass. Northbound traffic on the interstate below was backed up, creeping along. Early beachgoers on their way to the Jersey shore. Although the morning was windy, the weekend was shaping up to be the first nice one of the month. Rain, cold temperatures, and the occasional snow flurry had made the first two weeks of March less than pleasant. This third week—with temps in the mid-sixties—seemed to be the trigger for everyone to emerge from a self-induced winter hibernation.

As he glided past a slow-moving U-Haul, his mobile phone rang. He slipped the hands-free earpiece into his ear and pressed the button to answer.

“Yo Brian, where are you?” Jessica O’Rourke asked. The part-time newspaper photographer spoke quickly; her young throaty voice full of excitement.

“Just got off the highway,” he said. “Maybe ten minutes out.

Why?”

“The police scanner’s blowing up. Something’s rotten in Newark. Cops and paramedics have converged on Annabelle Street. Sounds serious,” she said, her words coming out in rapid fire.

Brian narrowed his eyes. Annabelle Street was in a select neighborhood on the north side of Newark. Half-million-dollar houses. Land Rovers and Mercedes in driveways. The mayor had a house in the neighborhood. So did the dean of Northern Delaware University. “Thanks for the tip.”

“Look,” said Jessica, a hint of hesitation in her voice. “I’ve got a wedding to shoot in three hours. I can’t meet you there.”

Brian smiled. “No worries. I’ve got my camera in the trunk.” His years as a journalist had taught him to be flexible, often taking photos for his own articles. A photographer by his side was a luxury he’d learned to do without. His pictures would never be as good as Jessica’s, but they’d be just fine for the newspaper. “You can criticize my picture-taking skills later.”

“How was the party?” she asked.

Heavy traffic slowed Brian’s approach into the city of Newark. He braked as the line of cars ahead came to a crawl. “You missed a good time.” He thought again about the previous night. “Chris was disappointed you weren’t there.”

She sighed. Chris Carson’s “crush” on Jessica was public knowledge—as was her unwillingness to be tied down in any relationship. “He’ll get over it,” she said.

Brian laughed. “Go to the wedding. Enjoy yourself.”

Three police cars were parked in front of a house on Annabelle Street, and an ambulance was backed into the driveway. Brian parked the Mustang along the curb a few houses up the block. Before climbing from the car, he reached into the glovebox and dug out a spiral notebook and a pen. From the trunk, he grabbed a black camera bag and slung it over his shoulder.

As he walked along the sidewalk, he noticed a small crowd of onlookers across the street. The house at the center of everyone’s attention was a modern take on a classic Victorian. A police officer

leaned on the white railing of the wraparound porch. A two-story turret rose high above the house, black shingles covering its peak. The white siding was bright in the afternoon sun. Brian recognized the house.

It belonged to Robbie Reynolds.

He sifted through a mental dossier of the man. Robbie Reynolds. Mid-forties. Married with one child. Wife's name is Andrea. Born and raised in Delaware. Attended and dropped out of Northern Delaware University. Local real estate agent. No, local real estate mogul. Self-proclaimed "king of Newark real estate."

The facts came readily to mind, as did the rumors. Egotist.

Gambler. Womanizer.

As Brian approached a nearby police car, he was surprised to find Father Andrew Blake in conversation with Sergeant Stacy Devonport. The priest's black hair was peppered with specks of gray; a few strands above his forehead waved with the afternoon breeze. He wore his customary black tab collar shirt and slacks. A black jacket hung awkwardly from Andrew's gaunt frame, looking like it was a size too big. The priest's presence was puzzling. As far as Brian knew, the Reynolds family wasn't Catholic.

Stacy shook Brian's hand and smiled. "I bet I can guess what brings you here."

"Same reason that brought you." He turned to Andrew. "I'm surprised. I don't recall ever seeing the Reynolds at St. Matthews."

"How would you know, Brian?" Andrew folded his arms and tilted his head to the side. "You're not exactly a regular attendee at Sunday Mass."

Stacy laughed at the priest's rebuke. "He's got you there."

Brian shrugged off their remarks. "I've been busy." It was easier to lie than try to explain why he'd not been to church in a while. He gestured toward the house. "What's going on, Stacy? Why the heavy police presence?"

"I can't tell you much." She rested the roll of crime scene tape on the trunk of the police car. "I've been relegated to crowd control. Haven't been inside."

Brian glanced at the crowd across the street. Ten, maybe eleven people. "Yeah. I see you've got your work cut out for you."

Stacy folded her arms. "Hey, if that throng gets out of hand—"

"That's a throng?" Brian raised an eyebrow. He let the moment linger before straightening up and narrowing his eyes. "Seriously, what's going on?"

“Suspicious death.” Stacy turned her gaze toward the house, then back at Brian. “Robbie.”

A slight heaviness pressed down on his shoulders. Brian’s dealings with the real estate agent were infrequent and always all business. Robbie ran a weekly half-page ad in the Monday edition in the newspaper, but often sent it, along with a check, in the mail. Brian’s only other dealings with the man had been when he first arrived in Newark.

Robbie was the real estate agent who helped Brian find the building that now served as the office of the *Newark Observer*. Since then, Brian rarely had to see the man face-to-face. But that only meant the pang of grief was momentary. A death was still a death after all. “How?”

“All I know is it’s suspicious.” She shrugged. “Nothing else.”

Brian gestured toward a black Dodge Charger parked up the street. “I see he’s here already.”

“The chief? Yeah, he’s in there now. Want me to tell him you’re here?”

Brian gave a nod, and Stacy spoke into the radio mic attached to her shoulder. He flipped open the notebook, made a couple notations, and closed it again.

“He’ll be right out,” she said. “Word of warning. He’s not in the best of moods. He’s missing his grandson’s Little League game for this.”

“Thanks for the heads-up. Where’s Flanagan? Couldn’t he handle this?”

Stacy gestured toward the house. “He’s here, too, but you know how the chief is. He’s got to stick his nose into every investigation.” She looked over at the crowd, which had now grown to twelve people. “If you’ll excuse me . . .”

As Stacy strode off, Brian turned back to Andrew. The priest stared across the lawn at the Reynolds’ family home, arms hanging limp at his sides, his eyes wet and dull.

Brian touched the priest’s shoulder. “Andrew?”

“Man’s propensity to commit violence against another never ceases to amaze me.” Andrew slipped his hands into his trouser pockets and sighed. “You’ve probably seen that more than most people. How do you get used to it?”

Brian mulled over the remark.

A twenty-two-year journalism career had certainly shown him the darkest sides of human brutality. He’d covered two wars in the Middle East. Been at ground zero on 9/11. Reported on the violence between the drug cartels in South America. Then there were more natural disasters than he could remember. All for *Time*, *Newsweek*, and a dozen other magazines and newspapers. He’d seen more death than one man probably should. “You don’t,” he finally said.

Brian watched the black van from the county medical examiner's office drive past and pull into the driveway. "Why are you here?"

Andrew rocked on the balls of his feet. "I'm just a chauffeur. Do you know Candice Miller, pastor at Trinity Episcopal Church? No?" He paused for a second; his lips thinned to a downward arch. "Remind me to introduce you. Anyway, we were meeting at the rectory for our weekly chess game."

Brian knew of the church on the corner of Haines Street and Delaware Avenue, but he couldn't recall ever meeting the pastor. He made a mental note to take Andrew up on his offer of an introduction. "You found a sucker who doesn't mind losing all the time?" Andrew snorted with amusement. "We're pretty evenly matched, thank you very much. We were just settling down to play when Candice got the call about Robbie. His wife called. They go to Candice's church. I offered to drive her."

"So, driving Ms. Miller?"

Andrew turned to look at the house. "You could say that."

A flurry of activity outside the house caught Brian's eye. Police chief Lyle Jenkins stepped from the house, paused at the base of the porch steps, then moved across the lawn toward Brian and Andrew with purposeful strides. A moment later, two additional people emerged from the house. Brian recognized Marissa Reynolds, but the woman with her was a stranger. She was petite with dark hair and wore a lavender windbreaker. The woman carried a small, bright-colored suitcase. She guided Marissa to a porch swing, and they sat together.

Brian was still studying the pair when Lyle Jenkins approached. The stout police chief—dressed in faded blue jeans and a gray polo—wore his holster and gun belt low on his waist. A gold badge hung from his neck on a silver chain and bounced off his chest. The touch of gray in his black hair was highlighted by his dark complexion. "Wilder, how did I know you'd show up here?" He held out his hand.

Brian returned the hardy handshake. "You going to give me a scoop? Or do I have to wait for the press conference?"

Lyle cocked his head. "How exclusive can you really be with that rag of yours?"

Brian snorted, knowing the chief had a point. The *Newark Observer* was a twice-weekly newspaper. Even if he was the first to a story, the larger news outlets would have covered it ad nauseam before the next issue of the *Observer* hit the streets.

"I hear its murder," Brian said.

Andrew shook his head and made a *tsk-tsk* sound. “I believe the words used were ‘suspicious death.’”

“That’s all you’re getting at the moment,” Lyle said. He then leaned toward Brian, conspiratorially. “Off the record, Flanagan’s got his hands full with this one.” He glanced around, then hitched his thumb into his belt. “Where’s your sidekick?”

“Shooting a wedding.” Brian tapped the camera slung over his shoulder. “I’m on my own.”

A gray Chevy Malibu slowly pulled up to the entrance of the driveway. The driver seemed confused as to where to park, first attempting to pull into the driveway behind the medical examiner’s van. Then, thinking better of it, the driver backed up and drove past the house to park along the curb. An elderly woman climbed from the car and headed for the house. She was stopped at the end of the driveway by two police officers. Their conversation started cordially enough. But when it was clear the officers weren’t going to let her pass, she became more animated. Her arms flew in wild gestures, pointing at the house. From where he stood, Brian heard the woman’s voice grow louder as she became more frustrated.

“. . . daughter needs me! Don’t you have any sympathy for what’s happened here?” The woman placed her hands on her hips, almost as if she were daring the officer to stand in her way. Obviously, she was a force to be reckoned with. Brian took pity on the officer. It was probably not going to be a battle he would win.

“Grandma!”

The cry came from the front porch. Marissa leapt from the porch swing and ran down the steps. The grandmother pushed past the police officers and met her granddaughter halfway. They embraced, and Marissa appeared to break down into tears.

Lyle let out a gruff sigh and shook his head. “I need to take care of this.”

“Chief, I’d like to check on Candice, if you don’t mind,” Andrew said.

Lyle’s eyes tightened and his lips curled down. He pointed at the house. “That is a crime scene, not a social club.”

Andrew folded his arms. “Even the comforter needs to be comforted sometimes.”

Lyle allowed a loud sigh to slip from his lips—a clear sign of reluctant capitulation. “Fine. Come with me,” Lyle finally said. “You can go as far as the porch. But, stay out of the house, understand?” The police chief turned and started toward the house, Andrew just steps behind. Brian shrugged his shoulders and took a step forward to follow.

“Not you, Wilder,” said Lyle, without looking back.