

NONE
WITHOUT
SIN

A FIRST STATE MYSTERY

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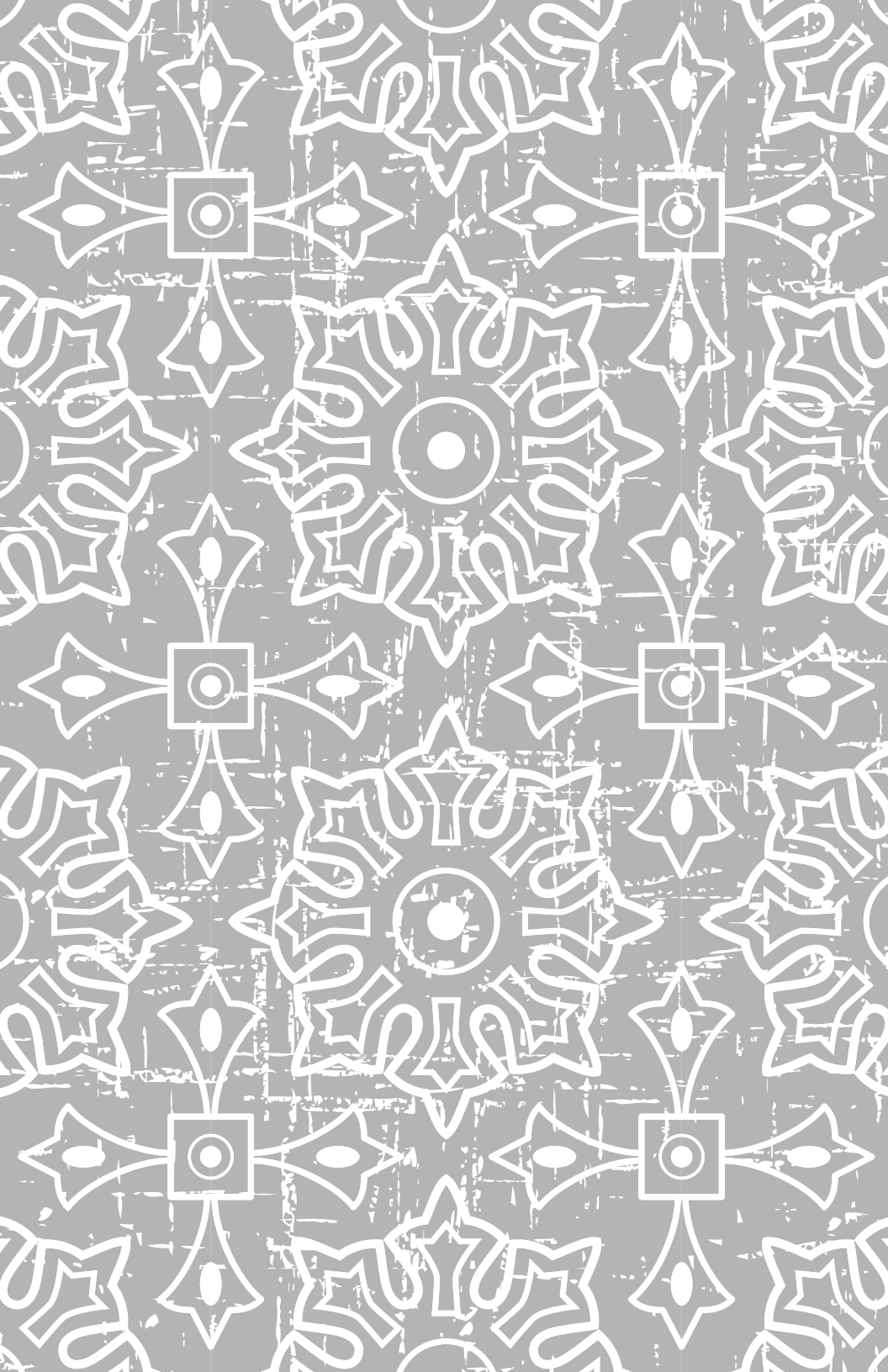
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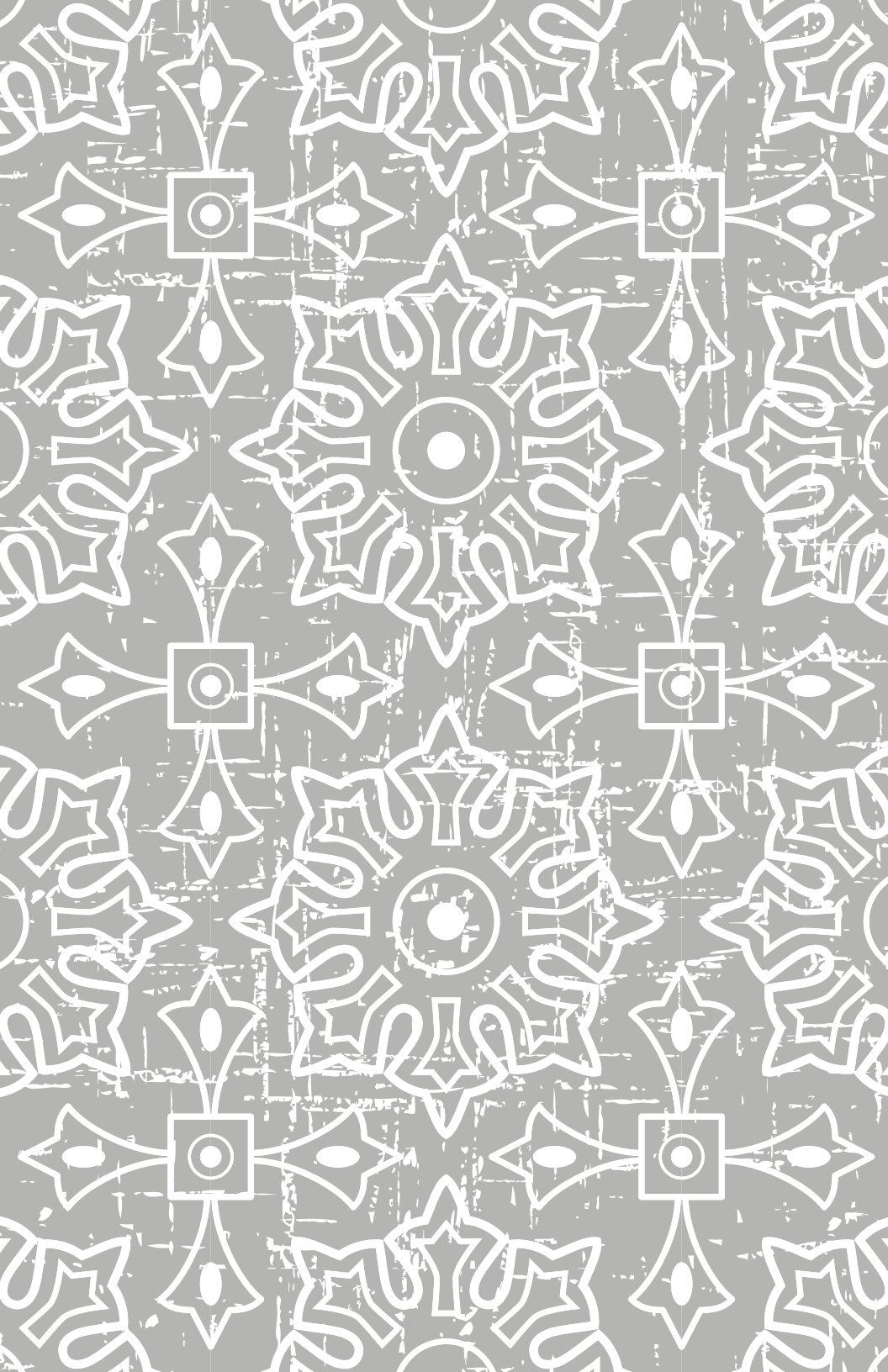
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*For Dennis “Elwood” Gallo and Michael “Jake” Canonica,
both of whom taught me the allure of creativity,
the value of having fun,
and the importance of being my authentic self.*



“Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.”

—William Shakespeare



WEEK

1



CHAPTER ONE

Saturday

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 hard-ass. 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 tussled, 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 into a 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's 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 Times 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.