

Saints in the City

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Outskirts Press, Inc.
Denver, Colorado

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Outskirts Press, Inc.

<http://www.outskirtspress.com>

ISBN: 978-1-4327-1104-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2008940978

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Chapter 1

Saints in the City

I had been a beggar for over seven hundred years but no one would have taken me for a day past fifty. I was grateful for the spry manner in which I could still climb the polished granite steps that led to the massive, arched red door of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, despite the searing pain that occasionally pierced my ancient heart with the same speed and stealth as the vipers lurking in the grassy meadows outside of my homeland of Assisi. The air inside Epiphany Hall where I stumbled in for the third time that week was thick with an odious blend of sweat and meatloaf, and I took notice of the day laborers who huddled over a deck of cards, waiting for their table to be called to the midday feast. I gave the darkest boy with the bright green *fútbol* shirt a casual nod and he answered me with a slow, deliberate bow of his head.

He's got the goods, I thought to myself, the uncut stuff, I prayed, that would steady my hands which were shaking out of control. I stuffed them into the pocket of my jeans as Helen drew near. God Almighty, I couldn't stand for Helen to see me that way.

"Frankie, you're looking awfully pale today," Helen said, her pretty green eyes traveling the surface of my long, narrow face, lingering over the stubble that had grown like a dark field of bad luck and sorrow.

"Nothing a cup of coffee and your southern charm can't cure," I replied, sorry I'd made her worry. She was a delicate girl with long wavy hair and an innocent smile that made most of the men in the soup kitchen think of their little sisters – except for the ones who saw her as easy prey for the desires of their flesh. I knew who they were, afflicted though I was by my own demons and a disease that marred my skin with dark purple lesions that made me an outcast in this distant American city that bore no resemblance to the leafy Italian countryside where I roamed in the days of my youth.

There, I had been a young man of privilege, the son of a wealthy merchant whose silken pleasures had made me soft and dispassionate. It was I who shunned the lepers with bent backs and mottled skin whose faces were shrouded in cheap white linen. Now, I recognized that same fear and loathing in the eyes of passersby who seemed to know at a glance that I was sick with the scourge of men who love other men, men transfused with tainted blood, and men like me who had needle tracks in their arms and toes and one foot in the grave and lived in a halfway house for dying men behind the iron gates of St. Paul's.

Yes, I knew who they were, the ones who would do her harm, the ones like Mickey Lightfoot whose keen blue eyes and shock of white hair earned him the nickname "Hawk." For the last two months, I have watched him hover over Helen in ever shrinking circles. I have seen her sit with him and his battalion of homeless Vietnam vets like a dove in a foxhole, radiating light and hope and making herself an easy target. I have longed to tell her there is warfare in our midst, forces of darkness that masquerade as

feeble, old ladies with thick, crooked glasses, as poor young men in green *fútbol* shirts who pretend not to speak or understand English and peddle death and self-destruction, as preachers of peace and as veterans of war who are equally beholden to the laws of darkness. But why should she heed the warnings of an AIDS-stricken addict like me? I wanted to tell her that I have been sent in this condition to test the hearts of men, but I am at the service of my Master who, in His infinite wisdom, bids me this silence and suffering – and I must obey.

“Frankie, come along with me to the head of the line. We’ll get you that coffee and set you right. C’mon, Frankie, give me your hand.”

I reluctantly took my hand from my pocket. Her firm grasp eased its trembling and I was aware of Hawk’s eyes upon us as we wound through a path littered with backpacks and bedrolls.

“Thank you, Helen,” I managed to say as she left me in the capable hands of the willowy, craggy-faced kitchen manager, Dorothy, who known to me alone has seen and ministered to me and to thousands of other poor, starving souls who gave rise to the Bowery’s bread lines during the Great Depression in New York City. She gave me a comforting wink and a Styrofoam cup filled with the blackest coffee I’d ever seen.

“Peace to you, Brother Francis,” she whispered.

“And to you, Dorothy,” I whispered back as a surge of resentment sprang from the waves of hungry men and women who had given way for me. “Dorothy,” I persisted, standing my ground for the moment. “Can this child be saved?”

“God only knows,” Dorothy replied with a sigh that for a split second made her strong, square shoulders surrender their habitual stiffness. She paused to wipe her hands on her dark blue apron, then stood tall and cleared her throat like a drill sergeant preparing to lash into the newest recruit.

“Go on, Frankie, move along!” she roared to my surprise and to the satisfaction of the mob behind me. “We’ve got one hour to feed all these saints in waiting! What’ll you have, Christine? You want milk and sugar with that?”

I sat at a table reserved for the residents of Damien House and watched the line of working poor and homeless people grow longer by the minute until it spilled out the tall red door and onto the street. I had no hunger or thirst that day, just a burning desire to rendezvous with my Costa Rican friend whose fine white powder would bring powerful relief for the deep, cutting pains that wracked my body and made me cry out in the street for mercy. I knew the end was near for me, but I could not bear to leave my dear Helen, this child who possessed my heart in the same way that my beloved Clare once cleaved unto it, this beautiful soul who teetered on the cusp of light and darkness.

I observed Helen across the room, vigilantly scanning the crowd for anyone who might need somebody to talk to. Employed by the county mental health department, she was paid by the hour to do just that. If she found a soup kitchen guest in need of special attention, she made sure the caseworkers back at the office got all the information needed to intervene on that guest’s behalf. Helen didn’t have any special training, just a heart for the poor that attracted troubled souls to her like bums to a bottle of Southern Comfort.

She was still as earnest in the discharge of her duties as she was her very first day on the job when she found herself paired with Tristan Bales – a tall, blocky, buzz-cut gay man who once had a weakness for good red wine, roughly a bottle a night. He was put off by the notion that the mental health department would hire a female outreach

worker who wasn't herself in the throes of recovery. How, he argued, could she get down in the dirt with these poor, needy people and understand their struggle to stay clean and sober? From what little he knew, she was a cheerful, pretty girl who had just recently relocated with her husband to New Jersey from the genteel suburbs of Richmond, Virginia. Nobody in Jersey was getting drunk on mint juleps while watching the Kentucky Derby and Tristan – accustomed to speaking his mind – made sure to tell the director of the mental health department just that.

Helen's anxiety that first day was palpable. I was among the first to meet her as she sat beside Tristan on the wide performance stage that flanked the rear of the hall. By contrast, his broad, six-foot frame made her look even smaller than she really was and her feet dangled capriciously, like those of a child on a swing. She smiled as Tristan introduced me as the troubadour of the soup kitchen. It was the force of habit that made me sing as I walked, a lightness of being that I had known from the days I had walked ten or even twenty miles a day to share the good news of Christ's salvation with men, women and children in little villages and big cities alike throughout the regions of Umbria and beyond. Now, afflicted as I was, it brought me peace and comfort to know that I continued to be a means of salvation to those who would offer me a hot meal or a cool cup of water. It was these hymns of remembrance that made my burden light.

"Frankie, sing a song for Helen," Tristan prodded with a slight twist of his lips.

"I'd be happy to, if the lady would indulge me."

"Indulge you? Why, I'd be delighted to hear your song," Helen said in soft southern drawl that filled the air with a haunting beauty reminiscent of the call of a mourning dove at the break of dawn.

"Your voice is as lovely as any song of mine," I said. "Where are you from, Helen?"

"I grew up in Dock Watch Hollow. It's a little bitty place in southwestern Virginia, in the hill country of Appalachia. I assure you, it's nothin' at all like this fine town. But there's so much natural beauty there in the narrow hollers and laurely hills," she said, her voice growing thinner as she traveled the distance toward home. "It's an old coal town, through and through, so it's seen its share of sickness and sorrow through the years. My mamma and I moved to Richmond a few years after my father died. He's been gone twelve years now."

"I'm sorry, Helen."

"Thank you, Frankie. He was a miner," she said and shrugged, expecting that alone was sufficient explanation. "But we're so far off the track we might never get back! About that song of yours...."

I opened my mouth to sing a verse from a canticle I had often sung while traversing the long valleys between Tuscany and Perugia, but my breath caught in my throat as a jab at my back sent me reeling towards Tristan's broad chest.

"Hey Frankie, aren't you gonna introduce me to your friend?"

I had known the likes of that voice forever, echoes of the one who had goaded and taunted me in my youth into acts of depravity and surrender to the desires of my flesh. But it was not my mission to protect Helen from Hawk or the legions like him that roam with the fury of the fallen. I was but a witness as to what was to be chosen, permitted or ordained – and given the sweeping eyes of God with which to see and tell the story that began that early November day.

"Tristan, baby, you holding out on me too?"

Helen was fixated on the graffiti of tattoos etched into Hawk's neck. Most were not the work of a practiced hand, but rather the rough renderings of ballpoint ink furtively jabbed into raw, taut skin in the deep, long shadows and tedium of an eight-by-twelve prison cell.

"You like what you see, honey?"

Helen stammered and began to blush.

"I got this one when I got out of San Quentin," Hawk said, pointing to a colorful portrait of a hawk with a finger encased in a stack of silver rings. "That's me. Now I guarantee you'll never forget my name."

"Your name is Bird?" Helen said with a sly smile, and I realized she was much savvier than she looked. Tristan and I laughed loudly.

"Bird!" Tristan repeated, slapping his thigh. "Mickey the Birdman, that's funny, Helen! Jesus, I didn't know you were funny," he said, smiling for the first time that day.

Hawk's piercing blue eyes crinkled at the corners as he answered with a narrow gaze and a crooked grin. "All right, all right, the name is Mickey Lightfoot. Two parts Cherokee, one part Dago, one part Irish. That's where this comes in," he said, reaching for a tarnished silver cross that hung from a long, thick chain and dwarfed a bronze-colored star pinned to his snug black tee shirt. "But you can call me *Hawk*."

"I'd rather call you Mickey," Helen said, "It's a right friendly name."

"No one calls me Mickey but my mother. I ain't seen her since I was twelve but I figure she's still got birthrights. It's Hawk or it's nothin'."

Helen nodded and thrust forward her delicate hand. "Nice to meet you, Hawk. My name is Helen."

"Helen. Is your last name Wheels? Miss Hell-on-Wheels?" Hawk was pleased with his play on words and laughed in a surprisingly boyish way.

"Hardly," Helen replied. "I'm gentle as a lamb, I can assure you of that."

"Yeah, that's what they all say, right, Frankie? These women act all soft and shit and then...BAM! You wouldn't know nothin' about that would you, Tristan?"

"Don't start." Tristan coolly raised his hand to deflect Hawk's attack, his eyes scanning the crowd for signs of trouble as a dull clamor arose from a table near the one occupied by the residents of Damien House.

"That's my boys," Hawk said, glancing toward the assembly of men who were predominately dressed in camouflage and dew rags perched atop graying ponytails. "Nice to meet you, Miss Wheels. I'll be seeing you around. You gonna be around?"

"I'll be here every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, twelve to two."

"Me too, God willing and the creek don't rise."

"Well, all right then."

Helen wondered what this brazen, silver-studded man with a fierce-looking hawk and a faded pentagram tattooed on his neck knew about God or rising creeks. That was the stuff of coal country, where she was raised on the reality of rising water that swept away homes, property, and hillfolk with equal abandon. They, too, called it God's will, though Helen didn't believe it for a minute. Those were the things that happened when God turned his back, when He grew weary of watching his children run with the wind and give in to the urges that burned holes in their souls the same way that the drudgery of walking a beaten path to the coalfields wore holes in the soles of her father's boots and worse, made him a mean drunkard who spent his last breaths looking for one more covert

fondle beneath her scratchy bed sheets.

"Don't let him get to you, Helen," Tristan said, his voice turning soft with concern. "If you've got a button, you can trust Hawk to find it. It's what he does. It's who he is. Don't get sucked in."

Helen swallowed hard and nodded. "Of course, I know better than that. Heck, where I come from there's fellows ten times more messed up than Mickey Lightfoot. I can take a little needling, Tristan, I'm tougher than I look."

"I'm beginning to see that," Tristan replied, "and it's a huge relief."

"What, you think I'm one of those helpless Southern belles raised on madeleines and sweet iced tea?"

"What's a madeleine?"

"Nothing you or I will ever sit on a wide porch and savor in our lifetimes, I guess," Helen quipped, the lightness returning to her voice and the fragrance of jasmine rising from the hollow of her throat where she absently rested the palm of her left hand. A simple gold wedding band encircled her ring finger and was the only trace of attachment that she wore. Even then, it seemed a size too small, the way it pinched the flesh of her finger, but she wore it proudly, the young wife of a preacher whose mission was to lead the strategic planting of a Baptist church in the foothills of this decidedly white Protestant stronghold. Surely the poor needed something more lively and hopeful than the Catholics or the Protestant orthodoxy could offer, the elders back home had reasoned. Her husband Todd's missionary zeal and gift for preaching had proven him a worthy candidate for the job. Together, they had been blessed and sent. And yet Helen couldn't help but feel that she'd been left behind almost from the moment they had arrived.

"You know you're allowed to eat lunch here if you want to," Tristan said.

"You mean with the guests?" It might be nice to have some mealtime companionship, Helen thought, having grown tired of dining alone while her husband worked late into the night.

"Yes, sometimes it helps if you break bread with them. Makes them feel less like it's *us* and *them*. But you can't sit just anywhere, with anyone. You have to be *invited*."

"But the director told me not to get too close, to keep proper boundaries."

"You mean Stuart? Stuart has never even stepped foot in this soup kitchen."

Helen rolled her eyes, having suspected all along that Stuart Lipsky had a little too much *book larnin'* for his own good!

"Listen up, people! This is the one and only call for seconds! You don't listen, you don't get 'em!" Dorothy's voice was deep with age and yet it had a soaring quality that made every guest pick up his or her head and take notice. "I want law and order, you hear?"

Team Costa Rica, as the local immigrants were known, snapped into action, dodging obstacles and leaping over benches until they dominated the head of the line. Other guests shuffled, the sound of their donated green, blue or black nylon jogging suits rising like a chorus of cicada wings. The poorest ones continued to sit, stunned like paralytics, knowing that the call for seconds was the last saving act before the red door opened and forced them back into the vast urban wilderness. Meanwhile, Hawk and his fellow veterans muscled their way anywhere they pleased, some with a smile, others with a strong and practiced arm.

It was almost too much for Helen, I could tell, by the way her eyes darted around

the room, trying to absorb the shock and the sweat and the furies in the air. She fiddled a lot with her hair, twisting it around her slender fingers which had perfect, crescent-shaped nails coated in a glossy polish.

As for me, Tristan and Helen hadn't noticed that I had retreated to my designated table in the furthest corner of the soup kitchen where I would come each day to be the ruin of many and the salvation of some. I didn't know if Helen would be among those who would rise or those who would fall; I only knew that she had the heart of a dove, wounded though it was, and that I would be there to minister to her to the end.

In the meantime, I had my own demons to defeat.