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Saints v Sinners

Written by Katie Agnew

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Saints v Sinners



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Prologue

It was just like Fatty to choose the hottest day of the year to be buried. In life he'd revelled in making people feel uncomfortable and in death he was doing exactly the same thing. Yes, he would have loved this, thought Francesca, wiping a droplet of perspiration from her forehead, two hundred people sweating in their finest designer funeral wear under the scorching Mediterranean sun. It was late September but now, in the throes of an Indian summer, the Cimetière de Monaco felt hotter than the fires of hell.

The mourners were all wearing black. The men in sharp, slim-fitting suits, white shirts offsetting their deep tans, tearless eyes hidden behind black or gold Ray-Bans, fine Italian leather shoes so highly polished that their owners could glance down and admire their own impeccable appearance whenever they felt the urge. The women wore chic black shift dresses by Chanel, Valentino or Dior, their glossy manes, blonde or black, accessorised with elaborate headpieces – feathers, lace, net, pearls. Their sunglasses were so huge and their cheek and collarbones so sharp that it was hard for Francesca to make out one passing acquaintance from the next.

Press helicopters buzzed overhead with more persistence than the wasps that buzzed around the mourners, attracted by the clouds of perfume and cologne. Of course that was why they were all here: the billionaires, oligarchs, racing drivers, actresses, models and movie stars. They didn't give a damn about Fatty's demise but his funeral was a great chance to grab some tabloid attention now that the summer season was over. And wasn't it convenient timing with the Monaco Yacht Show kicking off this weekend? thought Francesca cynically. Everything about the scene was reminiscent of a movie. The beautiful setting, the dazzling cast, the brilliant blue sky. It was so fake that Francesca had to fight the urge to walk off set.

The priest, Padre Gabriele Fontana, had been flown in from Palermo, as requested by Fatty in his will. He was a tall, charismatic, silver-haired fox of a man, who looked more like an extra from *The Godfather* than a man of the Lord. Even he wore black sunglasses. He towered above the grave, with the cemetery falling behind him in terraces towards the sea, perfectly framed by the midday sun. Francesca listened patiently as the priest lamented the tragic and untimely passing of his second cousin and close personal friend, Giancarlo Roberto LaFata, in lyrical, heavily accented English.

Francesca's younger brother, Giancarlo Junior took a half step closer to her and whispered, 'Who the fuck is he talking about?' into her ear.

'Ssh!' she scolded, but Carlo did have a point. The brave, bold, upstanding man of the people that the priest spoke about bore little resemblance to the lovable rogue being buried there that day.

Yes, Fatty had had his good points. He'd been larger than life and not just because of his six-foot, twenty-five-stone frame. Nobody's voice had boomed louder, nobody's laugh had reverberated around a room in quite the same way. For the first time that day, Francesca felt a tear prickle in the corner of her eye. She remembered him dancing the tarantella at her birthday party last year, eyes flashing, cheeks flushed with champagne, ridiculously light on his feet for such a huge man. She remembered him dressed as Father Christmas when she was a little girl, his breath hot and smelling of brandy, promising presents that always materialised even when he was broke. She remembered him making 'Frankie' pizza in the tiny kitchen of the family restaurant her parents had run when she was a child. Pepperoni and red peppers arranged into a smiley face with mozzarella hair. She'd never forget the bear hugs that had left her gasping for air, or the diamond earrings he'd given her for her sixteenth birthday, the same pair she wore today. Her fingers touched her ears automatically, just to check they were still there, everything so much more precious now he was gone.

But Francesca was under no illusions. The man had been no saint. She also remembered the furious temper, the threats, the accusations. The women whose hearts he'd broken, the innocent employees he'd sacked on a whim, the plates he'd smashed, the birthdays he'd missed, the cars he'd crashed, the lives he'd

ruined … She brushed the single stray tear from her cheek and tried to regain her composure.

'Frankie,' Carlo nudged her back into the present.

The priest was quiet now and the congregation stared expectantly at Francesca. They looked sombre and respectful but no more tears were being shed for Giancarlo LaFata. Francesca stepped forward and stood at the edge of the grave, staring down at the large mahogany coffin below.

She threw a single white rose into the grave. A rose for the man who'd always claimed to come up smelling of roses. Well now he would go down smelling of roses too.

'Bye, Dad,' she said simply. There was nothing left to say.

The rest of the family followed suit, throwing in their own flowers and saying their own goodbyes, and then the crowd began to wander off towards their waiting Bentleys, Range Rovers and Ferraris, heading to the lavish wake Francesca had organised at the Hotel de Paris.

The close family lingered by the grave a little longer, each lost in their own thoughts, until finally Carlo said, 'Come on, this show's over. Let's get drunk.'

He glanced at the grave one last time, undid the top button of his shirt, loosened his tie, tossed his thick black hair off his face and lit a cigarette. He was handsome as hell and he knew it. Every move he made was careful, considered and probably practised in front of a mirror. Carlo lived for an audience. He sauntered off, without a backward glance, all long, loose limbs and nonchalance, looking every inch the cool, *GQ* model. But he couldn't fool Francesca. She knew he was hurting inside. Carlo might have inherited his mother's vanity and his father's pride but as she watched her brother go, all Francesca saw was a little boy who'd just lost his daddy.

The others followed Carlo, but Francesca stayed put, her feet cemented to the earth, her eyes fixed on the coffin. Her heart felt heavy but not broken. She felt … what did she feel exactly? Regret? Remorse? Well, yes, both of those things but there was something else too. More than anything, what Francesca felt was relief. Yes, that was it. Relief. Finally, it was over.

But where had it all begun? In the dusty back streets of Sicily in 1946 when Giancarlo LaFata was born? In Edinburgh in 1970 when

the immigrant son opened his first pizza parlour and started the 'Fatty's' brand? In 1988, when the millionaire entrepreneur moved his family to Monaco as a tax exile? Perhaps. But that's not where it started for Francesca. She could pinpoint the exact moment where it had all started to go so horribly wrong …

Chapter One

Four months earlier …

Francesca woke with a jolt from a disturbing dream that vanished the minute she opened her eyes. She'd had a lot of those recently. She could never remember what had happened but she was left in a cold sweat, with a racing heart and a slight panic in her chest. The room came into focus slowly, muted by the half-light of dawn. Her bed sheets were damp and cold and she shivered in her flimsy cotton nightdress. The air conditioning must be set too high again, she thought. It wasn't midsummer yet. She'd have to have a word with the housekeeper about that later. She pressed the bell on the wall above the bed, signalling to the kitchen that she was awake and ready for her morning coffee.

She rolled onto the dry side of the bed and pulled the sheet up to her chin. William wasn't there, of course. He had taken to sleeping in another room. It had started with him 'working late' and 'not wanting to disturb you, darling' but it had gradually become the norm. Francesca was torn by her husband's decision to leave the marital bed. On the one hand she enjoyed her own space. William was a big man and for eight years she'd had to put up with his snoring, his mumbling and, worst of all, his midnight fumbling. Her husband had his good points but he wasn't the most pleasant bedtime companion. And she certainly didn't miss the sex. Francesca was a good wife, but the truth was, she was relieved to have given up that particular spousal arrangement. She shuddered at the memory.

The last time they'd made love … No! That was silly. Not made love. In hindsight they'd never actually *made love*. That was what people did in films. No, their sex life had never exactly been, well, sexy. The last time they'd had *sex* was six months earlier. She

remembered, with a slightly queasy feeling, the way he'd rolled his middle-aged body onto her and kissed her very briefly, before burying his face in her hair and getting on with the job in hand. There was no foreplay. Just a kind of unspoken mutual understanding that this was a ritual they went through once a fortnight because that's what married people did. She'd stared over his shoulder, thinking about work, and the children, feeling, well, nothing much really, other than a vague longing for something better. But their efforts never lasted very long and the performance was short-lived. He'd grunted, lain there heavily for a few minutes, panting into her ear, and then rolled over to his side of the bed.

'Thank you, darling,' he'd said politely, as if she'd cooked him a nice meal. 'Goodnight.'

And then he'd fallen asleep.

Francesca hadn't been able to sleep though. She'd lain awake for hours that night, trying to ignore the nagging voice in her head that kept telling her, over and over, 'There must be something better than this.'

Did she love William any more? God, had she ever loved him properly? Had she been so hell-bent on finding stability that she'd made a terrible mistake? And did he still love her? Sometimes when he looked at her his expression scared her. He looked cold, hard almost. No, she was being paranoid, she told herself. William was a good man. He was just a bit, well, set in his ways. And she was just a bit bored. Marriage was like that, wasn't it? It got monotonous after almost a decade. And anyway, what was the alternative? Divorce? That was unthinkable. Francesca was not the sort of woman to leave her husband. Besides, it would destroy the children. And what about the business? The LaFata empire, LaFata International, was publicly headed by her father Giancarlo 'Fatty' LaFata. But it was Francesca who ran the day-to-day business. And it was William who ran the financial side of things. William and Francesca were not only husband and wife, they were business partners. Their lives were so irreversibly linked that there was no way Francesca could ever unravel herself from him. No, she'd made her bed, she'd thought, glancing at William's snoring bulk beside her, and now she was very definitely having to lie in it.

Francesca didn't know if it was coincidence, or if William had

somehow read her mind that night, but for some reason he had decided to move to his own room the very next day. And, now, although she didn't miss the sex one bit, she did have a niggling feeling of failure that he'd chosen to move out of their bedroom. What sort of wife drives her husband to the spare room? Was their relationship such a disaster? Was she *that* unsexy? Did he even care about her any more?

But then William wasn't exactly a passionate man. He didn't get fired up about football, or Formula One, or gardening or books, not politics or history. And certainly not sex. He was completely addicted to checking the stock markets online but that didn't really count as a passion, did it? She'd dated a string of handsome bastards before William came along, and all they'd taught her was that love hurts. William had seemed delightfully easy in comparison. He wasn't a handsome man. He wasn't particularly tall. His shoulders drooped forward slightly. But it wasn't his looks that had attracted Francesca to him in the first place. His steady, level manner appealed to her and although she'd never fancied him, she had respected his calm approach and had gradually begun to feel a fondness for him that, on a good day, felt a little like love. He was ultra-reliable, never late, he was true to his word, he didn't flirt with her friends, or letch at women on the street. They rarely argued, even now. And most importantly, he never hurt her. He was safe. A little dull, maybe, but safe. And Francesca had had enough turbulence in her life already.

She'd watched her father break women's hearts all her life, she'd witnessed the pain he'd caused her poor mother first hand, and she'd vowed at a young age that she was never going to fall for a philanderer like Fatty. But now she knew that by avoiding the bad parts of a passionate relationship, she'd also sacrificed the good bits. Francesca never felt butterflies in her stomach, she never had wild, clothes-ripping sex, she didn't get serenaded or have poetry written for her. Christ, she didn't even get flowers or chocolates. William just wasn't like that. He didn't really 'do' emotion. He did 'respectable' very well. He was a dab hand at 'reliable'. And he positively shone at 'responsible'. But 'emotional'? No. That wasn't his forte. The few emotions he did have were hidden so deeply that Francesca had only ever caught glimpses of them. She remembered spotting the hint of a tear in the corner of his eye when Luca was born. But

by the time Benito had come along two years later, William had felt that a hedge-fund meeting in Frankfurt should take precedence. Here was a man who put his father-in-law's investment portfolio before the birth of his son. He chose head over heart every time. And sometimes Francesca found herself fantasising about men who drove too fast and drank too much, who cried out when they were hurt, and shouted when they were angry, and who made mad passionate love in the middle of the afternoon when they should have been in the office.

Maybe she was just having some sort of early mid-life crisis, she told herself. Craving a romantic fantasy that didn't even exist, just because she was a bit fed up with the routine of her marriage. It wasn't as if she would ever actually have an affair or anything. And it wasn't about sex. Not really. She'd never really been that into it. Maybe that's why she'd said yes to William, the most sexless man who ever lived. Francesca had never experienced that urgent, got-to-have-you-right-now sexual attraction that she read about in books. And, truth be told, she suspected it might be a bit of a myth. And as for romantic love? She wasn't really convinced by that either. Her little sister Angelica fell madly in love at least once a month and it never caused her anything but heartbreak, disappointment and another stint in rehab. No, Francesca didn't need a new man. She had her kids and her career. And, for all his faults, she had William. Francesca sighed a little forlornly at the thought. There had been one man who'd stirred her. But it wasn't as if she was ever going to see him again. And that was probably for the best. He was just another one of those good-looking bastards she'd sworn to steer clear of all those years ago. Dangerous. And to be avoided at all costs.