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NECESSARY SINS

Lazare Family Saga
BOOK ONE



ELIZABETH BELL



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The characteristics of a saint are: deep humility, blind obedience, dove-like simplicity and a complete detachment from things of Earth. These virtues, however, are not incompatible in living saints with some defects and lingering imperfections.

— Bishop William Stang, *Pastoral Theology* (1897)

Joseph knew he was committing a terrible, terrible sin, but he could only draw closer. He'd been alive ten whole years, and he'd never seen anything so beautiful. It occupied the very center of the painting. Soft and round, smooth and *crowned*—there, between the lips of the Christ Child, unmistakable: the perfect pink nipple of the Mother of God.

Joseph should be imitating his patron saint, who stood at the edge of the canvas. White-haired and lumpy-faced, Mary's husband seemed oblivious to his wife and Son, peering at a book through the spectacles on his nose. Much as Joseph himself liked to read, he could not imagine concentrating on lifeless pages in such company.

Draped in rich robes and her own golden hair, the Blessed Virgin gazed down serenely at her divine Son. The Christ Child's arms encircled Mary's right breast possessively, His green eyes pointing out of the painting as if He sensed Joseph's unholy stare.

"Joseph!"

He jumped and closed his eyes. Only then did he realize his mouth was open too.

His sister Cathy continued behind him, from the threshold: "Haven't you found it yet?"

Joseph turned quickly, to distract her from the painting. He'd completely forgotten why he'd come into Papa's office. Mama, Cathy, and Hélène were knitting something for the children at the Orphan House, only their scissors had broken. Joseph had been seated nearby at the piano-forte, and he'd offered to fetch another pair from Papa's office.

Huffing with impatience, Cathy strode to his desk. Joseph tried the drawers of Papa's medical cabinet and found scissors. On their way out of the office, he and Cathy passed the painting of headless Saint Denis, the one their father had had for years. Joseph had never seen the portrait of the Holy Family before. Papa must have brought it back from Paris.

In the parlor, Mama signed her thanks for the scissors by touching her fingertips to her mouth and then gesturing toward Joseph. She would not be smiling if she knew why he had lingered in Papa's office. Mama snipped whatever needed snipping, then returned her attention to her work.

Joseph sat down again at the piano, but as he stared at the pages in front of him, the notes became fuzzy. He dropped his eyes to the keys, but all he could see was that breast, that nipple. Were all women so beautiful?

Were all boys as wicked as he was?

Joseph closed his eyes tightly, and still the vision lingered. He tried desperately to pray, but the words would not come.

Fortunately, before too long Papa returned from visiting patients. Hélène ran to show him the mess of wool she claimed would soon be a mitten. Papa praised it and kissed the top of her head.

Joseph ventured: "Papa?"

"Yes, son?" he answered as H el ene scampered back to Mama.

"May I go to church before supper?"

"Is the choir practicing today?" Papa sounded confused, though Joseph didn't see his expression because he couldn't meet his eyes.

"No, sir."

"Joseph? What's troubling you, son?"

His sisters stopped chattering to each other, and Joseph felt their stares. Mama must be watching too.

Papa moved a chair next to the piano stool and sat facing Joseph. When Papa spoke, he sounded very grave. "You want to go to Confession, don't you?"

Joseph nodded miserably. He'd committed a mortal sin. His soul was in peril. What if the negroes tried to rebel again and weren't caught as Denmark Vesey had been? What if they killed Joseph in his sleep tonight? He would go straight to Hell. He deserved it.

"Whatever it is you think you've done, Joseph, you know you can talk to *me* about it?"

Again he nodded. But his earthly father couldn't grant him Absolution, couldn't make his soul clean again.

"You do realize that most people confess only once a year?"

"Father Laroche says he confesses every week," Joseph murmured, "and that we should too." What a Priest had to confess, Joseph still didn't understand.

He heard Papa draw in a breath to respond; but then, from the other side of the room, came the familiar, insistent-yet-polite finger-snap Mama used to attract their attention. Cathy must have been translating for her. Mama made Papa's sign name, and the expression on her face turned it into a plea. 'Let him go,' she said with her hands.

Papa turned to her. 'In the three years since he began, our son—our *perfect* son—has made more Confessions than most people do their entire *lives*.'

Mama frowned. Papa was criticizing her too: she took Joseph every Saturday. Cathy would go with them only once a month. None of her friends confessed more often than that, she said. At the

church, Mama always went first, clutching her little notebook till she passed it to Father Laroche. He would read her transgressions and then write down her Penance. Afterward, as Joseph watched Mama burning the pages, he would wonder what she had to confess every week. Apart from her deafness, Mama was perfect, as sinless as a Priest.

Unlike him.

‘None of us is perfect yet,’ Mama argued with her hands and expression. ‘It is only through union with Our Lord—through the Sacraments—that we can become perfect. We are *blessed* to receive Absolution every week. Have you forgotten Bastien already?’

‘Of course not,’ Papa signed impatiently.

‘He is lucky if he sees a Priest once a year.’ Joseph knew his mother’s brother lived somewhere in North Carolina, surrounded by Protestants. ‘Here, we even have a Priest who knows our language!’

‘Father Laroche does *not* know your language,’ Papa insisted, emphasizing the sign. ‘He knows *French*. Your English is just as good, Anne. It’s certainly better than his. I wish you’d confess to one of the Irishmen instead.’

Mama tensed. ‘Father Laroche—’

‘Father Laroche makes you do Penance for’—Papa’s hands hesitated—‘for being a woman!’

Mama drew in a sharp breath, and crimson flooded her cheeks. Her eyes darted nervously to Joseph and his sisters. They were still watching, though Joseph didn’t understand what Papa had meant or why it should make Mama blush. ‘We were talking about Joseph. Please don’t discourage him.’

Papa sighed, glanced away, then finally signed his consent. But he added aloud: “If it’s Father Laroche, son—promise me you won’t believe *everything* that French bull-dog says.”

Joseph worried about Papa’s soul, too. At Mass, he always looked bored or angry. Now, Papa was acting as though a Priest could be wrong. That was like saying God could be wrong.

ILLUMINATED BY SEPTEMBER SUNLIGHT, two fine churches stood directly across Archdale Street from their house. Joseph turned away from them. They were Protestant. He hurried past the shops and houses on Beaufain till he reached Hasell Street and the Catholic church, which had no steeple.

Joseph climbed the steps, pulled open the heavy door, and genuflected to the Body of Christ in the Tabernacle. He peered into the sacristy, but he saw only Mr. Doré polishing the sacred vessels. “Is Father Laroche or Father Gallagher here?”

“I think Father Laroche is saying his breviary in the cemetery. Do you need him?”

Joseph nodded. “For Confession.”

The sacristan frowned. “On a Wednesday?” But he agreed to fetch the Priest.

Joseph knelt in the stifling darkness of the confessional. This was the first time he’d truly dreaded putting his sins into words. Till now, his most serious faults had involved his great-grandmother Marguerite. So many times, he’d felt anger toward her and broken the Fourth Commandment, which included adults beyond your parents. Joseph knew it was wrong to blame Great-Grandmother Marguerite for his own sins; but with her buried, he’d thought the narrow path of righteousness would be easier.

Now he had no excuse, and he understood how wicked he was. Surely no one had ever stared at the Blessed Virgin as he had. Was Absolution possible for such a sin? Even if it was, how could Joseph ever face Father Laroche again?

At last, the Priest entered the other side of the confessional.

“Bless me, Father, for I have sinned.” Joseph could scarcely breathe. He knew how this would begin, but he was terrified about how it would end. “I confess to almighty God, to blessed Mary ever Virgin”—the words felt sharp in his throat—“to all the saints, and to you, Father, that I have sinned exceedingly...through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault.” *His* fault, no one else’s, Joseph reminded himself each time he struck his chest. “Since my last Confession, which was four days ago, I accuse myself of impure thoughts. For this and all my other sins which I cannot now

remember, I am heartily sorry and humbly ask pardon of God, and Penance and Absolution of you, Father.”

The Priest sighed. “How old are you?”

“Ten.”

“Did you entertain impure thoughts about women generally, or about someone specific? *Don't* give me a name.”

“I-I *have* to, Father.”

“Now you're being disobedient!” Father Laroche barked.

Joseph started. He hoped no one else had entered the sanctuary, or at least that they didn't understand French.

“I don't need the foul details, boy; I just need to determine the gravity of your sin.”

“But—my impure thoughts were...about Our Lady.”

“*What?*”

“There's a new painting in my father's office of the Holy Family. Our Lady, she's nursing her Son, and you can see...”

“You looked upon the Blessed Virgin, the Queen of Heaven—the pure, undefiled Mother of Christ and the Church, the *only* woman who never sinned—and instead of falling on your knees and praising her, you *sinned* against her?!”

Joseph had wanted to fall on his knees and praise her too. He'd wanted to *worship* her. “Yes,” he managed aloud. “And I—I envied Our Lord.”

“Do you envy His sufferings, too? Do you understand that every time you sin, you make Christ suffer more? You're driving another nail into His precious body, flaying His back open again and again with the scourge. Can you imagine the agonies He suffers when you look at His *Mother* with lust?”

Joseph squeezed his eyes shut, but the tears seeped out anyway.

“Because of what you've done, what you've thought, your soul is *filthy*, boy. Black as pitch. Black as a *negro*. You're hideous! If you could see your soul in a mirror, you would vomit. Do you *want* to be white? Do you want to be beautiful in God's eyes?”

“Yes, Father.”

“You must discipline yourself to avoid occasions of sin. If this painting is in your father's office, you must never set foot there

again. If you might see it from the hall, then walk past quickly and do not even raise your eyes. Do you know of Saint Aloysius Gonzaga?”

“No, Father.”

“You should. He is the patron of young people for a reason. He kept his eyes *always* downcast. He did not dare look at any woman—even his own mother—because he knew she might be a temptation for him. You would do well to follow his example.”

But Joseph *had* to look at his mother, or he couldn’t obey her, because he couldn’t see what she was signing.

“You are entering a very dangerous period of your life. These next few years will determine what kind of man you’ll be. As Saint Jerome reminds us: ‘The Devil only wishes us to begin.’ If you open the door but a crack, he will gain possession of your soul.”

Finally Father Laroche instructed Joseph to say the Act of Contrition: “I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee, and I detest all my sins... I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to sin no more and avoid proximate occasions of sin.”

The Priest gave Joseph Absolution and his Penance. He concluded: “And say a prayer for me.”

“Y-Yes, Father.”

“Don’t sound so reluctant, boy.”

“I’m sorry, Father,” Joseph answered quickly. “I will; I have been. Mama tells me to pray for you and Father Gallagher and Bishop England too. It’s only...you’re Priests. I don’t understand why you *need*—”

“Priests need prayer more than anyone! Whose souls do you think Satan covets most? Think how valuable each Priest is, how many souls he saves in his lifetime! For every one of us lost, Satan can claim thousands of you. It is your responsibility to protect us. When Priests sin, it’s because their parishioners haven’t prayed for them. That’s why there are so many bad Priests in America—because there are so many bad parishioners. Don’t be one of them. Do you hear me?”

. . .

JOSEPH TRIED VERY hard to obey Father Laroche and keep his eyes always lowered, at least when no one was signing. For a few days, he was successful. Then they went to visit Mama's sister. Her son Frederic was five years older than Joseph.

The moment they were alone, Frederic started chuckling. "Am I so very ugly, cousin?"

"No," Joseph stammered without looking up.

Frederic stooped over sideways till his head was lower than Joseph's. "Then why are you keeping your eyes cast down like a negro?"

It was *pride* that made Joseph raise his eyes then—another sin. He shouldn't be ashamed if someone mistook him for a negro. Not all of them were like Denmark Vesey. Many negroes were as humble and docile as saints. They obeyed their superiors without question and took correction when they deserved it. They knew they were nothing.

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