

Wednesday, June Seventh

Feast Day of Saint Robert of Newminster,
Abbot (1159 AD)

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“FATHER BAPTIST,” I HUFFED as I hobbled up the brick walkway to the shaded, mossy spot between the church and the rectory where he liked to meditate after morning Mass. I huff and hobble everywhere because I walk with a pronounced limp—well, more like a reeling lurch followed by a teetering pause during which equilibrium is tentatively restored until the ungainly perambulatory cycle repeats. It’s quite a sight, scary really, and amazing that I manage to get anywhere. For me, just going from one end of the garden to the other is a major production, and I had just returned from a trek all the way to the corner for a morning newspaper. “Father Baptist, you won’t believe this—”

He was seated in his neat but somewhat threadbare cassock on the wooden bench facing the statue of Saint Thérèse the Little Flower, a moldy old book spread open on his lap. He looked up at me with those unnerving eyes that seemed to whisper, tired yet patiently, “Considering all that I do believe, Martin, do you really think you could come up with something that is beyond me?” Exhaling slowly, he rolled the flimsy cover of the book closed and folded his hands on top. “Hm?”

“What I mean is—” I was lowering myself onto the edge of the cement birdbath, taking care not to knock the rigid, porous bird perched on the pockmarked rim with the handle of my cane. The stony little fellow had been broken off before and poorly repaired. “—that is—”

“If you’re talking about Bishop Brassorie,” said Father, “I received word just before Mass. A special messenger from the Chancery Office.”

“Messenger?”

“You were busy lighting the altar candles. He came through the side door into the sacristy.” Father began pulling a note from the pocket of his cassock, thought better of it, and shoved it back in. “Wry-looking fellow, probably a seminarian. Didn’t stay for Mass.”

“Why would they notify you about Brassorie?” I was shifting myself around, trying to find a comfortable position. No chance. Nasty critter, arthritis, especially of the spine. A grouchy companion even on warm summer mornings. “And by special messenger, yet.”

Father Baptist shifted his shoulders, that disconcerting shrug that seemed to whisper, exhausted but bravely, “Considering all the crap”—no, he wouldn’t have said “crap,” not even in a whisper, “crap” is my word—“Considering all the nasty and dubious directives that have come to me from the Chancery Office in the last three years, what’s one more?” But all he actually said was, “Hm.” Then he reconsidered and added, “Whatever it is, they want me to come at once. ‘They’ meaning the archbishop.”

“At once?” My cane, which I’d leaned against the rim of the birdbath, began to slide away from me. As I grabbed for it with my right hand, the newspaper wedged under my left arm slipped and fell to the ground. It landed face down on the mossy bricks between us. Great. With a back like mine, a stoop and a reach is an awesome undertaking. “You mean as in ‘right now’?”

“I believe that’s what ‘at once’ means.”

“But you’re *persona non grata*. In fact, you’re the most *non grata persona* in the archdiocese as far as they’re—he’s—concerned. Why would they—he—send for you?”

Hating royal plurals—in application, not concept—I heaved myself off the birdbath and began descending slowly, back straight, knees doing all the hydraulic work, just as my physical therapist had advised. The good Father didn’t do the obviously charitable thing and retrieve the paper for me because we had made an agreement long ago that I was not an invalid and was perfectly capable of picking up after myself. Besides, I’m lazy, and if I don’t keep my swollen joints moving I’ll freeze up like a department store mannequin. Therefore, the

truly charitable thing for Father to do was to look on unhelpfully and dispassionately while I grunted and groaned my way onto my haunches and scooped up the morning news. It was a long way down, but it was even a longer way back up.

By the time I'd hoisted myself back onto the rim of the birdbath, I'd forgotten what we'd been talking about. A glance at the newspaper in my hand brought it all back. Wednesday, June seventh. There was a picture in the lower left corner of the front page, rather small and not very flattering, taken during a speech Bishop Brassorie had made at some high school commencement a year or so before. His mouth was open and his eyes bulged—normal, for him. Underneath was a caption in bold letters: AUX BISHOP BRASSORIE FOUND DEAD; MURDERED, SAY POLICE.

GARDENING TIPS: For those of you who aren't Catholic or for modern Catholics who don't appreciate authority figures, auxiliary bishops are the assistant bishops under an archbishop who govern assigned regions of a large archdiocese. Bishop Brassorie was, or had been, one of four in our city. And, as you'll see, one closely connected to St. Philomena's Church.

--M.F.

"Old Brassiere," I mumbled, synopsisizing the brief article in my own, somewhat biased style, "croaked while conducting a 'sunset liturgy' alone in his private chapel. No real specifics, there never are." I handed the paper to Father. "Can't say I'm moved."

"We haven't the privilege not to be," he countered, raising his eyebrows as he scanned the page. He did not appreciate my word-play with respect to the late auxiliary bishop's name. "The man had an eternal soul, after all. Still, there was a time

when the death of a bishop would demand a headline. Now it's a tiny article in the lower left corner, three inches in one column. Shows you how far the stature of the Church has diminished. We should be grateful it made the front page at all."

I nodded sadly, knowingly, and silently while he read. When he looked up from the article I ventured, "You still haven't told me why."

"Hm?"

"Why do they want you?" I decided not to buck the royal plural. Too much effort.

He folded the paper and handed it back to me. "Not to give me Brassiere—Brasserie's job, I assure you."

I contorted my lips in what I thought was an expression of cautious thought, a failed attempt at hiding a smirk. "Don't be so certain. Maybe they think you'd follow suit."

"You mean I might have the good grace to get myself murdered, too?"

"Uh-huh. It would sure make their lives easier."

"Anything's possible, I suppose, especially these days. But a promotion, no, not conceivable. Not me, not this archbishop, not this century. I wouldn't want it anyway, even in a saner era."

"The message said 'at once'?"

He nodded. "The nerve. The wording smells of that new monsignor, whatsizname, Goolgol. The archbishop's new lackey. One opinion too many, one principle too few."

"Are you going?"

"Certainly," he said, a secretive smile forming on his lips.

"You mean you're not going."

"No, I mean I am going." The smile remained. "No choice."

"Well." I positioned my cane to start the awesome commotion of rising to my feet. "We haven't had breakfast. We haven't even had our morning coffee. But duty calls, so I'll bring the car around front."

"No. I will go alone."

For a moment I teetered between elation at not having to get up, and devastation at feeling left out. "But you never go anywhere without me."

"This time, yes."

"But I'm your chauffeur, your valet, your right-hand man, your cook when Millie's away, your—"

“According to parish records, you’re my gardener; and these roses around St. Thérèse appear to be wilting.”

Roses? As in work? He knew darn well I hadn’t tended the garden for over a year, not since several grateful but impoverished parishioners started donating their time in lieu of cash in the plate. The very thought of getting down on my hands and knees, never to get up again; why it sent shivers down my already traumatized spine. And my hips—ah, what arthritis does to hips! “But—”

“This errand is not for you. It shouldn’t even be for me, but I will do what I can to set that straight.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And I don’t want you to. Please.” He was rising. “Tend St. Thérèse’s roses, will you? And don’t forget to water the gardenias around St. Joseph.”