

IN THE BEGINNING

FOR THE DEAD lying in St. Lychton's churchyard, the moon's absence was of no consequence. But Father Lathrop had rushed into the darkness without thought of light as an alarming sound pulled him from his intention, his fragile courage collapsing under the weight of this intrusion, fear breaking his resolve. Who could be digging in lightless ground at such an hour? Grave robbers? In Lychton?

Curiosity drove away the edge of fear as Father Lathrop worked his way up the broken path to the gate, eyes pressing into darkness, seeing nothing. The spineless light of Parish House was of no use at all. The unsettling sound was not cowed by his stumbling on the wayward stones.

The gate was open.

Hesitating, his mind ran involuntarily to this morning's latest failure. Try as he might, there was no convincing bishop Broga of his plan for lighting the churchyard grounds. "We don't light graveyards!" the bishop had scoffed, ending all hope of renovating this Godforsaken place and certainly ending any chance of going to Rome if Broga is made cardinal. As he moved through the gate and near the first headstones, a slipper left his foot; the shock of wet grass snapped him into shouting; yet, only a tremoring whisper left his lips as fear returned. "Who's there?"

The digging stopped.

The silence triggered a familiar and chiding cackle that filled his head: "Where's your light Father?" Yes, how fitting he nearly whispered aloud: seeking something I cannot see, in darkness I cannot light. Holy Jesus! My life's story that. Ready for ending. Dear God, how I want to join these resting souls.

The renewed sound of digging broke his reverie. He was close now. Stiffening his back, arms folded across his chest against the chill, he gathered himself up, and barked into the darkness: "Who's there? Answer me! This is Father Lathrop!"

The answer came from the ground. "Father."

The shock sent him backwards. Catching his balance at the last moment, the sudden recognition poured relief over his fear. Stepping closer now to the source of the quivering voice, he came to the edge of the grave.

"Jose! What on earth are you doing? Why are you digging?" He heard his sexton's labored breathing, smelled his body's effort. Jose was silent. "Jose! Answer me at once!" Remarkable, he thought, how his authority filled to overflowing with this simple man.

"I no wanna bother you, Father. I afraid."

"Jose, in the name of Heaven, why are you afraid? There's no reason to dig a grave. My God, it's the middle of the night!"

The clank of the pick took up the rhythm again of one experienced in graves.

"Put your tools down. I forbid you to continue. No one can order a grave but me. Stop this nonsense at once!"

The picking stopped but the fear rose up from the grave in Jose's trembling voice. "I told to make grave now. It was—"

Father Lathrop cut him off. "Who told you to dig this grave?"

Jose was silent.

"Jose, answer me!" Father Lathrop, eyes adapting to the dark, could just make out the figure of his sexton standing in the half-dug grave.

Jose broke the silence: "It...it was...a dream."

"You're digging a grave because of a dream? Jose, this is crazy! Get out of there! Get to your cabin!" Father Lathrop's insistence only set the digger to greater effort. Jose was working in the Perlentino plots. "How am I going to explain what you've done here when the mayor comes for services on Sunday? Stop this now, or—

"Father!"

The sudden shriek spun Father Lathrop around so abruptly he lost his balance and fell completely, twisting his ankle and losing another slipper. Sister Adelina was calling out to him, haloed in the pale light of the Parish House door. Alarmed, he rose up, abandoned his slippers, and limped as fast as he could, off the broken path, down the sloping grass. Had she been to his desk? Had she seen what lay open there?

"Father, are you all right? I worried so when I..." but when she saw his face she could not finish her words.

Father Lathrop could see his secret was no longer his alone.