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DEEPAK  
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THE **13<sup>th</sup>**

DISCIPLE

A SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE

## CHAPTER 1

It was a morning without sunrise, frigid and overcast, during the weeks leading up to Christmas. Mare was just heading out to work when her cell phone jingled. Her mother was calling.

“Sister Margaret Thomas just died.”

“Who?” The question came out as a garbled mumble. Mare was washing down the last bite of a raspberry Pop-Tart with the dregs of her instant coffee. The last few crystals left dark smears at the bottom of the cup.

Her mother replied impatiently, “Your Aunt Meg, the nun. I’m very upset.”

There was silence on the line for a moment. Mare’s aunt had been out of the picture for a long time.

“Mare, are you there?” Not waiting for an answer, her mother went on. “The convent won’t tell me how she died. They just said she’s gone. Gone? Meg was barely fifty. I need you to go out there for me.”

“Why can’t you go?”

Mare resented her mother for various reasons. One was the fact that she never ran out of demands, most of them trivial and meaningless. Making a demand was like tugging an invisible apron string.

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The voice on the phone turned wheedling. “You know I’m afraid of nuns.”

“Meg was your sister.”

“Don’t be silly. It’s the other nuns I’m afraid of. They’re like scary penguins. Sign something so they can release the body. We’re all she has—had.” Her mother started crying softly. “Bring my dear sister home. Can you do that?”

Because no one had spoken of Aunt Meg in years, “dear sister” sounded a little insincere. But the job Mare was heading for was temp work, easy to call in sick for.

“I’ll do what I can,” she said.

Soon she was driving west on the turnpike, half listening to a James Taylor album that came out twenty years ago, about the time her rattling Honda Civic was born. The Great Recession had stalled a career that Mare hadn’t actually chosen yet. Like others in her generation, she was drifting, worrying from month to month that she might have to move back in with her parents. That would mean choosing between them. Her mother stayed in the old house after the divorce. Her father relocated to Pittsburgh with his new wife and remembered to call on Christmas and birthdays, usually.

She glanced at herself in the rearview mirror, noticing a scarlet smudge where she’d been careless with her lipstick. *Why did she think nuns would want her to wear makeup?*

Before she ran off to the convent, Aunt Meg used to wear the most stunning shade of lipstick, a dark burgundy red; it contrasted with her pale Irish skin like a drop of wine on a linen tablecloth. There was no question Meg was a looker. She had high cheekbones and that elegant McGeary nose, their proudest feature. She hadn’t turned into an old maid for any particular reason. (Meg liked the term “old maid,” because it was so outdated and politically incorrect.) Men had vaguely drifted in and out of her life. “I’ve had my chances, don’t you worry,” she said tartly.



She even frequented singles bars in the day. “Nasty places,” Meg said. “Soul killing.”

Nobody remembered her as being especially religious, so it had come as a surprise, and not the pleasant kind, when Aunt Meg suddenly announced, at the ripe age of forty, that she was becoming a nun. She had had enough of her family role as the oldest unmarried sister, being on call to babysit, expected to shop and tend house whenever somebody fell sick, listening to nieces gossiping about their boyfriends before suddenly drawing up short and saying, with embarrassment, “I’m sorry, Aunt Meg. We can talk about something else.”

It made the family feel guilty when she announced that she had asked to train as a novice. There was a nagging sense of *What did we do wrong?* Mare’s grandmother had died of stomach cancer two years before. If her grandmother had ever held strong religious convictions, months of excruciating pain wiped them away. She didn’t ask for Father Riley at the end, but she didn’t resist when he showed up at her sickroom. Doped up on morphine, she was barely aware of the wafer and the wine as he lifted her head off the pillow for the Eucharist. Nobody knew whether to be glad that Gran hadn’t lived to see the day a McGearly girl took the veil.

Mare’s grandfather was adrift in lonely grief after his wife died, retreating into his house and keeping the lights off well past sunset. He mowed the front lawn every Saturday, but the weeds in the backyard grew rank and tall, like a cursed woods guarding a castle of sorrows. When Meg knocked at the door and told him she was entering the convent, he became more animated than he had been in months.

“Don’t give yourself away. You’re still good-looking, Meg. Lots of men would be proud to have you.”

“Don’t be such a fool,” Meg retorted, blushing. She kissed him on the top of the head. “But thank you.”



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In the end, she shocked everyone by simply disappearing one night to join a strict Carmelite order that was completely cloistered. She wasn't going to be one of those modern nuns who wore street clothes and picked up some arugula at the supermarket. Once the doors of the convent shut behind her, Meg was never seen again. She left her apartment untouched, the furniture all in place, waiting patiently for a return that would never occur. Her dresses hung neatly in the closet, giving off the forlorn air of things turned useless.

Mare was eighteen when her aunt pulled this vanishing act. "The flight into Egypt," her mother called it, sounding bitter and neglected. "Not one real good-bye."

Being a big family didn't protect them from feeling the hole where Meg once had been. It seemed vaguely sinister that she never wrote or called for ten years. They hadn't heard anything until Mare's mother received the news that Sister Margaret Thomas, the ghost of someone they had known, was gone.

The convent was remote and not listed in the phone book, but GPS knew where to find it. "Turn left in three hundred yards," the voice advised. Mare took the turnoff; after another half mile through some overgrown woodland of pine and birch she slowed down. The convent grounds were protected by a high wrought-iron fence. The road ended at a gate flanked by a deserted sentry box. There was a rusty squawk box for visitors to announce themselves on.

Mare felt the awkwardness of her situation. How do you say you're here for a body? She raised her voice, as if the squawk box might be deaf.

"I'm here for Sister Margaret Thomas. I'm her niece."

No one answered; the box didn't even crackle. A moment passed, and Mare began to think she'd have to turn back. Then with a click the iron gate slowly swung open. She drove through.

In the distance sat a redbrick mansion, drearily Victorian under the gray sky. The old Honda's tires crunched on the gravel. Mare felt increasingly nervous, her mind flashing on Dickens and orphans without enough gruel to eat. The mansion was the real orphan, rescued by the church after it became a stately wreck.

Going up the long driveway to the convent, Mare brought her mind back to what she had to do. The woodland along the way was overgrown, but the grounds skirting the mansion were threadbare, stripped of the fountains and shrubbery that once adorned them. The place was probably built by a ruthless tycoon at a time when such immense piles were "summer cottages," serviced by their own private railway spur.

She parked her car at the end of the driveway and approached the front door. A stern hand-lettered sign hung next to the doorbell: "Silence is observed between vespers and terce. Do not disturb."

Terce? Mare couldn't remember what frighteningly early hour of the morning this meant—it made her shiver to imagine the nuns' bare penitent feet hitting cold stone floors before dawn. She rang the bell. After a reluctant moment she was buzzed in, just as anonymously as at the front gate. Cautiously she entered, allowing her eyes to adjust to the sudden drop in light. She found herself in a grand foyer. On one wall was a niche with a statue of the Virgin. Straight ahead a stout metal grill, divided into four-inch squares, blocked the way. The openings let visitors peer at the inhabitants without getting too close. The effect was a cross between a zoo and a jail.

In this case there was nobody to peer at. Mare took a seat on a rickety visitor's chair with a sagging cane bottom and waited. She began to worry that a nun would swoop down to scold her for dropping out of parochial school after the fifth grade, as if every sister in the area had gotten the guilty news. She gazed at the

sweeping staircase on the other side of the grill. When the place was a rich man's country retreat, those stairs had felt the pumps of satin-gowned debutantes skipping down to meet their beaux, she thought idly.

More time passed. The silence felt eerie and alien. The Carmelite order is unworldly, devoted solely to the rule of "prayer and toil." Mare had found a YouTube video about it. The nuns in the video smiled a lot. They greeted the interviewer from behind a metal screen like the one Mare was sitting at. The brash interviewer asked, "How long have you been behind bars?" The nuns laughed. As far as they were concerned, they were living on the right side of the bars.

Mare glanced at her watch. She had been there less than five minutes. *Let's get this over with*, she thought. It was sad, but trying to recapture Meg as she once was seemed pointless.

At last there was a soft tapping sound as a nun came downstairs—slowly, not swooping—and moved toward the visitor across a wide expanse of marble floor. She couldn't have been more than twenty. Mare had read that convents were having a hard time finding new members and were steadily growing older. Death was thinning the ranks.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," the young nun apologized with a shy smile. She didn't seem like the scolding type. She smelled faintly of laundry soap and Clorox. Her small hands were scrubbed red and raw; she hid them inside the sleeves of her habit when Mare noticed them. Mare resisted the impulse to cross herself.

"I've come about Sister Margaret Thomas," she said. Her nerves made her speak too loudly, creating an echo in the big empty space.

"Ah," said the young nun, who looked Hispanic and spoke with an accent. She had stopped smiling.

"I'm her niece," Mare added.

"I see."



The sister averted her eyes. Her face, encircled by a brown and white cowl, remained friendly, but it was giving nothing away.

Mare cleared her throat. "I don't know your procedures when somebody dies. It was very sudden, a shock."

"What do you mean?" The sister looked genuinely confused.

"You don't know? We got a phone message that Sister Margaret Thomas, my aunt, was gone. I'm here to claim the body. So if there are papers for me to sign, and if you have the number of a local funeral home . . ." Mare's voice trailed off.

Now the sister became alarmed. The faint roses in her soft cheeks suddenly turned pale. "That's not possible. You see—"

Mare cut her off. "You can't keep her and not notify the authorities."

"What? If you'll let me finish." The young nun raised both hands, asking for patience.

But Mare was getting suspicious. "She's not yours to just stick in the ground. How did she die anyway?" Mare tried to sound irate, but a doubt crossed her mind. Maybe the convent had legal possession of anyone who died in the order.

The sister wrung her hands. "Please, stop. Your aunt's not here anymore. She's gone. The whole thing's a misunderstanding."

A light came on in Mare's brain. "My mother assumed that 'gone' meant 'dead.'"

"No. Yesterday Sister Margaret Thomas didn't appear for terce, and her room was empty. We were very worried. We left a message at the only contact number on file. Our interaction with the outside world is minimal. That's the rule we live by. Are you Catholic?"

Mare nodded. She felt ridiculous and started to mumble an apology, but the young nun went on, her accent getting stronger. It took an effort for her not to get emotional.

"Margaret Thomas was our sister. She belonged to Christ, not to her family. But when a sister suddenly doesn't appear for

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prayers and her room is deserted, *Dios mio*, we felt obliged to tell someone.”

“So she simply left, and you don’t know where she went?”

“Exactly. Forgive us. We didn’t intend to hurt your heart.”

“All right. There’s nothing to forgive.” Mare wanted to ease the distress of the sister, who seemed very vulnerable in her homespun brown habit and with her raw, red hands. But she was also curious.

“Just one thing. Can I see her room?”

“Oh dear. I’m afraid that won’t be possible.” Unable to hide her agitation, the sister suddenly turned to leave. She felt bad, but rules are rules. No one was getting past the screen.

Mare called after her. “What about her personal things? If she left any, I want to claim them. You said you didn’t want to hurt my heart.”

It felt manipulative to throw the young woman’s words back at her, but Mare knew her mother wouldn’t settle for “She’s gone.” One vanishing act from Aunt Meg was the limit.

The retreating sister didn’t turn around. “Wait here,” she muttered.

She scurried upstairs, and the grand foyer returned to silence. After a moment a new nun appeared on the sweeping staircase, which was beginning to look in Mare’s eyes like a Hollywood prop fabricated solely for grand entrances. The new nun was older, perhaps seventy, and the habit that concealed her from head to toe like a brown cocoon couldn’t disguise her arthritic gait. She looked unsteady as she dealt with the heavy cardboard box she was carrying in her hands. Padding across the marble floor toward the screen, the old nun nodded at an opening off to one side. It was just large enough to allow the cardboard box to slide through.

“That’s all there is, I’m afraid,” said the old nun. She was panting slightly, her upper lip moist from exertion. Like the young sis-

ter, she didn't introduce herself. Her eyes had remained downcast when Mare tried to look into them. Unlike the young sister, she gave off no waves of sympathy.

Mare mumbled a thank-you, but the old nun had already turned away.

It was time to vacate the eeriness. Mare lifted the box, which was bound in layers of packing tape. Although less than a foot square, the parcel felt as if it contained lead weights. There was a white envelope taped to the top in place of a label.

After she returned to the gray light outside and drew a breath of sharp winter air, Mare's head started to clear. Each step she took toward her car made her feel a little less hazy, as if she was waking up from a narcotic medieval spell. Her hand was on the handle of the car door, now frosted with flakes of snow, before she realized all the questions she had failed to ask.

She'd learned nothing about her aunt's last days in the convent. Had she left the cloister sick or well? Was she disgruntled? Were there signs of mental disturbance? Mare had read about old monks breaking decades of silence, only to reveal that they were insane, driven into hopeless psychosis by their fixation on God.

Suddenly she felt an ache in her wrists from toting the heavy parcel. Getting in the car, she dumped it beside her on the passenger seat. Snow was falling thick enough to blanket the windshield, turning the interior into a twilight cave. She turned on the windshield wipers and checked the radio for weather warnings. The morning forecast said a blizzard would arrive late in the day. Now it was barely two o'clock. The storm had swept in early.

Bald snow tires gave Mare a reason to rush back to the turnpike, but she sat there, gazing blankly at the hypnotic swipe of the windshield wipers. Then the parcel caught her eye, like an object of wonder. The right to open it really belonged to her grandfather, since Meg was his daughter and he was next of kin. But



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Mare now saw that the envelope taped to the top wasn't blank. A message was scrawled in a fine spidery hand.

*For You*

Who was “you”? None of the sisters thought it meant them, or they would have opened the package. If Mare hadn't shown up, the box might have remained sealed and silent forever. Did Aunt Meg anticipate that “you” was certain to arrive? Mare reached over and tore away the envelope, which was affixed to the parcel with a scrap of Scotch tape. There was no one to tell her not to snoop.

There was a crisply folded note inside. Carefully she opened it, reading what was written in the same spidery hand.

*Hello, Mare,*

*This is from the thirteenth disciple. Follow where it leads.*

*Yours in Christ,*

*Meg*

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