

# Devotion

ne morning they found her on the cathedral steps, wrapped in a coarse gray blanket, staring at everything as though the world had just begun.

Anne lifted her, cradling her close.

"Well," she said softly. "You've come to the right place."

There was no note. No name.

Someone asked, "What shall we call her?"

Anne's eyes settled on the cathedral calendar pinned to the wall. This month's word was *Devotion*.

Anne gave a small nod. "That will do."

Devotion did not speak.

They waited for words that never came. Physicians examined. Priests prayed. Devotion remained silent, taking it all in with luminous eyes.

Other children beckoned her into their games. She followed as best she could. But by the time she understood, they had already moved on. Laughter moved too quickly. Words passed before she could catch them.

Everyone meant well.

But she did not belong.

Inside the cathedral, time moved differently.

Stone waited. Light returned to the same places day after day. The pillars did not interrupt. The floor did not hurry.

She began to walk the nave the way others learn conversation.

She traced the worn edges of columns. She pressed her palm against the limestone, cool from the night. She learned which stained-glass windows flared cold at winter dawn, and which ones bloomed softly when the days lengthened again. The building did not require speech. It received her whole in welcoming silence.

Anne watched.

On Devotion's twelfth birthday, Anne rose before dawn as usual.

She found Devotion already in the nave, the early light still gray along the pillars.

"You're twelve today," Anne said.

Devotion nodded.

"That's no small thing."

From her apron pocket, Anne drew a small medallion on a cord. It was inexpensive, the engraving slightly uneven. The word was simple: Devotion.

She slipped it around Devotion's neck.

"For you," Anne said quietly, touching her cheek.

Devotion closed her fingers around the disk, tracing its edge.

Anne's eyes warmed.

"Do everything with all your heart."

She let the words settle.

"And I have another gift."

She placed a broom in Devotion's hands.

"It's time."

Devotion closed her fingers around it.

And began.

Years folded quietly into one another.

Priests came and went. Candles were lit and extinguished. Incense rose and thinned in the high air. Music filled the nave on feast days, and fell quiet in the ribs of the vault.

And Devotion learned the cathedral as one learns a face.

Dust gathered differently beneath the transept than near the altar. The echo shifted when the pews were full. In autumn, light entered low and amber; in spring, it climbed pale and high along the pillars.

Sometimes she paused when a beam of sunlight caught the rising dust. The motes turned slowly in the air, suspended in depths she could not measure.

She could not name what she felt. It was simply what happened when she gave herself completely to what was before her.

When Anne died, Devotion stood near the back while prayers were spoken and chants were sung. She watched the light move across the coffin and listened as the final echo dissolved.

Then she took up her broom.

The town was growing.

It needed stone.

The incense and music still rose through the nave, but fewer people listened.

The pews held more emptiness than people, even on feast days.

New walls rose along the square.

There were meetings. Ledgers. Decisions.

The bell was lowered first. What once thundered above the town now lay mute on the ground. Devotion laid her hand on its cool bronze, feeling its weight. Then she turned away.

Walls followed. Statues were removed. The roof beams were taken down.

Wind moved freely where stained glass had once restrained it.

Devotion adjusted. When grass crept between the stones, she swept it. When sections of the floor were lifted, she cleared what remained.

At last, even the foundation stones were removed.

For the first time in her life, there was nothing left to tend.

She came at dusk.

She stood where the altar had been and listened.

Above her, the stars burned in their icy heat.

She drew a long breath.

She touched the small disk at her throat — warm from her skin — and let her hand fall.

Then she turned and walked quietly out the gate, slipping into the night.

The road lay open.

— *William Zeitler*

2026 February 16

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