



The Black Cloister by Melanie Dobson

Prologue

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The woman edged along the dark hallway, testing each floorboard with her bare toe until she reached the nursery. She stopped and placed her ear against the peeling door. The only sound she heard was the wind rattling against the windows of the old house.

Turning the knob, she hesitated in the shadows to see whether Phoebe or one of the children had heard. No one moved.

Last week, she had stolen up to the third floor during dinner, but Phoebe had caught her hovering over her baby's crib, mesmerized by the green flecks in her little girl's eyes. She had endured the punishment like a true follower, until Solomon banned her from seeing her children for a month. Phoebe was in charge of the kids, and if she needed any help, she would ask.

And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name's sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life.

She'd become too selfish, loving her girls more than she loved God, and Sol knew it. He had purchased a train ticket for her—one-way, to Berlin, so he could direct her spiritual growth without interference. She would leave in the morning.

She wanted to feel God's presence, to obey his will, but every time Sol left her room, she felt empty instead. She'd failed God. And she'd failed her family.

Her fingers brushed over the seal that marked her arm. They could beat her to death if they wanted; she was ready to die. But she couldn't leave her children alone. Not with

him.

Moonlight swept across the room, and she glanced over the line of twenty small beds crowded into the icy room. The older children slept on mattresses along the floor, and the younger ones were secured in the cribs by the drafty dormer windows.

Johanna slept in the third bed along the wall.

She tiptoed across the wood, knelt beside her daughter, and threaded her fingers through her hair until Johanna stirred in her sleep and opened her eyes. "Mommy?"

She leaned down and lifted her little girl. "I've got you, sweetheart."

Johanna wrapped around her neck and nestled into her shoulder. The child's long legs dangled down to her knees. When had her baby grown into a girl?

A cloud darkened the room, and she waited until the cloud passed. Then she whispered into Johanna's ear. "Where is she?"

Johanna lifted one of her arms and pointed to the first crib along the window.

"I'm going to pick her up," she said quietly, "and then we're going to run."

Johanna squeezed her neck, her gentle voice trembling. "Don't drop me."

She kissed her daughter's cheek. "I won't let you go."

She took a careful step toward the window and then a second one. Wind blasted through a crack in the glass, and Johanna shivered in her arms.

Another soft step.

The crib was only a few feet away now. She moved Johanna to her left hip so she could snag her baby with her right arm.

One of the boys cried out in the darkness behind her. She took a step back and saw Michael's curly blond hair thrashing on the pillow. She placed her hand on his head until he stopped shaking. She wished she could rescue all the children, take them someplace where they would be safe and warm.

Maybe she could come back later and steal all the little ones away, but tonight she

needed to focus on saving her girls.

Another step forward. Johanna's hair was soft on her cheek, hands wrapped around her neck.

God had entrusted her with these children. No matter what Sol or anyone else said, she had to get them away from here.

The floorboard groaned under her weight, and her shoulders shook as she leapt back and waited in the silence. And the darkness.

There were three more steps between her and her baby. She would pick her up and run toward the forest. Once they made it to the trees, Sol would never catch them.

As she stepped forward again, Michael bolted up. She bent down to comfort the boy, but it was too late. He shrieked as if he'd seen a ghost.

A flash of light blinded her for an instant, but it wouldn't stop her. She lunged toward the crib.

Phoebe slapped her hand away from her daughter. "What are you doing?"

A few other children cried out, but not her daughter. She could see her sleeping between the wooden slats, her black hair tangled around her forehead.

Phoebe held out her arms. "Give Johanna to me."

Her heart pounded as fear snaked through her skin. She would not leave her daughters with Sol.

Phoebe shone the light in her eyes. "I'll call him if you don't hand her over right now."

Adrenaline shot through her body, and she lurched forward. Phoebe couldn't stop her. She would grab her baby and run.

Phoebe stretched her arms across the crib and screamed. "Sol!"

She pushed forward, but Phoebe blocked the crib and yelled again for Sol.

She squinted through her tears to see her baby one last time. God help her. If Sol

caught her, she'd never see either of her girls again.

She turned and ran—out the door, down the hall. Sol called out to her, but she didn't stop. She stumbled down the winding steps and into the kitchen.

The cold tile jolted her bare feet, but she didn't break stride as she raced toward the back door. Freedom.

The door smacked the wall behind her as Sol threw it open. He pointed his cane at her. "Where are you going?"

Johanna trembled in her arms as she turned and locked his gaze. His velvet robe hung crooked over his shoulders, and his long, graying hair made him look a couple decades older than forty-five.

"I'm leaving," she said.

"You're not leaving." He took a small step as he steadied his words. "You belong here with your family."

She pressed her palms into Johanna's back as she moved toward the door. "She is my family."

"You're too young to raise her." His cracked lips eased into a smile, his outstretched arms welcoming her back into the fold. "There's so much you need to learn."

Johanna's tears soaked through her mother's clothes and puddled on her shoulder.

"They need someone strong to care for them." His voice dropped to an eerie calm. "Someone to show them the way."

She froze, her legs anchored to the tile. He knew her obsession to be a good mother, her insecurity that her children wouldn't grow up with faith. He knew her too well.

"You can leave if you want, but don't force Johanna into the world." His bad leg faltered, and he grasped the kitchen counter to steady himself. "She will be safe with us."

She shivered. Sol would teach her daughter about sacrifice and sin and purity—and

most of all, how to love as Christ loved the church.

His gaze moved from her to Johanna, and he devoured her with his stare. "I'll take care of her until you return."

With her daughter clutched in her arms, she threw open the door and raced down the steps. She didn't care what he did to her, but she would never let him have her girls.

The frosty grass stung her toes as she raced toward the forest. Wind pierced her skin.

"Damnation!" Sol shouted from the open door. "Is that what you want?"

Light flooded the yard, and she wheeled around for one last glance at the man who had embodied God's love for her. His cane batted the sky as he blasted her with a vulgar round of words.

She switched Johanna to her right hip and ducked into the shelter of brush and leaves.

"God will kill you!"

She could hear the rush of the river, the seduction in the wind.

She'd take Johanna to a safe place. Then she'd come back to rescue her baby before Sol hurt her too. She'd care for her family. Far, far away from here.

Sol's curse carried in the wind. "And he'll kill the girl!"