

The Secret Place

Molly Noble Bull

Dedication

**To Charlie, Bret, Burt, Bren, Jana, Linda, Angela, Bethanny
Dillard, Hailey, Bryson, Grant, Grace and Kathryn**

But to God give the Glory

A Note From the Author

The original title of *The Secret Place* was *Sanctuary*, and *Sanctuary* won the 2008 Gayle Wilson Award for excellence in the inspirational category for published authors. The novel also tied for first place in the Winter Rose, yet another contest for published authors in the inspirational category that year.

The Secret Place begins in France and ends in Luss, Scotland, and Luss is a real place and perhaps a thousand years old.

The French Huguenots were a group of Christian believers in search of Freedom of Religion and a safe place to live, and the characters in *The Secret Place* trace some of the same routes my ancestors took after they left France. One set of ancestors spent generations in Scotland and became a part of a Scottish Clan before finally settling in the United States. How my branch of the family ended up in the cattle ranching country of South Texas is another story. To learn about all my novels, including my western—*When the Cowboy Rides Away*, go to my author page at Amazon. <http://bit.ly/mollynoblebull> Or write Molly Noble Bull in the search slot at online or walk-in stores.

Come dream with me as the characters in these novels play out the spiritual journey of their lives. And learn a little history along the way.

Love in Jesus Christ,
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FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

The Huguenots were French Protestants, and most eventually became followers of John Calvin. Though they suffered severe persecution, they continued to worship God in a manner not approved by the official religion of France, and many Huguenots fled France in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for religious reasons. Others remained and practiced their religion in secret.

The civil and religious rights of Huguenots in France were partially restored with the Promulgation of the Edict of Toleration in November 1787. However, *The Secret Place* begins in 1740, and these new rights didn't apply to the characters in the novel.

The author of *The Secret Place*, Molly Noble Bull, found a copy of an old hymn, "Faith of Our Fathers" by Frederick W. Faber, in a yellowed music book used in public schools in America in the nineteen forties. The modern generation might be surprised to learn that hymns were openly played and sung in public school music classes when their grandparents were children. The words of the hymn told of bravery, martyrdom and faith under fire, helping to motivate Molly to write *The Secret Place* and another novel on the intolerance and persecution of the church in days gone by.

Frederick W. Faber (1814-1863) wrote the words to "Faith of Our Fathers" in 1849, but the music, first called "St. Catherine," was written in England by composer Henri Frederick Hemy in 1864. Ten years later, James Walton adapted the text of "Faith of Our Fathers" to the hymn's tune, St Catherine, and composed the refrain.

Faith of Our Fathers

Verse One

**Faith of our fathers! Living still. In spite of dungeon fire and sword:
O how our hearts beat high with joy when-e'er we hear that glorious
word**

Refrain

Faith of our fathers! Holy faith! We will be true to thee till death!

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.

Psalms 91: 1

Prologue

D'Hannis, Alsace
1729

Death to Jews, she read. Death to all Huguenots!

Eight-year-old Rachel Levin felt her ire bubbling up from deep inside. Merely glancing at the sign nailed to the side of a building up ahead disturbed her. Actually reading the words printed on it in black letters made her want to shout in protest. But Papa would be angry if she did.

The wind suddenly picked up, causing her long blue dress to gather in a tangle of wool material around her ankles. Briefly, she lifted her skirt and let it drop. Most of the wrinkles disappeared. She shifted the gray sack filled with the items she'd bought at the store from her right arm to her left.

The odor of fresh bread and cheeses mingled with the delicate scent of grapes coming from the wine fields on the hills nearby. She continued down the street as if nothing unusual had happened. Contrary to her internal thoughts, her controlled response to distress was something she'd learned almost before she could walk. It had been handed down from father to child for generations.

Her Jewish ancestors had left country after country, searching for a place to live where they would be safe. They had been taunted and persecuted. She battled her secret fear of the unknown almost daily, but like those who had gone before her, she had no intentions of letting others know the way she really felt or giving up.

Jew. Death. Was there somewhere in the world where Rachel and her parents could live in peace? If such a place existed and she ever found it, she would stay there forever.

Rachel turned the corner and saw a boy about her age. He'd taunted her several times, and now he stood in her path just ahead. She sucked in her breath.

"All beasts are the same," her father had said. "Whether animal or the human kind, never run from a beast. Never show fear or look them in the eyes. Stand your ground, always, and continue on."

Hands on his hips, the boy wore a tan cap, dark trousers and a dark shirt. Rachel could turn around and avoid a confrontation.

I will not walk away.

Beyond the boy, she could see the little white house she shared with her parents with its green shutters and window boxes crammed with flowers under every window. If she could grow wings and fly there, she would.

"Your kind is not wanted here," the boy shouted in French.

Her heart pounded.

Learning new languages had always been easy for Rachel. Besides her native tongue, German, she'd learned a little French from her father, enough to play with her friend, Marie. And enough to understand the boy's words as well as his harsh tone of voice. But she couldn't make a proper reply in French if she'd wanted to.

Something hard lodged in her throat. Rachel swallowed. If only she could know what would happen when she reached the boy. But Papa and Mama would expect her to continue on. She looked slightly above his head and kept moving forward.

Her breath caught. She'd almost reached him—so close she saw that dark brown strands of hair had slipped out from under his cap. His eyes reminded her of black cinders found among the ashes that remained after a wood-burning fire in the hearth had died. If she didn't turn now, she would run right into him.

She took in a deep breath of air. One more step and they would bump heads.

He stepped to one side at the last instant. Then he spat on her cheek as she walked by.

"Take a bath in that, you dirty little Jewess. It is more than your kind deserves."

The disgusting liquid rolled down her cheek—all the way to her heart. She felt the wet remains when it landed on the shoulder of her new blue dress.

Her jaw firmed again, and a wave of revulsion swept over her. She wanted to turn around and spit back, yet she kept walking down the path as if nothing important had occurred.

Rachel reached the stone steps leading to the front porch in the same even gait she had started out with when she left the store. As soon as she went inside the house, she put down the sack and turned to the bowl and pitcher by the front door. She felt like crying as she washed her face, but no tears came. Her well of sorrows dried up long ago. Only bad dreams remained.

"Come up stairs, Rachel," Mama said in German, "I want to talk to you."

"I am coming, Mama." She washed her face again.

She must never tell Mama what happened on the path today. It would make her cry, and her mother had cried too much of late.

Papa made his living making and selling barrels—as well as being a scholar, a teacher, and a historian. Besides French, he'd taught her a little English and Hebrew. In return, he expected her to be strong, work hard, and help Mama in any way she could.

Rachel took the cloth from the hook by the door and patted her face dry. Still, she felt dirty, as if a layer of filth stuck to her skin. She put the cloth back on the hook and turned toward the stairs. If only she could change out of the contaminated blue dress before going in to speak to Mama. No time for that now.

How many times had she heard Mama compliment her in front of Papa?

"Rachel is a sweet and gentle child, Amos," Mama would say, "and she cheers me up when I am low. Sometimes, she makes me laugh out loud."

And Papa would say to Mama, "I am proud of our daughter, too. Rachel is a good and brave girl and always does what is expected of her."

But she was neither sweet and gentle nor good and brave. She was Rachel, a girl trying to find a safe place where she could just be.

For now, she wouldn't think about the boy or what he said or did to her. She must be strong—for Papa. Mama was ill. She must think only of Mama when she went up to see her, and she must smile. That way, Mama would never guess what happened on the road today.

Chapter One

Benoit, France
Eleven years later

“You do as you wish, Louis,” Pierre Dupre said to his brother. “But after the long walk from Paris, I want to stop and rest before going home. Mama and Henri will want to hear all about our journey, and I would like to get some sleep before I start telling our little brother tales of our adventures.”

“Could it be that my big brother is tired?” Louis asked with a twinkle in his eye.

“Yes.” Pierre yawned. “I admit it.” He stretched his tired muscles and yawned again.

Louis threw back his head and laughed. “Sleep if you want. I intend to pay Rachel’s parents a visit before going home. I plan to ask their permission to marry her.”

“Is it not a bit late to be making such a request? We sail in two weeks and you said you would marry Rachel aboard ship. Yet you barely know her parents. They might resent the fact that you failed to step forward with your proposal sooner.”

“I will ask their forgiveness for the delay, of course. And I will also encourage them to sail to England with us. I fear Rachel will refuse to go at the last minute if we leave her mother and father behind.”

“Rachel is strong-willed and unpredictable,” Pierre said. “And she is always jumping to conclusions. However, she is also a good and faithful daughter. Were I wearing your shoes, Louis, I would have fears as well.”

They stood in front of the small stone cottage where Rachel and her parents lived.

They hadn’t slept much since heading home. On the previous night, they seldom stopped to rest. Pierre doubted that Rachel’s parents would welcome his brother into their home after they discovered why he came, and he had no desire to hear her mother and father scold Louis for his tardiness.

Pierre noticed a large tree surrounded by bushes a short distance away. “I will wait for you under that tree. It will be cool and shady there.”

“As you wish.” Louis smiled. “And sleep well, brother. I will not be long.”

Pierre watched Louis walk up to the front door of the cottage and knock. He found a grassy spot under the tree. With his brown jacket as a pillow, he stretched out and went to sleep.

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Pierre awoke to the rumble of horses’ hooves and men shouting. He crawled on his belly to a bushy area near the edge of the tall grass. A young captain in the king’s army kicked down the door of Rachel’s house. Soldiers swarmed inside.

He’d defended his younger brother for as long as he could remember and often fought his battles for him. But he saw at least thirty armed men and he with no weapons. Pierre wanted to hang his head in shame because he couldn’t do anything to help.

“Please, we are innocent!” he heard Louis shout out from inside the house.

Shattered, Pierre covered his mouth with his hands to keep from calling out in anger and despair.

“No!” he heard Rachel’s mother say. “Have mercy! Please!”

Tears filled the corners of his eyes as Pierre heard more shouting, screams, and then silence.

“No. No!” Pierre said under his breath.

“Take the trunk outside!” the captain shouted to his men.

As they dragged a trunk out the front door of the house, the captain stood on the lawn outside. Sunlight glinted on the metal buckle of his jacket. The shiny object mesmerized a shocked Pierre as the other soldiers brought out furniture, clothes, and other items.

A thin soldier came out wearing a gray dress that must have belonged to Rachel’s mother. He paraded around in it, swinging his hips and making distasteful gestures. Laughter echoed all around the soldier in the dress. Pierre fought nausea.

The captain opened the trunk, spilling its contents on the ground. Letters and papers blew here and there. The captain picked up a candlestick. The metal caught the afternoon sun, sparkling brighter than the buckle. From a distance, Pierre couldn’t tell for sure but thought it might have been made of gold.

The expensive-looking object would hold half a dozen candles or more. He’d never seen a design quite like it.

The captain waved the candlestick in the air for all to see. “This is a Menorah and can only belong to a Jew. It proves the people who lived in that house were Jews!”

The rest of the men gathered around the captain, looking at the candlestick. When they tried to touch it, the captain jerked it out of their reach.

“Two Huguenots from this village conspired against the government of France. We only found one. We must find the other man and the rest of the Jews and kill them.” The captain raised the Menorah in the air as though it were a kind of battle flag. “I shall not rest until the deed is done! Now, gather up all the papers and anything else you think I might want later.”

As the soldiers began doing as they were told, the captain leaned over and picked up something from the ground. Pierre thought it looked about the size and shape of a small wooden frame. The captain pulled a white cloth from his pocket, wiped off the object, gazed at it for a long moment and tucked it inside his jacket.

“Burn this house to the ground,” the captain demanded, “as a warning to all Jews and Huguenots!”

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Rachel Levin stood in the center of the elderly baker’s little shop surrounded by pleasing odors—cinnamon and sweet smelling pastries. Yet, her thoughts tasted only of the excitement her future marriage to Louis Dupre would bring. Louis and his brother, Pierre, farmed a small piece of land in Benoit, but when they sailed to England and on to Scotland, they were sure to become much more prosperous and farm even more land.

She glanced at a display of dark bread on a table nearby. She would need to hurry or she would be late for her meeting with Louis. After almost two weeks, she would see him within the hour, and she’d been counting the minutes until that moment came.

Rachel grabbed a loaf of bread, put it in her wicker basket and handed the baker two small coins. “For the bread,” she said in French.

He nodded, and a smile turned up the edges of his wrinkled mouth.

Rachel pulled the drawstring, closing the leather sack. The sack of coins jingled when she dropped it in the basket with the bread. She placed the hood of her cape over her tan cap and opened the shop's entry door.

"Au revoir, Monsieur."

"Good day to you, too, Mademoiselle," the elderly gentleman replied. "Come again soon."

The baker had been kind to her. However, he knew her as Rachel Zimmer, an immigrant who spoke French with a German accent, and probably assumed she was a Christian. Would he befriend her if he knew her as Rachel Levin. A Jew?

She disliked hiding her true identity and nationality because she felt it betrayed her people. But for reasons of safety, it had been necessary.

Rachel went outside and looked up and down the street. There had been reports of trouble brewing in a village nearby. Who could say but that trouble would come to Beniot as well? A single young woman of nineteen years couldn't be too careful this day-and-age.

A slender young man with an olive complexion came out of a shop two doors down.

"Louis?"

He turned and hurried away.

"Louis!" She ran after him. "Wait!"

He never looked back.

Why hadn't he acknowledged her presence? Her heart contracted. Had his love for her died since last they met?

As she watched, he raced down the cobblestone street, and it would be impossible to catch up with him. Maybe he hadn't heard her call his name. Besides, he looked too tall to be Louis.

How strange that she hadn't noticed sooner. The young man was Pierre, Louis's older brother. But why hadn't Pierre stopped or glanced back? He appeared to be in such a hurry. Why?

An old man and woman in black clothing hobbled into the butcher shop across from where she stood. Rachel started walking in the same direction that Pierre took. The narrow street curved to the left, and she caught a glimpse of the Catholic Church on the corner. She'd worked at the church helping the nuns clean the sanctuary since she arrived in Benoit a year ago.

When a personal disaster for her father caused her family to leave Alsace, they'd hoped to hide among the Huguenots, and she'd felt fortunate to find work in France. One day on her way home from the church, she met Pierre. Later, she also met his brother, Louis.

My Louis.

Meeting him had changed her life forever, bringing true happiness into her world for the first time. However, those good feelings disappeared each time she recalled how she'd deceived Louis by not telling him about her Jewish heritage. He would break their engagement if he knew.

Louis thought she'd told her parents of their love for each other weeks ago, and he'd wanted to ask them for her hand in marriage. But she'd insisted that he wait a little longer before making his request to her parents—then a little longer—and longer.

With a heavy heart she realized that she'd deceived her parents as well. They didn't know she attended a Protestant church now, much less that she planned to marry a French Huguenot, and guilt played on her mind for not telling them everything from the beginning.

Rachel and Louis had already paid their fees to cover the cost of their passage to England and were to be married aboard ship. Yet Mama and Papa knew nothing of this and barely knew Louis.

She would tell Mama and Papa everything. Today for certain. She'd put it off long enough.

Visions of her wedding put a smile in her heart. But when she considered actually telling her parents what she'd done and what she planned to do, a thick coil of worry choked her like a hangman's rope, squeezing out her last bit of joy.

Her parents might never speak to her again after they learned that she'd been attending a Christian church. But it was a chance she would have to take.

A line of brown fieldstone houses with red tile roofs lined both sides of the road. They looked like her house, as did most of the other structures in Benoit. Yet, according to her intended, Louis Dupre, some of the ordinary looking buildings held mysteries—tunnels and hidden rooms.

Gray smoke spiraled upward in the distance. Madame La Tou lived next door to her family's home, and the woman burned trash almost every day. Maybe she . . . Rachel scrutinized the flames. The blaze seemed larger than usual.

No. Her throat tightened. *It cannot be our house.*

Rachel thought of another fire—the one in Alsace—where she grew up. Her ancestors left Holland, settled in Germany for a while, and her parents had moved to Alsace before she was born.

In the Alsatian village of D'Hannis, she'd seen a fire much like this one. Four innocent people lost their lives that day. But surely a fire like that would never destroy her home. Rachel and her parents had already experienced enough tragedies to last a lifetime.

Madame La Tou probably set that old shed behind her house on fire. She'd been saying she would do it.

Yes, that is what must have happened. She tried to convince her mind that her assumptions were true. Still, she worried.

Louis was in Paris on some sort of secret mission, and he had told her to meet him at a new location. Though she wanted to see him, Rachel felt torn between her desire to spend time with Louis and the fact that she might be needed at home.

"When you come to meet me," he'd said before he left, "make sure you are not being followed."

She looked around. The streets of the village were unusually quiet for four o'clock in the afternoon. She turned left at the corner.

Rachel would be meeting Louis at what he called the Safe House. Though she had strolled by the stone building many times, she'd never been inside.

Was she being followed? She cast a glance behind her. The street looked empty. Only French Huguenots knew about the Safe House. Ahead, she saw a door.

Two-story buildings lined both sides of the shadowy street. The iron latch on the door felt cold when her hand touched it. The heavy door creaked open.

The rank odor of rotting fruit and other garbage flooded her senses. Her eyes stung. She blinked and went inside.

At first, the hallway seemed dark: haunting. As she moved along, her eyes became accustomed to her new surroundings, and everything looked lighter. She could see the door at the end of the long hallway.

Third door to the right, Louis had said. She continued on toward her destination.

Something with quick little legs raced across her right foot. She tensed, praying it wasn't a rat. In the dim light, she saw a gray mouse scamper ahead of her. It found a hole and disappeared.

Louis had said to knock on the third door. When she reached it, she stopped.

Pushing her cape back around her shoulders, Rachel pulled off her cap and unbraided the tight bun at the back of her neck. Her mother would be shocked if she knew. She put the cap back on and tied it under her chin. Still, her long hair fell in waves below her head covering, swinging around her waist—exactly as Louis liked it.

Satisfied that she looked her best, she knocked three times, waited, and knocked again.

“Who is there?” a man asked.

“A friend of Monsieur Chabor.”

“What is your name?”

“Rachel Zimmer. I am on the list.”

“Wait, please.”

In a few moments, the door opened. A middle-aged man holding a book stood in the doorway, blocking her passage.

He had slicked-back gray hair, one squinty brown eye, and a black patch over the other. A missing tooth in front added to his frightening appearance.

“Have you paid your fee, Mademoiselle?”

“We—we paid three weeks ago.”

“We? Who are we?”

“Louis Dupre. I am to be his wife.”

He looked down at the book. “Louis Dupre.” His eyes narrowed. “Very well, you may come in.”

They were in another hallway. He pointed to a door at the end. “Go in there. And may God go with you.”

She forced a smile. “Same to you, Monsieur.”

This time she didn't knock before opening the door. Rachel paused to untie her cap. She pushed back a stray curl and stepped inside.

The dimly-lit room appeared to be filled with people; men and women of all ages, as well as infants and children. Some sat on wooden benches. Others squatted or rested on the rock floor. She searched for a familiar face but saw none.

A young woman sat on a bench near the door, holding a baby. She'd been looking down at the child, but when she turned and glanced toward the door, her eyes connected

with Rachel's. Putting the baby on her left shoulder, she stood and patted the child's back.

"Forgive me for staring," the woman said. "But you have such beautiful auburn hair; so long, thick, and wavy. And green eyes. We seldom see women who look like you here in Beniot."

Rachel smiled. "Thank you. Your dark hair is pretty, too."

The woman nodded. "May I help you, Sister in Christ?"

"Yes. I am looking for Louis Dupre."

The woman's face paled. "Louis Dupre? I am afraid he—he is not here." She bit her lower lip, and her gaze darted away.

A shiver shot down Rachel's spine. The woman's dark eyes had taken on a sad expression, and her smile had disappeared. Had Louis been delayed? Had he been in an accident?

"As I said," the woman continued, "Monsieur Louis Dupre is not here but his older brother is. Shall I take you to Pierre Dupre?"

"Yes. Please do."

Rachel followed the young mother to the far end of the big room. Pierre sat on the floor by an old wooden door painted dark red—like old blood. He looked down at his feet as if his thoughts were far away. Maybe he hadn't noticed when she came in.

"Pierre. Good to see you."

He stood eyes downcast. "It is good to see you, too."

"I saw you on the street near the bakery earlier," Rachel said. "But when I called out, you continued on. You should have stopped."

"Forgive me. I was leaving an important meeting and in a hurry to get here. I neither saw nor heard you."

"You are forgiven."

After gazing at her for a moment, he looked away as if he didn't want to meet her eyes.

Her pulse raced. "Where is Louis?"

Pierre hesitated.

Her heart pulled into a hard knot. Something had happened. She knew it. Why was he keeping things from her?

He glanced her way again. "Louis is—he is gone."

"Gone? Where? By now he would have returned from Paris. And he promised to meet me here. We were to talk to Pastor Picon about our marriage ceremony on the ship."

"Yes, I know."

Pierre motioned for her to come closer and grew silent. Rachel didn't have to ask. Something was wrong.

She swallowed the lump of dread rising in her throat. "What happened?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Dear, sweet Rachel, our Louis has gone—to be with the Lord."

"To be with... What are you saying?"

Pierre hung his head, unable to meet her gaze.

"Pierre," she exclaimed, "tell me the truth. What has happened?"

“Soldiers,” he said wearily. “They were searching for two young men suspected of conspiring against the French government. I managed to get away before anyone saw me. But Louis. . . .”

“They—killed my Louis. . . .” Rachel covered her eyes with both hands, but no tears came. Her chest tightened, and her heart compressed again.

After what seemed like a long time, she uncovered her eyes and looked up at him. “What is the matter with me? I cannot even cry.”

Pierre embraced her. “The weeping will come soon enough.”

She could scarcely breathe. Her head swam. She pushed away from Pierre and glared up at him. “You are lying,” she shrieked. Rachel slammed her fists against his chest, pushing him away. “Why are you telling me this? It is untrue. You know it is.”

Pierre sighed heavily and stared at the ground, his own pain evident in his face.

“Louis,” she whispered as realization dawned on her. “My Louis is—is gone.”

“Yes.” Pierre connected his dark gaze with hers. “But I am here. I will always be here for you.”

I care nothing for you, Pierre. A wave of bitterness engulfed her. I want Louis.

The fact that Louis had gone to be with God gave her no comfort. Rachel needed him here—at her side. She wanted to see his handsome face, hear his whispered words of endearment. Her eyes burned with unshed tears.

“You look pale,” Pierre said. “Why not sit down for a minute?”

He spread a blanket on the floor and held his hand out to her. She stared at it for a moment because it wasn’t the hand she desperately wanted. At last, she allowed him to help her sit down.

Rachel had no right to be angry with Pierre. He must be hurting, too. He had lost his brother. But she couldn’t muster any sympathy for him. Not today. Her own pain went too deep.

“Would you care for a cup of water?” Pierre asked.

Rachel shook her head because she couldn’t speak. The wailing inside cut so deep her chest hurt. She studied her hands and noticed that they were shaking. Would this nightmare ever end?

Louis couldn’t really be dead. This must be some kind of terrible mistake. She would find him—prove to Pierre and his family that Louis was alive.

Yes. That is just what I shall do.

She started to rise. Her knees felt weak. The world began to spin around and around.

As if coming from a far away place, Rachel heard the voice of the young woman with the baby. “Can I be of help?”

Everything went black.