

Sanctuary:

First in the Faith of our Fathers series

Molly Noble Bull

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 are 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.

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!"

"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 blue 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!"