



Chateau of Secrets by Melanie Dobson

Chapter One

June 1940 (Agneaux, France)

Candlelight flickered on the medieval walls as Gisèle Duchant stepped into the warmth of the nave. The shadows in the sacristy were the only witnesses to her secret—no one but she and Michel knew the same small room that stored the vestments and supplies for their family’s *chapelle* was also a hiding place.

She slid the iron gate across the entry into the sacristy, and after locking it, she set down her picnic hamper—emptied of its Camembert cheese and Calvados—and turned toward the pews.

Five women from Agneaux, the tiny commune at the top of the lane, knelt before the altar, the sweet fragrance of incense blending with the smell of cigarette smoke on their clothing. For centuries, women had visited this *chapelle* to plead with the Almighty to protect their husbands, sons, and brothers as they fought for France. Now they battled in prayer even as the men they loved defended their country against Hitler and his ploy to assimilate the French people into his Third Reich.

Gisèle slid her fingers over the amber rosary beads around her neck, gently fingering the ornamented handle of the brass crucifix in the center. A cross that was also a key.

“Secrets can destroy.”

The words of her university professor echoed in her mind. If a secret was powerful enough, her philosophy professor had declared from his lectern, it could demolish an entire army. Or shatter the heart of a family.

The narrow pew creaked as she knelt beside it. Looking up at the crucifix that hung above the altar, she crossed herself and then whispered, “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name.”

Her mind wandered as the familiar prayer tumbled from her lips.

The healing powers of a secret intrigued her, the layers that sheltered families and nations alike. A secret could destroy, like her professor said, but it could also shield a family. Like the tangled hedgerows of brushwood and bramble that fortified the nearby city of Saint-Lô, a secret could keep those you love from destruction.

When did a secret cross over the gray wasteland between protecting one you loved and destroying him?

Last month Prime Minister Chamberlain had evacuated all the British troops he’d sent to France, along with a hundred thousand French soldiers. Michel had been among those evacuated at Dunkirk, and Papa thought his son was safe in England.

But Michel had snuck home after the evacuation, and she prayed God would forgive her for her trespasses, that her secret effort to save her younger brother’s life wouldn’t become a mortal sin.

The women whispered prayers around her, and like many of them, she couldn’t confess her sin to anyone, not even to the priest who came once a week to preside over mass. With the world in turmoil, they all had to guard secrets to protect the men they loved.

Aeroplane engines buzzed in the distance, and she shivered. The German bombers flew over them almost every night now, showing off their power for the citizens of Saint-Lô. Her country refused to be intimidated by their display.

Candles rattled in their bronze holders.

“Deliver us from evil,” she whispered as the planes passed overhead. Then she repeated her words.

Unlike Austria and Denmark, France would fight the Nazis.

When the drone of engines settled into the night, the village women silently slipped out the door. Gisèle rose to attend to her duties.

Just as she was the keeper of Michel’s secret, she was the keeper of the Chapelle d’Agneaux. While other aristocratic women attended their formal gardens or antique collections, her mother had painstakingly cared for the *chapelle* for two decades. Instead of remembering her mother at the cemetery beside the *chapelle*, Gisèle liked to remember her inside these walls. When she was at the château, she unlocked the door of the *chapelle* every morning so villagers could pray, and every night she blew out the vigil candles and swept the stone floors.

Outside in the courtyard, the misty breath of the river Vire stole up and over the stone walls of the *chapelle* and the turrets of the medieval château that stood before her, the home of the Duchant family for more than three hundred years. While her family had lost sons and daughters to the guillotine during the revolution and to the wars that were waged across France, this fortress of stone towers and secret tunnels had sheltered many of her ancestors through wars and storms. It had been a solace for her mother. And for her.

Gisèle quickly crossed the gravel courtyard and hurried into the foyer of the Château d'Epines. Sliding off her red suede pumps, she padded across the marble floor in her silk stockings, the handles of the picnic hamper clutched in her hands. If she could store the hamper before she saw her father, she wouldn't have to lie to him.

She snuck past the staircase that spiraled up to the second floor and the entrance to the drawing room, but before she reached the door to the kitchen, her father called her name. Then she heard the heels of his sturdy Richelieus clapping across the marble floor.

She dropped the hamper and kicked it to the edge of the antique console table.

The sight of her father in his brown cardigan and trousers, the familiar scent of applewood and tobacco, usually comforted her, but tonight the fear in his blue eyes wasn't familiar at all. Papa—known in France as the esteemed Vicomte Jean-François Bouchard Duchant—was never afraid.

She clasped the pumps to her chest. "What is it?"

His gaze wandered toward the tall window by the front door, like he was seeking solace from the *chapelle* outside as well.

"Hitler—" His voice cracked, and he hesitated as if he hadn't yet digested the news he bore.

"Papa?" she whispered.

"Hitler has taken Paris."

Her shoes clattered on the marble and she stumbled backward as if the tiles had shifted under her feet. Her hands flailed, searching until they caught the banister.

Paris was a great city, the greatest in the world. How could it bow to a lunatic?

"But the war—" she stammered. "It has just begun."

Papa's shoulders dropped. "The government in Paris . . . they decided not to fight."

She squeezed the iron banister. How could the Parisians refuse to fight?

If the French resisted together, if they refused to cower . . .

They had to resist.

"What will happen?" she whispered.

"Phillipe is coming to drive you south, to the manor in Lyon."

"I don't care what happens to me." Her voice trembled. "What will happen to France?"

He hesitated again, like he wasn't sure he should tell her the truth. He might still have thought her twelve, but she was twenty-two years old now. A graduate of the prestigious Université de Caen. She was certainly old enough to know the truth.

She willed strength into her voice. If he thought her strong, perhaps he would be honest. "You must tell me."

He seemed to consider her words before he spoke. "Hitler won't stop until he takes all of Europe."

She released the banister to pick up her pumps, her hands trembling. "I can't go to Lyon."

Compassion mixed with the fear in his eyes. "We must leave. Hitler seems determined to take London next, and his army will march through here on their way to the port at Cherbourg."

She rubbed her bare arms. Lyon was ten hours southeast. "If they've taken Paris, it won't be long before the Germans take Lyon too."

“Perhaps.” Papa tugged on the hem of his cardigan. “But Phillipe can take you to Switzerland before then.”

Hitler’s appetite for power seemed insatiable. He’d taken much of Europe now, but she doubted conquering the rest of France and even London would satisfy the German *führer*. With the French government refusing to fight, they needed courageous Frenchmen—former soldiers like Michel—to stop him.

But nine years ago, before her mother died, she’d begged Gisèle to care for Michel. Even though she was just a girl, Gisèle had sworn, on the crucifix of her mother’s rosary, that she would give her very life to watch over her brother. Michel may have been nineteen now, but he was just as headstrong as when he was a boy. How could she protect him from an onslaught of the German army and their bombs?

Papa rang a bell. “Émilie will help you pack your things for the trip.”

Seconds later their housemaid rushed into the hall, her white apron tied over her black uniform and her graying hair pinned back in a neat knot. But instead of stopping, Émilie rushed past Gisèle to the front door, a valise clutched in each of her hands.

Papa called out to her. “Where are you going?”

Émilie set down one of her bags. “My sister just called from Cahagnes. German tanks are moving through the town.”

Papa swore. Cahagnes was just thirty kilometers away.

As the door opened and then rattled shut, Gisèle slipped on her shoes. Before she left, she had to warn Michel that the Germans were near.

“You must pack your things,” Papa said as he glanced at his watch. “Phillipe said he would be here within the half hour.”

Her chest felt as if it might explode. The Germans might kill them if they stayed, but she couldn't leave without telling her brother. He had to flee as well.

"I need more time," she pleaded.

"*Ma chérie*," he said tenderly as he reached for her hand, imploring her. "It is not safe for you to stay here any longer."

Her heart felt as if it might rip into two. How could she make him understand without revealing Michel's secret?

He nudged her toward the steps. "I will meet you in Lyon."

Still she didn't move. "You must come with us, Papa."

"I will follow soon, after I hide the silver and your mother's jewelry. If they arrive while I'm here—" He cleared his throat. "The Germans won't harm a member of the aristocracy."

She nudged her chin up. "Nor will they harm his daughter."

A siren wailed and the floor shook from more aeroplanes sweeping low in the valley. Hair bristled on the back of her neck.

Papa turned her shoulders toward the stairs. "Hurry, Gisèle."

"I can't—"

"You don't have a choice."

She knew he was afraid that he would lose her, just like he had her mother, but if she left right now—

She feared they would both lose Michel.

