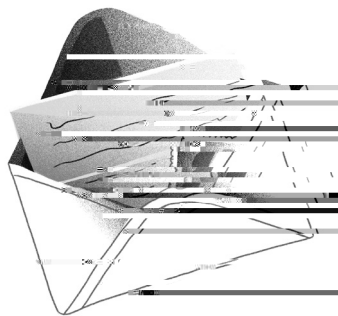


MASTERS OF SILENCE



KATHY KACER



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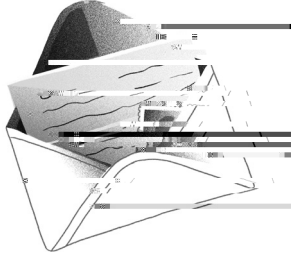
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Chapter 1



April 1940

Helen

The heavy convent door closed behind her with an echoing thud, and Helen found herself standing in a cavernous hall as cold and nearly as dark as the streets outside. She could hear the steeple bell ringing, and she counted twelve loud clangs—midnight. Three nuns stood before her, moving their eyes slowly from her head down to her feet and back again. Helen coughed nervously and placed her small brown suitcase on the floor beside her. Then she removed her

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dark eyes that Helen felt were staring right through her. She shrank back from her gaze.

"Fourteen," Helen's mother replied so ly. "And very mature for her age."

"And the boy?" e nun stood back up and pointed in the direction of Helen's brother.

"Henry is ten." Maman stroked his head as she said this. Henry had begun to cry, his sobs echoing noisily o the stone walls of the convent. It was as if he knew what was coming and was dreading it all at once. "He's small for his age, but very smart, and also very responsible," she added. "It's just that he's tired. We all are."

Helen shuddered. Everyone was so somber. It made her feel even more afraid than she already was. e journey from Germany to here in southern France had taken days—Helen had lost count of how many. And they had barely seen sunlight in all that time; Maman had insisted that they travel mainly at night, walking long hours, and had only accepted a ride once, in a truck with the kind farmer whose wife had clucked sympathetically when she had seen Helen and her younger brother.

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Helen knew what that meant—the part about being blond. It meant that she and her brother didn't look too Jewish, like some of her friends who had dark hair, dark eyes, and prominent noses. These days, looking Jewish was not a good thing.

“And it's good that they both speak French,” the nun continued.

Maman had been born in France and spoke only French to Helen and Henry. They had grown up listening to her stories about her childhood in Paris. Papa had spoken German to them, and Helen could move between the two languages as easily as she could switch from walking to running.

At the thought of her father, Helen shuddered again and squeezed her eyes tightly so that she wouldn't start to cry. How long had it been since she'd seen Papa? Perhaps more than a year! She could never forget the day he had been arrested and taken from their home in Frankfurt. It was seared into her memory like a deep scar. Nazi soldiers had run through the streets, smashing the windows of stores and synagogues, setting fire, and it had been so long since

another desperately, as if standing together could keep them safe. But a locked door meant nothing to the soldiers, who had smashed through it like it was paper, barged in, grabbed Papa, and took him away. It had happened in a moment—right before Helen’s eyes—and she’d had no chance to say good-bye.

“He won’t be any trouble, will he?” the nun asked. Henry was continuing to cry, his echoing wails growing louder.

“He’ll be fine,” Maman said. Her voice sounded strained and not at all convincing, at least not to Helen’s ears. “It may take some time, but he’ll settle,” Maman added. She looked pleadingly at Helen, who moved over to put her arm around her brother’s shoulder. y6(a)112(m)13.

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At first, all Helen could do was nod. She was

her cheekbones, so high and round that they looked like small apples; her one eyebrow that always lied higher than the other; her full, red lips. She knew she would need this mental image to draw on in the days to come. Maman stared back, first at Helen and then at Henry, as if she, too, were memorizing her children's faces.

"I love you both very much," Maman said. "Never forget that."

Finally, she opened the convent door and stepped outside. She looked to the left and to the right. And then, with one last backward glance at Helen, she disappeared into the darkness, and the convent door once again closed with a thud.