

MASTERS OF SILENCE



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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 hat, smoothing down her short curls.

“How old is she?” the tallest of the three asked, leaning forward. She had a long, narrow face with

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

“Fourteen,” Helen’s mother replied softly. “And very mature for her age.”

“And the boy?” The 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 off 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. The 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.

“It’s good that they both have blond hair,” the nun continued, studying the children with pursed lips and crossed arms. “It will make it easier if there are ever any questions.”

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 fires and attacking Jewish men and women who were walking outside, *just minding their own business*. There had been sounds of gunfire on the streets and people screaming. Papa had locked the door to their home and the four of them had stood together in a corner, clutching one

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. He looked so small and helpless, she thought. But even though she was trying to act like a helpful older sister, she felt just as defenseless.

“If he can’t adjust, he may have to go somewhere else,” the nun said.

Maman’s eyes grew round with fear. “But there is nowhere else,” she whispered.

After Papa had been taken, Maman knew they weren’t going to be safe staying in their home. The soldiers had arrested only Jewish men, but Maman had said, “Families like ours may be next.” And so they had packed a few things and left for the town of Kronberg, not far from Frankfurt. Maman knew

a Catholic family who lived there, the Webers. Frau Weber had once worked for Papa, and she and her husband were willing to take them in. And there they waited for things to get better. But instead, everything had gotten worse. Adolf Hitler, “the evil one,” as Maman called him, declared more restrictions against Jewish citizens. Orders, proclamations, rules, laws; they all meant the same thing—Jews couldn’t do anything that others could do. And they could even be arrested if they were discovered, especially if they were found to be hiding with a Christian family.

After a while, Frau Weber spoke to Maman. “We’re willing to let you stay, Frau Rosenthal,” she had said. “We can say you are a servant here in the house. But the children ...” She glanced at Helen and Henry as she spoke, lowering her voice and moving closer to Maman. “If our home were searched, it would be impossible to explain why they’re here. It’s not that we wouldn’t like to help. We would. What Hitler is doing to the Jews ... it’s dreadful. But you must understand that it’s terribly dangerous for us to protect all of you.” That part was true. Christian citizens were in danger of being punished if they helped their Jewish friends and neighbors.

It was actually Frau Weber who had told Maman about the convent in southern France—a place that took in Jewish children without asking many

questions. The next thing Helen knew, Maman was packing a few things for her and her brother, and they were on their way.

Helen looked over at the three nuns. The tall one who had done the talking was clearly in charge. The one on her left had a kind face that reminded Helen of Frau Becker, her teacher back in Frankfurt when she and her Jewish friends had still been allowed to attend school. When Helen looked at her, the nun smiled, and her eyes lit up and crinkled in the corners like a fan being folded up. But the nun on the right looked as if she already hated Helen, even though she didn't even know her. Her nose was scrunched up, and she pressed a tissue against it as if there were a bad smell in the room.

The tall nun was saying something else. "Do they have documents?" she asked. That's when Maman reached under her blouse and into the waistband of her skirt, pulling some papers out and handing them over to the nun.

"I didn't want anyone to find these," she said. "These are their identity documents." As she handed the papers over to the tall nun, Helen could just make out the red letter J that was stamped on each of their papers—the letter that meant that they were Jewish, the letter that had forced them to be on the run.

It was still so confusing to Helen: Why was being

Jewish was such a terrible thing? Why had people gone from being kind to being cruel? Why had Papa been taken, along with so many others? Why? Why? Why? None of it made any sense.

“It’s time to say your good-byes.” The tall nun was talking once more. “We will take over from here.”

Good-bye? Helen’s heart began to beat hard in her chest and she suddenly felt light-headed, like the time she had almost passed out after cutting her knee on some glass and seeing the blood. She bit her lower lip and swallowed hard, trying to steady herself. Then she watched as her mother first bent to talk to Henry.

“You must be very brave,” Maman said. She reached out to hug him. He clung to her so hard that the tall nun had to untangle his arms from around Maman’s neck. That made Henry cry louder. He screamed out for her to stay and struggled to pull free of the nun, who continued to hold his arms. And then suddenly, he fell silent and went limp as a rag doll. His chin fell to his chest, and his shoulders slumped forward. Helen thought it was almost worse to see him this way. Shouting and begging had meant that he was fighting. Now he looked like a broken animal.

Maman’s face was grayer than ash by the time she came to Helen and placed both hands gently on her shoulders. “Take care of your brother,” she said. “You’ll need to rely on one another from now on.”

At first, all Helen could do was nod. She was afraid that if she said anything, she would break down. Instead, she reached up and placed her hand against Maman's cheek. Her mother pressed her own hand over Helen's and closed her eyes. "Where are you going to go?" Helen finally croaked out.

"Back to Kronberg," Maman said. "I'll wait there for news of your father."

"Why can't we wait with you?" Helen knew the answer even before she asked.

Maman sighed; she had answered this question many times on their journey here. "You know I can't protect you out there," she replied.

If Maman was trying to protect her, then why did this feel like a punishment? Helen wondered. And for what? She had done nothing wrong. She glanced over again at the tall nun, still holding Henry by the arms. She, too, wanted to scream and beg Maman not to leave them behind. But she knew it would do no good. Instead, she asked, "When will you come back?"

Maman shook her head.

That's when the tall nun cleared her throat. "It's best that you go, Madam Rosenthal," she said. "Lingering only makes it harder."

Maman sighed again. Helen stared intently at her mother's face, trying to memorize every detail: the brown freckle close to the side of her mouth;

her cheekbones, so high and round that they looked like small apples; her one eyebrow that always lifted 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.