

In The Silence

James Andrew Edske

Chapter ~ Nine

It was dark and after nine before Scott could go home. He spent four hours driving around trying to get a grip on himself. After pulling the car into the garage, he slowly tried to sneak in the rear door. Sue was sitting on the sofa in the front room, ready to confront him about another broken promise to the children. She was in a long bathrobe, her long blond hair still wet from a shower. Seeing her, Scott thought about the danger he had put her in. The mattress and the video camera in the corner of the storage room made him quiver. He hated himself for being a coward.

Sue's hurt and disappointment evaporated when she saw the blood all over the front of his shirt. She also noticed how messed up and dirty Scott's suit was. Alarmed, she jumped up and ran over to him. "What happened? Did you get into an accident? Are you okay?"

Unable to answer, Scott put his arms around her and pulled her to him. As she laid her head on his shoulder, Scott felt her wet hair on his neck, smelled the shampoo and her freshness. They embraced, still in love after eighteen plus years of marriage. They seemed to be the ideal family, husband, wife and two children. They were active in their church, respected by the community, but now were on the verge of destruction.

During the long discerning hours that Scott had driven around, he tried to figure a way out, but came up blank. One thing he did decide upon, never to tell Sue about the jeopardy he had put their family in. Sue believed that her husband made sure that all the statistics, polls, and facts were accurate. That his working late through so many nights was to assure the truth was compiled correctly. This seemed a fair tradeoff for all the time he missed away from his family and special events.

It was only because of Sue that Scott attended church. Now Scott's weak faith was being tested. Standing there in doubt and fear, Scott knew what he would have to do. *I will go along with whatever the department needs. I have to keep my family out of harm's way. All I ever did was to alter the truth a little. A few small lies are not worth my family's welfare. God, you leave me no other choice. I do whatever. I just hope that Mr. Henderson needs me after we find the computer infiltrator.* Paul let go of Sue and pushed her back so he could talk, "I'm sorry that I missed the school play."

Like the many times she had done so in the past, she replied, "I took care of it. I explained to them how important your job is and that next time you would make it."

Next time! There may never be a next time. A cold chill went down Scott's spine.

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"What happened to you?" Sue asked with deep concern. "Did you get into an accident? It looks like your nose got bloodied."

"I tripped on the parking bumper and fell into the car when I left work."

Sue looked at his clothes and asked, "How did you get so dirty?"

"I rolled around on the ground a little. It was dark and I must have been knocked out. It's no big deal."

Sue took Scott by the hand into the kitchen and had him sit in a chair. She went to the sink and turned on the water. As she reached for the first aid supplies above the sink, her robe came undone. Her exposed white flesh made Scott think of Kirk and the mattress and the video camera again.

The warm cloth felt good as Sue cleaned Scott's face and the blood from under his nose. She straddled him on the chair, uninhibited and still very much in love. Scott was a good provider and although she wished he could spend more time with the children, she was pleased with the lifestyle his position afforded them. However, she would give it all up if Scott could spend more time at home. As Sue ran her fingers through Scott's light brown wavy hair, she felt a big bump. She needed the truth. "Scott, what really happened tonight? When you didn't show up at the kid's play, I knew something was wrong. You said that you would be there no matter what. It looks like you were in a fight."

Scott looked at his beautiful, innocent wife in her half-opened robe. He was terrified for her! "Honey, whatever happens," Scott swallowed hard. "I just want you to know that nothing in this world could make me as happy as you have. Ever since that first day my eyes found you in the college library, I have been living a dream, a dream that I don't deserve."

Sue couldn't respond. She trusted her intuition, something was seriously wrong and she knew it had to do with the Department of Statistics. She never tried to pass judgment, but some fifteen plus years ago at a DOS function Mr. Henderson professed to be an atheist and then quoted Scripture. Sue recognized him to be a misguided man and probably evil. She now saw the fear in Scott's eyes and started to weep inside and out.

"It will be okay," Scott said. He attempted to sound reassuring but the memory of Mr. Henderson's threats robbed any assertiveness from his crackled voice.

Sue wiped the tears from her eyes, knowing that she would not get any more answers. She never knew exactly what Scott did at the department. After all the years of her prying for information, she knew not to waste her time at another useless attempt. Sue changed the subject. "The children may still be awake if you

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want to go say good night."

"I'll do that," said Scott, as he lifted Sue from his lap.

Scott slowly pushed the door open to Chad's room and a small voice asked, "Is that you, Daddy?"

"Yes it's me. I'm sorry that I missed your play."

"It's okay. Mommy told us how important it is at your work and maybe next time. I love you Daddy."

Scott's knees weakened as he realized how often Chad had heard the maybe next time excuse. So many broken promises for a seven year old to have to endure. Scott canted to the side and slid down the door jam. He plopped down outside his youngest one's door. Too ashamed, too weak, and so frightened he couldn't stand.

The door across the hall opened. Polly saw her dad sitting on the floor. "Daddy, are you okay?" she asked, rubbing her eyes.

Scott looked up at his other love and joy. "Yes, I'm fine. I just feel so bad that I missed the play tonight."

Though only nine years old, Polly knew there was more to it. She went over, sat on her dad's outstretched legs and hugged him. "When I said my prayers tonight I asked Jesus to take care of you," she whispered into her daddy's ear.

Chad's door opened and he joined in the hug. The three became one in a bond that was more than blood. Both children hugged tighter, trying to pull a part of their daddy inside of them. It was the same hug pictured and felt by soldiers as they said goodbye to their families before going off to battle—the infinite hug that all too often becomes the last.

Scott again apologized. "I'm so sorry that I missed the play. I had even planned for us all to go out for ice cream afterward."

"Ice cream," echoed the two children.

"Yes. Next time I will be there and then we can all go out for a treat afterwards."

"Oh, next time." Both voices echoed disappointment.

Scott had let his children down all too many times and wished he could change. The next words just flowed spontaneously. "Let's go get some ice cream."

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"Now!" shouted the two exuberant children.

"Yes, now. Go get dressed."

At the restaurant, Sue regarded her children over the rim of her coffee cup with hot fudge all over their happy faces. Scott had squeezed between them in the orange vinyl booth and listened to each small detail of the play. Sue did not join in. It was out of character for Scott to take the children out for a sugary treat late at night. Something was so wrong! Sue silently prayed and rubbed her foot on Scott's leg under the table.

The children fell asleep on the drive home from the all night restaurant and Sue squeezed and rubbed Scott's hand. Scott carried Chad into his bed. Polly groggily followed. Sue helped both out of their clothes and recited their usual bedtime prayer. When she returned to the master bedroom, Scott was already in bed. She said nothing as she undressed, washed herself and slipped into a sexy nightgown. She was a woman both meek and wanton. She knew when to be demure yet was determinedly confident, knowing exactly her place in the family. God had empowered her to be the moral foundation for her children and gave her the grace of true womanhood. She had an aura that kept Scott spellbound. Albeit many a feminist envied her for having the very essence of womanhood they often derided.

Sue slid into bed. Scott turned and kissed her. They lay flesh against flesh, but on this night the uncertainty of the future precluded passion. Scott rolled over and pretended to sleep but Sue knew better. She counted each of the five different times he got up to just go look upon the children. If it were not for the darkness, Sue could not have hidden the tears that flowed throughout the night and drenched her pillow.

Out of character, Scott got up early and helped Sue with the morning ritual of getting the children off to school. Sue loaded the kids into the van and wanted to hurry back home but this was a day she was going to help out on a field trip.

Scott wandered around the house and kids bedrooms and then got out the family album and gazed over each page. In less than twenty four hours he would be making a new contract with DOS. If Mr. Henderson refused his offer, Scott would have to do something, but had no idea what. Scott wished he hadn't been a draft dodger and had learned self defense and preservation of life and liberty.

Early Wednesday standing at the red steel door Scott drew a deep breath and knocked. The electric latch growled as it moved to unlock the door. Mr. Henderson was sitting behind his massive wood desk in his leather executive chair, Kirk was at his side. As Scott approached the desk, Mr. Henderson laid the newspaper down that they both were reading. The headline read: **FAULTY GAS LINE CAUSED SENATOR'S PLANE TO EXPLODE.**

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Mr. Henderson glanced up and asked, "Well Scott, have you made your decision? Are you with us?"

"Yes, whatever the department needs, I'm with you."

"Good. I want you to work on a big project. I need you to continue feeding out false information about all these small upstart churches. There is one in Texas and one small Christian orphanage in Oregon you can start with. Get the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms in the fake news. I want the ATF to make it one of their missions to root out orthodox Christians and Jews. Make sure you exonerate the government, just like that case in Northern Idaho where the U.S. Marshals shot that white separatist wife, his son and their dog."

Scott was sickened. That was the only project on which he had altered information that resulted in a death of a mother and son. Scott took another deep breath, preparing to say he would not be involved with any bombings or killings but Kirk butted in first. "Before you start on that smear project, I need you to remember the name of that guy that broke into our encrypted data line Friday night."

"It was David with some Irish last name," Scott replied harshly not looking at Kirk.

"You'd better try harder than that," ordered Kirk.

"We do need to find that computer infiltrator. He could destroy our whole goal here at the department. You must cooperate completely with Kirk!" ordered Mr. Henderson.

Scott wanted to know exactly what the goal of the department was. He had no real problem getting a few key people elected to office and changing a few statistics to make a better society, but over the past few years, as DOS grew, so did Mr. Henderson's power. It was an evil power that was corrupting the department from within. Kirk was a different story. From the very beginning, Kirk acted like he was above the law and the relationship with Mr. Henderson turned out to be a volatile mixture. It was a marriage made in hell. Biting his tongue, Scott replied with a simple, "I'll help find David, that hacker guy."

"Good," said Mr. Henderson. "I want the two of you to get on that right away. Make it your first priority."

"Tom might recall more of what we read on the monitor last Friday," Scott suggested, trying to show eagerness yet not really wanting to help or be near Kirk.

"Oh, you must not have heard. Tom died in a car accident last night," Kirk said nonchalantly.

Scott could not believe his ears. He had worked side by side with Tom for over five

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years. Tom was more than a coworker; he was his fishing buddy and friend. Now he was dead! In a state of shock, Scott looked at Kirk hoping he had not heard right. Kirk had an evil grin on his face.

Frightened and dazed, Scott returned to his desk and sat in a stupor, not even noticing as the other employees came on the afternoon shift. The mood on the whole third basement level was somber as the word spread about the death of Tom and his teenage son. The rumor was that on Tuesday morning, when Tom met with Mr. Henderson and Kirk, almost everyone heard the shouting and accusations. Tom stormed out of Mr. Henderson's office, went to his desk, gathered some things and left. Now he and his son were dead!

Running to the bathroom, Scott slammed open a stall door and threw up into the toilet. At the sink he splashed cold water onto his face; he looked at himself in the mirror and asked himself. *Who am I? Just some worthless coward who is afraid to stand up for what is right? I've known what was going on down here in the department for years.* Scott's mind went blank as he looked again into his own eyes in the mirror. He was not proud of what he saw. Scott got sick again.

Scott was leaning back over the toilet when he heard the door open. The footsteps of someone walking across the tile floor toward him echoed off the concrete walls. He trembled with the knowledge that he was not a soldier, not capable to stand up and defend himself, let alone protect his family. A bullet to the back of his head would be a reprieve. He was a man who had sold his soul. Only through the strength of God can a man stand tall at the time of his death, and that man must live for principle and truth. This was not Scott's case.

"Scott, this is Dan. Are you okay?"

Scott mumbled, "Yes."

Dan whispered through the stall door, "Scott, I'm leaving the department at lunch and will never be back. We have been friends a long time and I know I can trust you. I just wanted to say good-bye."

Scott came out from the stall, bent over and looked under the rest of the stalls to make sure they were alone. "What do you mean you're leaving?"

Dan continued to whisper, "Things have gotten out of hand here. When I was recruited four years ago, I bought into Mr. Henderson's philosophy that the news media was controlling what people thought by the spin they put on a story, that they conducted polls in a way to get the results they wanted. Back then changing a few things on the wire service seemed right. But now Mr. Henderson is controlling elections and the way people think. Right now he has me working on a project that is going to kill millions of people."

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"What are you talking about?"

Just as Dan started to answer the restroom door swung open. One of the newest employees came in and used the urinal. Scott and Dan washed their hands silently until the new recruit left.

Dan continued. "Mr. Henderson has me working on this project all by myself. I'm to release all these phony poll results over the wire showing that the majority of people are in favor of letting terminally ill people kill themselves. It's this dying with dignity thing you keep reading about. Mr. Henderson is obsessed with it. You should see the outline he wants me to work within. All you are going to see in the media is how humane and right assisted suicide is. I know he has someone else working on releasing facts on how costly it is on society to keep terminally ill people living because I read a statistic last week that it cost more to keep a bipolar patient living than what the average man earns in a lifetime. I don't know what statistic or poll to believe any longer. And the crux is, I'm done with the spinning."

"Dan, I think you are overreacting. We have only swayed a few polls, and maybe we did help a few people get elected into office, but they were the right people for the job."

"Scott, wake up. What project are you working on?"

"Mr. Henderson wants me to keep all these upstart churches in the press. Only the radical ones that preach the fundamental principles."

"Scott, take a look at the whole picture. First it's the small churches, next it will be organized religion. Don't you get it? While I am feeding the media how good death with dignity is someone else is releasing all these statistics about how expensive it is to keep mentally challenged people living. And you are..." Dan took a deep breath and looked around. "You are working at destroying the moral fibers that hold a free society together. The basic principles of the Ten Commandments."

Scott did not like what he heard. He was not part of some evil plan to destroy Christianity. He was not like others that wanted to rewrite history and deny that the country's greatness came about because it was founded on Christian principle. Although not a strong believer, he had to defend himself. "Dan, you're wrong. I would quit right now if I thought our department was out to destroy the foundation of our country."

Dan looked Scott straight in the eyes. "Then leave with me after our shift. I am going to pick my kids up at school and then go get my wife and get far away from all the evil brewing down here."

After everything that had happened, Scott had been vacillating over what to do. He

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liked Dan's defiant stand of leaving DOS and getting far away. "Dan, I need some time to get things in order. Could you wait a week or so and I'll leave with you?"

"And end up like Tom and his son?" whispered Dan.

"What are you talking about?" Scott replied with panic.

"You know how to check what the department changed on the wire service over the last few nights. Go read the changes for yourself." Dan quickly exited the restroom. Scott stood in front of the mirror, unable to see himself. It had become so easy to lie to himself over the years.

Back at his desk, Scott gazed at the clock on the wall—time was still on his side. His eyes lowered to the photo of Sue and his children. He had to know! Scott slowly typed in his password. The monitor instantly went to full screen. He searched backwards through the information that had come across the wire service into DOS Tuesday and found the initial story.

TOM BARKER AND TEENAGE SON KILLED WHEN THEIR CAR REAR-ENDED A SEMI TRUCK AND BURST INTO FLAMES. POLICE REPORTS INDICATE BRAKE FAILURE. EYEWITNESS REPORTED CAR SWERVED AROUND SEVERAL CARS FIRST. NO SKID MARKS.

Scott took a deep breath as he paged forward to verify that the story had indeed been changed. He found the entry that the department had changed on the wire service Tuesday while he was off. The new entry read:

TOM BARKER AND TEENAGE SON KILLED WHEN THEIR CAR REAR-ENDED A SEMI TRUCK AND BURST INTO FLAMES. INITIAL POLICE REPORT INDICATES ALCOHOL WAS INVOLVED. SEVERAL EYEWITNESSES TESTIFIED TO CAR SWERVING ALL OVER ROAD.

Mr. Henderson had Kirk rework the brakes. Like Scott, most all of the department had convinced themselves that they were not part of anything evil. Some employees went home distraught with what little they did know and terrified over what they thought they knew. Scott just sat at his desk numb, staring at the photo of his own family. Truth was staring back at him. Scott was terrified at the raw and ugly reality that he and so many others deny. That evil exists—it does.