

In The Silence

James Andrew Edske

Chapter ~ Two

Paul wiped a swath through the fog that had built up inside the windshield, then peered out and strained his eyes. *I hope David gets through soon. Maybe I should go check. No, I'd better not. He wants me to stay in the truck.*

Twenty minutes later Paul wiped the fog off the window again. There was no sign of movement from the concrete building; the door was almost closed and the light from inside had become dim. *There must be heat inside that building. David is probably fine. But it looks like his flashlight is getting weak. Yeah, I'm sure he's okay. If I don't see something in awhile, I'll go . . .*

David lay huddled between a generator and bank of batteries. The uncontrollable shaking had ceased but his hands had become numb, his mind was not clear and he had become oblivious to his dangerous situation.

It was also getting cold in the truck; Paul got some extra clothes out of his suitcase and put them on for a second layer. He cracked the driver's door so he could stuff a lightweight windbreaker into the weather stripping along the top and down the sides; halting the flow of cold air coming through the broken window. Then he pulled a pair of socks over his hands to serve as mittens. It didn't take long before he was somewhat comfortable and started to pray. *Please God, give David the strength to forgive me for what I did to his name. Don't let the sin of hate destroy his soul. Please show him the light you have shown me through your divine love. And just let our friendship turn into . . .*

Paul lost sight of passing time and leaned his head back. *Boy, blocking out the cold air sure helped. I'm finally getting warm. I'll rest my eyes for just five minutes. David should be through soon.* Paul more than rested. While he slept the rain and wind let up and the night sky was now almost clear. Then, a sudden and unusual gust of wind from a different direction, snapped at the windbreaker in the window waking him. Immediate panic hit Paul when he looked at his watch. *It's almost midnight! Something must have gone wrong.*

Paul flung the door open and a frigid blast of night air hit his face. The brilliance of the full moon aided his vision as he ran toward the bunker, but there was no light shining from inside. Reaching the building, Paul yanked the door all the way open. As he stood there in the unlit doorway, his eyes began to adjust and his heart raced. He yelled, "David!" There was no response. He yelled again, "David, are you in here?"

Straining to see into the pitch black room, Paul could make out some red lights glowing from equipment on one wall. He noticed a dim blue rectangular light sitting on a shelf on the other wall. It was David's laptop computer. Now standing in the

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center of the room, he knew not to reach around. He heard the low hum of electricity that David had warned him about. Slowly and carefully, Paul exited the building.

The moonlight enabled him to search around the outside of the building. "David, where are you?" All he saw was a huge fuel tank mounted to the side of the bunker. Paul checked around the landing site and then looked up all three antenna towers. *Where could he have gone?* Paul backtracked while calling for David and worked himself back to the truck. *David must have gone down the road for help.* Paul opened the truck door and got inside, he tried to convince himself that everything was okay.

After five minutes Paul lost control. He raised both fists above his head and screamed, "Where in the hell is David?" and then slammed both fists on the dash. The glove box sprang open, startling him. Pulling the socks from his hands, Paul rummaged through the glove compartment and found a flashlight. The flashlight produced a momentarily orange glow, then nothing. "Give me a break," Paul said in despair as he tossed the light across the seat and went back to digging in the glove box. Feeling around, he found a book of matches.

With renewed zeal and a pounding heart, Paul sprang from the truck and ran to the bunker. Once inside, he struck a match and immediately saw David curled up between some equipment. Squatting down, he held the match next to David's face. The match burnt out. Paul lit another and felt David's face, cool and clammy! He leaned in closer to listen for breathing but could not hear over the low hum of the equipment.

Grabbing David's hand and shaking it, Paul yelled, "David, can you hear me?" There was no response. David's hand felt ice cold! Paul started to rub David's hand and thanked God when he felt David's finger move. Then he heard a weak moan. Paul knew that time was crucial and that he had to get David's wet clothes off.

He ran full speed to the truck, opened the door, grabbed his suitcase and hardly broke stride as he headed back. But just as he reached the concrete building, a pain shot into his right ankle. His foot had caught one of the guy cables. He went flying through the air; the suitcase went sliding toward the cliff. Taking the force of the ground with his hands and arms, Paul tucked, rolled and managed to scramble back to his feet. Seeing the suitcase just resting on the cliff's edge, he cautiously approached toward the cliff and carefully grabbed the handle.

Back inside the small building, he felt something running down his arm. It was blood from when he had tripped. He lit a match and concentrated on getting David into some dry clothes. He slipped his hands under David's armpits and pulled him from between the equipment and toward the steel door where there was light from the moon. Paul took his jacket off, laid it on the floor right inside the doorway and then pulled David onto the jacket.

David started to respond a little and was able to sit up while Paul stripped off his wet

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clothes. There were red spots all over David's white shirt, blood stains from the gash in Paul's forearm. Paul pulled the undershirt off, ripped a long two-inch wide swatch from it, and wrapped that around his injured arm. He then retrieved the suitcase just outside the doorway. Opening it, he dug for something dry and warm. There was a sweat suit. It was a little small but, after a struggle he finally got David into it.

Now in dry clothing, David had become a little more coherent and started to shiver. Paul squatted behind him and began to massage his shoulders and chest. "David, don't freeze to death on me. You can't go to sleep. We need to get you up and walking around. No matter what happens to our friendship, I'll always love you. Come on David, talk to me. Come on, David."

Paul watched the steam of David's breath get shorter. Putting his cheek against the back of David's cold neck, he knew David had to be warmer. Turning his wrist toward the moon, he read his watch: **1:15**. Paul pulled David in tighter against him and started praying out loud. A voice in the back of his mind seemed to say. *There's a time to pray. There's a time to take action. Get with it!*

Paul dug for some more clothes, pulling what he could onto David, but it was not enough. David was unresponsive. Paul got his suitcase and leaned it up against some equipment and then propped David against the suitcase. All the time he was in the bunker he kept noticing the blue glow from the screen of the computer. He carefully moved through the dark toward the shelf. The message on the screen read: **YOU HAVE PENETRATED A HIGH SECURITY UNITED STATES DATA BASE. UNDER PENALTY OF LAW, IDENTIFY YOURSELF**

Standing there, he kept rereading the message. *If I identify myself, I can get help. But David said he could go to prison for twenty years if he got caught with this Clipper Chip thing. I have been enough trouble. All I need now is to send David to jail. But if I don't do something, David could die. He might not make it till morning. I can save him or send him to prison . . . Please help me, God.* Paul looked from the screen to his almost comatose friend, then back to the computer. He stood there and read the message on the screen over and over; immobile and transfixed as precious time dwindled away. Finally, Paul moved his hands to the keyboard and typed: **NEED HELP! MAN IS FREEZING.**

Nothing happened! Then Paul read the pop-down-menu off the screen: **F2 TO SEND MESSAGE.** Paul found the F2 key.

Seventy-five air miles away Scott read the distress signal off his monitor, picked the phone up on his desk, called security, and typed all at the same time.

YOU HAVE PENETRATED A HIGH SECURITY UNITED STATES DATA BASE. FOR THE SECOND TIME, IDENTIFY YOURSELF UNDER PENALTY OF LAW.

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MY NAME IS PAUL. I NEED HELP IMMEDIATELY!

HOW DID YOU GET INTO THIS COMPUTER? THIS IS A TOP-SECRET GOVERNMENT DEPT. IDENTIFY YOURSELF IMMEDIATELY. WE HAVE YOUR NAME AS DAVID McCLINTOCK, NOT PAUL. WHICH IS CORRECT?

As Paul tried to type his reply, the message on the screen kept flashing: **CHARGE BATTERY. CHARGE BATTERY.** He frantically hit at the keys but they were locked up; there was no response. The display started to dim. The computer emitted a low pitch hum, then a click and then went dead. "Damn!" Paul moved back through the cold darkness. He sat next to David and wrapped his arms around him. David's body had cooled down another degree or two!

The gray cloud of death was closing in, a nightmare Paul had experienced before. Some twenty years before, it was he who was wet, cold, and near death. Paul had only thirty days left on his tour in Vietnam and the platoon was doing some routine scouting. They were hiking up a trail when suddenly they got ambushed. The point man got shot two times and fell back, rolling down the hill. The radio man turned around and got shot several times in the back. Then his head exploded. Paul was next in line. He turned and tried to take cover but was blocked.

Eddie, the newest recruit, had dropped his M16 and just stood frozen with fear in the cross-hairs of the enemy's rifle. Paul grabbed Eddie by the shoulder, spun him around, and started to push on his pack. Sergeant Gardner and the medic hit the dirt and crawled into the underbrush. All Paul could think of was getting Eddie back down the trail. Suddenly, there was a small burning sensation in Paul's shoulder, and then his left arm went limp.

From the bottom of the hill, wounded and with the specter of his own death pushed aside, Paul knew two of his comrades were still pinned down by the enemy, up the trail. With only one rifle, Paul assessed the situation. Eddie was too green to circle around the back side of the hill. The gunfire grew more sporadic and from Paul's vantage point he could tell the enemy was working toward the sergeant and medic.

Paul had Eddie load a new clip into his M16, then told him to stay put. Then Paul took back his rifle, with his one good arm headed off to the right into the thick jungle. Through the middle of a waist-deep cascading stream, Paul worked himself up the backside of the hill. The sound of the water flowing over the rock covered him; the splashing cold water numbed his shot-up shoulder.

Once at the top of the hill, Paul crawled into position toward the now sporadic bursts of gunfire. Using all his strength, he got to a crouched position and half stood with his rifle sandwiched between his body and right arm, his left arm dangling at his side. With his finger on the trigger, he felt like an animal, a predator ready to spring

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on its prey. As the blood in his head beat against his skull, Paul emptied the whole clip! There was no return fire.

Sergeant Gardner ran up the trail, and started popping shots into the enemy, making sure they were all dead. The medic ran up, threw his first aid pack down, and tore away Paul's wet pants. Paul was still squeezing the trigger, unaware that it was all over and that his right leg was gushing blood. This was the third time Paul had experienced a killing frenzy, a sick feeling mingled with some sort of victorious enjoyment. Life seemed upside down—living didn't seem as important as the victory. They had won this round. The stench of death hung in the air.

With the radioman and his radio being shot up, they'd have to spend the night in the jungle. After dark an unusual cool mist settled into the jungle and Paul started shaking uncontrollably. It could have been shock, or the side effect of the morphine, but it didn't matter, Paul was wet and the temperature was dropping. Sergeant Gardner realized that Paul would not make it till dawn unless he took action. It was a risk, a sure way of drawing in Charlie, yet Eddie and the medic took the orders without hesitation. After building a fire they both stood watch—honored to guard a hero. The heat from the fire warmed Paul, the last shot of morphine calmed him, the shaking ceased, and Paul dozed. The last thing he could remember was Sergeant Gardner's arm around him, comforting and protecting him.