

In The Silence

James Andrew Edske

Chapter ~ Five

Many years ago David had been Paul's closest friend, now they were far apart. It was hard for Paul to sort things out in his own mind, let alone try to explain himself to someone else. He had heard hundreds of different reasons why people were homosexual and he was still unsure. How could he try to explain it? He'd tried with his own father and the outcome was a disaster.

Paul decided to try a different approach, hoping to avoid another conflict. He never liked coming across as the enlightened, self-righteous sinner who had found redemption. It reminded him of smokers who had quit, or alcoholics who took the cure. They would make it their place to cure the world of the ills they themselves had once suffered. Paul promised himself he would never be a Bible-toting preacher out to set the world straight. He was sure of one thing though, he wanted to let people know about the divine love of Jesus and hoped that before he died he could at least convert a few lost souls. Leaning forward, Paul scooted to the edge of the tailgate, and swung his legs as he searched for words. "Ask me any questions you want. I'll answer them with no excuses and no preaching."

David saw before him a handsome man. Paul was still trim, with a muscular build, and even had all his wavy blond hair. How could he have been with another man? The thought of it almost made him ill. "When was the first time you were with another guy?"

"When I was twenty-two." Paul answered.

"How did it happen?" David asked.

"I was going to college on the GI Bill. I wanted to play football, but the wound to my leg, along with no feelings in my left arm prevented that. I was having emotional problems and was not sure of what I wanted out of life. I could barely afford college, so I advertised for a roommate on campus and we fell in love."

With a disgusted look on his face, David spat on the ground. "Please, don't call it love."

"Okay. I was twenty-two when I met Jeffrey."

This still didn't clear things up for David but he gave up. Instead of pursuing it, he asked, "Why'd you become a priest?"

"I was in a group therapy class for post war trauma vets and at one class they had as a guest speaker, a priest, Monsignor Charles Grant. The first thing I noticed about him was that he was partially crippled and could have not weighed more than one hundred and ten pounds. Anyway, as he talked to us about the forgiveness and the love of

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Jesus, I was completely overtaken by the way this frail thread of a man spoke. I found out what church he was at and I started going to hear his sermons every week."

"That's why you became a priest?"

"Not exactly, but it is what precipitated the end of a four-year relationship I was in."

"With this Jeffrey guy?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"The more I went to church to hear Monsignor Grant speak, the more militant Jeffrey became. He wanted to boast about our commitment and insisted that we should educate the public that our lifestyle was right and common and that anyone that didn't accept us was wrong. He was becoming the same as the homophobic. He too was intolerant. I just wanted to stay in the closet, so to speak."

David thought he had it figured out. "So it was this Monsignor Grant's preaching that let you know that all the homosexuals are going to hell? And that is why you broke it off?"

Recognizing ignorance in David's words, Paul chose his next words carefully this time. "No, not really. I never did hear Monsignor Grant give a sermon on homosexuality."

"Then what caused you to break up with Jeffrey?"

"The more I learned about Jesus and how he wanted us to be like him, I just couldn't try to convince other people to live like me. I couldn't condemn them but at the same time I couldn't actively support the gay lifestyle. It made Jeffrey mad that I would not come out. He insisted that I support the movement and I just couldn't do that. Then Jeffrey left me."

"Were you hurt that he left you?" David was stunned that he was actually asking this question.

"Yes, very much." Paul paused as he thought of Jeffrey. "We were very good for each other and I loved him very much."

David cringed at the word love, but this time said nothing about it. Tired of speculating, he asked, "Then what happened?"

"I changed my major at college to theology and starting praying more, sometimes two or more hours a day. The next thing I knew I was being ordained a priest," Paul said, with a glow of happiness upon his face.

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"Do you ever see Jeffrey anymore and try to show him the way?"

"No, he died of AIDS two years ago." There was silence as reality hit home.

David thought that he should say that he was sorry or something, but deep in some dark corner of his mind he actually felt good that another homosexual was dead. Now craving to hear Paul condemn homosexuals, he asked, "Now that you are an expert about God, where do you think he sent your friend Jeffrey, heaven or hell? Wasn't he a homosexual, right to the end?"

"Who am I to say how God is going to judge anyone? But I can say that toward the end of my relationship with Jeffrey, hatred was poisoning his soul and he became more militant. Jeffrey wanted the pleasures of earth and would not accept the conditions that could set him free. Anyway, it's too complex and I thought we were going to stay away from religion. Neither of us wants a repeat of this morning," Paul said.

"See? That's your problem, Paul. You can't say God is going to send all the gays to hell. I have heard other preachers say it, but because you were one, you can't."

Wishing to avoid another physical confrontation Paul picked his words carefully. "David, there are two small groups of people that are evil and are spreading hate. Their reckless condemnation of each other has drawn in millions of innocent individuals and divided decent people. This is how Satan gains his strength, he divides, and then conquers. One group preaches all homosexuals are going to hell. They are bigots who call themselves Christians and are equal to the truculent homosexuals who insist God condones their lifestyle. Both groups ignore the divine love Jesus Christ told us to live by."

"You're losing me again," David said. "Are you saying that militant homosexuals and bigoted Christians are the same in God's eyes?"

"Amen!" Paul responded, now standing face to face with David.

"So you're telling me hate is the devil's tool, and love is what Jesus wants."

Paul again responded with a loud, "Amen," delighted that he might be getting through to David.

David felt both threatened and angry. "So my hating homosexuals is wrong and Jesus does not like that?"

Paul recognized David's hostility, something he had tried to avoid. Then in the stillness he heard something, a slight rumbling coming from down the mountain road. "Do you hear something?"

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David cupped his hands around his ears, listened hard and then said, "Sounds like a truck or something coming up the road."

The low crawling noise was definitely a truck winding its way up the steep road. After a few minutes, a white pickup rounded the last corner and the driver waved.

"It's Bill, the guy I work for," David said and waved back.

The truck stopped inches behind David's truck. Out crawled a big man, at least six foot five and over two hundred fifty pounds. He wore a cowboy hat that made him look even more intimidating. "How y'all doing? I figured you guys got in trouble up here. Marcea called up this morning and said y'all never made it home last night. I figured I better mosey on up here," Bill extended his hand to Paul.

"David just told me your name is Bill," Paul said.

Shaking Paul's hand Bill rambled on with his Texan drawl. "And I already know your name. It's a real pleasure to meet you, Father Paul. David told us all about how, with a broken collarbone you caught that football that won your State Championship Game, became a decorated war hero, a martial arts expert, and now a priest. Glory be, he's been bragging on you all week."

Paul glowed. It had been so long since he felt worthy of such praise. Feeling tears behind his eyes he let go of Bill's hand and simply replied, "Thank you."

David jumped in. "There's another thing to add to Paul's list of achievements."

Paul's face immediately tightened up and turned red. He could hardly breathe.

"He saved my life last night. First the wind was blowing so hard it slammed the truck door and the window broke out. Then I got soaking wet in the rain and the truck battery died. There was no way I could get warm. I almost froze to death. Paul got me into some dry clothes and kept a fire going all night. I don't remember much, but I owe my old buddy," David said, moved next to Paul and put one arm around him while giving him half a hug.

Stunned, Paul wanted to blurt out, I love you David, but knew not to. Instead, he humbly said, "It was God who got us through the night."

David was not going to let Paul off that easily. "If God built that fire, I wish he would have stayed around so I could've thanked him."

All three men chuckled while Paul thought, *I already did*. Paul tried again, trying to down play things. "And that catch I made, I bet he didn't tell you the whole story."

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"I don't know," replied Bill. "David's got us plumb wore out about that catch. He has gone over the story about fifty times just this last week. I'm sure we know it by now,"

There was determination in Paul's voice as he asked, "Did David tell you how he blocked my man and that left me open so that I could catch the ball?"

"No, he never mentioned anything about that part. But I've got a gut feeling you're going to tell me," Bill laughed.

Because of the letdown after the game Paul had never talked about that victory night. Now twenty-plus years later, he could finally set the story straight. "Sure, I caught the ball but it was only because David annihilated my man. It was our last play and my shoulder was killing me. The defensive end was huge and was grinding me into the field every play. I just wanted the game to be over. When we were in the huddle and a pass play was called, I wanted to change the play. I knew I couldn't get by this defensive end. But David had his mindset." Paul stopped and looked right at David.

"David can be one stubborn mule," Bill added to the story.

Paul laughed. This big Texan had just described David to a T. "Anyway, we broke from the huddle and David ran right up to the line, like a man with a mission. The ball was snapped, David hit his man and then cross-blocked the defensive end. He hit my man so hard it flipped him on his back, and then he drove the guy into the turf like a pile driver. The field was wide open for me; all I did was catch the ball. The clock ran out and when I looked down the field, David gave me thumbs up. At that instant we both knew it was his taking my man out that enabled me to catch the pass."

"David told the story a tad bit differently," Bill said. "All about how y'all caught the ball with a broken collar bone."

"That part might be true but without David blocking my man we would have lost the game. I just got all the glory and the game ball. I only wish I had that game ball today. I'd give it to the person who really deserves it," said Paul, shifting his gaze from Bill to David.

A knot tightened in David's throat. He had always wondered why Paul had never said anything about that night. Now he knew it was because of what happened with Paul's father after the game. At that moment David was reliving that night, only this time, in David's mind, Paul was saying, *Here's the Most Valuable Player, and handing the game ball to him.*

There was a long silence as the three men stood there, a sanctifying moment brought on by the truth. A large amount of the resentment David had held against Paul for all these years ebbed and receded. David savored the moment and then spoke quickly to change the subject. "Hey, we better quit the bull. I'd better get the battery hooked up so

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we can get off this mountain."

"Yep! If you two keep it up, y'all be grabbing butt soon," replied Bill.

Paul and David looked at each other and then erupted into laughter. Bill joined in the laughter, despite not thinking what he'd said was all that funny.

As soon as they started down the winding mountain road, Paul fell sound asleep in the cab. David drove all the way back to Denver trying to sort things out. A force, a spirit and new blood was flowing through David and growing larger every minute. Forty five minutes later David turned the truck into a motel parking lot. He reached over and shook Paul by the shoulder and said, "Hey, wake up."

Paul woke up and looked around, his neck stiff from leaning against the window. "Where are we?"

"I got you this room last week when you called and told me you had to come and see me. I made the reservation for three nights. There's still two nights left."

Paul felt awkward as the two of them sat in front of the motel office. He figured that this was probably the last time he'd see David. This was to be their final good-bye. He had hoped for something different, but in the back of his mind knew it would end something like this.

Paul reached down to his satchel on the floor and pulled a white envelope out. He handed it to David and said, "I am genuinely sorry for the inconvenience I've caused you. Here is a round trip ticket to San Francisco and directions where to go to get your name and Social Security number taken off my medical records. I have everything set up. You just have to show up in person to sign a few forms. You might have to take a blood test. The airplane ticket is wide open so use it when you want. I also wrote down a phone number where you can get a hold of me when you're in town, if you want."

David took the envelope and noticed there was some cash along with the ticket. He tried to count the currency without being obvious. It looked like five one-hundred dollar bills. "What's the cash for?"

"You will have to stay overnight and you will need some cab fare," answered Paul. With that, he pulled back on the door handle, got out of the truck, grabbed his suitcase from behind the seat, and then walked around to the driver's side of the truck.

David sat in the truck with the engine still running, counting the money. He noticed Paul at the broken window, turned his head and said, "Oh, by the way, Marcea is cooking a big Sunday dinner for you. I'll pick you up about noon tomorrow. Wait till you taste her cooking. It's great." David dropped the truck into gear and as he turned out of the parking lot, he waved back at Paul.

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Paul stood silent with suitcase and satchel in hand and watched the pickup fade down the highway. He wiped at a small tear and headed into the motel office.

Paul slept hard that night and woke up early. He walked to the nearest church, a small but beautiful turn-of-the-century Episcopal relic. He prayed for David, thanking God for going to battle over David's soul and ridding him of at least some of his destructive hatred. After the service, Paul was back at his motel room by ten. He worked out and had time to practice his martial arts. He showered and was ready, knowing David would be there at noon.

At noon straight up there was a knock at the door. Paul opened the motel door and said, "Good morning."

"How did you sleep?" David asked.

"Great. I really was tired. I slept for almost ten hours."

"Are you ready for the best meal of your life?"

"Sounds great, I haven't had home cooking for years," Paul said and then added.

"David, you don't know how good it makes me feel that you invited me to your home for dinner."

"Hey, it's the least I can do for my old buddy," replied David. He slapped Paul on the shoulder. "Let's get a move on."

While heading south on Interstate 25 Paul could sense tension in the cab. David had not said a word in the last ten miles. To break the tension Paul asked, "How much further to your house?"

"We take the Castle Rock exit and then go about five miles east on Highway 86," David said. There was silence again.

David turned the truck off the interstate and they went back across the overpass. Then he steered the truck into the parking lot of an abandoned filling station and turned the ignition off. "I have a few things to tell you and one thing to ask of you."

David had been mulling the words over and over while he drove and now blurted out his prepared speech. "There is something that I have never shared with anyone. I trust you, and I'm asking that you never tell anybody else."

"Sure, no problem," Paul replied.

David drew in a deep breath and then started. "When I was in Vietnam, I had problems too, somewhat different than you had, Paul. I truly believed in this country but I was also

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scared and did not want to go to the front lines. I knew that with my aptitude for electronics and radio equipment, I probably would not see much action. That is why I enlisted, but I have always felt like I wasn't really a soldier. When you signed up for the Army, I thought you were so brave. After you told me about your experiences yesterday, I am glad I never saw what you did. Anyway, you dragged up some memories that I would like to get off my chest. I am asking you never to tell anybody."

"Sure, as a priest I have taken an oath of confidentiality."

"Good. If you told anybody, I could still get into serious trouble." Paul knew that this had to do with either the Clipper Chip or David's military records. "You have my word as a friend and as a priest. I will never repeat what you tell me, even if my life depends on it."

"Thank you," David replied and started to pour out his story. "When I was in Vietnam I got this out of harm's way job in Saigon working on the news teletype and communication equipment. I had it made, no one really knew much about the equipment and I was pretty much on my own. I had Top Secret Clearance and even worked my own hours. In the later part of sixty eight, I started to notice that some of the information was being suppressed. The number of casualties was a lot higher than what we were telling the press. Almost every time a village was hit and innocent people were lost, that information was not put on the news wire. I also became aware that some information was being made up. They were hand feeding the press only what they wanted them to know. It really bothered me, but being young and naive I just figured that was the way things were done."

David stopped and looked around the parking lot, like somebody might be listening. "I was working late one evening on the Teletype trying to solve a communication error we had been having. No one was allowed in the communication headquarters after midnight, so I ran a separate data line into my private electronic shop so I could try to isolate a problem in this Teletype machine. While I was working on the machine, some information came across. I knew it was Top Secret, and that I should not read it."

Paul frowned before he replied, "But you did. David, ever since we were in grade school you always were getting into things like that. I remember when you tapped the school phone and almost got expelled."

"You're right, Paul. I am always snooping into things that I should keep my nose out of. Anyway, I read that an American Special Forces Team had been sent into Cambodia. They were going to run into a heavy build up of enemy troops ready to ambush them inside the border. The government expected heavy losses and would deny any American troops were in Cambodia. It went on to say there'd be no more radio contact or support for these seventeen soldiers. Risk level to white house image too high, expendable losses..." David stopped talking.

David, war is a horrible thing. Sometimes it is best to not dwell in the past," Paul said.

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David continued, "The words *expendable losses* made me sick. Then the Teletype started again and seventeen names printed out, with their military numbers in a nice neat alphabetical column. The Teletype was already listing these men as MIA. I read the names one at a time, knowing they were going to walk right into the enemy hands." David stopped abruptly and reached to start the truck. "That's all I should tell you."

Paul had been listening carefully, something he had learned to do in the confessional. Knowing David needed closure Paul probed, "David, why don't you go on? Maybe if you tell me your story, it can be for the last time."

"Well, okay, but remember your promise never to repeat it." David pulled his hand away from the ignition. "Anyway, I just sat there with this information still on the Teletype, knowing that these men were trapped, needing some support. If somebody didn't get help up there fast there would be seventeen dead soldiers. I tore the paper off the platen and knew that if I got caught with it I would be court martialed. More than that, I knew what kind of operation we were running and I had the proof on paper."

"David, I thought you said you had Top Secret Clearance to work in communications. Didn't you see reports like this all the time?"

"No, I never saw any of the reports or information. My job was just to keep the equipment operating. Only when I ran the wire to my shop for test purposes did I actually see a report, and that was an accident."

"Oh, now I understand," Paul said. "What did you do with the information?"

"All night I thought about what I should do with this teletype printout. I knew that it was urgent, that these soldiers needed help. I couldn't go to the commanding officer because I suspected he was in on altering the news. He was a poor commander and didn't care how many troops died, just so he kept his enemy kill ratio high."

"Did you do anything?" Paul asked.

"I surely did!" snapped David. "I put the teletype message in a plain manila envelope and mailed it to The Times news desk in New York. I thought they would run the story the next night and that we would be forced to send help in for these soldiers." David's face seemed to collapse. "The story ran three weeks later — as an unconfirmed story in the back pages of the paper."

Paul had heard stories like this before from other soldiers in his group therapy class and was aware of the guilt. Although some men never saw the ground war like he had, they were traumatized just as badly. He remembered a navigator in his class who had not even carried a gun, but, because he was the one that plotted the air strikes, felt responsible for all the people killed, he ended up committing suicide. Paul knew that he was treading on thin ice and chose his words carefully. "You can't hold yourself

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responsible for those men."

"Oh, I don't feel responsible, I did what I could. It was the people higher up that were guilty, along with the news media, which was too lazy to investigate their own News Wire Service. In fact, **The Times** gave the document I mailed them to a military investigation committee. The investigators traced it back to my base from the cancellation marks on the postage stamp and there was an investigation.

"Did they find out that you were the one that mailed it?"

"By the time they started their investigation I only had four weeks left. I had planned to re-up but with the direction the war was going, compounded with the chance of being found out, I decided that it was a good time to get out."

"Did they ever try to investigate you after you got out?"

"They did better than that. They ruined my whole life! Do you remember when I got my discharge? You came to San Diego to pick me up," David asked.

Paul rubbed his forehead, straining his mind into the past. "I can sort of recall picking you up at the base. Then we hung around the city and went to a couple of clubs. That part of my past is kind of a purple haze."

"Remember how as soon as I got my discharge papers I wanted to celebrate? I felt like the two of us owned the town. Here I was still in uniform and you a decorated vet. All I wanted was a woman that night."

The purple haze quickly cleared. After some twenty years that night was coming back to him. Whatever it was, Paul hoped that he could handle it. His mind had been pulled taut often over the past years and he did not know when it might snap from the constant dredging up of suppressed memories. Paul wished he were back at the monastery where prayer kept him focused. Taking a deep breath, Paul said, "Go on."

"Well, we got pretty drunk that night. I can understand why you can't remember," David said. "Anyway, after we left the base we headed for a nightclub to celebrate and all I had on my mind were women. I had heard that this was the hot spot. When we walked in it was wall to wall people. The smoke was thick and you could smell the marijuana. They were playing rock and roll. I walked in so proud to have served for these people. We got a booth in the back and had a couple beers while I checked out all the women."

Paul gazed through the windshield. The haze was clearing, things were becoming crystal clear. Paul could almost taste the beer and smell the smoke in the air as they sat there in a booth under the dim light, the music blaring out over the exchange of useless rhetoric. "Yeah, it's coming back to me."

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"Anyway, we were feeling no pain and I kept noticing two girls up against the bar. They looked like college girls. One had some hip hugger jeans, a halter top, and no bra! I said 'There's my date.' I motioned for them to come over to the table and as they slowly walked toward us I was thinking how they probably liked men in uniform."

With a jolt, Paul remembered that exact moment. "Yes! That girl walked up to the table with her friend, leaned toward you and asked, 'How does it feel killing innocent women and children?' Then she gave you the finger."

"Yep that's exactly right!" David said and continued. "After that incident we proceeded to get so drunk that we ended up sleeping in the car. I didn't even fire a gun my whole tour in Nam and here this girl accused me of killing women and children. I couldn't figure out where she got her information. It was like my whole effort in trying to make this country better evaporated with her one sentence about killing women and children."

Without even thinking Paul butted in. "I know the feeling, like being a priest and having someone tell you that you're all a bunch of gays, molesters or some type of sexual predator. I don't know where they get their information. And you are right; it is like all your efforts to help people are gone with one callous sentence."

David hated having Paul compare his patriotism with being a homosexual. He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, his knuckles turning white. Hot, he reached for the window crank for fresh air but then noticed the plastic that was in place of the broken window, making him even angrier. But then David felt some unexpected kind of emotional liberation. "You're right, Paul. Some of my remarks have been cruel. I hope you can forgive me for them. But I just don't understand. I don't know if I can ever . . ."

Stunned, Paul interrupted, "I do forgive you for your words, and I hope someday you will better understand about men like me."

Neither glanced away, their eyes locked as an eternal bond bridged between two old friends. Knowing each other's imperfections only strengthened their respect for each other. Finally, Paul turned away, focused his eyes on the windshield, yet saw nothing. He prayed in silence for the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to free David's soul from the intolerance still in his heart.

David, also silent, twisted all around, looking out every window of the truck. He nervously checked the entire parking lot with a three hundred and sixty-degree scan. Things looked clear so he continued. "Anyway, that teletype message and that incident with that girl in the bar were really causing me to question my feelings about the country. Then three weeks later a Dishonorable Discharge showed up in the mail and my life has been living hell ever since."

"A Dishonorable Discharge? I never knew that. Why? What for?" Paul asked, astounded.

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"I have never been able to figure it out, but I think it had to do with my sending off that teletype information to the news media. First, I was honorably discharged, but then somebody must have altered my records. I think they were trying to figure out who leaked the information to the press. Somebody was on to me and was trying to flush me out. They had me. If I asked for a hearing to correct the discharge error, they'd ask about the teletype paper. I was trapped."

Things clicked in Paul's mind. Now he knew what was behind David's rambling the night they spent on Mount Antero. "You know, you accused me of altering your military records the other night."

"I did?" David was confused.

"Yes. I thought the cold was affecting your thinking."

"Did I say anything else?"

Paul now knew for sure that David did not recall some of what went on up at the mountain, when David was in the early stages of hypothermia. "You told me about the Clipper Chip."

David bolted toward Paul and put his hand over Paul's mouth. He scanned the parking lot and then whispered into Paul's ear, "You have to promise me you will never mention to anybody about that Clipper Chip."

Paul nodded his head in the affirmative and David removed his hand.

David worried someone might be watching, or maybe somebody planted a microphone in the truck. He actually enjoyed the adrenaline rush. He probably would have been working for the FBI or CIA if it were not for that Dishonorable Discharge. Just in case somebody was eavesdropping, he changed the subject, "There are a couple more things we need to talk about."

"Okay," said Paul nervously. David's paranoia had rubbed off and he too was scanning the surrounding area. Out of the rear corner of Paul's right eye he caught a white sedan coming across the overpass. Its left blinker came on. "Who is that?"

The sedan wheeled into the second driveway of the abandoned service station, turned one hundred and eighty degrees and came to a stop right in front of David's pickup truck. Both men sat petrified in the cab, unable to move, their eyes were on the driver in the car. The man wore a dark gray suit, white shirt, and black tie. He moved and picked something up off the seat. Paul and David's heart beat violently, almost in unison.

The driver moved from behind the steering wheel and with something in hand, walked up to the passenger side of the truck. Paul's years of martial arts training helped him

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plan the next move. He immediately opened the door and stood less than two feet from the stranger, prepared.

The stranger, somewhat startled, stepped back and asked, "Do either of you know where Cooley Road is?" Then he pulled a business card from a black zippered case and handed it to Paul. "I work for Rocky Mountain Realtors and I'm looking for a property located on Cooley Road."

Sure enough, it said Rocky Mountain Real Estate Company. Paul breathed a sigh of relief. "David, this gentleman is trying to find Cooley Road. Can you help him?"

David leaned across the seat and yelled, "Just keep on this road for about six miles. There's a big yellow barn on the corner. You can't miss it."

"Thanks," yelled the stranger and waved at David. "Have a good day, Father," the driver said and walked back to his car.

Paul looked at David and broke out laughing. "You've got me half scared to death! I thought that guy was a spy or something."

"Yeah, I guess I am a little paranoid. Sorry about that." Then David reached out and took the business card from Paul. "Did that guy give you his name?"

"No. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. It just seems strange that a real estate agent wouldn't have his name on his business card."

Paul took the card back and sure enough, there was no name. But there was a phone number. Paul was now playing the investigator. He looked across the road at the country store, an old white wooden building with a gravel parking lot and a sign with big red letters: **OPEN 365 DAYS A YEAR**. There was only one vehicle parked in front of the store, a van with tinted windows. Paul got out of the cab and said, "I'll be right back."

As Paul walked across the road toward the store, the van started with a roar and backed up directly toward him. Paul had to jump to the side, but in front of the van he saw what he was looking for; a pay phone. A phone book hung from a chain. Paul set the book on the shelf, turned to the real estate section, and found what he wanted, the listing for **Rocky Mountain Realtors**. He checked the phone number against the one on the business card. They matched.

Paul turned around and started back to inform David, but instead reached into his pocket. He found a quarter, deposited it, and dialed the number. The phone did not even ring twice before Paul heard a woman say, "Rocky Mountain Realtors." Paul hung up the phone.

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David watched Paul from the truck, surprisingly unconcerned about Paul's calling someone. He was concentrating on the two more things he had yet to tell. He had saved the worst for last.

Paul rapidly crossed the road and got back into the truck. "The number on the business card matches the one in the phone book. I called the number also. The real estate company is legit," Paul reported with assurance.

"Good," David said with a distant tone.

Paul sensed the change in tone and asked, "Is there anything else you need to tell me?"

"Yes, it has to do with Marcea. You already know that we are living together and I probably should marry her, but . . ."

"But what?"

"She used to be a dancer," David said almost inaudibly.

Paul could hardly hear him and then asked, "Did you say she used to be a dancer?"

"Yes, she was a dancer in a nightclub." David's voice was still low.

"So?"

"So," snapped David, "don't you get it? She danced in a strip joint."

"David, I'm not stupid, but I don't understand. Why do you feel that you have to tell me this? You should let me meet Marcea without any prior judgments."

"I am telling you this because it is one of the reasons I can't marry her."

Paul took a deep breath. "What's the other reason?"

David hesitated for a moment, "Well, I guess it might be her kids. Plus she breaks down and cries quite often. I know she's hiding something about her childhood."

"David, you have to learn to free yourself before you can find love. Even if you asked this Marcea to marry you today, it would not be fair to her."

"How can you say that? You don't even know her. If I asked her to marry me, she'd jump at the chance. She needs me and I even help her out with her kids."

Paul knew it was not the time to continue but had to ask, "Do you truly love her?"

In The Silence

James Andrew Edske

David kept running the words *truly love* around in his head. Then he answered. "Yeah, I guess."

"David, let's drop the subject about your relationship with Marcea, I know you take very good care of her. Now, was that all you had to tell me? I can't wait to meet her and her children."

Her children rang in David's head. "Oh yeah, there's one last thing. Don't touch the children, you know, hug them or anything," said David as he reached for the key and started the truck.

Paul did not even notice the beautiful countryside as they wound on the road to David's place. The words, ***don't touch the children***, echoed in his head. This was the biggest curse, for him. He was prudent and knew that he would have to accept eternal responsibility for anyone that he infected. Maybe it was David's lack of trust that hurt the most? Whatever it was—the isolation and seclusion from the human element was agonizing. It was like hell on earth.