

A NOVEL

SILENCED

THE WRATH OF GOD DESCENDS

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NOTHING HAD PREPARED Paul Stepola for living a double life, and there were days when he wondered how long he could go on. That wasn't like him. He had been military, a man's man, a decorated operative in the National Peace Organization. But he had seldom been called upon to work under cover. He had always been a straightforward representative of the government of the United Seven States of America. Paul relied on his bearing, his presence, his intellect, his communication skills. Pretending to be someone else had been fun on the few occasions his assignment called for it, but those had always been short-term, means to ends.

Now his whole life was an elaborate deceit. Paul was a mole within his own agency, within his own family. He had undergone the greatest transformation a man could, and he could think of nothing he would rather do than tell his wife and children and include them in his new life. But he could not.

Without knowing in advance Jae's reaction, or whether she would tell her father, Paul could not risk it. The truth in the wrong hands meant death for him and perhaps for his family as well. And the NPO would settle for nothing less than being led to whatever underground factions had compromised their star.

It was one thing to show up at the Chicago bureau office and be lauded as a premier enemy of the underground while secretly supporting the rebels. It was quite another to be unable to even tell your wife what had caused the change in your personality. For all Jae knew, their reconciliation and renewed attempts to repair the marriage were her ideas. He was finally ready and even equipped to make the changes, but she had to wonder why. If only he could tell her.

Wintermas of 37 P.3 was an ordeal, another visit to Jae's parents in Washington, this time with her obnoxious older brother in attendance. Berlitz (who had named these people?) had brought along his third wife, Aryana—yet another he complained of aloud who wasn't "likely to pop me out any progeny."

Aryana looked crushed and was stony the rest of the time, which at least made her fit the family. Jae's father, Ranold B. Decenti, wore his usual scowl, formally acknowledging the children when noticing them at all. He couldn't hide his disgust over his only son, who had, he said, "never succeeded at anything except graduating high school."

It was all Paul could do to get through the long weekend. When they sang and ate and opened gifts, he wished he could sing what was in his heart, that he could pray aloud, that he could celebrate the birth of Christ rather than "the bounty of the season." For Jae's part, she seemed genuinely appreciative of the new Paul. She commented more than once about his getting along with the difficult personalities and his attentiveness to her and the kids.

"It's not me," Paul wanted to say. But all he could do was smile. How could he know if she was genuine? Was she onto him, looking for ways to trip him up? Why the sudden change in her? He had never felt so precariously on the edge of an abyss. The pressure affected his sleep, threatened to make jagged his new personality. It was as if he teetered all the time.

Late at night, as was his custom, Ranold liked to debrief, as he called it, the events of the day with the "menfolk." But the short, dark, spiky-haired Berlitz, eager as he seemed to share a drink in Ranold's den, had little to offer. He was from another world, a salesman on commission.

"Do you not even watch the news, boy?" Ranold said, reddening. "Do you not keep up at all?"

"Some," Berlitz said. "Not like you two, I guess."

"I guess not! Do you not care what goes on in the world?"

The adult son shrugged, sitting. Paul couldn't imagine what it must have been like growing up in that home. For now he was grateful Berlitz was taking the attention off him. Paul's every word had to be weighed. He had to be constantly on guard and appear to give the party line. All the while he was privately celebrating the events in Los Angeles, but of course that could never come out.

As Berlitz and Ranold consumed more alcohol, their inhibitions, never well controlled, seemed to evaporate. "This one," Ranold would begin, nodding toward his son before launching into an assumption about how the man thought.

"Yeah, speak for me like you always do," Berlitz would say. "At least you're givin' me credit for having a thought in my head."

"My mistake," Ranold said.

"Thanks, Dad."

"For giving you credit, I mean."

Berlitz flipped his father an obscene gesture.

"I ever did that to my dad," Ranold said, "I'd have been staring at the ceiling."

"You wanna try something with a forty-year-old man?" Berlitz said.

Ranold waved him off.

Merry Christmas, Paul thought.

"One more for the road," Berlitz said, rising to pour himself another.

"Where you going?" Ranold said.

"Just to bed. Can't get rid of me that easy, pops."

"You need booze to sleep?"

"I need booze for a lot of things."

Ranold seemed embarrassed when his son was gone. "Don't let Connor grow up to be like that," he said.

Paul couldn't imagine it. He was just grateful the discussion topic was not business for once. "How do I ensure that, sir? What would you have done differently?"

"Put him on his can when I was able," Ranold said. "I bought into all the 'let 'em be' bull. Look what that produced."

"He's all right."

"He's nothing. Not like you."

Paul fought a double take. Ranold hadn't liked Paul much in Los Angeles. At times they were at each other's throats. In the end, though, the result seemed to take heat and suspicion off Paul. He couldn't have been behind the drought phenomenon, and that turned Ranold's ire from him to the underground. He was still seething.

"I don't like the way NPO brass and the government kowtow to the rebels," Ranold said.

Paul raised an eyebrow. "You *are* NPO brass, sir."

"Not really. But 'slong as I've got any clout, I'm going to do

things the old-fashioned way. I catch one of these yahoos from the underground, I'm not looking the other way, I'll tell you that."

"Not afraid of a judgment from God?" Paul said, pretending to tease.

"Nah. You?"

"No, sir." That was no lie.

"I see big things ahead for you, boy."

"Big things?"

"In the organization."

Here we go. "I don't know, sir."

"I do. They like you. I like you. You've succeeded where many have failed."

Paul studied the old man. Maybe the alcohol had already done its work on him the way it had on his son. But he was good. Could he already be onto Paul, flattering him to see if he could cause a misstep? Was Ranold really so naive about the difference between a real person of faith and the charlatans Paul had exposed? If that kind of success made him look effective, well, so be it. But after decades of espionage, Ranold had to be more astute than he was letting on.

On the other hand, Paul's father-in-law had seemed to flip from bemusement to real respect when Paul had been honored after being blinded in action. They'd had their ups and downs since, but it appeared Ranold looked for reasons to be proud of Paul.

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Jae still didn't know what to make of the new Paul. She was grateful, no question. They had not raised their voices to each other in weeks. She had almost talked herself into believing that—while he had been unfaithful to her in the past and deserved whatever she dished out—perhaps her more recent

suspicions were unfounded. He seemed to be trying to prove he had changed, and now his attitude—toward her at least—appeared truly different.

He had helped get the kids to bed and kissed her good night as she settled in to wait for him, all the while knowing that her father expected him and her brother in the den. Those sessions seldom went smoothly, and the addition of Berlitz did not bode well. Big brother was the type of guy who frustrated the daylights out of an overachiever like Paul. In the past they had merely tolerated each other, so Jae had been surprised during the flight from Chicago when Paul had expressed actual eagerness to see Berlitz again.

"Really?" she said. "Why?"

"He's harmless. Charming in his own way."

"His weird way, you mean."

"You said it, Jae. Not me."

"I know Berlitz is a strange bird," she said, "but I love him."

"And that's reason enough for me to as well."

Jae had cocked her head at Paul.

"What?" he said.

"You love Berlitz too?"

"And your parents, because I love you."

"And your name again is—?"

He acted playfully hurt, but she sensed he had been sincere. How did that happen? Paul had always displayed good manners with her, acted chivalrous, did the things a husband was supposed to do in public. But she could always read in his look and body language that his motive was guilt over indiscretions or simply a sense of duty. Or he had just been doing what he had to do to keep the peace. Heaven knew she often made him work for it.

But this trip, he was truly deferential, helpful, kind, as he had been since their return from California. Frankly, she found it dis-

concerting. It wasn't that any weakness revealed itself. He wasn't throwing aside his maleness. He was being a different kind of man, not too big to keep an eye on the kids, help with the luggage, take charge by serving her, doing for her.

It had made her want to do her part too. She recalled many times having stood waiting, giving him an expectant stare as if silently demanding to know whether he was going to shoulder his part of the load or let her do everything. It was no wonder he seemed to do it begrudgingly. But now she didn't have to wait or wonder, and thus there was no need for the look. Upon landing he was out of the seat, reaching overhead for her stuff, corralling Connor, advising Brie, getting them from the plane and onto the road in the rental car without incident. Maybe his new friend Straight was having a good influence on him.

Paul had even adjusted his relationship with Straight, restricting their time together to when the kids were in bed and any other family responsibilities had been met. Straight seemed to enjoy playing with the kids for a few minutes before he and Paul settled in for some chess. Jae appreciated that now they played late at night if at all. Once she had overheard Straight exhorting Paul to treat his wife the way he wanted to be treated. Of course she wanted Paul to do that on his own, but whatever it took. Straight had been responsible for the loss of his own entire family, so perhaps the motivation behind his counsel was grief and regret. But his words reaped benefits in Jae's family, and one day she would have to tell Straight that.

She also knew that one of the contributors to a better marriage and home life was that since Paul's Las Vegas and California assignments, he had been home more. Jae didn't expect that to last. He had become a prize, in demand, sought by other bureaus for his expertise. For now she would enjoy his being home at reasonable hours. And if he could keep up this new attitude,

she would resolve to give him the benefit of the doubt when he was away. It all made Jae more than ambivalent about the shocking discovery she kept to herself in a safety deposit box at Park Ridge Fidelity in the Chicago suburbs.

When Jae heard weary footsteps on the stairs at her parents' home that Wintermas, she hoped it wasn't Paul knocking off early because of some offense by either her father or brother. She heard the tinkling of ice in a glass as the unsteady gait moved past her door. Peeking out, she saw it was Berlitz.

"Little sister," he said, seeming to force a smile.

"Hey, Berl," she said. "You guys solve all the problems of the world already?"

He stopped and leaned against the wall, as if weary. His eyes were bloodshot, which they had not been at dinner. Jae had never known him to be a problem drinker, but clearly he wasn't holding his liquor well that night. Of course, Daddy stocked only the good stuff. A shot or two of that was like a whole bottle of anything else.

"Ah," he said. "You know Dad. I *am* one of the problems of his world. Always comparin' me to Paul. Paul this and Paul that."

Jae knitted her brow. "He did that with Paul there?"

"Not in so many words. C'mon. You know how he is. Oozing disgust for the no-account son."

"That must've made Paul terribly uncomfortable."

"*Paul*? What about me? I was the target. Paul is the model."

"But Paul didn't contribute, did he? That doesn't sound like him."

Berlitz took a sip and sloshed the liquid in circles in the glass. "Paul's all right, you know? I've always liked him. He must think I'm—"

"He thinks you're all right too, Berl." When he squinted she

said, "He does! He told me on the way here he was eager to see you again."

Berlitz swore with admiration. "For real?"

She nodded. "And I like your new wife too."

"Do ya? I'm not sure I do yet."

"What? You—"

"I'm not sayin' I don't love her and all that, Jae. But loving and liking are two different things. She's starting to get quiet all the time, like Mom, like she's just tolerating me."

"Well, that's more than you can say for your first two choices."

"Don't remind me." He muttered a label for them under his breath. "Sorry."

"Frankly, I can't argue. Never liked either of them."

"But you like this one? Honest?"

"I do."

In truth, Jae just hoped Aryana would settle him, smooth him out. He could be an okay guy if he would just focus on his work and his relationships. When she was little he'd been a good brother—protective, parental in many ways. Then it became clear that he was not going to be the kind of son her father had hoped for, someone who would follow in his footsteps. Daddy had been unfair in that, she concluded. Berlitz would never be his father, and she wished Ranold could accept that.

As she returned to bed, grateful Paul had found reason to stay and talk with her father, she had to chuckle at her own brother's name. It was her father's mother's maiden name, but still . . . to lay that on an unsuspecting son and expect him to deal with it his whole life. Well, it spoke volumes about her father.

When Paul finally came to bed, he closed the door quietly and changed in the dark, as if he thought Jae was asleep.

"You survived?" she said.

"Oh yeah," he said, sliding in beside her. "It was okay. Your dad's exercised about how soft the government and the agency have become. And poor Berlitz. He'll never measure up. He bailed early."

"Couldn't you encourage him, Paul?"

"I could try. I don't want to offend him though. He's older than I am, you know."

Who was this sensitive, new man? Jae loved him.

• • •

Back in Chicago the week after New Year's, Paul successfully deflected a plan to reward him with a bigger, more opulent office. He told his boss, Bob Koontz, "Half my success is owed to blending in. I need to do that here too. First sign I'm getting too big for my britches, all of a sudden I don't get what I need from other departments to do my job. I've already got nice views, lots of room, and the best secretary in the bureau. Now if you wanted to promote me or give me a raise . . ."

Koontz laughed. "A bigger office was supposed to be like a raise without pay."

"You should be in propaganda. Talk about doublespeak."

"Well, let the record show, you turned me down."

"So stipulated, Your Honor."

"And as for that secretary of yours," Koontz said, "you know I have dibs on her when mine retires."

"Doesn't she get a say in that?"

"Only if it's yes."

"Don't count on it. I treat her right."

Tall, black, and direct, Felicia was the kind of woman with whom Paul would discuss such a matter—mainly to nip it before it blossomed.

The next day, Thursday, January 10, at just after nine in the

morning, Felicia said, "You don't need to worry about that. I wouldn't work for Bob Koontz unless you died."

"That's comforting. What do you have against Bob?"

"That was a compliment to you, not a rap on him. Fact is, I wouldn't work for *anybody* else 'less you died."

"He's a good guy."

"Maybe so," Felicia said, "but women talk."

"His secretary bad-mouths him?"

"How would I know? I don't listen to gossip."

Felicia's headset chirped. She held up a finger and took the call. "Yes, ma'am," she said. "Right away." She clicked off. "Speak of the devil. You don't think this office is bugged, do you?"

"Course it is," Paul said. "We're the NPO. Bob want me or you?"

She pointed at him. "And right now. Sounds urgent. Remember everything."

"No need. You don't listen to gossip."

Of course, it wasn't gossip and it had nothing to do with secretaries. By the time he arrived in Bob's office, the International News Network was broadcasting on one of four big screens on the wall, and Koontz was teleconferencing with Washington—Ranold Decenti—and NPO International in Bern.

Within seconds Koontz's office was filled with heads of other departments. There was no small talk, just coarse language and grunts of surprise when INN showed simultaneous disasters on a split screen. Black smoke billowed from a crater where London's Big Ben had been, emergency vehicles noisily swarming. In Rome, the former zoological gardens (which for fifty years had been a Bio Park containing endangered species) had been nearly obliterated, the animals killed or scattered, and hundreds of visitors killed or wounded.

"A Norwegian whom authorities have been as yet unable to

identify has claimed responsibility for both attacks," INN reported. "He calls himself Styr Magnor and has announced from an unknown location that he represents, quote, 'the millions of underground believers throughout Europe, brothers and sisters to the oppressed in the USSA, and followers of the one true God who had judged the wicked of Los Angeles.'

"Magnor threatens more reprisals if the International Government does not lift its ban on the freedom of citizens to practice religion. Head of the International Government in Bern, Chancellor Baldwin Dengler, had this response: 'We have not, do not, and will not negotiate with terrorists. End of story.'"

The chancellor's combative response spurred the room to cheers. Paul had to join in, despite his own waffling on whether this Magnor character was from the true Christian underground.

Paul traded glances with others and knew they were all thinking the same about the chancellor. He had never seen Dengler so outwardly upset. The man's jaw was set, his eyes level, and his tone severe.

This would be called an act of war, and it would be blamed on religion. Whatever gains the USSA underground had made would be dashed. The dichotomy was not lost on Paul. Usually, inside these walls, he tried to keep himself from thinking like the double agent he was. Not thinking for or about the believers kept him from blurting anything that might give him away.

"What time is it over there?" Paul said.

"Middle of the afternoon in London," Koontz said. "After three. An hour later in Rome. Thus all the casualties. Brassy. But who is this Magnor?" A dozen faces folded into scowls as they tried to place the name. Koontz snapped his fingers. "Who is he? Come on! Somebody has run into this kook in some case or another. Paul?"

He shook his head. "I can check the files, but no. Nothing. No idea. I doubt the underground connection though."

"Why? Is this so different from L.A.?"

"Bombs and carnage?" Paul said. "Hard to blame on God."

"If that was God in Sunterra, He snuffed a lot of people there too. Not just government or NPO. Innocent bystanders, just like here."

Paul could only shrug. "You have a point."

"We're Code Red," Koontz said. "Ultimate security. Everybody on this until we know what we've got and can advise Washington and Bern."