

The Freedom of Silence

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Based on the screenplay:

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“God, who gave us life, gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the Gift of God.”

Thomas Jefferson, in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 1781.

Prologue

Just below the magnificent columns, and beneath the ironic, yet watchful eyes, of Moses holding the Ten Commandments, the press watched and waited for the verdict. Beside them loomed a small, yet peaceful, crowd raising signs protesting Congress' impending decision. Signs which read: “Freedom for all,” “Faith is worth fighting for,” and “Congress shall make NO law restricting Faith,” littered the courthouse steps. Though the crowd numbered only two hundred people, they still drew the media dogs to their scent.

An attractive rookie reporter smoothed her grey pencil-skirt and peered into her compact mirror. Retouching her makeup she took a deep breath, and then cleared her throat. “Okay, Mike let's do an intro piece. I think the public might appreciate a little history, but be ready if we're transferring to Kim at the Capitol Building. Congress is expected to pass the new bill any moment.”

The cameraman adjusted the camera, and then made sure the lens was clean. Hoisting the camera onto his shoulder, he nodded to his associate. “Ready Pam? Rolling in five, four, three, two ...”

“This is Pamela Jones for Channel 51 News. I am on the steps of the Supreme Court House where a crowd is growing, protesting the impending new Religious Tolerance Act. Above me we can see the marble etched friezes of Moses holding the Ten Commandments, along with Solomon, Augustus and other great law givers in history.” The cameraman panned from the reporter, to the stone figures lining the top of the courthouse, and then down toward the crowd. Below me grows a crowd, who say their religious freedoms will be trampled upon, if Congress passes this law.

Minority Leader, Senator Margaret Jamison, says the bill will strengthen homeland security, and help identify and capture terrorists. But protesters here, say it will usher in a government run church, and destroy religious freedom. Let's hear from Kim at the... What's this?" Pam held her hand to her earpiece trying to listen to the person on the other end.

The cameraman panned toward the crowd. People were shouting and screaming, others crying. Many were watching cell phones.

"This just in ...," the reporter started again, "We just received word from Kim at the Capitol that despite scattered protests, like the one seen here at the Supreme Court House, Congress has swiftly passed the Religious Tolerance Act. The unprecedented law will go into immediate effect, this year, in 2005. President Karney has stated he will sign the bill as soon as it reaches his desk. But critics say the bill will not promote religious tolerance, but will instead result in rampant discrimination against conservative Christian and Jewish groups." Pam adjusted her earpiece again, and then motioned for the cameraman to follow her. "Let's see if we can find someone in the crowd to comment on this development." Reaching the crowd she gestured toward a man praying. "Sorry to interrupt, Sir, I'm Pamela Jones from KATV's Channel 51 News. Would you like to comment on the Religious Tolerance Act's passage?"

The man nodded.

"Sir, what do you think of the new law Congress has passed? Do you plan to appeal, or comply?"

"Well, I'm a pastor. Pastor Rhodes of First Christian Church and I ...um ..." The man cleared his throat. "I'm not quite sure how I feel about the passage. I had more confidence in my senators. I hoped they would hold to the Constitution. In the First Amendment, entitled 'Freedom of Religion' it states, 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.' I don't fully understand what just happened here and how it will affect our religious freedoms? In the past few years the U.S. Congress and court judges have banned the printed word of God; banned preaching in public places; removed all religious icons from every public place, taken away our right to celebrate our religious holidays; banned prayer in school; and now they want to take away our right to worship God. This has to stop somewhere. We Christians just let it happen. We've all been asleep at the wheel."

"So pastor, if it infringes on your religious rights, will you appeal the decision?" the rookie reporter questioned.

The man's eyes darted toward the restless crowd, and then trailed back to the Supreme Court building.

"On second thought, yes, we will certainly have our church's attorney file an appeal. And I'll ask other pastors to do the same. But, for now, we intend to obey the law. As I already said, this law is a blatant violation of the First Amendment. 'Congress shall make no law...' I am sure you will see us back on these steps again. Thank you for your time."

"Yes, and thank you." Pam turned back toward the camera. "This has been Pamela Jones for Channel 51 News. Thank you and tune in for more coverage of this life changing new law."

The crowd gracing the Supreme Court House steps was smaller, numbering only in the tens or twenties. The same newscaster smoothed her black hair, and checked her lipstick. She had just received a signal, from her inside man, that the verdict, from the Supreme Court, had been issued. The plaintiffs in the historic case would be exiting the building soon.

After the Religious Tolerance law was signed, several pastors and religious rights organizations appealed the new bill in the lower courts. But their efforts were to no avail. Judge after judge struck down the appeals, ruling in favor of the Religious Tolerance Act. But the pastors and activists would not give up. Finally, after a year of struggling in the lower courts the Supreme Court had decided to hear the religious rights case.

Religious practices had been frowned upon for years, the Bible shunned. But if the Supreme Court Judges upheld the Religious Tolerance Law, then all religions would come under the scrutiny of the government.

Pam waited. Hearing footsteps, she signaled for her cameraman to start filming. The large doors, engraved with images of historic men giving and writing laws, opened. A man, followed by several lawyers, emerged. The newscaster pushed through the crowd making her way toward the man. "Sir, Pamela Jones of KATV, just one comment. Please!"

The man turned toward her, remembering his conversation with the newscaster a year ago. "Yes, Miss Jones."

"Pastor Rhodes, last spring you said you would appeal the Tolerance Act."

The man nodded. "Yes, Miss I did."

"So what's the verdict? What did the Supreme Court say?"

"Well ..." The man paused, breathed in a deep breath, and then sighed. "I told you we would be back to fight this law. And we did, but the court voted six to three in favor of the bill." The pastor shook his head. "I just don't understand. They have to amend the Constitution of the United States to do this kind of thing. When did the courts start making the laws? Our founding fathers are rolling over in their graves today. They fought the American Revolution to give us freedom of religion, something they didn't have in England. Now we're doing it all over again."

"I see. So what did the judges say?"

"They threw out our challenge. Though the law restricts printing and distribution of certain religious materials, Judge Mages said, 'it does not amount to censorship.' They cited the government's compelling interest to 'ensure domestic tranquility' as set forth in the Constitution. In his opinion, Chief Justice Dean wrote, 'The inflammatory nature of some religious tracts, texts and websites make these articles hate crimes, and all who engage in hate crimes are, from this day forward, deemed as terrorists.' I just can't believe this is still the 'land of the free and the home of the brave.' The only resolve, Judge Dean's gave us, was Congress is working on establishing a national church. But that would make things worse. The Court might as well have burned the United States Constitution right in front of me. It's worthless now. Sorry but I have to go. Thank you for your time." The pastor pushed past the newscaster and made his way down the steps, leaving Pam submersed in a sea of reporters.

The young reporter yanked open the van door and hopped out, followed by her cameraman. "Are you getting this Mike?" The sound of screaming children, and angry parents filled the usually quiet neighborhood.

"Yeah, but this is crazy! Why are they putting those kids in handcuffs?"

"That's what we're here to find out." Pam situated herself on the opposite side of the street. It was a perfect position for a broadcast - out of the way of police, but with a great view of the mayhem in front of her. "Mike, you ready? Make sure you get a close-up of the kids."

"Sure thing." He hoisted his camera to his shoulder and switched it on.

"Recording in five, four, three, two..."

"This is Pamela Jones with Channel 51 News. I am outside the residence of what the police say is a raid. The underlying details are still unclear, but a government official informed our news desk the arrests were a result of an extensive investigation. An agent of the Religious Tactical Response Unit or RTRU, Jack Johansen, said his team had unearthed hate criminals operating out of several homes in the Kansas City Metro area. He said they are now working with local police to crack down on Religious Tolerance Act violators. Johansen said: the bill allotted for the formation of a new government agency to assess and capture these religious criminals. The agent would not comment on why children are involved in this raid by the RTRU."

The cameraman zoomed in on the children being handcuffed. Several were crying, begging the police to let them see their parents. Desperation flooded their eyes, terror gripped their tiny hearts. The camera caught the image of a mother screaming. An agent yanked her baby from her arms, and threw the mother to the ground. A book, hidden in the baby's blanket, tumbled to the ground, and lay open at Johansen's feet.

"Cuff her and burn that book," Johansen barked.

The camera zoomed in again, this time focusing on the book Johansen ordered burned. The letters BIBL...came into focus, just before the book was set on fire and thrown onto the green lawn.

The camera continued to roll. More books were pulled from the house and set on fire. Smoke filled the air; the street grew silent once again.

"Mike, stop rolling, the news desk will probably cut our footage anyway. Besides, I just got word about a raid taking place on the other side of town. The source says they've caught a cyber terrorist."

The newscaster and cameraman jumped into the van and raced down the street; onto their next assignment.

Chapter 1

Present Day: 2030

Zach turned the handle on the red door; the familiar scent of lavender candles, mixed with fresh made spaghetti sauce, penetrated his nostrils. Drinking in the strange aroma, a woman's voice greeted his weary spirit. It was Kelly, his wife of ten years. She

was reading to their two girls, her soft voice rising and falling in a soothing rhythm. He lingered a moment, listening to the cadence of her words. Savoring each one, as if it was the last time he'd hear her beautiful voice. He waited one second more, and then closed the front door. He was home, his sanctuary - a place he could shut out the cruel world - a place he felt safe and secure, for now.

Zach took a deep breath, taking in all he had grown to love. The little pictures of his girls above the fireplace, the new stones he and his father-in-law placed around the hearth, and the hardwood floor he worked so hard to refinish. Memories of happier times flooded his mind; holidays in the living room, watching movies with his wife, and playing board games with his girls at their kitchen table. He loved this home, and even more so, the family who made it more than just a house.

Sensing his presence Kelly looked up from her book. Though just in a T-shirt and jeans, she was radiant; her beautiful chestnut brown hair was pulled back from her small face. She was a natural beauty, not a high maintenance girl, natural nails, just a touch of makeup; beautiful inside and out.

Kelly smiled. A half smile, which faded for a moment, then returned with forced confidence. After ten years of marriage they could read each other's actions, sense each other's feelings. Zach smiled back, they both knew tonight was the night. A night he had planned for three long years. Everything they had dreamed and feared was all coming to a conclusion. He pushed back the flood of emotions washing over him. He had to be brave for his girls, for his wife. Brushing a small tear from his eye, he leaned down to kiss his daughters.

"Daddy, are you okay?" his youngest asked.

Jordan was a beautiful six-year-old. Bright and sensitive, yet full of life, Jordan had her daddy's darker brown hair and soft brown eyes, and her mother's lovely features. She was small and petite, a real cutie.

"Yes, honey, just busy. Daddy has a lot of things going on right now. A lot on his mind."

"Like what things?" Jaycee, his precious nine year old, chimed in.

Jaycee was the spitting image of her father. Bright as well, she had long wavy blond hair. She loved dancing and sports, and was good at everything she set her mind to. She looked up, giving her father a big inquisitive smile.

"Oh, just some computer stuff." He kissed her head, and then motioned to the children's book they were reading. "Go back to reading with Mommy, I'll be back to help you pack in a minute."

Zach kissed his wife next. Drinking in the love of his wife, his lips lingered on hers for a moment. Tearing himself away, he returned his daughter's beaming faces with a half-hearted smile. Was he ready to do this? Was it worth the risk it imposed on his family? Zach tried to shake off the feeling which wrapped around him with its icy hands. He must go on. People were counting on him; people could be saved by his actions.

He kissed Jaycee and Jordan on the cheek, and then headed toward the spare bedroom, the past year's events buzzed through his head. So much had happened, so many things had changed. He stopped just short of the spare bedroom. His hand rested on the door frame, fear choking his soul. "I don't think I can do this," he whispered, resting his head on the frame. His stomach churned; his heart raced. Everything would change in their lives from this moment on. Nothing would be the same again. He bit his upper lip;

his feet filled with lead, not wanting to budge from their positions. Doubts shot up in his heart smothering his courage. Did he have what it took to spread such a message? “Lord, please help me. I need Your strength.” Just as the words escaped his lips, he heard his daughter, Jaycee, praying in the other room.

“Please protect Daddy,” she prayed, “help him do what he needs to do.”

As her prayer met his ears an eternal voice calmed his fears. *Peace be still; I am with you*, the internal voice seemed to say.

Yes, without a doubt, he must move forward. No matter what the cost; the reward was greater than his fears.

Breathing in a deep breath he entered the room, and then headed toward the computer. Turning it on, the computer beeped, then booted up. Zach’s security software initiated, running a series of encryption and decryptions. Sitting down, Zach clicked a few icons before logging into an instant messenger computer program. The program allowed him to chat in real-time over the computer. Each time he’d type a message the person on the other end could see his response right away.

A dialogue box popped up revealing his screen name “B-Lev-R.” Zach began typing: “You there, MO-BRO?”

Zach waited a few minutes, until another instant message (IM) user, returned a typed message.

“I’m here. Are you ready for this?”

“Been praying about it all night,” Zach responded.

“Not what I asked.”

Zach checked the encryption and decryption icon. Yes, the software was active and working just as it was designed. The signal was bouncing across the country from city to city. Another instant message popped up on the screen.

“You still there?”

Zach began typing again. “Yes, we’re ready.”

The IM user screen name: MO-BRO typed again, “Our security is set on this end. I am ready for your streaming video, begin upload when ready.”

Zach watched his computer screen. The encryption software ticked behind the scenes while the computer downloaded a new message. He scanned the message then began typing again. “Praying the satellite codes are still good.”

Zach sat for a minute, waiting for MO-BRO’s response, then watched the IM pop up and display the words: MO-BRO is typing a message. He waited a second more, the IM refreshed, revealing MO-BRO’s response.

“Codes are number two. You guys always number one.”

“Thanks, make sure everybody stays away from your house. The routing program should keep them guessing for at least 30 minutes, maybe longer.”

“*Deo volente,*’ God willing. I’m praying it gives you time to get out.” MO-BRO responded.

Zach paused for a minute contemplating his next response then typed. “Not getting out. Going to stay until finished.”

There is a long pause before the next message appeared. Zach began to type again when the IM screen blinked and he could see that MO-BRO was typing a response. The screen refreshed.

“I know. Thought you might have changed your mind.”

Zach took a deep breath then began to type “This is what I’ve been called to do. The world needs the truth. We have to give it to them.”

“You’re right... Ready when you are.”

“Be back in a few. Saying goodbye to the wife and kids.”

MO-BRO responded, “Take all the time you need.”

“Thanks.”

The instant message screen went blank. Staring at the monitor, Zach could hear his family praying in the background. Jaycee had finished, Jordan had said her one line, then her cute little amen, and now Kelly was praying. Zach pushed himself from the computer desk, and stared at the screen for a minute. He dreaded what he’d have to do next, but he must protect his family at all costs, they were important.

Kelly continued her prayer; her sweet words filled Zach’s aching heart.

My strength is yours, the still soft voice spoke to him again. *I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth.*

The verse filled Zach’s heart with new courage. Yes, God would be with him, he had to go on. Rising from the chair he walked into the living room. Kelly had finished praying, and they were now discussing the story she had read to them.

“You guys ready for your trip?” Zach exited the spare bedroom and entered the living room.

“Uh-huh,” Jaycee responded, “Momma was reading us the story of how Paul went on a trip.”

“To tell people about, Je... uh, Him!” Jordan added.

Zach chuckled. His daughters were so bright, and brave. If only everyone could think and act like innocent children, things would be so much better. “That’s right, sweetheart. Paul went on a trip to tell others all about Jesus.” Zach patted Jordan on her head before he sat down beside the girls and Kelly. “Good job being careful about saying His name out loud, but you can talk about Him at the house.”

Jordan tilted her head, and wrinkled her cute forehead. “Are we going to tell people about Him too, Daddy?”

Zach and Kelly exchanged glances. Such sweet words were refreshing, but they both new the outcome of telling others about Christ.

Smiling at Jordan, Kelly caressed her daughter’s cheek. “Maybe, sometime. You know we have to be careful about that. Right now we’re going to go see Grandma and Grandpa, remember?”

Jaycee nodded her head, and then raised her eyebrows. “Yeah, we can talk about Him there, can’t we?” she blurted.

“Yes, honey, you can talk about God in China. Now remember, on the way to see Grandma we have to keep quiet, and not talk to other people about God. On this trip we have to keep Jesus to ourselves. There will be other times we can share our faith, but this trip is extra special. Hush, hush, like spies. Okay, girls?”

The kids nodded in agreement.

“Come on, time to go.”

“Mom do we have to?” the girls sighed.

“Now get your coats,” Zach instructed, “Jaycee, help Jordan.”

With reluctance, the girls headed toward the coat closet by the front door. Not really understanding what was to come next. They were unafraid, not burdened by life's troubles, or the turbulent times. They only knew Daddy would not be going with them on their long journey. Zach's eyes moved from the girls to his wife. A different look shrouded her beautiful brown eyes.

"Zach..." Kelly's words trailed off. She bit her lip, tears filled her eyes.

"Kel, it'll be okay."

"But ..." Kelly wiped a cascading tear from her cheek, "...do you think it will work?"

"Yeah. We've been planning this a long time. The encryption/decryption software and jamming device seems good ..."

"Seems good. But, Zach, what if it's not? What if the signal is blocked? Or traced? What if..?" She choked back another tear.

"That's why you and the girls are going away." Zach put his hand on Kelly's shoulder, and then trailed her arm to her hand. Holding her soft palm in his, he kissed it. "Kel, if things go haywire, you'll be safe."

Kelly shook her head. Throwing her arms around her husband, she buried her face in his chest and held tight. "I don't want to be safe. I want to be with you."

"I want to be with you too. But our children need a mother."

"But..." Kelly sobbed. Tears rolled down her cheeks soaking his shirt. "I just can't go on without you; you're my life, my everything, my best friend."

Zach wrapped his arms around his wife; her soft, wet cheek caressed his chest. He breathed in, trying to capture the scent of her perfume, her hair, the softness of her face next to his: memories which might have to carry him through the next few days; moments that might be his last. He kissed the top of her head, pulling her tighter to his chest— an embrace neither wanted to release. Fighting back tears, Zach released his embrace and gazed into Kelly's eyes. "Whatever is going to happen will happen, Kel." Zach wiped a tear descending her rosy cheek, "God is in control."

"I know... I know..." Kelly laid her head back on his chest for a moment wrapping her arms around his waist, "I am just so scared for you, for us."

"Me too, but God is greater." They held each other for a moment just listening to each other's heartbeats. Zach caressed her cheek. Lifting her chin, he leaned in and embraced her soft lips. Their kisses were sweet and passionate – kisses like they had never been intimate before – kisses like they'd never see each other again. They knew the challenges set before them. The next hour would alter their lives forever. The eternal fate of the world now rest in Zach's hands.