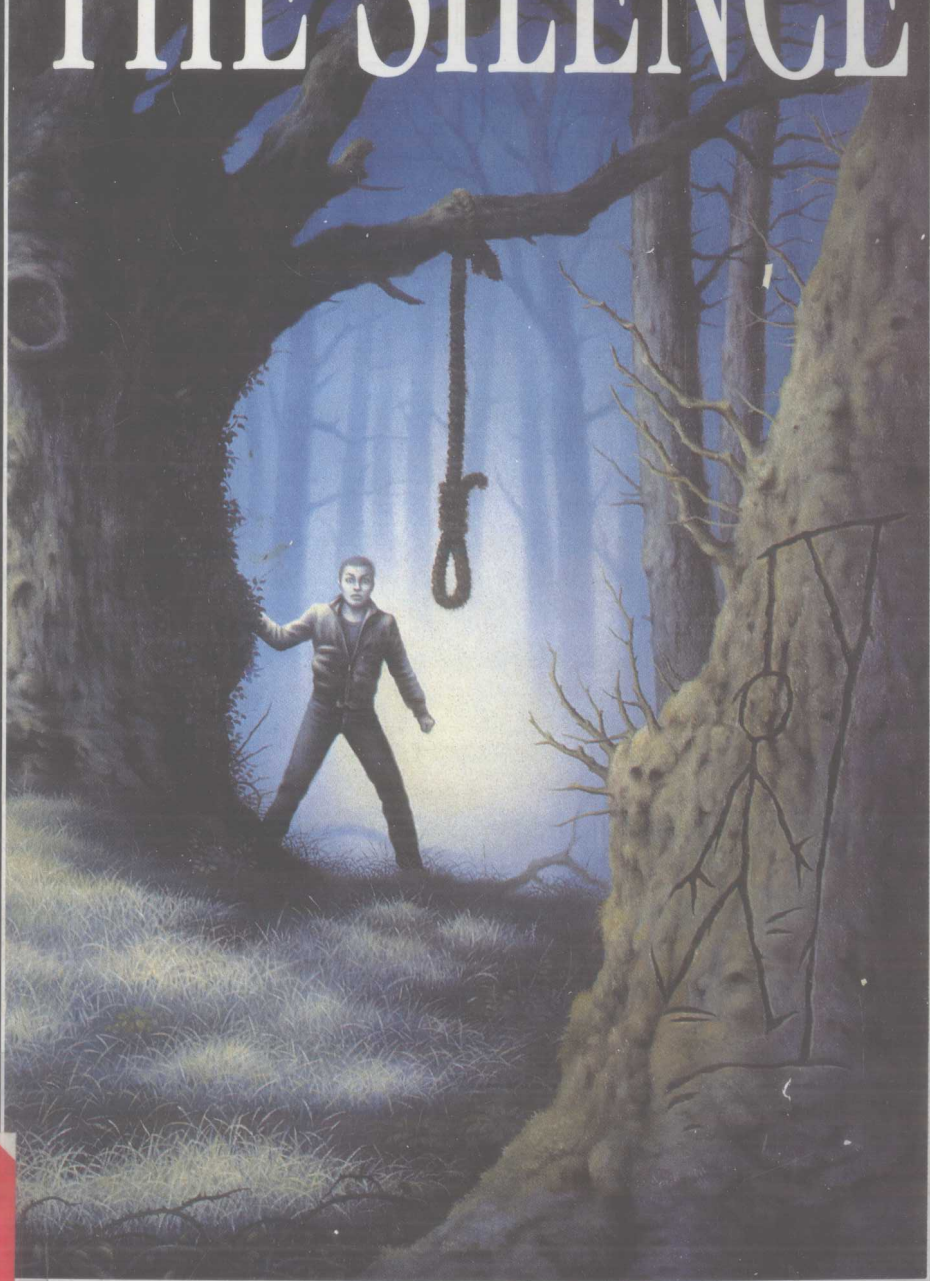


CHRIS WESTWOOD

THE SILENCE



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The Silence

To Mandy Little —
for just about everything

PART ONE
September Rain

Chapter One

The Centre was one of the few terraced houses still standing on the row. There were four of them in all; two were unoccupied and boarded up, another inhabited by squatters, the remainder of the row having been condemned and pulled down long ago. In hazy late summer, fumes from the motorway flyover and dust from a nearby construction site formed a constant ground smog that caused the Centre and its three companions to waver in the heat. When it rained, the brown dust coating the walls of the houses turned liquid.

Some of the dust had settled inside the Centre. A layer had formed on each window-sill, and on every surface not recently swept clean. Upstairs, where only the bathroom and toilet were used, it was everywhere. In the late evening, motes danced in the columns of light squeezing between the drawn curtains, and the distant rush of motorway traffic became muted, like a stream. In its way the endless sound was lulling, so much so that by midnight Linda Walker had fallen asleep on the couch, thumb still marking her place in the paperback novel she'd been reading.

In the next room, Godfrey's voice rambled on, the words unclear, rising now in a query, falling as he emphasised something deeply felt. This sound was lulling too, like the motorway. Far down in Linda's sub-conscious the muffled voice hummed, a trapped insect trying to escape. She was so far gone that when the phone rang suddenly she came to with a start.

The book fell from her grasp and landed face down, splying the pages, adding another crease to the weary

spine. Linda sat upright, letting the room come into focus. Her sleeping bag was still bound like a Swiss roll at one end of the couch. Directly above a bookcase bowed under the weight of popular paperbacks, an old square rug hung from the wall like a tapestry. To her right, between the books and the door, was an open fireplace, the hearth and grate overflowing with rubber plants. The phone, on the desk by the window, was still ringing. Although she'd set the volume at minimum, it seemed inordinately loud. By the seventh ring she was at the desk, sliding onto the hard-backed chair, reaching for the receiver. As she did so she took a deep, purposeful breath, composing herself.

'Hello,' she said. 'Samaritans, can I help you?'

The *I* was important, the *Help* a key word. The thing was to personalise these first moments quickly, provide the caller with an easy way in. The wrong inflection, a half-hearted or preoccupied tone could lose them forever. So she sat, the receiver pressed to one side of her face, a forefinger tracing a line through the new layer of dust on the desk surface, and waited.

And then, the silence.

Almost every call seemed to begin this way. For some reason she found the first faltering pause, the void, the instant before she heard the voice, far more worrying than anything the caller might tell her. Usually, it meant that whoever was on the line would either be steadying themselves for the emotional outburst that followed or registering her voice, a woman's voice. Sometimes, with sex callers, the sound of a woman was all that was required. Others could only confess to a man, as if to a priest. Always, though, the silence felt to her far longer than it was. A second or two might pass, and it would cross her mind that anyone, anyone at all could be calling, that she could be about to hear the worst thing in the world, something she'd rather not share. And then the caller would clear his or her throat, and Linda would find herself again, and life would go on. The call could take place.

Except that sometimes, as now, the silence continued. She clutched the receiver, still waiting. In the next room Godfrey's voice rose and fell mildly. There were two lines

into the Centre and one private line out. As a rule all calls were initially directed to the other room, then diverted here if the first line was busy. Linda cleared her throat. Somewhere on the line was a recognisable sound, much like the rush of motorway traffic. Perhaps the caller was close by, or the sound was merely a nervous intake of breath. Finally she repeated herself, her mouth still parched from sleep.

'Samaritans, can I help you?'

'I don't know that anyone can help,' replied a voice, a woman's, mid or late thirtyish, slightly groggy and slow.

Immediately, before she could check herself, Linda had a crystal-clear picture of an empty room, shabbily furnished, and a lonely, bedraggled woman, wearing only a slip, in an armchair, knees drawn up almost to her chin. Perhaps a cigarette in one hand. Perhaps an empty or half-empty tumbler. A voice could set off so many images.

'I can try. I can try to help,' Linda said. She waited, but the silence prompted her on. 'You can talk to me as freely as you like, you know. This is between the two of us.'

'Nobody knows,' the voice sighed. The short, ragged breaths were close to sobs. Linda waited. 'Nobody knows what I've gone through.'

'But you feel it will help to tell someone?'

'You, you mean? I don't know.'

'Still, you picked up the phone. A lot of people don't get that far. You must have wanted ...' But she was pressing the point. Better to stand back, give the caller time.

'Sometimes it's easier saying what you have to say to someone you don't know.'

'It would be nice if there *were* someone I knew I could tell it to.'

'An understanding friend.'

'Yes, but I don't have that. People who have that don't know how lucky they are.'

'Even close friends can be hard to approach about certain things,' Linda said. 'What's good about our set-up is that we're anonymous. You can say whatever you like - we don't know you and you don't know us. We could pass one another in the street tomorrow without realising.'

'Do you judge people for what they say?' the woman

asked in a voice that was somehow altered, sharper, coming down like a whip. 'Do you hold what they tell you against them?'

This was not the typical caller. Most, having found the courage to pick up the phone, wasted no time at all in coming to the point. Here was a woman who wanted to know where she stood before confession, as if this were a matter of profit or loss.

'Everything that passes between us is confidential,' Linda said finally.

'Everything?'

'Absolutely.'

'But you didn't answer my question. About whether or not you make judgements.'

'Me personally? If I do, I can't help it. It's human nature to do that, but I don't attach blame if I can help it. Sometimes we all do things we're unhappy about but have no control over.'

"'Judge ye not,'" the woman's voice began, before breaking into humourless laughter. "'Judge ye not," or something or other. I can't remember the rest, even though I knew it by heart once. Did you ever do anything you were unhappy about?'

This time it was Linda who hesitated. Had the woman phoned for help or to intimidate her? Some callers, a surprising number, contacted the Centre for kicks. Training had prepared her for many eventualities, but occasionally hoaxers could be hard to spot. A man who claimed to be preparing for suicide had once kept Linda engaged on the phone for two traumatic hours before heartily thanking her for her time and inviting her out to dinner. Another caller had rotated between three separate personalities — one week a jilted young business woman; the next a housewife whose husband beat her; the next a lonely bedridden spinster — until one of the daytime Sams had made the connection, noting a turn of phrase, a common reference which linked the three. Oh, they were out there all right: the down at heart, the genuinely desperate. But the twisted and deceitful were out there too, in equal numbers.

Linda glanced at the noticeboard above the desk, to the

left of the window. Pinned to it were several memos and colour photographs and the card the other Sams had given her for her thirtieth birthday. Next to this was a colour print of George and herself emerging from church, dusted with confetti, flushed and smiling.

'We've all done things we're unhappy about,' she said. 'Otherwise we'd hardly be human, would we? Making mistakes is how we learn.'

'But sometimes our mistakes are too great to learn from. The only thing to do then is bury them, wipe the slate clean, pretend they never happened.' Again, the humourless laughter, the background of distant noise. 'Will you judge me for what I've done, I wonder?' the woman said.

All at once, Linda wished Godfrey were free to take over, but she could still hear his mumbling next door. There was something — not in the silence between exchanges, but in the woman's voice, the knowing quality of it — that troubled her. She was back to the silence again, the moment before conversation began, and the numbing prospect of what might be revealed.

'Someone is dead because of me,' the caller said.

Linda took another deep breath, transferring the receiver from one hand to the other. She mustn't react. The caller had decided to come clean and mustn't be dissuaded.

'Did you hear what I said?' the woman demanded.

'Yes. But I was waiting for more.'

'You're in luck, then. There's much more.'

'Are you talking about someone you knew? Someone close to you?'

'Someone I knew. Not close to me, though, not in that way. Someone who didn't deserve to live.'

The words were becoming harsher, the voice colder still. There was an edge to it now, vaguely familiar, that Linda wanted desperately not to recognise. She could no longer visualise the woman curled dismally in an armchair. There was no half-empty tumbler. The imagined features were changing, the dishevelled hair rearranging itself.

'Why do you say this person didn't deserve to live?' she wondered.

'Some people don't. They take the joy out of living for

others. They only exist to hurt and drag you down with them. They just keep on coming, they push you to the point where you've no choice but to retaliate . . . You must have known someone like that yourself, Linda.'

At first she couldn't be sure she'd heard correctly. Her lips moved without sound, unable to form a meaningful reply. The important thing about the system of anonymity was that it protected the person taking the call as well as the caller. If the desolate needed help, the calls must be personalised, but this was too close: too personal. Samaritans were allowed to give out their first names on the phone – it helped build confidence – but tonight she hadn't needed to. The caller already knew her.

'Did you call before?' Linda said conversationally, in spite of her nerves. 'Is that how you knew my name?'

And now there was a new and vast silence, on the line and in her heart. Perhaps this was why she had always feared that moment before the first words were uttered; it was the fear that someone out there knew her, that they had called her, Linda Walker, for a reason. She held her breath. The room was suddenly uncomfortably warm. The connection, the distant traffic, Godfrey next door, all had receded to a dim hiss.

'I know more about you than your name,' the voice said. 'And I'll ask you again, Linda. Do you judge people for what they tell you? Do you really believe we learn from our mistakes?'

But it wasn't a point of contention; Linda understood that only too well. The call had not been made out of desperation or as a cry for help. It had been made, she thought, as the truth slowly dawned on her, despite what they'd agreed all those years ago, huddled together inside the ice house.

'Alison?' she said, and as she spoke the room darkened. One of the few remaining streetlights outside had just gone out with a whisper. 'Alison, is that you?' The speaker's image was suddenly complete: sullen-eyed, raven-haired, fifteen years old. The left ear was pierced and studded, the fingernails painted blue. 'Ali, we shouldn't be speaking. You know what we said. You're breaking the agreement we made.' It didn't occur to her to ask how Alison had traced her.

'You're right,' the caller's voice said flatly. 'We all know full well what went on and was said. But that was then, and things change.'

They wouldn't be changing without this call, Linda thought angrily. Without this call, the past might have been kept at bay, perhaps eventually forgotten. We were different people back then, she thought, and we made mistakes, as everyone does, and dealt with things as we saw them at the time. It should have been over, but instead the voice on the line was saying, 'Linda, it's beginning again.'

'That's nonsense! You know it is. Why are you doing this?'

'Give me a minute, hear me out. Something has happened to someone we know.'

'Who?'

'Take a look at the day after tomorrow's papers and you'll understand everything.'

'Why not tell me now, since you took the trouble to call?' The rushing traffic felt lodged within Linda's head, thick and relentless as her thoughts. She couldn't be sure anymore that the muffled hum she heard was Godfrey's voice next door. 'You can't break our silence after all this time, after however many years it's been, just to leave me hanging in mid-air. Remember what was agreed. We weren't to involve ourselves in each other's lives again unless it became really necessary.'

'I remember, Linda. Take a look at the papers,' the caller repeated, and hung up.

As she replaced the receiver, Linda noticed her hands shaking. She clutched the front edge of the desk to steady herself, and felt the tremor through the rest of her body. In the darkness beyond the window where the streetlight had gone out, her car was parked. Anyone could be concealed near it, watching, waiting for her to emerge from the Centre. Thankfully it would be first light by the time she came off duty, but for the moment she couldn't see how she was going to get through the night. How could she empathise with others now, hearing their problems, when her own were suddenly so alive and immediate?

Fifteen years, she thought, still seated, unable to budge

from the desk. In all that time they had kept the promise, and as if by magic there had been peace. From a distance she'd watched the others succeed and rise — Alison first through provincial newspaper reporting, then magazine journalism; Michael, after years of frustration, through publishing — and as long as they remained strangers it had seemed they could all go on prospering forever in their separate, secret lives. But it had always been on the cards that the spell would break, that one day there would come a familiar voice she had thought she would never hear again. Until now she hadn't been certain why she feared the silence, the brief hesitation before the first word of every call.

She was still at the desk when the phone began ringing again. In the dust on the desk-top she had, without realising, drawn a gallows, a noose, a hanged stick-man. Averting her eyes from it, she took a deep breath and lifted the receiver.

'Samaritans, can I help you?' she said, and waited for whatever came next.

Chapter Two

More than two hundred miles away, in a third floor hotel room overlooking Piccadilly Circus, a telephone receiver was being replaced, then lifted again. Presently, the hotel receptionist answered. The caller cleared his throat, requested an outside line, and dialled.

This time he was through to emergency services.

'Police, please,' he specified. 'No need for an ambulance. Too late for that, I'm afraid.' Within seconds he was speaking to an authoritative-sounding police officer who didn't intimidate him in the least. He let the officer wait for a minute before saying, 'There's been a nasty accident you should know about. Someone got hurt. It won't be easy to identify them. From what I can make out, it could be anybody.' He glanced across at the bed, marvelling at his play on words — anybody, any body — a joke that the officer had evidently missed altogether. 'Yes, that's correct. Whoever did this must be sick, not in their right mind. You really ought to get someone over here now.'

The officer waited, possibly expecting more, then said, 'Could you give me your name and home address, sir?'

'Not really.'

'I see.' There was a lull. 'Then perhaps the address you're calling from.'

'That won't help you,' the caller said firmly. 'This is the first time I've been here and I don't expect to be back.'

'Then I don't really see what we can do, if you're not prepared to help us.' The policeman sounded as though his interest were waning. Perhaps he suspected a hoax, or was

taking this disinterested approach to draw him out, tempt him to say something he'd later regret.

The caller took his time. He, not the authorities, was the one in control here. A strange sense of power surged through him, making him dizzy. The french windows were three-quarters open, and he watched the lace curtains billow inwards before the air sucked them out again, towards the balcony and the night.

'Perhaps "accident" isn't the right word,' he decided. 'Whoever did this must have had a strong stomach, is all I can say. It takes me back to the art class at school, reminds me of -'

'Did you say art class?' The officer sounded perplexed.

'Reminds me of how, when I'd drawn something badly and despised it for what it was, I'd scribble it out, take firm hold of my pencil and scratch out what I'd done until you could hardly identify it. You know the feeling. And that's how this looks to me. As if someone was trying to scratch out what was there.' He was leaps and bounds ahead of the policeman now; the voice of authority had gone, was mewling and sighing for want of the proper response.

'Listen,' the caller said. Quickly, he gave the name of the hotel and the street, and hung up.

He stood in front of the dresser in the dimness, resting his fingers lightly on the phone. Next to it was a glass and the small tin of Coke he'd taken from the mini bar before calling. In the dresser's mirror he could see, reflected behind him, the lifeless mess on the bed.

He couldn't make out the details in this light. Not that he needed to, for he knew only too well how precisely the face had been re-drawn, the skin, eyes and tongue removed, the features obliterated. Even the tips of the fingers had been cut off, and when the officer who'd taken the call heard of that, he'd finally get the joke: lacking a face and fingerprints, it really could be any body.

Pouring the Coke into the glass, he stepped on to the balcony and looked down. Even at this hour, the traffic flowed endlessly. The blaze of neon might have been a dream he had woken into. In spite of the busy streets the city air felt cool and fresh, as it never seemed to do in the