

# **Solutions**

## **A Man's Dilemma**

**by James Gerard, 1960-**

**Published: 2015**

✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻ ✻

## **Table of Contents**

**The Dawn of Misery  
Resurrection of Hope  
Conflicting Allegiance  
Proceeding with Caution  
Illogical Plans**

**Confronting a Friend  
The Eyes Above  
True Intentions  
But Why?  
Grumblings from the Dead  
Truth Kept Alive**

✿ ✿ ✿ ✿ ✿ ✿ ✿ ✿ ✿ ✿

## **The Dawn of Misery**

Dim pinpoints of light were visible out of the few passenger windows of the small jet. The pilot had announced there was a problem powering up the runway lights and had been instructed to a holding pattern until the pathway was alit for landing.

But Stephen did not care. Long before takeoff dreaded thoughts of having to deal with just one more reluctant relocation sapped the motivation for the job. The world-wide pandemic, however, made his personal feelings insignificant. The emergency plan, seemingly devised on the run based on dire events, took precedent.

Finally the landing strip was flooded with light. The jet circled one hundred and eighty degrees to line up for the landing approach and quickly touched ground.

Stephen had become accustomed to the debarking process. Planes no longer taxied to terminals. There were no more airline personnel to assist anyone off the plane. No more baggage carts were needed. The lone pilot did not need help either. Just pick up your bag lying in the seat next to you, open the door, and step out.

All along the tarmac and parked in front of the dark and empty terminals of the international airport sat countless planes of all sizes and shapes. Private craft mingled among commercial craft mingled among military craft. Most looked relatively new and shiny, but a few had the look of the desperate measures that called them into duty.

The runway lights were extinguished, darkness descended onto the scene. Everything in sight under the moonless sky turned into ghostly silhouettes, relics of an era gone by.

Stephen just wanted to stand there, to plant himself as a tombstone in the field that had become a lifeless function compared to the once vibrant past, but duty called.

“Hello,” a voice called out from the darkness.

Stephen turned around and spotted the silhouette of a figure emerging from the background of the only lighted structure around.

The man did not speak another word as he faced Stephen. Stephen just took the envelope from the man's hand. He spotted the lone car parked close to the plane that flew him in and begrudgingly made his way to the government vehicle.

Stephen sat idle in the driver's seat and contemplated the next step. All he had to do was tear open the envelope, input the destination into the vehicle's navigational device, and drive away. But he longed for just a few moments of peace, a few moments to contemplate what had happened to the known world.

He closed his eyes, imagined as best he could the once hectic setting of the bustling airport. Sounds and sights and smells flooded the thoughts with memories in the controlled chaos in moving passengers as quickly as possible from one point to the next. He visualized the various workers abiding to the rule that time was money as they scurried about. He could see the mayhem coordinated and directed with the mastery of a conductor's baton; a dance choreographed with fine precision.

The face of his wife and children popped into the scene as his imagination had him step into the terminal. He could see his children gleefully running at him for hugs and kisses, a warm smile and welcoming embrace from the wife he missed so much. But the memories had to reluctantly come to an end as reality took over, stopped the tears from rolling down the cheeks.

His wife and children were now listed as victims of the flu pandemic. Relegated to his thoughts and heart, nine loved ones lived now as permanent memories that would sadly fade over time. Mother and father, all but one of his siblings, nieces and nephews and aunts and uncles and cousins were all gone; them too victims of the virus that plagued the Earth.

As the pandemic spread throughout the world killing its victims one by one, he eventually would be notified of the death in his family. Every time a notification made its way to him in whatever location of the states he was in at the time, all he could do was grieve for a moment before duty called him back to the reality of the situation.

Stephen searched frantically for his younger brother on every database still available in the chaos of the disorder brought about by the pandemic, but it was as if he had vanished into thin air. The last contact was in the form of a cryptic message in the form of Spanish language Holy Bible that had been mysteriously delivered from some mysterious location, but the message was understood.

As a former forensic psychologist in local law enforcement he was use to extracting clues from that which was seen and heard and read. Recruited by the FBI to interrogate serial killers, he learned to see the sentences in written text as the space between sentences and the space between sentences as the sentences. By use of inductive reasoning in the cryptic message from his brother, Stephen knew he had finally found a home and was happy. Yet, he longed to know of his true fate.

Stephen wanted so much to assign the blame for the horrific situation on the Lord he loved, but he resisted the urge to do so. He begged his God to alleviate the pain buried deep in his heart, but it was as if his cries fell on deaf ears. He cried out so many times for intervention, a simple word to wipe away the tears of the

world, to send to the pit the virus that plagued the existence of his brothers and sisters, but there was no miracle from above. Life, as heart wrenching the events were, marched on to the cries of suffering and hopelessness.

But now the dreaded duty called his attention. He had allowed himself enough time to satisfy the imagination and escape from the nightmare, enough time to consider his Lord's silence in the matter. If it were all just a nightmare he could just simply wake up, but it was no nightmare.

The instrument panel came to life as the sedan started. The destination was keyed into the navigator and the step by step routing information flashed to life on the display.

Traveling the empty interstate seemed more ominous from previous times. It was not often Stephen was dragged from one location to another at night, and the sheer stretch of darkness offered a challenge to his driving abilities. How strange it all was in the absence of illuminating highway lights, lighted directional signs, and any light from businesses and houses penetrating the sides of the highway. And though the highway was made wide by numerous lanes, Stephen needed to be especially vigilant with each turn of the vast stretch of emptiness.

After hours of driving, signs of the Sun had yet to penetrate the star filled sky. The scheduled time was seven in the morning so he figured one last chance to stop and cater to the imagination was at hand.

The sedan came to a stop in the middle of the deserted highway. In the sparse light provided by the stars high above, he could see the silhouettes of the houses left vacant, of the personal cars abandoned in lieu of the large scale government transportation vehicles. Eyes focused on the lifeless scene. Stephen told himself that everyone was just sleeping in the quaint and peaceful suburban setting. That come morning parents would be seen shuffling their children off to school, a husband, a wife, late for work would hurriedly jump in their car and race away. Sprinklers would come alive and spread water all about finely manicured lawns and gardens. A paperboy would cruise down the streets tossing newspapers to waiting readers. They're just asleep. They're just asleep.

Stephen could finally see the madness of it all. He found it hard to believe that a virus, tiny, lacking intelligence, could bring down man and send fear and terror throughout the world. He could not see how the virus could be more powerful than any force of nature. There had been no plague, hurricane, tornado, flood, or volcanic eruption of such destructive force that even came close to the destructive power of the flu pandemic. There had been no war or conflict that had the mighty force of the tiny virus. In fact, thought Stephen, you could combine all the wars and plagues and natural disasters through the history of the world together and they could still not approach the devastating power of such a tiny virus.

In the latest update of those eradicated, the count was nearly six billion. Stephen knew the number was based on those they had evacuated to safe zones. All others, they concluded, were dead or would be dead soon.

So here he was again, alone in some deserted highway somewhere in the United States sent in to convince one more reluctant survivor to voluntarily move or be moved. He sighed, looked to the stars above and wondered when it would end.

## Resurrection of Hope

Stephen had witnessed the horrific effects of the pandemic over the last couple of years, but this time it was different. The town was deserted. In the light of the morning overgrown brush and lawns strangled with weeds came to view. Torn and tattered pieces of paper littered the streets and sidewalks. A film of dust covered cars parked on the curbside and in driveways of abandoned houses. Once alive and vibrant, desolation now dominated the suburban landscape.

His sole purpose for being there was a few miles ahead on the outskirts of the town. He had yet to take a look at the woman's name, let alone look and see what state he was actually in, but the name meant nothing; duty called for quick and decisive action.

Up ahead, parked on the street, was the usual military vehicle he had grown accustomed to seeing. It was plain and gray with black lettering identifying the branch of the armed service. And as usual he expected to see the same people but with different faces. The attitude and purpose, however, were always the same.

Stephen pulled into the vacant driveway and spotted the two armed soldiers standing guard on the front porch of the neatly groomed house. He walked past them without a word and entered upon the scene of an army captain standing behind a woman sipping from a cup amidst the sounds of some nostalgic song humming from the speakers of a stereo.

"Good morning," said Stephen realizing that there was nothing good about the morning at all.

The woman sat silent.

The captain took Stephen aside. "I will give you fifteen minutes. If she does not voluntarily leave then we take her by force."

Stephen was sick of hearing that same old speech. At first he took it as matter of fact directives obeyed by the military men, but now the words sounded void of any emotion except anger. He reasoned that they felt they were the ones being inconvenienced and not the people that were forced out of their home.

Stephen peered over the contents of a sheet pulled from the envelope and read it from top to bottom.

"Carolyn? Carolyn Baxter?"

The woman spoke up in a tone of sadness, "Who are you?"

"My name is Stephen. I was asked to come and talk to you about the situation."

"As I told these gentlemen, I am not leaving my home period. If I die then I die. But I am not leaving my home."

"Yes ma'am, I understand your feelings and actually empathize with you, but it would be...."

"No," Carolyn shouted. "I have heard enough. I am not leaving. I want all of you out of my house now."

The captain took a step towards the woman, but Stephen waved him off.

"Would it be all right if I talked with Carolyn alone?" asked Stephen.

The captain stared momentarily at him then walked outside.

“Have they told you Carolyn that you are not only the last living person in this town but you are the last living person in this state?”

“I don’t care. My husband bought me this home. We raised our children here. I am not leaving.”

Stephen could hear the sniffing and see the tears roll silently down her face. At that moment he could agree with Carolyn’s position but she needed to leave. He knelt before her and gently rubbed the top of one of her hands with his. “Do you believe in God Carolyn?”

He saw Carolyn nod as a stream of tears rolled off her cheeks and splashed onto his hand.

“You know He feels your pain don’t you?”

Carolyn nodded yes.

“You know He loves you very much don’t you?”

Carolyn bowed her head and sobbed louder.

“You know He is crying with you right now don’t you?”

Carolyn doubled up before him as the sobbing intensified.

“God knows exactly what you are going through. He is here with you now. What we are asking you to do is out of love, just like Jesus showed us when He left Heaven to come here to Earth. Jesus left his home because of love, his love for us; for you Carolyn.”

“But...”

“I know Carolyn. It all seems so unfair doesn’t it? It’s like you just don’t matter. It’s like no one understands that all you want is to stay in your home. But the power plant will be shut off in a matter of minutes. You will have no electricity, water, nothing but just plain emptiness. And although our Lord will be right here with you, there will be no more food or water to survive on. You will be totally alone. You will die a miserable death. Do you think our Lord wants that to happen to you? Or do you think that maybe, just maybe He wants you to leave and be with other believers so you can find love and happiness again? What do you think Carolyn?”

Carolyn continued to sob, but after a few minutes the flow of tears stopped.

“They’re telling me all I can take is some clothes. They won’t let me take anything else.”

“What else do you want to take with you?”

“I want to take my family pictures and a few items to remember my children and husband by.”

“All she can take are clothes,” the captain said as he walked back in. “No personal items whatsoever.”

“But...”

“No personal items!”

Stephen jumped to his feet, marched over to the captain, and planted his face into his.

“Now look here you....”

“Don’t....”

“I will because I have complete authority concerning this matter. If you get in my way I will make sure the rest of your pathetic life will be spent regretting you ever challenged my authority. Do you understand?” screamed Stephen.

“Yes sir.”

“Very good. Now get back outside until I tell you when to come back in. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir.”

Stephen turned to Carolyn. He noticed the calmness about her. The eyes were dry and she sat up straight apparently looking to him for further help.

“Do you have a really big, big bag Carolyn?”

“I do.”

“Good. I want you to get it and stuff as much stuff you want into it. Do you understand?”

“Thank you,” cried Carolyn as tears once again flowed from her eyes.

As Carolyn packed Stephen looked over the papers that had been sitting in the envelope. He looked at her appointed designation, Las Vegas, and wondered why. In all his past encounters with those such as Carolyn, he noticed the various designations each one was assigned to. All those he encountered were destined for desert cities, even though cities in Southern California and select mountain cities were also designated as survival cities.

Within the contents of another paper was the listing of surviving relatives. Her daughter Deborah and granddaughter Cathy were the only family survivors. The others, her husband and other children and all extended family members had died from the flu virus. The contents did not reveal, however, her daughter’s and granddaughter’s location.

Curious, Stephen decided to make an inquiry with the agency he had been assigned, the U.S. National Crisis Center.

“Yes. Code name Retriever, I.D. number two-eight-one-six-two dash eight, dash zero, dash X dot six-one-nine-one.”

Stephen fanned the papers in his hands, directed air to the face while he waited for a response.

“Hold on. Carolyn! Come here for a moment.”

Carolyn came running from up the basement stairs.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everything’s fine. Tell me Deborah’s and Cathy’s full names and birthdates.”

Stephen scribbled the information on the back of a sheet of paper and gave the information to the person on the other side of the phone, instructed the person not to hang up.

“I need their present location.”

Carolyn began to sob as in disbelief. She came close to Stephen and tried to ask what was going on, but Stephen just waved the question off.

“Los Angeles? Are you sure? Give me the location number.”

Stephen turned to Carolyn. “Your daughter Deborah and granddaughter Cathy are alive. Did you know that?”

Carolyn buckled at the knees, dropped to the ground.

“Captain,” Stephen called.

“Yes sir.”

“I am changing her destination to Los Angeles, location code one-one-zero-one.”

“I cannot....”

“Yes you can. How are you taking her?”

“We’re using a long strip of road just a few miles from here as a makeshift runway. The plane is waiting.”

“Finish packing Carolyn.”

Stephen turned his attention back to the person on hold and gave instructions as to her new designation.

Carolyn dragged a giant suitcase up the stairs. Upon hearing the news that she would be reunited with her remaining family she jumped up and down shouting words of thanks to the Lord.

Stephen just smiled, actually felt good for a change.

Carolyn was escorted out of the house by the captain and rushed to the rendezvous point.

Stephen plopped down into a sofa and listened to the music still humming from the stereo’s speakers. But it did not last long as the electricity was cut off.

The town, the county, the state was now void of any human life except for himself and any other human necessary to carry out the emergency plan.

Relaxation swept over his body as he lay in the quiet house. He knew soon the phone would ring and he would be flying off to his next assignment, to the next reluctant evacuee. But for the moment, while the time lasted he let his thoughts slip away from the call of duty and pretended that he was back in the past that was filled with both hope and despair in everyday existence.

## **Conflicting Allegiance**

Stephen waited patiently for the next assignment. From information fed to him via his superiors he had been told evacuations of all survivors sweeping the entire east coast from northeast states to southeast states had been accomplished. The same confirmation was also fed to him concerning the clearing of survivors of all southern states and mid-west states. Currently, he was well aware that his next assignment would take him to northwest states or southwest states, excluding California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. There, in official transmissions, would be the final evacuation of all remaining survivors not yet affected by the spread of the virus.

Caught up in the swirl of the chaos, Stephen found it difficult to stop and truly analyze what was happening. He remembered when the pandemic was reported that scientists admitted to being absolutely baffled by not only the spread of the virus, but how the virus sprang up and attacked all continents at the same time.

One day he was reporting to work as usual, and within a matter of hours a transfer to virus plagued areas to utilize his gift of persuasion and cleverness to calm down those trapped in the panic was enacted. His job description was to assure those reluctant to leave that the call for an evacuation was in the best interest of the world as a whole.

Stephen already knew that evacuees would lack reason. By experience alone he was well schooled by the fact that in horrific situations victims turned inward to cut themselves off from outside influences as a matter of emotional survival. To tell them to think of others under such circumstances was paramount to telling



them that their feelings did not matter, that their personal fears were not important and that their very lives were now just a hindrance in the fight to contain the flu. But running contrary to this, his duty was to take those caught up in such an emotional survival mode and convince them that the survival of the whole was more important than the survival of just one individual. He had to convince them that just one unsuspecting individual could spread the virus and wipeout all other survivors.

All through his career in law enforcement, starting in the military as an MP and working as a beat cop in local law enforcement to a homicide detective and through his last position, Stephen had always had the heart to exercise compassion towards both victims and assailants. Whether it was the act of investigating, taking a statement, arresting, interrogating, or a testimony, the focus was on the individual first and society second.

He discovered that in the approach to criminal acts, the individual always came first in focus because of the variations of truth that resulted from the different versions of what was witnessed, of physical markings on bodies that contradicted the physical assault described in words. What was seen and heard by one person was different from what another saw and heard. This victim claims an attack in this fashion or by this means yet the assailant makes the claim that all that was done was this. If every detail had been so cut and dry, collaborated, agreed to by all involved, then he could look beyond the individual and in favor of society.

The pandemic provided this path for Stephen. There was one truth to it and therefore there was no room for various versions. Yes, in the beginning he had heard all the rumors of its inception. The conspiracy theorists claimed a purposeful act of government. The ufologists claimed the onset of an alien invasion. Environmentalist claimed the Earth was retaliating for all the damage mankind had done to it. The theologians claimed measures brought on by religious wars. Outright believers, however, believed the power of God was simply at hand. Himself, he certainly believed what was occurring was by the Lord's will but not directly. He saw it as a test of faith for the world to consider: for He had allowed the powers and principalities to try to influence the hearts of men.

But whatever the cause, whatever the reason was behind the plague, whatever his personal view was, duty called for him to act in accordance to those in charge of saving mankind as a race, a people, inhabitants of the planet. And he was more than willing to help save the world whatever the cost to those he encountered because the truth was evident; individual's wants and needs were inconsequential. But now his dilemma was not in the rescue attempt itself, but in how he treated those he came across.

Stephen realized that confusion more than anything turned what should have been a somewhat orderly plan of attack into organized chaos. With the how and the why of the plague not answered with any expertise, the general public had no choice but to panic.

Scientists could not figure out how the virus seemed to choose its locations and target its victims in such a random fashion. Was it an airborne virus? Was it a communicable virus? Was it hidden in food and water? What were the correlations between the victims? Under what environmental conditions did it thrive? It was a mystery.

Young and old, males and females of all nationalities, of all ethnic groups, of all races were targeted at random. It took a husband but not the wife. It took the children but not the parents. It took a neighbor on one side but on the other side it spared. It devastated a whole town, city, but left others standing. Both white collar and blue collar workers, professionals and laborers, public or private sector were each targeted at random.

Stephen, once he had been called to duty, reasoned that world leaders had no choice but to consort together in a short amount of time to come up with the best solution possible. It was clear, though not readily accepted, that the plan to remove and isolate survivors into specific areas where they could stand guard against the mysterious virus was the best and last hope of saving humanity. Safe zones were established in all nations, on every continent, and were quickly established. The organized chaos commenced.

That was all well and good for Stephen in the beginning, but now the amount of human misery he had witnessed took control of his conscious. The thought of facing just one more reluctant resident, convincing them that the forced evacuation was for their own good no longer satisfied the call of duty. He saw himself losing his humanity in saving humanity.

The plague had given the opportunity to forego simple human compassion, but he confessed that it was himself that chose the course of action. He talked with the Lord as he had always done. All through his career in law enforcement he had always sought guidance to serve accordingly to the will of his Lord while begging for forgiveness when he went astray. More and more his cries were sent to his Lord with an urgent plea for forgiveness as he obeyed the orders of his superiors and tricked people in doing the one thing they did not want to do.

He thought which was better: To survive the pandemic and start a life with new unknowns in every pathway, or succumb to the virus' deadly attack and be burned in fire?

Flying over the country he had seen large plumes of smoke first in cities and suburbs and countryside, but more and more as he was flown around from location to location the plumes rose in the countryside only. He figured as the death toll mounted heaps of dead corpses were treated as so much garbage and hauled by the truckload to sites in rural areas to be burned in deep and broad pits dug hastily to destroy any remains of the virus amongst the rotting flesh. He had heard rumor that the stockpile of the dead had risen to unmanageable numbers so many victims were left were they had fallen.

Either way, he figured, the pandemic had to be dealt with in the quickest most efficient way possible. Although he wanted to play judge and speak out against the cold procedures set in place, he knew that would get him nowhere. However, deviations from the plan in the form of limited compassion might be the only way any semblance of his Faith in God could stand up against the plans of the U.S. National Crisis Center.

## **Proceeding with Caution**

From the view high above the landscape below, a thin vein of a once thriving interstate highway was sighted. Stephen scanned the narrow path for any crawling object but none were detected.

He wondered if such systems would ever come back to life one day in light of the devastating attack of the flu virus. Would metropolises be left for decay and ruin before they ever saw a thriving population once again? It never dawned on him that the reshaping of human habitats depended on the decisions by the U.S. National Crisis Center and not by nature itself.

Hours before arriving in Portland, Stephen decided to quench his curiosity by the information made available to him via the center's communication network.

From the main menu he brought up the relocation sites carefully approved by those making the decisions on the fates of surviving U.S. citizens. He wondered how they chose the sites situated in mountain cities from Montana down to Arizona, and from desert cities in Nevada and Arizona, and why they opted for just Southern California locations of Los Angeles and San Diego. After all, if the idea was to isolate the survivors from the virus then the near proximity of the locations could enable the virus to attack no matter what the method of transmission was.

Pulling up the information regarding age demographics, Stephen noticed that senior men and women, both couples and singles, were designated for either Las Vegas or Phoenix, while adolescents, both male and female, were designated for either San Diego or Los Angeles. For all age demographics in between, designations for the various mountain cities were prescribed.

Although he had been told about the leaders' rationale at an orientation meeting shortly after the call of duty, he wanted to revisit the information, try to reconcile the decisions with that he had experienced in the line of duty. The information just confirmed that of the oral briefing just a few years ago. It was mainly a calculated risk of assuring, no matter the age demographics of the particular sites, the survival of the human race.

Ideally, a viable population of prepubescent teens and those having just reached fertile age would be the first and strongest priority to assure survival. The seniors, even though the men could still impregnate, were to be put away separately since it was reasoned that in their advanced years they would be more susceptible to the virus and thus affect those around them, yet could be used in the event other populations were affected by the virus and wiped out. Everyone in between were also used as safety nets in the event of a catastrophic attack on the very young and the very old. There was no mention of infants and toddlers specifically, but he assumed any of the very young accompanied any surviving parent or adult family member that too had survived. If not, it was not mentioned in either the oral briefing or the written copy.

He thought of Carolyn and wondered how one person could so upset the carefully laid out survival plan? By the leaders' position, it probably spelled out a scenario in which the slightest variation to the plan would end in doom.

The same he reasoned for George and Gladys Pinkerton, his next assignment in Portland. The concise information and instructions designated them for Las Vegas. A thought suddenly popped up. He figured that not only were they to be isolated because they were highly susceptible in their old age, but a much warmer climate would meet their comfort level as well. It made sense to Stephen.

Other files showed that all of their relatives had died from the virus except for one. A surviving granddaughter relocated to San Diego. Stephen felt compelled out of compassion to once again countermand the orders of his superiors and alter information before arriving. He thought about the weather in San Diego and remembered how comfortable it was year round. He speculated they would rather go to San Diego to be with their granddaughter over the desolation of the desert. A designation for San Diego replaced the Las Vegas designation.

Suspicious thoughts ran through his mind after the information was altered. When called to the line of duty he had been given certain powers in fulfilling the job at hand. But he was unclear whether or not that included rerouting survivors from the prescribed designation. If it were a violation of the survival plan he could not be sure if any of the center's management could see the changes or not. After all, only personnel from the U.S. National Crisis Center had access to any of the satellites used to access the World Wide Web. But would there still be a need for spying? That was the question he sought a logical answer to.

Eventually, if his decisions were discovered and deemed as a threat to the overall survival plan, he felt that a phone call or visit by someone from the center who objected to the alterations would come soon. Until then, he cared not to think about it and let his heart guide the way.

A few planes sat idly on the tarmac and select terminals as the plane set down. Luggage carts made their way to the underbelly of a large commercial airliner while the sparse ground crew was busy pumping fuel into one of its wings.

As he sped down the highway a few gray trucks zoomed by in the direction of the airport. On both sides he spotted the occasional security vehicle parked in front of a home whose occupants were hurriedly scuttled away leaving behind the life they would never again see.

Coming off the highway Stephen immediately noticed the location of the reluctant evacuees. "Don't do anything foolish," he whispered, as the sight of the dull and gray military vehicle came in sight.

"Captain," shouted Stephen as he stepped out into the vacant street.

"What?"

"New designation for this couple. They are going to San Diego. See to it."

"I have my..."

"Orders? Yeah, yeah, whatever. If you want to challenge my decision then feel free to. Then again, I am the one making the decision under the authority of my superiors at the crisis center. But go ahead and make a fool out of yourself."

"San Diego?" the Captain sheepishly asked.

"That's what I said."

"Yes sir."

Stephen strolled into the home, told the captain to wait outside.

"You must be Mr. and Mrs. Pinkerton," said Stephen with a smile.

"Who are you?" asked Mr. Pinkerton.

"My name is Stephen. I am here to help you with the transition to your new home."

"You mean sin city?" snarled Mrs. Pinkerton.

That attitude was all Stephen needed to hear to direct his strategy. In just those few words he heard the willingness to adhere to the decision of relocation, the dissatisfaction of the chosen location.

Smiling, Stephen uttered, "San Diego?"

"No damn you. Las Vegas."

"You're a retired navy man are you not Mr. Pinkerton?"

"What of it?"

"On occasions, did you ever have to pull into port there?"

"Of course!"

"That is where you are going."

"The damn army officer told us different."

"Between me and you I could care less about what he thinks. You two are going to San Diego."

"Gladys, what do you think?"

"San Diego is a good place George."

"Okay then, if it's okay with my wife then it's okay with me."

"Very good. I already informed the captain of the new destination. He'll see that he gets you two there."

Stephen walked outside to the gray day that all of a sudden did not seem so dreary. He kept going over and over in his mind that a few people could not disrupt the entire survival plan. He convinced himself that it was such a ridiculous notion that he would treat any more assignments in the same manner as he had with Carolyn and George and Gladys Pinkerton.

## **Illogical Plans**

"How am I doing?" asked Stephen contemplating the course of action he had enacted.

In the dead silence offered by the rolled up windows he smiled as the answer came into the mind. Somewhere along the line he knew he would have to abandon the directions of the center and think of the Lord in all this.

He acknowledged the All Mighty being all power and knowledge, and therefore was well aware of the situation. It did not matter if the plans of the center's superiors might be upset by the actions he took; for good needed to be done. With those thoughts in mind, Stephen took another step that further moved away from the prescribed course of action.

So far he had towed the line in the few years of service. Always directed to a certain location, to a certain reluctant individual or couple, he felt it was time to call his own shot as to his next designation. A side trip to Los Angeles and a well timed visit to Carolyn consumed the thoughts and guided the decision.

But he wondered how. There needed to be an acceptable excuse that his superiors would fall for, but it could neither be too subtle or deemed exceedingly inappropriate.

All of a sudden an idea popped up. Naturally, he reasoned, once my services are no longer needed then I will have a designated location. Obviously, I will get to choose a location as a reward for my service. That idea pleased him well.

“Code name Retriever. I.D. number two-eight-one-six-two dash eight dash zero dash X dot six-one-nine-one.”

He waited anxiously for a response.

“Yes. I am requesting a short visit to Los Angeles to relax before next assignment. I’d also like an opportunity to make living arrangements when the time comes.”

Fingers tapped a rapid beat as the person on the other end once again put him on hold.

“Great. Two days would be good. Thanks. By the way, I’ll need a car while I’m there.”

The captain stood by as the two armed men assisted George and Gladys into the back of the vehicle.

“Captain?”

“Yes sir.”

“You got room for one more?”

“Sir?”

“I’m tagging along on this one. Is there room?”

“Yes sir.”

“Good. I’ll follow you.”

They made a dash to the airport and scrambled to the transport sitting idle on the tarmac. There was nothing in the way of luxury on the bloated transport except for blankets and pillows, bag lunches and a container of hot coffee to ease the discomfort of the cold and bumpy ride.

Along the way he devised a course of action based on the readings of the center’s communication site. According to the center’s map of Los Angeles, the location code, one-one-zero-one, was an environmentally controlled condominium high-rise situated in the coastal district of the city.

Red dots covered the grid on the screen representing designated buildings for relocation. Stephen noticed all the dots represented the buildings housing survivors. The stated rationale entailed that the self-contained controlled environments could be isolated against the virus if it were to arise in the city.

Further reading did not uncover any details as to who was occupying what building or any specific unit. The print just spoke in vague terms.

For Stephen, such vagueness enacted the curious and suspicious nature within the mind. After all, any information concerning the survival plan was designated for those called to duty. He strongly suspected that the lack of detail pointed out deception: For what was not written had more weight to it than the subject matter mentioned in the information itself.

The airport bustled with vehicles and official personnel as the lumbering giant landed on the long stretch of runway handling the multiple air traffic. It was so unlike all the other airport locations where planes sat as ghosts. But he could see no ghostly figures. It appeared as normal; before the onslaught of the killer virus.

Stephen dashed to the vehicle awaiting his arrival. Once in the car he quickly typed in the location code and directions popped up on the screen.

He had never asked anyone how each individual was transported to whichever location once they arrived. It was not mentioned in any file nor was it ever spoken of by the security forces. But in independent mode he demanded answers.

His imagination stirred as he drove along the freeway. He thought back to lazy Sunday morning drives with his family amongst those who also sought an escape from the city. It all seemed like a quiet ride to some spot where worries melted away, but the distinct military gray and green and camouflage vehicles sharing the road jerked his thoughts back to reality.

Stephen longed for normalcy no matter the direction of the dire consequences. He wanted the day, which looked like any other normal day, to transform back into the routine activity that once was. But the reality of the virus kept tainting the thoughts and forced the truth back into view.

Those are not moving trucks, he thought, as canvassed covered trucks occupied much of the highway. There was not much activity with the exception of those trucks obviously heading into the direction of the downtown area to deliver the survivors to their appointed sanctuary. In fact, he noticed, he stuck out driving about in the civilian sedan amongst the military units that were out and about both the freeway and the frontage roads.

Driving along the wide avenues separating the towering condominium to either side, Stephen noticed the posted guards walking the perimeters of the buildings. At each entrance were armed men standing and sitting behind a makeshift shack blocking the front entrances.

The navigation device beeped, alerting him to the arrival at the desired location.

"I am looking for Carolyn Baxter, her daughter Deborah Thurmond, and her granddaughter Cathy."

One guard, his rifle dangling off a shoulder, asked for and was given credential information. A thorough search verified Stephen's position but a puzzled look signified bad news.

"Cathy Thurmond is the only one listed here sir."

"I'm sorry. Repeat that."

"I said Cathy is the only one listed here."

"Where's her mother Deborah Thurmond?"

"There is no Deborah Thurmond here Sir."

"What about her grandmother Carolyn Baxter?"

"Sir, I'm telling you what I show here on the list. Cathy Thurmond is the only one listed from that family."

Stephen thought about it for a moment and wondered if it were just a mistake. Maybe the young man was working off an old list before the changes were enacted. But again the guard repeated the same thing.

"I guess if Cathy is the only one listed then I will talk with her."

The guard handed Stephen a temporary identity card and gave him the directions to the apartment unit.

On the way to the elevator the hallway was abuzz with activity as small groups of young women sat just outside doorways in the long corridor. Nurses and doctors walked in and out of view, carrying charts and whispering to each other. Stephen peaked into the open doors as he strolled by and noticed what he would describe as physical examinations. However, he could not be quite sure if they

were being checked for signs of the virus or just being probed for explanations as to how they survived.

The elevator took him to the twentieth floor. The doors opened, two armed guards greeted him. Stephen flashed the identity card and they parted to let him through.

He rang the door bell and waited for a response.

“Yes?” a voice responded from behind the door.

“Cathy? Cathy Thurmond?”

“Wait a minute.”

Stephen waited.

“Who is it?”

“Are you Cathy Thurmond?”

“Yes.”

“Can you open the door please? I need to talk to you.”

“You have to open it.”

Stephen turned the door handle but it did not budge.

“Cathy, the door is locked.”

“Use the card.”

Stephen looked at the temporary identity card and tapped it to a metal panel just to the side of the door.

“Cathy?”

“Yes.”

He looked around at the spacious unit and noticed no one else but Cathy. The room was rather sterile. It was void of anything that gave it a warm and personable feel.

“My name is Stephen. I sent your grandmother here. Where is she?”

“I don’t know.”

“You mean you don’t know where she is at the moment or you don’t know where she is at all?”

“I don’t know where she is at all.”

Stephen was perplexed. Not having heard anything from his superiors in regards to his decision, he had believed his authority had gone unchallenged and even approved. But in light of the absence of both Carolyn and Deborah, they had obviously protested vehemently and countermanded his decision.

“Was your grandmother here at all? Was your mother ever here? I mean where they here then taken away?”

“They took me here by myself. The last time I saw my mom was before they put her on the plane. I can’t remember the last time I saw my grandma.”

Just then a cough interrupted the silence. Stephen took a couple of steps forward and espied about a dozen or so young girls in a room down the hallway, each with a face that spoke of innocence.

“Can we sit down Cathy to talk?”

Cathy stepped to the side and followed Stephen over to one of three big sofas crowding the room. The sofas in the living room were the only pieces of furniture. He expected to see other furniture and electronics since whomever the owners were who had once dwelled here certainly had wealth, but only the sofas



remained. He could smell food, the odor wafting about the unit, but the odor was not appetizing.

“Are there any adults here?”

“Not in the apartment but just the doctors and the nurses and the soldiers downstairs.”

“How long have all of you been here?”

“I’m not sure,” Cathy answered.

“Why can’t you open the door from the inside?”

“We just can’t.”

“Do you ever get to go out?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“Downstairs to see the doctors.”

“What do they do? Are they checking to see if any of you are sick or not?”

Cathy lowered her head.

Stephen looked to the other girls who had now assembled themselves in the hallway. A few of them were quietly shedding tears as the others hid their faces.

“Cathy, what’s wrong?”

“We can’t talk about it.”

“Talk about what?”

“Can you go please.”

“Cathy, if something is going on here you girls don’t like tell me. I can help you.”

“Just please go.”

Stephen reluctantly left based on the discomfort in the room. His experience shouted at him that the girls were under great distress and that they hid their pain inside.

Stephen confronted one of the nurses. He asked for an explanation as to what was going on but was only referred to one of the doctors. The doctor revealed that they were in the process of saving the human race and that was it. Stephen tried to press him but the doctor just repeated himself and walked away.

Outside, he asked one of the guards what the building’s purpose was but in effect received the same answer as the doctor.

It did not make sense to him that if they were so afraid of the virus coming to life in the self-contained building, why would they have allowed him to come in especially when his duty had taken him to once plague ridden regions. Not once did any of his superiors order him to report for a medical examination. Something just did not sit right within the logic of the survival plan.

Stephen contacted the U.S. National Crisis Center and asked to talk with anyone other than his immediate supervisor Robert, an old friend of his. He wanted to find out exactly why Carolyn had never reached Los Angeles and why had her daughter, who was listed in the city, had never been there. But the operator claimed that the director in charge of seeing to the execution of the survival plan was too busy to speak at the moment.

Stephen once again checked the databases where he had retrieved the information but discovered they had been altered; the lie erased. Now, for Stephen, the transparency of the plan started to take on the appearance of deceit.

He knew those above him, after the initial chaos, after the plan was thrown together as rapidly as it could, examined and rewrote all details in a succinct and precise manner. The altered information spoke of a cover up, a lie transformed into truth.

## **Confronting a Friend**

The phone rattled Stephen from deep sleep. He knew the call had to originate from the virus center since the phone only permitted official calls. The phone continued to ring but he was in no mood to answer. The questions concerning Carolyn still weighed heavily on his mind. His hope was not to suspect foul play, but investigative instincts told him that what was going on had the rancid odor of deceit.

“Yeah.”

He bowed his head in frustration as the voice on the other end added frustration to his already tired thoughts. A few “yeas” here and there was all he could bring himself to say in response to the interrogation from the other end of the line.

“Eight o’clock. I’ll be there.”

He took a few moments to gather his thoughts as the fatigue weighed heavily upon him. The call was from his old friend and colleague Robert. He had been assigned as regional superintendant of Southern California, and henceforth, became his superior. All his assignments had come from him, and even the two day excursion to Los Angeles had been ultimately approved by him. But Stephen knew, not by the seriousness of the tone or the lack of a greeting or any other nicety enjoyed among friends, but rather by his friend being in an awkward position.

Stephen’s investigative skills told him immediately that the call of concern probably did not have to do with the rerouting of those he had, but the seriousness lay in the trip to Los Angeles which no doubt was reported as a fact finding mission by those he encountered. He knew he screwed up. Instead of curbing his emotions to put forth the cold and calculating strategies that emerged, his decision had been totally controlled by emotions.

For the first time in his professional life he found himself in panic mode. What to tell him? he pondered. What would he buy? But it would not be so easy to overcome the instincts of his old friend and colleague: For he had been just as versed in the act of cunning to sniff out the weaknesses of anything predators offered as alibis and excuses. It had to be original but with a twist. It had to contain just the right amount of truth between the words and within the words itself. He had to be under control, to turn things around and put his friend in a defensive position to ascertain the truth of the matter.

Parked on a deserted street, just miles away from the activity of the condominiums, hid in the darkness of the night, he fought the urge to flee. But he would not flee. He moaned and then cursed the plague on the world in the safe confines of the car.

Stephen quickly began a self-diagnosis of his psyche as he had performed many a time before confronting the men and women that he viewed as Godless souls. He went through the mental checklist of who he was and where he was and why he was there and what for. One by one he silenced the voices screaming at him, trying to convince him he was the one in error, that he was the one performing evil. Over and over the doubts that suggested it was just him, he was tired, he was strained and he was not thinking right were put down in a logical and detached way as he visualized the hideous object of confrontation and saw it as the evil one; this time, however, the evil may have consumed a friend.

No matter the mental and emotional torment beginning to creep upon the scene within the confines of his mind, he still could not dismiss the possibility that his friend was involved in the events. Too many things were not adding up. Too many things were suspicious, puzzling, had the smell and look and feel of hidden agendas and crafty objectives.

Stephen promptly arrived at the U.S. National Crisis Center's headquarters. He had only been at the physical site once during the orientation detailing his working objective. At that time his friend and former colleague was also called to duty in the same manner. Robert, however, was promoted to regional supervisor soon after for the purpose of dealing with the men sent to carry out the specifics of the goal. In effect, the promotion landed his friend a position by which he was more in touch with those above him than below.

Passing on by security, he made the way to the one elevator reserved specifically for the privileged few of the center. On the way up he went over the plan to fool Robert before the confrontation.

"It's been awhile since we've actually seen each other's face," said Stephen. "You look a little stressed."

"Saving humanity will do that to you. You are looking pretty good though."

"I just have to deal with one assignment at a time. But you, you've got the tough job."

Stephen watched Robert's every movement. From the polite little smile he showed, the walk back to his desk, each little mannerism as he seated himself, even the sound of his breathing, Stephen began the evaluation of his friend. From what he observed, all indications hinted at a discussion of grave concern.

"I told you about the reports I am hearing about you," stated Robert. "You want to explain yourself?"

Stephen smiled. "Just exercising my power to do things a little different than planned, that's all."

"Different?"

"You were there Robert. Back then they gave us that power to use at our discretion."

"Sure. But what worries me Stephen is your visit here to Los Angeles. You stated you wanted a little time to relax and I had no problem with that. You also wanted a little time to stake out a spot for yourself when all this is done and finished, but the report says you used your power not only to find out who was presently assigned to the condominium, but actually went up to one of the rooms to interrogate one of the assignees. Explain that."

“For god’s sake Robert, I just wanted a little assurance that I haven’t lost my sense of compassion. So what if I wanted to reunite some family members. How in the world could that upset the survival plan?”

Robert sighed, rubbed his eyes. “I can understand your position, but you repeated it.”

“They’re saved aren’t they? I convinced them to move didn’t I? They’re out of danger from the virus. Come on, what does it matter?”

“It matters. Look, they’ve left the decision up to me over this matter. I can remove you altogether from duty or show some compassion. So, I am asking you, will you just knock off your own little salvation plan?”

Stephen bowed his head realizing that his friend may have been too deep in the call of duty to respond with any sort of empathy for anyone individual survivor. He figured Robert’s removal from the frontline of the battle against the plague had hardened his heart to the point he could no longer remember just how gut wrenching it was to inform the innocent that their lives were to be disrupted for the greater good.

“Can I tell you something personal?” asked Stephen.

“I’m not....”

“Please. I know you are only doing your job, but you’ve been out there. You know what it’s like. Will you at least hear me out?”

Robert leaned back in the chair, cradled the back of his head with his hands and nodded the go ahead.

“Remember when we were recruited by the FBI out of the force and how they told us if we really wanted to make a difference in the world to come help seek out and destroy those that have such wicked thoughts that they cannot see outside of their own minds?”

“Sure.”

“It was satisfying wasn’t it? I mean these oh so clever men and women who truly believed that their own craftiness, their cleverness, their superior intelligence could hide them against such idiots as ourselves. That they were so good at thinking out all possibilities on how they could be caught and thought they could cover all those possibilities didn’t they? They actually convinced themselves they could overcome capture by carefully planning out every detail of the crime. Remember that?”

“I know that this might sound stupid Robert but I feel doing what I do, that I’ve switched roles and now I am the predator manipulating my prey to get them to do something they simply don’t want to do. I use my cleverness to outsmart them because I am just that good. I’ve incorporated all my experience and all of my training to tell people that it’s okay and that everything is going to be just fine. I tell them not to worry. I tell them we are only doing this for your own good. We care about you. We have love for you. And who knows, one day soon all the doctors and all the scientists will figure this all out and the virus will be destroyed. You’ve been there Robert. Haven’t you said those same words?”

“Are you....”

“We’ve discussed our Lord many a times haven’t we? We talked about what good we were doing in defeating evil. How with our Lord these sick, perverted killers would be revealed and the evil would be thrown right back at them. We

judged them because we felt they were to be judged, but not just by God, but by us as well didn't we? We were the righteous ones weren't we? We twisted about the Word of God and used it to our benefit because we were the ones that had to bring these Godless psychopaths to justice; not God.

"We were so clever weren't we? How many times did we receive a pat on the back, a heartbreaking thank you from a victim's family, a letter of accommodation, a special reward because we were the ones that were saving the world from evil? I threw my Faith out the window. I took his Word and said to him this is what you mean isn't it Lord? And I actually convinced myself He'd be pleased with me for doing the work He sanctioned me to do.

"I took God and put him aside. I took God and told him this is the way it's going to be. I took God and put him below me because He simply wasn't doing his job. And here I am doing the same thing, twisting and redefining God's words so I can get people who are so scared all they want to do is to stay in their homes where they have tons of memories of comfort, of children, of everything good they've ever had and I take that away and convince them otherwise. I manipulate them to believe in lies...for their own good? Why? Because we decided that they're too stupid to think for themselves? We decided that their comfort and happiness doesn't matter. We decided to make them fear so we can have our way with them.

"So a couple wants to die in their home. So a grandmother wants to die in her home. What's the big deal? What are we doing Robert? So a few people don't end up where we say they're supposed to go. So what?

"Are you God Robert? Are you a god at all? Am I? Is anyone else involved in this great plan to save humanity a god? What happened to you? What happened to all of us?"

Stephen diverted his eyes to the floor and waited for a response.

Robert stayed silent for a few seconds as if contemplating the words Stephen had spoken.

Stephen could not interpret the silence. At best he was hoping that at least he hit a nerve with his old friend and that the truth would be revealed. He did not want to believe that his friend had been so overcome with the sense of duty that he had forgotten what compassion was about.

"You're back to Oregon," blurted Robert. "This time do not alter the plan. Understand?"

Stephen wanted more confrontation time, but he felt he had broken his friend. He smiled, lifted himself slowly off the chair and stepped to the office door.

"No problem."

"You know," said Robert, "if you haven't figured it out yet the internet is still up and running. We've been cutting off power down here on the ground but not up there."

Stephen heard the words but just walked out of the office. Though he acknowledged his compliance concerning Robert's decision, the job, the call of duty had lost its appeal. The thought of having to manipulate the mind of just one more poor soul weighed heavy on his heart.

"What do I do my Lord?"

## **The Eyes Above**

Staring out the window to the nothingness below, Stephen wanted to quit altogether. He was hoping to find out if there was an outbreak of the virus currently taking place somewhere in the northeast to ease the pain in his thoughts, but the instructions contained no such status report. Yet he yearned for a simple plan that would divert him away from the next appointed evacuee and smack into the truth of the survival plan. But beyond that he just craved for an ending, a solution to the dilemma that made his life a living hell.

Stephen pulled out the laptop from the bag occupying the seat next to him. He typed in all the appropriate information as usual to access the information that was made available only to those that belonged to the crisis center. Unfortunately, he realized, he had to be one of them.

He did not feel at all compelled to read further the evacuee's personal information, but figuring there could be a clue somewhere in the data, he forced himself to scan it carefully. Nothing new; the evacuee was just like the countless others encountered and manipulated in the past. Once again he was expected to use his skills and abilities to cleverly tell the person that the relocation was for his own good and safety.

There, in big black letters, the Las Vegas designation caught his eye. He already knew that he would face the same old countenance of shock and disbelief and accusatory eyes that would see the heart as cold and calculating. Another senior who could not understand why he could not remain where he was, yet had no choice but to be dispatched to the desolation of the desert. At that moment Stephen did not see the man's life as so empty that it was to be cast out into the middle of nowhere. But it had been decided so.

Stephen saw a glimpse of a clue to his dilemma in the connection between the desert city and Las Vegas, but it was yet clear. He thought about his personal experiences with the city. Twice a visit was made when he was still young and single, and once with his wife on a getaway from the kids. But those fond memories revealed no great revelation about the city's current function. Frustration turned into anger and hatred as the answer he sought remained elusive. He began to feel such a contempt with the site that he wished the virus would attack the concrete wasteland itself; then, once dead, to set it on fire and rid the Earth of such a contemptible place. But then again he knew for now it was to be used for a purpose, but apparently not the purpose he had originally thought.

"Why did Robert mention satellites?" he whispered aloud.

In the past he had often used satellite maps to stake out a number of the deviant's sites selected for his or her victims, but it never occurred to him that they in any way shape or form could be of use now.

Out of curiosity he typed in the information to the national data base system he had used the most in the past, and with a mild surprise saw that indeed Robert's words were true. With some prompting, real time satellite views appeared on the screen. Specific views of the whole continental United States was a keyboard tap away.

There was the object of his contempt. Las Vegas came into view. But it did not look right. Then again, he wondered, did I ever see it from high atop? The view, however, did not concern the rooftop view of casinos and streets. The interest was seen in the trucks heading out of the city and towards the desert where a huge plume of smoke hid from view the landscape below.

Stephen figured it was the burning of the dead, the active destruction of the virus that may have been still active in lifeless forms. But that was perplexing. He had not sent corpses there but those who had been untouched by the virus, those who had survived the killer disease. It did not make sense to send evacuees to a place where the virus could reach out and have a second chance at taking their lives.

With further prompting the lens focused tighter and tighter and provided a view much closer to the darkest part of the plume. But the thick cloud of smoke was too much for the eye to penetrate. He could see vehicles enter the perimeter of the cloud but then disappear from view.

The trucks in view were enclosed hiding the view of the supposed corpses inside. But he couldn't help notice on the top of each truck what appeared to be the cooling system that kept the cargo at just the right temperature. In fact, he noticed, all the trucks were equipped with chilling equipment. They were dead. Except for the fact that if exposed to heat, the putrid stench of rotting flesh would waft about the general area and make the breathable air polluted with the ungodly smell of death. As far as the refrigeration units atop the trucks, he reasoned those trucks were the only ones available in the general area.

He switched to another satellite view, this one eyeing Phoenix. Once again the same images of a concrete emptiness dotted with trucks moving away from the city and out into the desert landscape came into view. A thick plume of smoke too blanketed the scene therefore hiding most of the activity occurring on the ground below. There again, focusing the satellite's eye closer, refrigerated trucks came into view and disappeared under the cloud of smoke.

One by one Stephen activated the eyes of satellites stationed high above the states below. The tip of Florida raised some suspicion as the view of Cape Canaveral came into focus. There, activity in or around the launch areas, around a wide swath of secret sites and buildings, was witnessed. Based on what he had seen at the airport in his very last excursion to Florida, the vast field and wide variety of planes amidst the tarmac and runways and terminals suggested a lot more people flew in than out of the abandoned airport. He knew there had to be a purpose for the launch facility still being up and running, but what that purpose was he did not know.

Curious about other regions, view after view of deserted landscape dotted with towns and cities and loosely gridded cityscapes and abandoned highways and freeways and streets and avenues came and went on the computer screen. Then, as yet another scene came into view, there was more activity.

Around the plains region a slew of activity was taking place. A close view offered pictures of people and all types of earth moving machines moving to and fro. Again the question begged an answer within the confines of his reasoning. The only valid explanation was that mass graves were forming to accept the dead from throughout the region.

All over the country in spots where he had been told were vacated by all human existence, dead or alive, large scale activity existed. In the plains as well as in the mountains and even along the west coast events beyond his knowledge were unfolding.

Maybe paranoia, a result of too many encounters with both predators and victims had clouded his judgment. Maybe it was just a matter of him being too busy with the call of duty to pay attention to parts of the plan that did not include his involvement. Or maybe, just maybe he reasoned, an act of deception was actually taking place and pure emotional fatigue was overshadowing the truth of the matter.

But to risk another detour from the assigned task was too soon. Robert must have issued an order that he be watched closely at all times. From the time the plane arrives, the car driving away, to the site of the evacuation target that the monitoring of suspicious behavior would be monitored. Then again, he wondered when all is said and done and the last isolated human is transported safely to the finish line of humanity saved, where was he assigned to? Was Los Angeles the destination? he wondered. Would I be joining the selected saviors from the crisis center?

For now, however, the call of duty would be obeyed. It would be in a time of his choosing that the questions arising from all doubts and suspicions that stirred in his mind would be answered.

## **True Intentions**

An explosion disrupted the calmness of the cabin. Chaos reverberated all around as wind whipped about everything in sight. The sound of an engine thrown into full thrust was heard. The plane rolled uncontrollably from side to side while the nose seemingly struggled against the downward motion pushing it towards the ground.

Stephen struggled against the gravitational forces knocking him about at will and fell into the cockpit door. Shouting as loud as he could over the sounds of hurricane force wind, banged and banged at the door, he desperately waited for an answer that never came.

Assuming the worst survival instincts kicked in. Wading through the forces of destruction hindering the walk to the rear of the plane, he frantically searched for a parachute. Time for planning was ticking away as the ground in view neared. He fought off panic, allowed the presence of patience to take hold, located a lone parachute, and loosely secured it to his torso. A hand slammed open the emergency lever to the cabin door. The door was sucked off its hinges and went flying away. He begged for mercy and leapt into the sheer terror fast approaching. He yanked on the chord. The chute opened. His legs buckled underneath his frame from the collision with the ground. At a short distance the scene exploded in a cloud of sparks and flames and dust as the jet slammed into the ground.



Aches and pains were tempered by the shock of the collision. A sense of disbelief muddled the senses. He could not believe he was alive, but the frantic pulse and rapid breathing assured otherwise.

The thick black smoke arising from the plane's debris answered the pilot's fate. Feelings of grief for the pilot's demise were too overcome with the shock of his miraculous survival. All Stephen could do was offer the Lord a silent prayer of mercy for the pilot's soul, and a much elated thank you for sparing his own life.

Stephen had no idea where he was. He figured he could be anywhere between Northern California and the destination point in Oregon since all around him stood a tall forest of pines and mountains dotted with patches of felled trees. His cell phone managed to survive the jolt of the impact. But the phone was of no use as it did not respond amidst the mountains surrounding him in all directions. However, the time function was still operating. It was close to eleven in the morning, and with a quick estimation of the lapsed time he felt more assured of the present location.

Stephen wondered had the pilot in all the mayhem dispatched a distress call. Then again, he thought if the pilot did manage to transmit a call would anyone respond considering the world was dying anyway. Do I or the pilot even matter?

Mustering up all the logic within his rattled brain and clearing out the cobwebs covering common sense, Stephen needed to devise an emergency plan of his own. He doubted a response call was even transmitted because such scenarios no longer mattered in the battle against the plague. But, in the event the pilot panicked, sent out an SOS, even then Stephen could not see the logic in worrying about two souls in the face of the pandemic. If the world were right then the sudden disappearance of the jet off the radar screen would be noticed and rescuers alerted, but the world was anything but right. And even if the plane bore an emergency beacon that emitted a steady beat of pulses to some satellite in the sky, would there be anyone in any regional communication center listening at all.

A quick check of the integrity in bones and muscles came back with just a bit of soreness. Standing, he surveyed the surrounding area and headed for a small hill rising from the valley floor. Starting with the view of the clear patches of mountains his eyes followed the thin bare line coming down the side of one particular mountain and into the valley floor. There would be his escape, but the escape found him instead.

The chopping whir of helicopter blades buzzed his ears. He looked up with flailing arms to signal the eyes in the sky his location. Finally seen, the chopper turned on a dime and descended to a point just above the trees. A safety line dropped feet away. Stephen secured himself in the harness and was lifted to safety. As he ascended to his rescuers above Stephen had the time to consider why they even bothered to send out a rescue team, or for that matter, how the chopper arrived on the scene so quickly.

"Stephen Boyd?" yelled out a member of the crew attending the harness.

"Yes."

"Did the pilot make it?"

"No."

"Can you confirm that?"

"Trust me, he didn't make it."

The crewmember unstrapped the harness and led Stephen to a seat. The helicopter lurched forward and turned sharply to the left.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To a makeshift base about thirty miles due east.”

Stephen leaned back into the seat and deeply inhaled the fresh air swirling around, slowly released it back to the rush of air.

The scene below was filled with the site of endless trees and an occasional small mountain lake as the helicopter flew just above the top of the canopy of the forest. Stephen had an obstructed view of the ground but as it turned sharply to the left the site of a field covered with trailers and tents and vehicles came into view. The helicopter leveled itself for a vertical landing. Stephen could see activity on the mountainside to the left of their position. He was not so sure what the vehicles and people were doing, but the bustling activity suggested something vital to the success of the survival plan was at hand.

He was escorted off the helicopter and accompanied straight to a military transport plane idling on the tarmac of a makeshift runway. Without a word two armed men followed him onto the plane and sat in seats opposite his position.

“Where are you taking me now?”

“I don’t know,” answered one of the guards. “We’ve just been order to escort you to wherever it is you’re going to.”

Stephen did not want to risk suspicion by questioning the two any further. It was better, he reasoned, whatever was going on it was paramount to maintain a calm train of thought to better deal with the situation.

In a matter of hours the plane landed at an unknown destination. Stepping out of the plane and onto the tarmac was like stepping into an oven. The Sun was still high in the sky and beamed down penetrating rays of heat.

Stephen turned to one of the guards, “We’re in Las Vegas aren’t we?”

“Looks that way sir.”

Stephen did not recognize the two men walking towards him. Their eyes were transfixed squarely on him, but he had no doubt who they represented. Thoughts of Robert popped into the mind. It appeared as if he had acted deceptively and wondered if whatever hit the jet was an intentional act of sabotage. Feelings of dread led to thoughts that he had been targeted for elimination. That was the logic behind the rescue team’s sudden presence he felt. They had not shown up for humanitarian reasons but rather to verify the success of the plan to kill him. All this, he concluded, because he dared to disrupt the plans by his acts of compassion. But to the extent that they would want to eliminate him for it was beyond comprehension.

“Stephen, you survived the crash.”

“How did you know I survived?”

“Satellites of course. Too bad for the pilot.”

“Where are you taking me?”

One of the men smiled. “Just to get you checked out.”

Stephen was baffled by the situation. Now suspicions reined his thoughts. Events were not following the path of a clear and orderly pattern. For the first time in a long time he was facing a fear of the unknown. An intense feeling of doom shrouded his usually cool and calm manner. He was not in control of the

situation. He was the one that was being led about, as if played with for the amusement of others.

He was driven directly to an operational building somewhere off the Las Vegas strip. The huge structure once serving the throng of tourists in the form of a hotel casino and resort now gave way to an operational building of the U.S. National Crisis Center. No doubt, he deduced, that the building now offered a different kind of reality than the usual customer accommodations for the masses.

Inside, Stephen was presented in front of the regional superintendent. The man seemed polite enough. A warm smile and firm handshake greeted him. The reassurance of rest and relaxation were offered with words wrapped in a tone of sincerity. The invitation to roam the streets freely to any site, to any location, was a benefit offered as well.

But Stephen was too overcome with suspicion to see that everything offered, every word, every smile was done so in the most honorable tradition of polite society; the show of kindness was seen as smoke and mirrors. The niceties had to be hiding the intentions brewing behind the kindness thrown at him. What that was, however, he would be a willing participant and play the game.

Behind the steering wheel of a luxury SUV, Stephen carefully maneuvered out of the parking lot and turned onto the boulevard. There was not much activity to see except for the armed guards patrolling the perimeter of each building. To the rear of the buildings, however, he could see some activity and decided to investigate the actions.

There were the same refrigerated trucks he had seen from the satellite view, parked behind the building in the area reserved for deliveries. He wondered if they were delivering food. But he remembered from the satellite view that the same trucks were not heading in the direction of the strip but in the direction of the desert where they disappeared into a cloud of smoke hiding the ground below. Are they picking up food? Did they run out of space and were forced to use desert camps to house more survivors?

Stephen shouted to one of the guards patrolling the area and asked about the refrigerated trucks. The guard just smiled and said in effect it was none of his business to know what the trucks were for only that he had to guard the area.

Then the sound of doors opening, the shuffling of feet, and the quiet whispers of many voices filled the air. People, seniors, seniors in wheelchairs and with walkers and on gurneys were herded into the back of the trucks that sat ready. The back doors were slammed shut. Each truck's refrigeration unit started to hum as the engines roared to life. One by one the trucks departed into the direction of the desert not too far away.

Before the last one was finished loading Stephen quickly ran up to the back end and asked one of the survivors what was going on. But the old man, all the old men and women stayed silent. The look on their faces was the look of hopelessness. The door rolled down and slammed shut before Stephen could further question the survivors further. He could understand if the trucks were used to bring survivors to the buildings, but to take them away from did not make sense.

He marched into the building and found himself within the large kitchen area of the former hotel casino. Everything looked clean. Pots and pans and ladles and

spoons and whisks and tongs and various other cooking utensils hung from stainless steel pegs jutting out of appropriately placed organizers. Plates and glasses of all shapes and sizes were stacked high within the dishwasher room and on counters by the many steam kettles and ovens and griddles of the industrial sized kitchen. All stainless steel sparkled under the bright lights. Floors were swept and mopped.

Walking into the large dining room the sight of tables, bare of fine linen coverings, caught his eye. The lack of flower arrangements, anything that suggested anyone had eaten off of them for some time was curious. The absence of cooks and servers and all other kitchen personnel transformed the scene into a ghostly world of hidden spirits that once were alive and thrived in the hotel casino.

No one stopped the investigation as he walked into the main lobby. No one was there to demand identity papers. He simply walked to the elevator and had complete access to all areas.

Stephen inspected room after room. The signs of life were left behind in the form of unmade beds, stained sofas and chairs, and loads of clothing that scattered the floors and closets. He was hoping to find written notes, a message, but all the rooms were void of any writing instrument or paper. The only thing written he could find in any of the rooms were copies of the Holy Bible stored safely in a drawer of some fancy looking chest of drawers or desks that were littered with paper cups emptied of liquids.

Stephen went down the strip investigating every empty hotel he came across. No signs of security personnel, no signs of human activity around the perimeters, and no signs of anything that spoke of human activity in the once flourishing vacation getaway.

Hotel after hotel Stephen sifted through the remnants of vacant rooms searching for any message left by those taken away by the trucks, but none could be found. The questions floating around his thoughts asked where were they taken and why?

But in the stillness of the day, the strange tranquility of the scene, the eerie serenity momentarily swept away the clouded thoughts and brought clarity into view. Maybe the virus was drifting this way in the air? That is why the survivors were transported in the refrigerated trucks. They're self-contained in case the virus is floating around in the air. That must be it.

But at the same time he remembered the trucks he had seen well overhead travelling in a large convoy out to the desert. The trucks had disappeared under the expansive plume of smoke. Could the virus have been in hiding in the food and needed burning before consumed and spread to destroy its human hosts? But to transfer the survivors in the same trucks?

Stephen resisted the urge to pay a visit to the regional superintendent and sniff about for the truth. He felt it too risky to ask about things that did not concern him. Then again, he questioned their motive to evacuate him to Las Vegas in the first place. After all, he reasoned, there was not a single doctor to be seen.

Nearing the end of the trek down the long boulevard he spotted activity. As he drove to the rear of the complex there again were the refrigerated trucks waiting for their cargo of survivors. Quickly, as seniors were being assisted into a truck, Stephen ran over to talk with any one of the survivors.

“Do you know where they are taking you ma’am?”

She did not utter a word. A man perched next to her on the bench seat took her hands in his and gently kissed them as she began to sob.

“I thought you would know that young man.”

“Look,” Stephen pleaded, “if you know please tell me.”

The old man smiled. “As far as you are concerned young man we’re not going where you want us to go.”

Before Stephen pled again for an answer the door rolled down and slammed shut. An attendant slapped the side of a panel and the truck sped away. Just before the last of the survivors were packed into the last truck he rushed over looking for someone else to question, but it was too late. The door was about to be closed. In that last moment two smiles and two waving hands caught his attention.

“Mr. and Mrs. Pinkerton!”

The door slammed shut. The truck raced away.

He looked around for anyone who looked as if they had authority over and above the authority and knowledge of all the armed men standing around, but the area was void of any old and wise men.

Stephen felt compelled to follow the trail to the end, but would they allow him to ascertain the knowledge sitting under the plume of smoke was the question that begged an answer.

## **But Why?**

Having slept in the makeshift lounge at the regional center, Stephen was now prepared to follow his investigative nature and find out just what was happening. He had played out a number of scenarios throughout the night, the same scenarios that had spontaneously surfaced the day before. His instincts begged for clarity, to force a calm exposure and sound mind to rid the polluted thoughts born out of frustration.

He figured there was a logical explanation, a planned course of action for everything he had seen and encountered, but the dilemma seemed to be well crafted by those above him. Even the advice from his old friend Robert was not only taken suspiciously, but acted on suspiciously as well.

He knew Robert as a man of good character, morals, and ethics. He was as much as a man of God as himself, who approached the predators in the same cunning manner and with the same purposeful intent of putting an end to the cruel immoralities, dredging out the last terror filled moments of the innocent victim’s life, and providing comfort to family members with the knowledge justice would be served in regard to the lost loved one.

Stephen was convinced that it had to be the stress of the job that clouded the mind. Too many cries from the innocent for understanding and compassion as they saw one last opportunity to go out from life on their terms stirred the passions deep inside. He could see the objections to the decision made by some

distant and cold agency; unfortunately, he represented that agency so therefore was the agency.

He even had to admit that the death of his wife and children weighed him down in doubts of the Lord's love and mercy and compassion. Stephen confessed to his Lord that even if he were not the loving and attentive husband and father, that by taking the only semblance of love he had known in his earthly existence served as an act he was simply unable to see as good. Though he had time to grieve, the grieving came and went in days as he had to force himself back into the world and accept the challenge that the call of duty called for. Nonetheless, revisiting the past only refreshed the memories of hurt and pain and stood in the way of the truth.

One last attempt, he reasoned, one last attempt to figure out what was going on. He had no doubt that the long nurtured ability to uncover the lies still existed somewhere in the confusion of the pandemic, but felt himself slipping so badly that the strength to conjure up that ability had waned, seemingly never to return. Still, the hope existed. The answer to the question would not only come from careful cunning and precise maneuvers plotted out in the depths of his cognitive abilities, but through that hope as well.

He once again roamed the boulevard looking for just one more hotel casino yet emptied of the refugees. Up and down the strip he drove, looking left and right, stopping and listening for any rumbles of diesel engines and rushed movements but the strip was now desolate.

He drove by the regional building and witnessed the empty shell. The parking lot was as the desert itself; void of any vehicles that just recently made the lot their home. Even inside, just hours before, the building was abuzz from the clatter of talk over phones and of graphics glowing from computer screens, but the scene was now silent and dark.

He looked to the desert to see the thick plume of smoke drifting high and over the desolate landscape. If the answer were to come now it would have to be offered by the activity hidden under the smoke. The tires screeched and the SUV sped towards the fiery site.

Just ahead Stephen saw a convoy of trucks slowly creeping along the last stretch of highway before it left the city. Positioned behind the last truck Stephen followed the convoy just to a point where they reached the top of a rise before it descended down to the desert floor. From the vantage point he could see a large depression in the sand. From it came a plume of thick smoke, an eerie red glow and licks of flames.

Trucks drove towards specific spots around the rim. All of a sudden drivers jumped out of the cabs as the vehicles sped up and plunged to their fiery death.

"What the hell," whispered Stephen.

He peered over the arid landscape for trailers, shacks or tents, but there were none to be seen. The survivors must have been transferred to other trucks and taken to another location he reasoned. The answer remained elusive from the current position. A closer inspection was called for.

He cautiously drove down the stretch of highway unencumbered by any security check points. Moving closer to the pit a whiff of the mild aroma wafting about the area caused a quick cough. The smoke was drifting in the direction opposite his

position so as to avoid the choking and blinding mess. As he approached the depression just a few trucks were in the process of speeding up and plunging in its depths. No obstacles blocked the path to the rim.

Looking down in the deep depression, through all the smoke and licks of flame, crushed and mangled remains of vehicles that leapt to their death littered the deep. He looked around but no one could be seen. But just as he was about to leave a voice called out. He looked around but saw no one. The voice shouted again. He stopped, tried to figure out the direction it was coming from. Once again the shout was heard. He stepped to the very rim of the depression and looked down. The answer to the question came from a body struggling for life.

“Oh my god!” he cried.

Weakness overwhelmed Stephen. The knees buckled to the ground. He could not believe what he was seeing, but he knew this was no trick from the lack of clear thoughts. Nothing was disorienting his thoughts. It was clear as can be. He knelt at the edge of the rim staring down at the person who screamed for help but now the body appeared lifeless; just a victim that had succumbed to the devious plans of others. The plan to save humanity came at the expense of humanity. He knelt on the edge of the pit witnessing the death by fire in the deep smoldering pit.

“How could you,” he shouted. “You are love. How can you let this happen?”

Stephen jumped to his feet as wrathful and hateful thoughts were let loose. He cursed God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Every imaginable hateful and hurtful word he could dredge up came spewing out his mouth aimed directly at the God who he had thought of as nothing but mercy and love and compassion. The only God whom by his purpose, his will, and for his glory, the true God who was the all powerful and protected those he willed to protect seemingly failed on his promises. The scene before his eyes contradicted everything about his Lord he had come to know. The wicked murders before his eyes broke his Faith and brought in rejection of the God he had loved.

Out of anger Stephen raced to the SUV and sped away. Disgusted and broken, all hope had vanished.

## **Grumblings from the Dead**

For a few days Stephen spoke nothing but hatred to God and repeated false accusation after false accusation. He poured out his soul and heart in vile sentiments. But eventually, drained of the anger and the hate and the misconceptions and the wrong judgments against his God, Stephen fell to his knees and sobbed uncontrollably asking for forgiveness, begging for understanding, calling for mercy.

The thoughts that had plagued his mind drifted away. He knew God would not do such a thing since He is the Truth, the Word, everything opposite of the lies that he had witnessed: For he knew what was done came by cold and unmerciful directions of those who believed they knew best how to save humanity. It was so plainly clear to Stephen that their decisions were void of love and respect and

compassion and that the directives did not come from the Almighty himself, but rather from the powers and principalities plaguing the minds of men.

Stephen felt drained in the eerie silence of the regional office. He lay motionless on a sofa staring at the glow of vacant computer screens. No phones rang. No one was scurrying in or out or about the room. He felt alone in the world, abandoned by the men that called him to duty, that left him in the dark, but by faith he knew his God was with him.

God was on his mind and that was somewhat of a comfort, but what to do became the dilemma he felt no man should confront. Isolation weighed heavily on his existence. He wondered if there was anything he could do to stop the reality of the plan from being carried out elsewhere in the states, but it was far too late to defeat the plans of the men; they had seized control.

Morbid curiosity led Stephen to the computers. Satellites, the only eyes left to witness the carnage below, came to life. Staring intently at Las Vegas, the view appeared so empty of any activity or movement at all. The highways and streets became paths to nowhere. All the casinos and hotels no longer thrived. Those seeking fortune at the gaming tables were long gone. Houses in the outlying areas were no more than abandoned property cluttering up the landscape.

He directed one satellite's eye directly to the plume of smoke now slowly diminishing in its thickness. The mangled mess he had witnessed close up haunted him with thoughts of hidden mangled bodies considered useless in the future construction of a new world. They were sacrificed for what? Lying below the decision to urgently act to save humanity was a logic he could not understand but to the power they succumbed to he could not conceive.

The question was answered in that which was witnessed. In saving humanity the selected few, the leaders of the crisis center, had ordered the elimination of those no longer useful to a new world needing the strength of the youth. A world that would eventually emerge would be a world with less workers and much demand from the survivors. A world occupied by the young would be better suited to build a new society where the mistakes of the past could be replaced with the visions and mandates of the select few.

For Stephen, his job finished, the future of his existence escaped from the dark recesses of his mind. If he could do anything it would be to spread the truth about the survival plan. He brought to life the satellite view of Phoenix with a light hope that the elimination process had yet to begin, but the hope was torn to rags as he witnessed the plume of smoke rising from the ashes of the dead. He was not shocked this time: For the plan was clear.

Another satellite view showed the rather peaceful and tranquil scene of Los Angeles. There was no activity on the highways crossing the area in every direction, and there was sparse activity on the streets below. There were no signs



of scorched landscape or of smoke wandering about in the air. He knew now that everyone that had been selected to occupy the spaces, the ones which at some point would emerge into a brand new world, had been stowed safely and securely inside the concrete havens.

South Florida was abuzz in activity, but why he could only guess. The activity around the plains and mountains witnessed before had vanished. He did not bother to bring up a satellite view of San Diego since it was apparent the survival plan was near complete. All that the select few wanted to accomplish had been or was about to be accomplished. The satellites now were nothing more than blind eyes hovering above the deception below.

The Sun was shining bright as it looked down from the bright blue sky. He looked all about and wondered if anyone would be sent to retrieve him, or more appropriately, to escort him to his appointed elimination site. Then again, he was good as dead amongst the dead where he stood.

But an urgent thought tugged at his heart and compelled him to action. The SUV waited. Gas stations pumps stood ready to provide ample amounts of fuel. He knew the way to Los Angeles. It was just a matter of time.

He looked around and found ample gas canisters for the trip in a shed once used by landscapers of a plush hotel casino. The first gas station available on exiting the city made available the needed fuel. With no traffic before him Stephen raced down the highway towards the destination of his choosing. This time for a long time he was acting independently of others. This time he was choosing his own path rather than the ones that were given to him with deceptive motives.

But as fast as the campaign started, it looked as if it were about to end. Off to the left side of the highway a helicopter came into sight. It was on a parallel path synchronized with the rate of speed Stephen was travelling down the deserted highway.

He did not know what to do but managed to suppress the panic ready to break out into his thoughts. With cool calculated thoughts he slammed a foot on the brake pedal and jerked the wheel to the right. The car skidded and stopped pointing in the direction of the city. The tires screeched and sent him screaming forward.

Stephen kept a diligent lookout for the helicopter. Rapidly turning his attention back and forth, from the left and the right, from forward and behind vigilance guided the search but the chopper was nowhere in sight. The car skidded to a stop in the middle of the boulevard. He looked all around for the hunting bird of prey but it was still nowhere in sight. He raced to the entrance of the nearest empty shell.

He quickly thought of a place to hide, somewhere on the ground level would be the best place for a secluded spot in the event they came searching and a quick getaway was needed. Panic sent him scurrying about the floor looking for just the right spot. Finally, with the feeling of time quickly lapsing, he ducked behind the front desk of the main lobby.

Hands darted about the slots and drawers of the front counter looking for paper and pen to jot down a firsthand account of what was witnessed. The writing was scribbled down but legible enough for someone to read and understand the truth as it was seen.

While scribbling down the thoughts he kept an ear open for the sound of footsteps, voices, any loud sounds from outside that signaled a search was at hand. He kept writing and writing redundantly as to assure the main facts were recorded.

His heart raced at the sound of footsteps in the lobby. A hand covered the mouth to block the sound of fear and anxiety that might spontaneously leak out under the stress. The footsteps became louder and louder. He knew they were coming right for him. He figured they had embedded some sort of tracking device somewhere about his body to have already known his exact location in the empty shell.

“Stephen,” a familiar voice called out.

He remained silent afraid to respond. Maybe they were just probing, guessing, hoping that he would just give up and save them the time and trouble of having to search the entire building. He was hoping for just that so he could scurry to yet another building and elude a capture.

“Come on Stephen,” a voice prompted in a calm tone. “You want to be dragged out from behind the desk or do you just want to walk out on your own?”

Stephen stood up and saw Robert standing a few feet away with a team of armed men.

“I know Robert,” he calmly stated. “I know the truth now.”

“I suppose you do Stephen. Unfortunately that’s bad news for you.”

Stephen put up no resistance as two armed men led him from behind the desk. The written testimony was left behind atop the front counter. He glanced at it and realized its testimony would erode over time as the wind and sand would continually pummel the empty building; no one would ever know the truth.

Now it was just a matter of his execution. He was now the victim at the wicked discretion of the predators.

## **Truth Kept Alive**

The makeshift lounge at the regional center became a holding cell as the executioners decided the mode of death that Stephen anticipated. He just laid there talking to his God, his Lord and Savior asking for mercy for all involved in the plot generated by the evil influences plaguing the world.

The door creaked. Robert walked in and sat in a sofa opposite Stephen.

“Why?” asked Stephen.

“Decisions had to be made quickly. They figured out the best way to save the human race. Time and space were the main factors in the decision to do what was done.”

“Really Robert? I’ve never known you to be a liar. Do you actually believe what you’re saying?”

“Yes,” Robert shouted. “Why can’t you Stephen? Can you just put away your moral nonsense for once and understand that what was done had to be done?”

“But you murdered them? What I thought I was doing was a good thing, but all this time all I was doing was sending them to their death. And you want me to put away my morality, my Lord, and just accept it?”

“Well listen to you, all high and mighty. You actually believe your God will accept your plea of ignorance and save you from your participation in all this? You actually think that your God will forgive you for what you have done? Do you still actually believe there is a God?”

“Don’t you mean our God Robert?”

“My god! So many warnings but we didn’t listen. The virus Stephen is meant to wake us up. She is waking us up Stephen. She is giving us another chance before she unleashes all her fury on everyone of us and kills us all.”

“The Earth...you’re rejecting God? You think that a clump of dirt formed by God is greater than God? You actually believe that the created is greater than the Creator? You actually believe that Earth is a god?”

“Yes I do Stephen. I really, really do. Where is He Stephen? If He is all that you believe He is then why didn’t He stop it?”

“Because He expected better of you Robert. He expected you to choose to ignore the lies, all the hatred and anger and fear coming at you every minute of the day.”

“It’s not a lie I believe but you. Don’t you get it? If He is to come then don’t you think He’d have been here by now? For Christ’s sake Stephen, isn’t all this exactly what He describes in Revelations? It’s the end of the world Stephen; where is He?”

“Please Robert, I’m begging you. You’re not like this. You’re my friend. I know you better than this. Think, just think about what’s happening to you and think about what you’re doing.”

“You just don’t understand. You think what we’ve done so far is the worst of it? It’s far worse than you can even begin to imagine. The virus was nothing. What’s coming will be far more devastating, just not to a percentage of the people, but to the whole damn world.”

“And what’s that Robert? What is so damned worse than what all of you have done?”

“That knowledge will make no difference to you now.”

“Just not part of the plan?”

“When they told me of it I could see the rationale behind everything that has been done. But what’s hidden behind the rationale, the truth, the truth that we inflicted too much pain on this living planet forced us to do what we’ve done. Don’t you get it Stephen? The power to save is not from what you say is your God, but from the Earth herself.”

“You’re not the friend I know. My friend could never fall for lies.”

Robert smiled and left the room.

Stephen could not believe what he had heard. Everything in his mind was now the results of images hidden in smoke and mirrors, hiding the truth in regard to all that had transpired. His commitment, his oath to uphold the law of the land from first as a beat cop to his role in revealing the worst of the worst in society, was forced out of existence. The law was dictated by the influence of the powers and principalities and not of the love of God.

But Stephen knew Robert was right in his scorching accusations concerning his innocence. Before God he had to once again admit that he was no better than Robert or any other person that had executed the lie. Everything he had done too violated the laws of God in relishing the role of judge and basking in the glow of righteousness. He had taken the Word and twisted and turned and shaped and arranged it to justify his actions instead of heeding the love of his God.

Robert strolled back into the room. “Here’s the deal. As much as I disagree they still consider you valuable. They’re giving you the opportunity to stop this foolishness and continue with your job. What do you say?”

“How much did you know from the beginning?”

“I don’t have time for this Stephen. Will...”

“Answer me please. Just tell me what you knew.”

“I knew enough Stephen. Does that satisfy you?”

“The flu pandemic?”

“I don’t know.”

“Again, you’re saying something far worse is coming. Tell me.”

“Will you join us?”

“Robert, what the hell are you doing?”

“One more time will you join us?”

Stephen contemplated the question. He had seen too much from his friend and the atrocities that he witnessed. It dawned on him for the first time that the same atrocities were occurring in all parts of the world, on every continent, in every nation as it was from the beginning, but he never considered looking via a satellite’s eye to find out. Now, to be knowingly part of lie would be choosing to bow down to the forces of the powers and principalities. To say “yes” to Robert would be saying “no” to his Lord.

“Do what you want with me, but I don’t want any more to do with all this.”

“Fine,” responded Robert.

Robert walked out of the room.

Stephen waited for him to return but after a while wondered where he had gone. He walked out into the room still aglow from the computer screens. Suddenly, darkness fell upon him. The power was cut off. He ran outside to see where they were, but none could be found. There were no vehicles, no power, no one at all stirring about. The plume of smoke had vanished. The plan must have been completed.

Stephen figured they left him alive because he was pretty much dead in a city that now was part of the desert landscape. For miles and miles around there was only desolate terrain and burning heat. He went back into the building and turned on the faucet of the bathroom sink but not even a drop dripped forth. The toilets were empty of water, an inlet water pipe broke with a kick was bone dry. There was nothing in the refrigerators, cabinets, restaurants, convenient stores, supermarkets, rooms, houses, apartments, hotels, casinos and any other building that once held food and beverage.

He thought of finding a way out to Lake Mead but something told him that if water was there it would be tainted with something foul added by those who chose destruction over Truth. There was nothing left for Stephen to do but pray.

He went back to the lobby of the hotel casino where he had attempted to hide and retrieved the notes he had written. Funny, he thought, they didn't bother to take them because no one was ever going to read them.

He sat in one of the lobby's sofas and decided to rewrite his eye witness accounts with some thought rather than the hurried notes he had scribbled down.

The Sun was setting. The light of the day was dimming to a point he could no longer see in the dark. Stephen gathered up all the written accounts and marched back to the regional center. He retrieved the bag securing the Spanish language Holy Bible sent by his brother. Stephen rushed to one of the former hotel casino's room and retrieved an English language Holy Bible. He secured it and his notes into the bag and walked out in the day shrouded in the darkness of the dusk.

He looked around in all directions. The eyes focused on the silhouettes of the mountains in the distance. The way was made known.

---