

CARL AND GEORGE

John Boston

I knew it was a mistake to hire Carl Feldman. I told my boss it was a mistake. I told the staff as well. It made zero sense. Carl was vastly overqualified to be working as a caregiver in a nursing home. By overqualified, I mean like, if Einstein decided to become a street sweeper. He had worked as a surgeon's assistant while in the Air Force and had graduated from UCLA Medical School. He became a licensed EMT when he was only sixteen. I had no doubts as to his skill set, I just had no idea why he would be wasting his time in a place like the Evergreen Nursing Home.

Evergreen was a corporation that actually owned several of them in different states. It was really just a franchise. The CEO and shot caller was a soulless corporate suit named John Deegan who thought Carl was the greatest thing since sliced bread and vibrators. He figured Carl would quickly work his way up and become another head honcho for the corporation. John and I did not see eye to eye on the issue. He thought we were getting the deal of a lifetime in Carl. I thought otherwise.

"Jesus John, it doesn't strike you as odd that someone with his background and skill set would want to change bedpans in a nursing home?"

"George, he only needs to do his residency and he can get a medical license. We have thousands of employees and we don't have a single licensed medical doctor on our staff. It's insane. After working here for a few years, Carl can present a very good case to the medical board that he should get his license to work in geriatric care. I just can't pass up an opportunity like this."

"John, a guy like Carl isn't working here out of the kindness of his heart. He's got a plan and I don't really think it involves working for this company."

"George, I've spoken with him in detail. This is a good deal for everybody. We desperately need someone like Carl. Just give him a chance, okay?"

"He can't even legally write prescriptions."

"He knows more about the drugs than the pharmacists filling them. I expect you to do exactly what he tells you to do."

There it was. The *shit or get off the pot* type of moment. I should have just told Deegan to piss off. This was my nursing home and I and I alone decide what drugs to prescribe. I've got almost fifteen years of experience with the different drugs we give our patients and I have seen the results firsthand. Carl may be brilliant, but he had zero real-world experience. In the medical field, experience is everything. Sometimes the brilliant people get it very, very wrong.

"If that's what you want, John," I said.

Hiring Carl was my first mistake. Allowing him to override my decisions was the second. Had I known then, what I know now, my biggest mistake of all was simply not killing him when I had the chance. I let the devil right into my house and pretty much held the front door open for him. I had no idea how bad things would get.

Carl was a likable fellow. Very Jewish in his mannerisms and appearance. I really wanted this to work. I figured he'd spend six months here and then Deegan would simply move him someplace else and out of my hair. I assumed this to be a temporary situation. That's kind of why I didn't protest too much at first. He certainly didn't look too intimidating. He was small and wiry. I must have had a hundred pounds or more on him. He looked like a teenager, even though he was nearly thirty. I tried to extend the olive branch, I really did. Carl had me sized up in about ten seconds and never looked back.

"Carl, I hope there are no misunderstandings here. John has very big plans for you and I hope it works out, but while you're here, I expect you to do as I tell you. I've been running this home for over a decade and I've never been sued. I don't want that streak to end."

"George, that's fine. You're certainly bright enough to understand the situation. I don't want to step on anyone's toes. I just hope you understand that there are some big expectations on my shoulders. This job was just a stepping stone for me. I don't plan on staying in this home for very long. I just want you to understand that I am the doctor. I can't just sit by and watch you or your staff screw up and not do anything. It would ruin my reputation, which is more important than some stupid medical license to me."

"Carl.....I know you're probably not going to tell me, but I have to ask anyway. Why exactly are you here? It just seems like this company is still way beneath your ability. There ain't no pot of gold at the end of this rainbow. It's pretty goddamn depressing, to be honest. This really is just God's waiting room.

It's not that I don't want you here, Lord knows we need someone with your ability around here. I just can't imagine anyone with your background wanting to do this for a living. Every single person in here is pretty much terminal. No one ever leaves here and goes back home to live a happy and productive life."

"George, maybe you have me wrong. True, I want to climb high with this company, but I also care about my patients. I didn't become a doctor just to watch people die. I learned quite a bit over my career. If I can't save them, we can try to make their remaining time here as comfortable as possible. We're trying to paint a Bob Ross here, not a Picasso." he said

"Well, then why don't you shadow me for the first few weeks? We can call John and decide what he wants to do next." I said.

"Sounds great. I'm looking forward to meeting the staff and patients."

"Well, we have Patti and Deidre. They're both excellent. Just CNAs, but I trust them completely. Patti should be an RN here shortly. Penelope works in the kitchen and the rest of the staff just assist and change bedpans. Patti works overnight. She has been handing out meds without incident for over five years."

"Can't wait to meet her."

I have to hand it to Carl. He was good. Almost too good. He could work a crowd like no other. Everyone knew he went to medical school. Little did I know he was second in his class at medical school and had a full residency at Cedar Sinai Medical Center. Carl was likable. He not only talked, but he listened. He made you feel like you were important, even though you weren't. I guess some people are just born to be CEOs and leaders.

He met all the patients. He listened to their stories. He shook their hands and made them feel like a person again, instead of just a corpse that isn't dead yet. I knew right away that this guy was going places. Deegan had better watch his ass, cause Carl would be right on it. Mrs. Lemon was 92 years old and still as sharp as a tack. She probably didn't need to be here, but her family thought she was too old to be on her own. She was quite opinionated in her beliefs as to what was wrong with the medical industry. She hit Carl with everything she had and it just seemed to bounce off him.

His armor was that freaking good!

"This industry is nothing but a racket. Takes money from people who don't have it and promises them it will make them better. The only reason I'm alive today is cause I don't go anywhere near doctors. Why on Earth should we listen to you?"

"Mrs. Lemon, I completely agree with you. The medical profession is far from perfect. There are many things wrong with it. Take these dementia medications like Exelon. It was never actually tested on someone your age. The phase one and two trials were done by volunteers who were probably in their twenties and thirties. None of them needed the drug, they just had to see what the side effects were. They give another control group a placebo and then compare the results between the two groups. Let's say half of the group feels the drug is helping them and only a third of the group given the placebo shows improvement. The drug passes clinical trials and is put out for public use. The head of the FDA used to work for a pharmaceutical company. That's ridiculous. Everyone I went to medical school with felt the same way, but we can only change it from the inside. That's what I'm trying to do. I just hope you'll give me a chance." he said.

Mrs. Lemon was floored. Her attitude and demeanor changed immediately.

"You got a good one here Georgie, don't let him go!" she said as were leaving.

Carl and I went back to the office. We were sitting there when my phone rang. It was Deegan. I figured I had better answer it.

"Hello?"

"George.....Jesus is everything okay there?" asked Deegan.

"Yeah, why wouldn't it be?"

"You haven't seen the news?"

"No.....why?"

"Jesus, it really happened. I'll call you right back," he said and hung up.

"Carl.....turn on that TV there."

Carl got up and turned on the TV. What I saw next.....well, it can only be described as a nightmare brought to life. A moment later my phone lit up, as did Carl's. It was an emergency alert notification, like reverse 911. It read:

UNKNOWN SITUATION HAPPENING IN WASHINGTON D.C.

STAY INDOORS UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. MORE ALERTS TO

FOLLOW

"The hell is happening?" asked Carl.

We watched the emergency report together. It was chaotic. The news team was not even dressed or in makeup. Heather Donovan from News 8 was reporting the news. She was shaking and we could clearly see had been crying.

"This morning, shortly after 9 AM, there were three separate nuclear explosions over the metro Washington DC area. The first blast targeted the Capitol Building. The second blast occurred in the parking lot of the Pentagon. The third explosion was believed to have occurred at the NSA Headquarters just outside of the Washington DC area. We also have unconfirmed reports about more explosions at Fort Bragg and Fort Hood. The three explosions in Washington have now been confirmed, we are waiting for further confirmation about the military bases.....may God help us all." she said tearing up as the camera cut out.

Both Carl and I were in shock. This was pretty much the last thing anyone expected when they woke up that morning on March 3rd. This was real. This was really happening. Washington had just been destroyed.

"It has to be the Russians. Who else would it be?" asked Carl almost hysterical.

"So, we nuke them back? What if it wasn't them? You stay here and find out what you can. I'm going to try and calm everyone down." I said as I ran out of the office.

I ran into Deidre in the hallway.

"George, what the hell is going on? My phone just said there were explosions in Washington?" she asked.

"Deidre, get all the staff together and meet me in the break room, ASAP," I said calmly.

"What's going on?"

"Somebody just nuked Washington!"

"WHAT? Are you serious?"

"Just get everybody together," I said as I ran into the kitchen to get Penelope. She was making lunch, oblivious as to what was happening.

"Hey George, what's up?"

"Penelope, I need you to stop what you're doing and head to the break room, now!"

"Um, ok.....is everything okay?"

"No," I said running off to find the rest of the staff.

I ran into David Silverman. He was in a wheelchair, but still mentally sharp. I knew this was not going to go well.

"George.....the TV said we just lost Washington, is that true?"

"David, I have no idea what's happening, but I need to have a meeting with the rest of the staff. Could you keep an eye on the place until we get back? You've got my number. Text me if you need help."

"Sure thing bud. You can count on me."

There were only four of us counting George. We were all glued to the TV. The internet had been completely shut down. We could still make calls, but no email or messaging. It just made a bad situation, even worse.

The regular news networks had all been replaced by some kind of national emergency center. No one had ever seen it before. We all watched in horror as the first pictures emerged from drones over Washington. It was like something straight out of a horror movie. What used to be the Capitol building and Washington Mall was now a giant smoking crater. There were pictures of the Pentagon, but an airplane had been flying over NSA Headquarters at Ft. Meade and had taken some photos. The building was completely destroyed. They could now confirm separate nuclear detonations over Ft Hood and Fort Bragg. The network news was quickly replaced by a group of military people gathered around a podium. A general came into the room and everyone else sat down.

"My fellow Americans. I watched in horror this morning as our great country was attacked and brought to its knees by an unknown enemy. The Russian government claims to have no knowledge of the attacks. Our military has confirmed that there were no launches detected on Russian soil or at sea. The device that detonated at the Pentagon was stopped in the parking lot by security forces before it detonated. The bombs were in the ten to fifteen kiloton range, roughly equal to the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ft Hood and Fort Bragg have been hit as well. The first bomb detonated in a parking lot adjacent to the Capitol building where the congress was in session. There were no survivors. Vice President Hansen was in the building to cast the deciding vote if needed. At this time, we do not believe anyone inside survived the blast. President Gabbard's motorcade was only a few miles from the Capitol Building at the time

of the blast. We have had no further communications from her or anyone with her. The US Military and government have plans put into place should a disaster of this magnitude. As of ten o'clock eastern time, in accordance with Presidential Security Directive 51 and the continuity of government protocol, Secretary of State Peterson is being flown back to the United States to an undisclosed location, where he will assume the office of the presidency immediately. The strategic forces are currently at Defense Condition 2, where they will remain pending further attacks. As of ten o'clock eastern time, President Peterson's first act was to declare a nationwide emergency and the Constitution of the United States is hereby temporarily suspended. All law enforcement and first responders have now been nationalized and the National Guard in all fifty states is currently being mobilized. All military reservists are to report to their command immediately for further instruction. Communication networks in the United States will be temporarily shut down to prevent them from being attacked.

I want to stress that the United States will find those responsible for these reprehensible attacks.....and when we do.....God help you."

"Holy shit.....this is really happening. This isn't a joke," said Deidre.

"What did he mean by congress was in session?" asked Penelope

"He means that every congressman and senator from all fifty states were inside the capitol building to vote on that big health care bill. We just lost our entire government." I said.

"President Gabbard's gone. I loved her!" said Penelope.

"Look guys, I know this sucks, but right now, we have to keep everyone in here calm. There's no telling how they'll react once they hear this. Our priority is to the patients." I say.

"George, our priority is our family. I just do maintenance here. This is just a job to me and right now, I'm going home to be with my family." said Pablo, our maintenance man.

"I understand Pablo. You do what you have to do."

"Sorry George. My family needs me right now," he said and walked out.

"Look, George, I'll finish lunch, but I'm going to check up on my mom and brother. I'll be back to make dinner."

"Okay. I hope you'll come back."

"I will. These old bastards would starve without me," she said as she grabbed her purse and headed out.

"Well Dee, guess that leaves you and me."

"George.....my sister and her husband live in Washington. She got a great job with the Post Office. They sent her to Washington for a few months for training. I haven't been able to reach her."

"Jesus Dee. I'm sorry." I said hugging her. She sobbed in my arms for a few minutes. All I could do was hold her while she got it out.

"I've got to go to my parent's house in New York. I can't get a hold of them. They're probably freaking out right now." she said, wiping away the tears.

"I understand. Are you sure you can even make it to New York?" That's a long way."

"I've got to try. I'm sorry George. If it were anything else, I wouldn't even think of leaving, but my sister is all I have left."

"I just hope you come back to us."

"The world is never going to be the same after today, is it?" she asked.

"No, no it sure isn't. Nothing is going to be the same after today, I'm afraid."

"I'm old enough to remember 9-11. That looks like a bad Wal-Mart experience after this one," she said

"Then there were two," said Carl from the doorway.

"Are you leaving too?" I asked

"No George. My patients need me right now. I don't have any family left. My patients are my family." he said quietly.

"Glad to hear. This place is definitely going to need you."

"I've been trying to calm everyone down. We may need to draft a few of our patients into the ranks. The ones that still have a functioning brain left, that is."

"I'll try and get a hold of Deegan or someone at the corporate office. I don't know what the protocol for something like this is."

"I'll help you serve lunch. Let's get them fed first before we start fielding questions. I'll take care of lunchtime meds." he said.

I never did see Deidre or Pablo again. I don't even know if they're still alive. The next few days were a blur. I never even left the building. I would have been dead in the water without Carl. He managed to save Elena Ramirez when she went into defib. He used the shock pads and got her heart going again. The crazy old bird was watching TV an hour after her heart stopped beating because of Carl's quick actions. I thought he was a gift from God. He was a gift alright, but it wasn't from God, it was from the other guy.

I don't think Carl ever left the facility either. Penelope came back and did the best she could with what she had. It was total chaos. The internet would work for about five minutes, then go down again. Phone lines were working for the most part as the grim news began to trickle in one nightmare at a time.

Patti worked her shift as scheduled. The three of us were going on just a few hours of sleep a night. I was sleeping on the couch when they both came in and asked me how we were going to feed everybody.

"We placed our order last week. Manny should be here at any time." I said.

"He was supposed to be here yesterday," said Patti

"I tried calling. It just went to voicemail. George without those supplies, we're screwed. We only have a thirty-day supply of drugs." she said.

"Manny knows how important the shipment is, he'll be here."

"George.....we have to accept the very unpleasant reality that he might not show up. We're going to need food and drugs. Do you have a plan B?"

"No.....no, I do not. I'm certainly open to suggestions."

"We need so many. Dialysis, antibiotics, Seroquel, Lisinopril, Omerprazole.....George.....these people won't last very long without their medications," said Patti.

"Well, I can go to the nearest pharmacy and give it a try."

"Guys.....the food situation, we can fix. Without the meds.....we're going to be needing a lot of body bags," said Patti.

We didn't get much resolved, just sat down and watched the news on the TV. No one was running the government. Secretary of State Peterson was an experienced politician, but he was not elected to the office of the presidency, he was just in the right place at the wrong time.

The country was being held together with duct tape and barbed wire. There had been another failed attack on the Indian Point Nuclear Power Plant in New York, which had been stopped at the last minute by a very astute security guard. If the bomb in the truck had detonated, it would have been a mega-disaster. The driver of the semi had no idea it was even there. A bomb squad from NYC managed to remove the detonator. It had been the one bit of good news in any otherwise horrific week.

The government pretty much shut down all interstate travel at that point unless they were moving supplies. The only vehicles on the road were the semis. Regular passenger cars were being stopped at the state lines by police and National Guard. Tempers had begun to boil over. The National Guard in New Jersey had opened fire on police at the George Washington Bridge.

Everyone had expected the United States to do something against Russia or Iran or North Korea. Thankfully, President Peterson did not listen to his psychotic generals and did nothing until we had more evidence. Core signatures from the bombs had already confirmed what most of us feared. The weapons-grade uranium used in the bombs had been produced at our very own Hanford Washington Nuclear Site in the early 2000s. The bombs had been placed in the back of

delivery vans. It was an inside job. There was no clear evidence that Russia or anyone else was involved. Everyone had a theory, but no one had any real answers.

As the days turned into weeks, a very unpleasant sense of dread began to spread over the country. Things were getting worse by the minute. The Evergreen Nursing Home was going to need a small miracle if it was going to continue operations.

Manny had managed to make a delivery and drop off food and other supplies, but he made it clear that he had no idea when he would be back.....if he would be back. His suppliers had temporarily shut down operations.

"Shit man, you gringos are gonna see how the rest of the world lives. I remember what it was like in Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. It was total chaos. We didn't have power or water for months. That's why I came to the United States. I'll pray for you guys." he said as he handed over the invoice for George to sign.

"Good luck Manny. Thanks for everything. You literally saved their lives." I said.

Penelope and I unloaded the pallets. It was everything we had ordered. Enough to last thirty days for twenty-six people and four staff members.

I had expected Penelope to simply walk away the day of the attacks. She didn't. She had shown up on time for all of her shifts. She wasn't much of a cook, but she was getting better every day. At least now, she could make eggs and pancakes.

"George?"

"What's up?"

"What's going to happen to all of the people in here?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. We don't have any meds for our patients. Carl is a doctor, not a miracle worker. there's only so much he can do without the proper equipment.

"Nothing is going to happen to them. Why would you think that?" I asked.

"George, I might be young, but I'm not stupid. Most of these people have one foot in the grave already. It isn't going to take much to push them over the edge."

"Penelope, I'm going to let you in on a little secret here in the medical profession. Most of these drugs don't do a damn thing. The blood pressure meds, maybe. Blood pressure can be controlled somewhat through diet and exercise. The rest of them don't do a damn thing except make the drug companies richer. I've been doing this long enough, I should know. Most of them are a complete waste of money."

"Maybe, but it's the psychological effect on their brains as well. If the patient thinks the meds are helping them, they will feel better. You know about the placebo effect. It's pretty amazing what it can do. I think it might not go the way you think it will."

"George.....Elena Ramirez went into cardiac arrest," said Patti over the radio.

"I'm on my way," I said running up the stairs.

I met Carl on the way. We ran down the hallway and into her room. Patti was doing CPR on her, trying to revive her. Carl ran into the hallway closet and grabbed the AED. We shocked her several times, but she was still unconscious. After the tenth time, we decided to pronounce her dead. Patti held back her tears as she pulled the sheet up over her face."

"Do you want me to contact her family?" asked Carl

"I already tried. I called every family member we had on record and told them to come and pick up their people in here. Every single one George the day after the attacks. Do you want to know how many responded? One. Just one goddamn family member could be bothered. I'll try the number on the card again, but I don't think anyone's going to care. I haven't seen anyone visit her in months. No one cares about these people. We're the stop on the line for them. That's why they're here.....cause no one cares."

I hugged Patti. I knew she was hurting. These people weren't just her patients, they were her extended family. I had known her for nearly ten years. No matter how difficult, or far gone the patient was, Patti never turned a blind eye to them. She would never abandon them, not now, not ever. I was lucky to have her.

"I'll call an ambulance for her," said Carl

She wasn't the first patient I had lost. No matter how many times I went through it, it never got easier.

"We did everything we could, Patti."

"I know. It still sucks," she said fighting back the tears.

"That it does."

Carl came back into her room a few minutes later. I could tell by the look on his face that we had a problem.

"The 911 dispatcher said it is going to be several hours before they can send anyone here to pick up the body. I guess they're a little overwhelmed."

"Let's get into a cadaver bag and put her in the loading dock."

David Silverman was there in his wheelchair. He was working on crowd control. He put his hand on mine. He said a lot.....*without saying a lot.*

George and I loaded her into the cadaver bag and zipped her up. I could tell Carl was upset. I figured he would at least put on his game face. If he had any intention of becoming a doctor.....*he had better learn how to deal with dead bodies.....and quickly.*

"You alright, Carl?"

"No George, I am not."

"Carl.....we did everything we could."

"It's more than just poor Mrs. Ramirez. We've got ourselves quite a situation here, both legally and ethically."

"What do you mean?"

"This place is going to become a morgue if we don't get meds and supplies. Mr. Bannister and Juanita Gomes both have terminal kidney disease. If they can't get to a dialysis machine in a few days, their kidneys are going to begin to shut down. It won't be pretty."

"I was going to take them both in tomorrow morning at the dialysis center and get it done," I said

"George.....I called the center this morning. There are some new laws put in place by our acting President. One of them is rationing medical care. All of the doctors and medical staff at the hospitals have been moved to Washington. They're operating on a skeleton crew. They have also begun to triage medical care. They won't do any dialysis on anyone over sixty-five."

"What? They can't do that! That's insane."

"Yes, it is. It is also very legal. The Red Cross took every bit of medical hardware they could get their hands on and sent it to the disaster zones in Washington. The city hospital has begun to ration what meds they're giving out and what medical services they can provide. They won't be seen. I was screaming at the lady and she just hung up on me. They're both going to die and there's not a goddamn thing we can do about it."

"Did you call John?"

"No one has seen him since the day of the attacks. His secretary told me his son was stationed at Ft. Hood."

"Jesus.....did you try his cell?" I asked

"Of course I did. I even drove over to his house last night. He's gone, John. there's more bad news about the Evergreen LLC."

"What?"

"All of our board members and corporate staff were in Washington for that health care bill. Deegan stayed behind. We have to assume they're dead. No one has heard from any of them."

I had been so caught up in the mess here in the facility, I hadn't even bothered to call anyone in the corporate office. Carl had just confirmed my worst fears.

We were completely on our own here. No one was coming to save us.

"Did you say anything to Patti?"

"No. Payroll is still issuing checks into our accounts, but I don't know for how much longer. We're a publicly traded stock and there's no stock market right now. I figure there's no point in saying anything to her until they stop paying us." said Carl

I had to sit down on a pallet and take this all in. Carl had a very annoying habit of being right. Unless we could provide medical care.....*we were going to have a lot of dead bodies here very quickly.*

"Mrs. Bannister has advanced dementia. Juanita Gomes is still perfectly sane. I don't know how to tell her she is going to die a horrible death. How the hell do you tell somebody they're going to die?" he asked

"We just can't let these people die. There has to be something we can do for them."

"I've been racking my brain for the last two days trying to figure out how. Ask the EMTs when they get here. George.....the world is pretty much over. You've got to accept that. It's never going to be like it was."

"It's not over Carl. We've survived worse. We'll survive this too." I said

"I'm not so sure. The only thing holding this whole mess together was Washington and its giant piggy bank of money it handed out to us. I think maybe we should just look at this differently, that's all.

"What do you mean?"

"George, nearly all of these patients are terminal. This is hospice care, it's not a hospital and we aren't doctors. We were put in a very, very bad position here. The few patients we have that aren't terminal..... should be our priority. I don't even know why David Silverman is even in here. He seems fine, other than the fact he lost a leg. Hannah Felson is only seventy-two. She goes walking every day. She doesn't need to be here either."

"Carl, we can't make those decisions. It's not up to us."

"Then just who in the hell is going to? Have you ever seen someone with advanced brain disease? George, they're barely human anymore. Or seen a schizophrenic off their Seroquel or Clozapine? It isn't pretty. That woman in room 4c is on a ventilator. Half of our patients need oxygen. George, you're just not being realistic here. We won't be able to help any of them very shortly. This is not going to end well for us."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying if we have a terminal patient and we get no response from the family.....I think it's our duty to try and make their passing as easy as possible."

I just looked at Carl with both pity and disgust that he would even suggest something like that. Maybe he was just being more practical than I was.

"We are not going to kill a patient, Carl. You're insane."

"Look.....I didn't ask to be put in this nightmare of a situation, but here I am. You know I'm right. You know this is the only way. If we can't reach the family members.....there is no other choice." he said coldly. As if this were a video game and he could just turn it off and walk away from the mess he had created at any time.

"Carl.....let me be perfectly clear here: We are not going to kill any of these patients. Maybe this facility isn't where you need to be."

"Okay then.....we just watch these people die. I'm sure a jury will understand."

"Oh, screw you, Carl. Get the hell out of here." I said, more than just a little angry.

"What if it's what the patient wants? What if they want to die? Who the hell are we to stop them?"

"You wanted to be a doctor? You should have been a mortician. Business is probably booming right now." I said angrily.

"I'm not the bad guy here George. I just wish you would understand that," he said and walked up the stairs back to the main building.

I was beginning to see a side of Carl that just did not sit well with me. Actually, it scared the bejesus out of me. He was right about one thing: neither of us ever asked to be put in this situation where we have to make life or death decisions for the people we are supposed to be helping. He had simply decided that the easiest way out of this was just to kill the patient. I'd like to think my patients expected better from us than that. In many cases, we were the only family these people had left.

I called the district Attorney's Office the next morning and spoke at length to the assistant district attorney as to the legal implications should a patient die in our care. He made it clear that the first thing President Peterson did was to sign an Executive Order shielding anyone from legal action as a direct result of the attacks. No one in this facility was going to be sued for a patient dying in our care simply because we didn't have the means to save them. Negligence was one thing, not having the medication was another.

As for my Carl problem, he was less than concrete. He said right now, there are so many dead bodies piling up, it would take his office a decade to prosecute everyone. He also hinted that his office would not be prosecuting anyone in the medical field."

"Right now, we need every single one of you guys," he said.

I thought about simply asking George to volunteer his services to the Red Cross. He had completed medical school and nearly completed his residency when he simply quit. Right now, he would be given a temporary medical license. If he wanted to be a doctor, this was his chance.

I hadn't been to my apartment in nearly ten days. I told George I'd be back for dinner and took off.

The streets were eerily empty. I would occasionally see a passing National Guard patrol and saw that the city now had a dusk till dawn curfew in effect. There were no radio stations, just the emergency broadcast network on all of them, pretty much playing the same message over and over. Most of the gas stations were closed. Before the attacks, the traffic would have been bumper to bumper near my condo. I was the only car on the road. It was downright creepy.

This is not the same world it was two weeks ago. It's a new world.....scary and depressing.

I stopped by my neighborhood grocery store. There were two police cars parked in front with three officers armed to the teeth. I got the distinct *we're not screwing around* type of vibe from them as I walked past.

There was a very uneasy calm about the place as I loaded up my cart. Half of the shelves were empty. Several of the store clerks were carrying sidearms. As I ordered some deli meats, I could see two bullet holes in the wall. Clearly, times were changing and not for the better. The checkout girl made no eye contact with me or even acknowledged me as I paid. I was glad to see that my ATM card was still working. I was on my way out of the store when my phone rang. I immediately recognized the number. It was Marjorie. She was in corporate or hr. When she came around, it was never to deliver good news.

"Hello?"

"Hi, George. Look, I don't really how to tell you this, but none of you are going to get paid tomorrow," she said

"Huh?"

"George.....I'm the only one left. Everyone else is either dead or simply not shown up for work. I'm all that's left. I have to do payroll and accounting and pretty much everything else."

"Where's John?"

"I don't know. Two days after the attacks he said that he still had not heard from his son and was going to try and make it to Texas to find out if he was still alive. He was stationed at Ft. Hood. He won't respond to my calls or texts."

"Well.....that's not good."

"No, it isn't. The reason I can't pay you is that John emptied the payroll account before he left. Over fifty thousand dollars. He was one of two people that had access to it. That son of a bitch."

"What are we going to do?"

"Just keep on keeping on. I know you won't walk away, but I certainly can't expect anyone to show up for work if they won't get paid. I would say we can just give it to them in next week's check, but I'm not sure there will even be checks issued next week. I'm still learning how to do this payroll software."

"Marjorie.....I can't run the place by myself. What the hell am I supposed to tell my staff?"

"I don't know George. I'm so sorry. I certainly won't be getting paid either. Have you tried to contact any of the family members of the patients?"

"Yup. Several times. We got one response. There's no one coming for them Marjorie. We did get our shipment, but we're going to be out of meds in about two weeks. I'm sure you can draw your own conclusions as to what will occur when we have no meds for our patients."

"The Red Cross and the City are having this big meeting at the hospital tomorrow. Hopefully, we can get some answers. I'm trying to get anyone I can. Patti told me you lost a patient last night?"

"Yes. It took EMS almost six hours to come and pick her up. Marjorie, we need help in here. I can't make anyone stay. This is going to get very bad."

"I know George, I'm doing everything I can to try and get you guys help. I've called the mayor's office, the sheriff, and the police, asking for help. They don't have any help to send. Half of the city's police force and medical have been sent to Washington. Just don't quit on me, George."

"Marjorie.....I think we have another more pressing problem."

"What's that?"

"Carl. He has made it pretty clear that we need to take matters into our own hands and basically start killing the terminal patients."

"Are you serious? What do you want to do with him?"

"There's nothing we can do. I need him here. He's pretty much a doctor. I can't risk losing him, but I'm afraid of keeping him."

"We can't have him killing patients either," she said.

"Maybe the stress of losing a patient just got the better of him. I just don't want to think what will happen if some people start taking him seriously."

"If you have to fire him, I'll support you one hundred percent. He has to know we're in charge."

"Good to know. Hopefully, it won't come to that. I'm going to send out certified letters to all of our patient's family members asking them to come and get them. I don't know if it will do any good, but at least it shows we tried."

"Good idea. How are the rest of the homes doing?"

"Hanging on for dear life. I got to go George. I know what's being asked of you. I wouldn't want anyone there but you."

"When things get back to normal, you owe me a dinner."

"I owe you more than that," she said and hung up.

The problem was, that things did not return to normal, they just slowly deteriorated over the next few weeks. One month after the attacks, the city and the rest of the country were pretty much unrecognizable. The red state blue state divide didn't call a truce, it just seemed to get worse. Most of the southern and plains states were acting as a separate country. The coastal blue states were pretty much doing the same thing. President Peterson was trying to hold the whole mess together, but no one was taking him seriously. The mighty US military had been decapitated. What units remained were assisting in Washington. The death toll now topped one hundred thousand, with another hundred thousand expected to die from radiation poisoning in the coming months and years.

And that was just in Washington

The entire medical establishment in the United States had been shattered. Drug shipments were delayed or canceled altogether. Hospitals were stretched far too thin and the police weren't much better. The thin veneer holding society together had been ripped away. It was every man, woman, and child for themselves. Just in this city alone, there had been an increase of nearly three hundred percent in deaths since the attacks. Multiply that increase throughout the country and the real picture began to emerge as to how bad things were.

We lost two more patients. Both had advanced brain diseases and death was preferable to the life they were living. I don't know if Carl had a hand in it or not. He was the last staff member to check on them.

The real kick in the balls came one morning when Patti told me she had to leave. Her son-in-law had been shot the night before. The doctors treating him weren't sure if he was going to make it. I was upset, but I could hardly blame her. I knew full well what this meant. I told her she was like family to me and could come back at any time. I never saw her again.

It was downright shocking how quickly the country fell apart. It was quickly dissolving into chaos. Semis loaded with shipments were being robbed. Police and National Guard units now had to escort the trucks and even then it sometimes wasn't enough. The supply chain had been badly damaged during Covid. It was now broken into a thousand pieces. None of our drug shipments had come in. They are delivered each week by a private courier. We hadn't seen him in over a week. No calls were answered at the courier company either. We called the hospital who confirmed what George had said earlier. The hospital was only treating patients under the age of sixty-five. Covid was still raging and they had precious little resources to hand out. None of the letters I had sent out got any response. Some were returned unopened. Things were going from bad to worse. They came to head late one evening when Janet Felson became unresponsive. She had overdosed on her Xanax and downed a pint of vodka. She had dementia and in a moment of

clarity, decided to end her own life. David Silverman found her and called me. I ran downstairs and found George standing over her. He was checking for a heartbeat. He looked down at the bottle of vodka and read the suicide note. He took off his stethoscope.

"How bad is she?" I asked

"She has a faint heartbeat. She might make it through the night."

"Well, can't we pump her stomach?"

"With what? We don't have a stomach pump and even if we did, at this point, I don't think it would do much good. Alcohol and Xanax can be deadly. It can attack her organs and kidneys. She may as well have shot herself."

"So, what do we do?" I asked

"There's nothing we can do. She decided to end her own life. Maybe we should just abide by her wishes."

"Carl.....I am not just going to stand here and do nothing, now how do we fix this?"

"Call 911, George. If they even show up," he said and walked out of the room.

I would have strangled him, but I had to attend to Janet first. I put her on a ventilator and called 911. The dispatcher said it was going to be a few hours.

"Keep an eye on her David," I said as I stormed out of the room and went looking for Carl.

David moved his wheelchair as close to her bed as possible. Even at 88 years old, people can surprise you. I had taught him how to use a ventilator and give a drip IV. He was helping hand out meds and the meals. The patients respected him. Right now, he was about the only thing keeping this hot mess together.

I intended to find Carl and to have a few very choice words with him. I was angry and no one does their best when angry. I decided to go back to my office for a few minutes to cool down. This was a bad situation and getting worse by the minute. Carl came in a few minutes later and sat down. I was surprised to see him lighting up a cigarette.

"I didn't know you smoked," I said surprised.

"There's probably a whole hell of a lot about me you don't know George."

"I'm sure there is. Carl.....you know the Red Cross is desperate for anyone with medical training to go to Washington. I'm sure they would give you a medical license."

"You're not trying to get rid of me are you?"

"No, I just think you could do a hell of a lot more for people than you could in here. As you said, most of these people in here are terminal. there's not much we can do for them."

"So are most of those poor bastards in Washington. They're dead, they just don't know it yet. Radiation poisoning might take a while to show up, but it will definitely show up."

"George, I'm not disagreeing with you, I just think we're throwing in the towel way too early. We don't get to decide when someone lives or dies. The power to decide life and death goes several pay grades above ours."

"George.....six months from now, most of these patients will be dead or in the process of dying. They're all terminal. We can't save them. Science cannot save them. No one can save them. If you had a dog that couldn't walk or eat you'd put them down. I just don't see why a person is any different."

"Carl.....we could get in big trouble just for having this conversation," I said

"Who's going to arrest us? George, I'm sorry, but you just aren't being logical here. Keeping some of these people alive is just inhuman. Let them die on their own terms, with a little bit of dignity."

"There is no dignity in death, Carl. Never has been and there never will be. It sucks. It always sucks." I said.

"George, if you got lost on your way to the bathroom, wouldn't you want someone to just put you out of your misery?"

"I don't know, Carl. I'd still like to think that only God has the right to decide who lives and who dies." I said

"God let all of this horror happen. God isn't on our side. What kind of loving, caring God could strike someone down with dementia? I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. If God loves us so much, why would he ever do that to us?" said Carl lighting up another cigarette.

"I don't know, Carl. I've wondered that myself sometimes."

"George, I hope you can see the fallacy of your position. A good doctor has to put politics and emotion aside and do what is best for the patient and what is best for almost all of these people is simply to let them die on their own terms. You can't murder someone who is going to die very shortly."

"George, the difference between you and me is that I've seen a lot more patients than you have. I've seen patients come in on their deathbeds and make miraculous recoveries. I've seen people clinically dead for minutes and suddenly come back to life. I've seen people die that shouldn't have and vice versa. As tempted as I've been to watch someone with brain disease not even recognize their own reflection in the mirror, I've never even considered ending their life. I don't have the right and neither do you or anyone else."

"Okay, George. We'll do it your way. I'll just sit back and watch the bodies pile up in here. It's your call. Like I said on day one, I don't want to step on anyone's toes."

"Carl.....can I ask you a question?"

"Fire away."

"Why didn't you ever become a doctor? What made you stop?"

"George.....I wasn't always the good little Jew my parents wanted. They wanted me to marry a nice Jewish girl and pop out cute little Jewish babies and do whatever the hell it is good Jews do. I got my non-Jewish girlfriend pregnant a few years ago. She refused to get an abortion and I supported her decision. One night we were coming home from a med school function and our car was hit by a drunk driver. She didn't have her seat belt on. I had mine on. I told her a thousand times to put her goddamn seat belt on, but she didn't that one night. One goddamn night out of thousands and it changed our lives forever. We went over an embankment into a canal. It had rained hard that week and the canal had about five feet of water in it. I managed to get out. She was unconscious. I pulled her out and tried unsuccessfully for almost an hour to revive her, but it was no use. She was under for almost ten minutes. Even if she came back, she would be brain dead. Our baby didn't survive. The son of a bitch that hit us didn't even stop. Some rich asshole from Hollywood. Turns himself in the next day with his attorney. By then, he was completely sober. He said he just panicked and ran. He only spent six months in jail. Worked out a deal with the DA. He pleads guilty and gets a slap on the wrist. I stopped being a doctor because I figured if I can't save my own girlfriend and our baby, then how can I be expected to save anyone else? I don't ever want to look into someone's eyes and have to tell them their loved one didn't make it. It's the worst feeling in the world. I won't ever be put in that position again."

"Jesus, Carl.....I'm sorry."

"I would have walked away from the profession altogether, but I have student loans to pay off and my parents still want a doctor in the family. Funny thing is, I haven't spoken to my parents since the accident. I think they were glad to just be done with the whole situation. I chose my girlfriend over them.....and I would do it again in a heartbeat."

"I don't really know what to say, Carl. I mean doctors can't save everybody. If it's your time, it's your time."

"That's what I tell myself. They made us interns and residents have to tell the families the bad news, so we could get used to it. I never could get used to it. I still can't. I would rather end a terminal patient's life than have to tell them I failed them. It's what's best for everybody. No more worrying about when the big day will come. No more trips to the ER in the middle of the night. No more crying or screaming at the top of your lungs at God. It's just over. There's a big difference between hospice and being an ER doctor. When you know somebody is terminal, you can't really beat yourself up too bad for letting them die on your watch, but if they're otherwise healthy and they die on your watch, then you killed them. You are solely responsible for their death."

"Carl, I'm sorry, but that's not how this works. Doctors don't murder people, they save them. Can't you see that very basic difference?"

"George, all you're doing here is prolonging their agony. You're not helping them one bit. You're just torturing them a little bit more with each passing day. These people want to die. They don't want to live anymore in this hell. Do you enjoy watching people suffer? I certainly don't."

"We can go back and forth on this all night. I'm not asking you to say I'm right, just accept that this is the way it has to be. We fight for the patients. We don't just throw in the towel and let death win every time."

"You can't beat death. No one knows that better than me." Carl said solemnly.

"I'm very sorry this happened to you, Carl, but in here, we abide by my rules and the number one rule I have is not to murder our patients."

"Someday, you might be in a place like this. Staring at the walls all day, not remembering what happened to you five minutes ago. Not recognizing the people that come to see you. You're going to go from a human being to a human jellyfish and you'll be too far gone to realize what has happened to you."

"Carl, you strike me as a bit of a pessimist."

"No, I'm just a realist. Optimists are delusional and pessimists are usually just assholes, so that's the camp I'm in. Goddamn, you for what you've put us through, George."

"If you don't like it, you can always leave. No one is keeping you here." I said, hoping he wouldn't call my bluff.

"That's where you're wrong. The patients are keeping me here. I walk out that door, I've let them all down. I'm all they have left. I'm not going to abandon them when they need me the most."

"So.....you're not going to murder them when I'm not watching," I asked.

"I wouldn't dream of it, George," said Carl.

Things did begin to level off after our little heart-to-heart. At least as far as the nursing home was concerned. Outside these walls, it seemed as if society was getting worse by the minute. A group of nearly twenty-five states had declared their independence from the rest of the United States and told what was left of the United States Government to politely fuck off. The governor of Texas announced that they would be holding a referendum on their independence as well. It looked as if the two hundred and forty-seven year experiment called the United States of America was about to come to a screeching halt. Our military had taken a massive hit on March 3rd. The Air Force and Navy were still very combat-ready, but the regular Army and National Guard units were barely functioning. Many of them were not getting paid. Only twenty-five out of two hundred guardsmen had shown up for duty on Monday morning. Most were not getting paid, so why bother putting your life on the line? I had never realized just how divided the country had become. Some on both sides of the political spectrum saw the attacks as a good thing, to further advance their political and social agendas. Things came to a head yesterday when the hundreds of National Guard vehicles and militiamen surrounded Fort Knox in Tennessee and demanded the base commander hand over the base to the state. The general

refused and the standoff was very tense, with both sides bringing in reinforcements. I just had to sit and wonder:

If the country disintegrates, who is going to be in charge of our nuclear weapons?

The situation in the nursing home was hardly any better. We were desperately short of nearly everything from drugs to bedpans to food. We lost another patient on Saturday night. It took nearly twelve hours for the ambulance to show up. Clearly, corpses were not high on their list of priorities.

We had several visitors, but none of them wanted to take their loved ones home. They were our problem now and would be for the foreseeable future.

Marjorie had managed to get us paid, including back pay by tapping into some federal relief fund for anyone working in the medical field. We had help wanted signs out everywhere, but not a single person had applied.

Carl was being very Carl-like. He said little to me and only spoke to Penelope. I still did not trust him. I'm surprised he stayed on, knowing that Deegan was never coming back. The company on paper had pretty much ceased to exist. I called Marjorie and asked her if she could send Carl to our sister nursing home across town.

"George, they've had over a dozen deaths in the last month. I'm not sure we want him there to add to the body count."

"I really don't want him here either."

"You and that kid can run the place by yourselves?"

"No. I just don't want to think about what would happen if I weren't here. That guy sends shivers up my spine. He's checked out of life. He claims to want to help the patients, but I don't buy it. I just think he's a broken human being and is going to take anyone and everyone down with him that he can."

"It's up to you George. I think we both know you can't run that place with just two people," said Marjorie.

"I know. I just don't have a good feeling about him. I think he's just waiting for the right moment to make his move." I said.

That night I got a call from David. I was sleeping on the sofa in my office.

"George.....we got a problem. I just saw two shit bags coming into the building through a window. Passed right by me. I pretended to be asleep. They're probably here for the pills."

"Keep everyone calm. I'll be right there." I said. I quickly got dressed and grabbed my little pistol in my desk.

I ran downstairs to the medicine room. I thought it kind of odd that these punks knew exactly where to look for their next fix.

"That's far enough," I said turning on the light and pointing the pistol at them.

They both froze. I could tell they were junkies just by looking at them.

"We're just here for the pills man. We don't want to hurt anybody." one of them said.

"I don't want to hurt anybody either, now get the hell out of here. I'll follow you to the door." I said pointing my pistol at them.

"Look, man. He said we could have the pills. All we have to do is to kill some guy named George."

"I'm sorry.....what the hell did you just say?" I asked in shock.

One of them threw a bottle at me and they both drew their weapons. I fired at the first one, hitting him in the arm. The second punk got a shot off, which grazed my face. I dove for the ground and managed to shoot him twice in the foot. We were all firing blindly at one another. I managed to get out of the room and down the hall. The punks ran down the hall with their haul and left the same way they entered. David and some of the other patients came out of their rooms to see what had happened.

"I called 911, George. They're on their way, just hang on. Said David.

The bullet had missed my eye by inches. I was bleeding everywhere. I sat down on a bench in the front reception area. The first units arrived almost half an hour later. It was just two officers. David let them in and directed them to me.

"You alive?" asked one of the officers.

"Yeah....fortunately the tweakers couldn't shoot worth a shit, otherwise I'd be dead."

"We'll take you in. It's going to take the ambulance a few hours to get to you. We just had a shooting downtown. Killed fifteen people." said another officer.

They did the best they could with their first aid kit. They managed to get my face bandaged. They took me to the hospital. It was eerily deserted. I waited for maybe an hour before a doctor came out to get me. He had two other uniformed officers with him. I assumed they were acting as his bodyguards.

"Rough night?" he asked

"I've definitely had better," I said.

"You're lucky. Another few inches and they would have brought you to the morgue."

He put over twenty stitches in me. He asked me a few personal questions. I told him I was holding the Evergreen Nursing Home together. He stopped what he was doing and looked at me."

"You're doing God's work son. Some day, people are going to remember what you did for them," he said.

"Hopefully, there will be people left alive in the future," I said.

"My parents escaped Pol Pot in Cambodia. You think this is bad, you should have seen that horror show." said the doctor.

"I guess we all have our crosses to bear."

"My son.....I've seen so much death in these last few months, that I've almost become numb to it. You see people like us are the last line of defense against the Satanic world order. Each of us is doing our part to stop Satan from winning. If Satan wins, there will be no future.....for anyone."

"I guess I never thought about it that way," I said.

"Perhaps you should. All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people like yourself to sit back and do nothing," he said, finishing up the sutures.

"Don't worry about that. As soon as I am out of here, I'm going to have a little pow-wow with one of Satan's children. The same one who put me in this hospital." I said

I didn't say anything to George the next morning. I assumed we just didn't like one another, but trying to have me killed was another matter entirely. What the hell was he trying to do? This was personal now. I had to stop George as soon as I could. I called Marjorie and told her what had happened.

"Holy shit Georgie, you're lucky to be alive!" she said.

"I think it would be best if Carl left. I can't work with someone who wants me dead."

"George, just so we're clear, did those guys ever mention Carl's name? I mean did they tell you Carl hired them to kill you?"

"No, they never mentioned his name."

"Damn. That's going to be a problem."

"Why?"

"What if Carl had nothing to do with it?"

I had to take a step back. It was something I hadn't considered. I just assumed Carl was behind the whole thing. Perhaps I had been a little premature.

"Of course it was him. Who else would it be? Who else would know exactly where we keep our meds?"

"I'm inclined to agree with you, that's not the problem."

"So, what is the problem?"

"John Deegan is alive and well. He went to Washington to try and find out what happened to our staff. He somehow raised half a million dollars which he put back into our account yesterday. It's just a band-aid, but at least it's in the black. He wants Carl running the show. I guess the two of them have been talking since the attacks. Carl is going to be our new CFO."

"You've got to be kidding me."

"I wish I were. Legally, there's nothing we can do. He's still the boss and what he says goes."

"Marjorie, Carl is a goddamn psychopath. I'm sure he's killed a few of our patients already."

"Aren't most CFOs psychopaths, George?" she asked.

"This guy tried to have me killed!"

"I know George, this is a mess. If it were anyone but Carl, he'd be gone by now. I wish I could help you, but there's nothing I can do. John will be back in a few days and Carl will get the job."

"So, he's going to be my boss!" I asked in shock.

"He's everyone's boss. I think he and Deegan are planning something. I just wish I knew what it was."

"What the hell are we going to do?"

"At the moment, nothing. Whatever you, I don't want to know about it."

And there it was. She said it without saying it. Take care of the problem, but don't leave any loose ends.

Carl was going to be in for a rude awakening very shortly. I didn't care what Deegan wanted, Carl was gone. I just had to make him quit. That shouldn't be too hard. Hopefully, I could get it done before he did any more damage.

The bodies were quickly beginning to pile up around here.

I woke up the next morning to discover Mrs. Jansen dead in her bed. She had renal failure and was in and out of consciousness for the past several days. That made six dead bodies in just one week. Granted, all of them were terminal patients, but I was beginning to wonder if Carl had a hand in it. He did night checks. Penelope managed to make breakfast and put together a pretty good meal. I made certain she got her pay and some extra.

"I heard Mrs. Jansen died last night," she said while washing the pots and pans.

"Yes, she's gone."

"George.....I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Fire away."

"We don't have enough food left to do three meals a day."

"How bad is it?"

"Bad. We'll be completely out of everything in about a week," she said.

"Can you just make smaller portions?"

"I'm doing that. They're supposed to be getting 2500 calories a day. I can barely do fifteen hundred. George, what are we going to do?"

"I'll call our vendors. We'll get food in here, don't worry. No one's going to starve on my watch." I said

I called some of our vendors. They were desperately short as well. The fact that none of them had been paid since the attacks were not helping matters. I called half a dozen companies. None of them wanted our business and even if they did, they had no product to give us."

"We're paying our employees in food." said one of the ladies I spoke with.

It was just one dead end after another. I called the Red Cross Hotline. I was on hold for three hours until I finally got to speak with a real person. I tried to remain calm as I explained our situation. She told me the Red Cross was handing out food donations at distribution centers. If I wanted supplies, I would have to drive there myself and pick them up. Getting any more meds would be next to impossible.

"I'm sorry, but the Red Cross is rationing food and medicine."

"Meaning if they're over the age of sixty-five, they're pretty much screwed," I said.

"That's the director's policy."

I hung up the phone and threw it on my desk. This nightmare was getting worse by the minute. I had no choice. I had to call a truce. If Carl was the new CFO, then this was his problem as well. I texted him and asked him to come to my office. This was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

He came up the stairs a few minutes later drinking a large cup of coffee. He sat down on my sofa.

"You rang?"

"I understand you got a promotion."

"Well.....you shouldn't be surprised. You didn't think I was going to change bedpans my whole life, did you?"

"We're running out of food. We have maybe a week left."

"Yes, I was wondering when you were going to bring that up."

"So, what do we do? You're in charge now, this is your problem too."

"John and I are aware of the situation and we have it taken care of. The food will be here tomorrow morning."

"How did you get food?"

"What does it matter? You were busy pulling out your hair, while I was handling the situation."

"How much food did you get?"

"Enough to last us for a while. We had to take what we could get."

"Which company did you use?"

"George. I appreciate what you've done here, but John and I feel it might be best if you were transferred to another unit. This place doesn't need two of us here. We have homes in surrounding areas that could desperately use your help. I'm asking you politely to leave this place. John will call you tomorrow and tell you himself."

"I'm not going to just let you murder these people, Carl."

"Just because I don't buy into your delusional way of thinking does not make me a murderer. Frankly, I resent the accusation. That home in Springwood has lost over half its patients. One of them was actually decomposing before anyone realized they were dead. I think we've done amazing considering what obstacles we're facing."

I knew there was little I could do at this point. Carl had me by the balls and he knew it. I felt defeated and very angry. People like Carl always seem to win. People like me always seem to be on the short end of the stick.

"Carl.....what the hell are you doing hanging around here? What's in this for you? None of this is really adding up."

"George, you're beginning to get on my nerves. I'll give you twenty-four hours to clean out your desk and take your personal belongings. Monday morning, I expect you to take over the Springwood home and try and stop the bleeding. I'll hold the fort here."

Penelope opened the door and came storming in.

"George, tell me this is some kind of a joke. I am not doing this," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I am not serving our patients dog food!" she said.

I looked over at Carl. He wouldn't even look at me.

"Somebody want to fill me in here?" I asked.

"We have three thousand cans of dog food coming in tomorrow morning. The trucking company just called to confirm our address. Dog food and dog treats.....that's what we're feeding our patients."

"Carl, tell me she's kidding."

"This was the only option we have left. It's either that or they starve to death."

"There's food in the supermarkets.....kind of. I just bought some last night on my way home. We have a van, let's just fill it up with food."

"With what money?" asked George.

"I know about the money Deegan put into our account, Carl."

"George, you also know we burn through millions of dollars a week in here. The money John put in here was a drop in the bucket. Our med list just for this home is almost eighty thousand dollars a week. We had to make some difficult choices. Our power bill here is fourteen thousand dollars a month. Payroll is nearly ten thousand a week. You guys just aren't accepting the fact that our society is in big, big trouble and it's only going to get worse before it gets any better. If you want to go to the grocery store and load up, go ahead. We can't afford to buy groceries and pay you. It's up to you." said George.

"Dog food, Carl? Would you want to eat dog food?" she asked

"I will, if I have to. I'm trying to adapt. We all have to learn with less and be thankful for it. You didn't tell George about what happened this morning, did you?" he asked.

"I told you not to say anything!"

"What happened?"

"Some guys cornered me in the parking lot. I know what they wanted and it wasn't to try my cooking. I thought I was dead, but a cop car came into the parking lot and they all scattered. There were like five of them. I got lucky."

"You sure did. George, this is what it's come to. Last night, the police and National Guard got into a shootout over supplies. That's what it's come to. Pretty soon, there won't be anything on the shelf. The Great Starvation is right around the corner."

"So, what? We just throw in the towel and kill all of our patients? Is that what you want?"

"George, as misguided and delusional as you, you must realize this is a no-win situation. There's not going to be any happy ending here. It's just going to go from bad to worse. I've had to tell dozens of families that we can't take any more patients right now. What do you think is going to happen to these people? Do you think they're just going to live out the rest of their lives and make meaningful contributions to society? We're going to find them dead in a drainage ditch. If dementia doesn't kill them, then their own families will. I'm trying to help these people. I just wish you could understand that."

"Goddamn you, Carl," she said and stormed out.

I wanted to punch him, but I also knew he was right. We were fighting a losing battle. These patients were dead as soon as the bombs went off. Our fates were pretty much sealed.

"How many of our patients are going to be alive in three months?" I asked.

"I can't answer that George."

"Do you believe in God, Carl?"

"Sometimes."

"If there's a God, then there's a hell.....and I hope you burn in it," I said and left the room.

I walked down the stairs and found David. He was checking in on some other patients.

"David.....I'm leaving. I'm being moved to Springwood."

"Oh hell. You're leaving me with that son of a bitch? It's Jews like him that ruin for the rest of us," he said.

"You can come with me if you want. Can't promise you it will be any better, but at least you don't have to worry about being murdered in your sleep."

"I'm half tempted to take you up on your offer, but these people, they're my family now. I can't abandon them when they need me," he said.

I reached over and gave him a hug.

"George, if there were more people like you in this world, then maybe the world wouldn't be such a giant, flaming pile of shit. Take care of yourself," he said.

"Try not to get murdered, alright."

"I survived the Korean War, I can take care of this punk."

I drove home that afternoon and cried myself to sleep. I was backed into a corner and had no way out. Carl was going to get away with murder. I went to the police the next day and spoke with a detective about what I had witnessed at the home. He was sympathetic, but there wasn't much he could do.

"We've had over a hundred deaths in just one week alone. Half of them were homicides. The cases will never be brought to court. Half our force called in sick or quit. Even if we did arrest him I doubt the DA would bring charges. He'd probably be able to talk his way out of it." he said.

There it was. My last lifeline was gone. Carl had won. I had lost. The country was disintegrating. There was chaos and horror everywhere. For the first time in my life, I felt like giving up. If somebody like Carl was going to win and no one was going to stop him, then it was over for the rest of us. The good guys need not apply.

I looked down at my phone. It was Patti's number.

"Hey, gorgeous," I said.

"I heard what that Carl guy is doing in there. If I wasn't knee-deep in shit down here, I'd be right there with you, George."

"How are things?"

"George, I just talked to Marjorie. She filled me in on everything. You can't leave the home. He's going to kill them and turn the Evergreen into some kind of stress and shock therapy center. He and Deegan think they're going to make a fortune by helping people who have had nervous breakdowns cause of all this get back on their feet. The government just approved it. Deegan was in Washington to get a slice of the pie. They just have to kill off all of the patients first."

"The plot thickens. Carl is right though. We can't even feed them, how are we going to make it?"

"George, my family owns a giant horse farm down here in Bowling Green. Bring the patients down here. I have no idea how we are going to care for them, but it's better than nothing, which is exactly what they will have with Carl in charge.

"How the hell am I going to do that?"

"Just put them in a van and get down here."

"Pat, that's kidnapping."

"Not if you're saving their life it's not," she added.

"Are you really serious? How the hell are we going to feed them?"

"We have food down here. People are coming together. The south really is different. Everybody has a gun down here. George, you're all they've got."

I parked my car and stopped for a second. I remembered what my priest had told me once when I was just a boy.

"The very essence of Christianity is following the word of God, knowing full well that you are going to fail miserably doing it."

I drove to the nursing home in Springwood the next morning. It was total chaos. There was one young lady named Carmen who was keeping it all together. She had no formal medical training and had taught herself how to do IV's and used an AED from YOUTUBE.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey," she replied.

"Carmen, I'm taking these patients with me to Kentucky. You can stop me if you want, but I think you've seen enough to know that this is the only chance they have."

"Okay. Can I go too?" she asked.

We loaded all eleven patients up in the van. Thankfully, it had a full tank and two five-gallon cans loaded up. It wasn't enough to reach Bowling Green, but it was all we had.

"The roads are blocked and Mrs. Dench can't control her bladder. This is insane," she said.

"Insane is letting these people die in here. We treat dogs better than we've treated these people."

"It's like five hundred miles to Bowling Green. This van gets ten miles a gallon. We won't make it," she said.

"Wing and a prayer kid, wing and a prayer," I said as I pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the freeway. Maybe I could find a military convoy headed to that area. Maybe we'll never make it to Kentucky.....but, it's never over until you stop trying.