

The Onyx Seed

by Clifford Beck

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To My Brother, Randy

Many Thanks to Michael J. Schermuly
for his informative advice on the
United States Constitution

“When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.”

Revelations 6: 7,8

Chapter 1

The California Redwoods stood along the northern coast as majestic witnesses to the beauty of the wooded northwest. Further south, San Francisco sat at the bay of its namesake, a shining gem of cultural diversity. Its steel span, a testament to human will and genius, stretched from shore to shore. Further below, Los Angeles lay sprawling over the warm spring earth. But the streets of L.A. were oddly quiet. From beyond its borders, no one would ever have known that anything had changed. That the city's soul, like most of its people, was dead. What visited Los Angeles, as well as many other cities, was not something that killed in mid-stride, but something far more insidious and by the time they had discovered its true nature, it was too late. Schools, factories, and businesses were empty. Anyone who didn't go to a hospital died where they slept, be it a bed, couch or park bench. People simply lay down and died. The only survivors seemed to be those who lived in solitude. Monks, nomadic people or anyone who saw it coming and had the good sense to run and the resourcefulness to keep running. Hospitals and churches, long considered to be bastions of safety and spiritual comfort were filled beyond capacity with the dead as the haze that once blanketed Los Angeles was replaced by the warm, humid stench of death and decay. Around the world, humankind lay in ruins. Those who had not yet consumed by what had defiled the illusion of security would likely follow, and they go like lambs to the slaughter. Every city in every state, every country, had been trampled by the same beast, whose name was known only by only a few. The ghosts of the dead were now the only witnesses

to a crime committed by its own victims. They walked, unseen, through the streets. They stared out from behind windows and hovered in doorways with vague, lost expressions. Even in death, they were unable to comprehend what had forced them into an ethereal empty existence.

Four months ago, the bustling Los Angeles skyline pulsed with the energy of humanity in motion. Many lived in desperate isolation, in fear of what lurked in the shadows. Los Angeles was, largely, a place to be feared. The criminal element was alive and well in its streets and allies. But the people still milled about, hurrying here and there, moving almost anonymously through their day, doing whatever they did to ensure their survival. From a distance, the world hung in the blackness of space like a ship floating alone in the brackish waters of a vast ocean.

It was on an average day in downtown Los Angeles, wherein a small restaurant a young man toils over a hot frying grill. His short, cropped hair gathers a layer of grease as he stands for ten hours a day, cooking eggs, French fries, and assorted meat. It is here that he scrapes out a living on the paycheck he has long believed to be nothing less than slave wages. Martin Bryson, known at his place of work as Marty, dreams of going to college to study forestry. He is in love with the outdoors and escapes into the mountains whenever possible. But Los Angeles carries a constant hunger for human misery and will not release him. It is unlikely that he will ever see the inside of a college classroom. Yet in spite of the

anonymity the city has forced upon him; he is not alone. Lucas Vasquez also works in the same restaurant. They share a small apartment about twelve blocks from the restaurant and for all appearances, seemed to be each other's only friend.

It was Friday and like any other day; the restaurant opened at six a.m. It was Marty's turn to open, and he arrived at five forty-five in the morning. He'd been given the keys the night before and just before unlocking the doors, looked around in each direction. The restaurant was in one of the many areas of the city that had been overrun with gang violence and drugs. There seemed to be no one in charge of the city anymore. Even the mayor referred to L.A. as controlled chaos. But this early in the morning, things were usually quiet. One might suppose that even the bad guys needed their sleep. In Marty's nervous hands, the keys jingled like tiny chimes in the heavy morning air. The lock turned effortlessly and as Marty walked into the darkened restaurant; he looked back over his shoulder, just to be sure. He locked the door behind him and turned back toward the darkness.

"Shit," he whispered to himself. "This fuckin place creeps me out."

He wasn't bothered by the work. There's nothing wrong with making a buck, as long as you earn it honestly. But it was the area that bothered him. He also felt as though his life was on the edge of complete catastrophe. There had been times when he left his apartment only to discover that someone had attempted to pry the door open at some point during

the night. He understood very clearly that in Los Angeles, there were no safe places.

After locking himself into the restaurant, he began turning on the lights and taking the chairs down from the tables. A light-filled room seemed to be the only thing that could give someone even a fractional sense of security. At least, if something bad happened, one would see it coming. You might not be able to do anything about it, but at least you would know what was going on. The floors had been mopped the night before, but Marty gave a quick once over with a broom. His boss, Vinnie, was a stickler for cleanliness. Over the last two months, there had been three complaints to the health department, all by the same customer. A health inspection turned up nothing. Knowing who the customer was, Marty quickly surmised that the complaints grew from the customer's belief that they were not being treated as the special person they thought they were. Marty saw a lot of that in L.A. The sheer size of the city seemed to force people into an unconscious feeling of anonymity, and they reacted with a need to stand out from the crowd, as though they had somehow risen above everyone else.

Marty disappeared into the back, retrieving what they would need for the oncoming breakfast crowd. He took a moment to turn the television on. The sound of another voice provided him with a noticeable degree of comfort, even if it was a one-way conversation. While his eyes were focused on the off-color images of the television, a loud knock on the glass door

startled Marty into an abrupt, momentary shudder. It was Vinnie. He pointed to the door lock and impatiently motioned for Marty to let him in. He turned the lock and opened the door. Vinnie walked in feeling frustrated that Marty had once again locked him out.

“Marty!” he began. “How are the customers supposed to get in?”

Marty let out a deep sigh.

“Vinnie, you know how I am about this city,” he answered. Vinnie was in his late thirties and grew up in the Italian section of the city. His father had been killed, execution-style, for refusing to pay protection to the local gang. But that was fifteen years ago, when his father ran the restaurant. So, ownership fell to Vinnie, along with the risks. And when the gang approached him and threatened to kill his mother, he gave in. He has been paying protection money to them every month since.

“Marty, listen to me,” he said. “Nothing’s going to happen, alright? As long as I make the payments, nothing’s going to happen, capisce?”

He continued walking back to his office.

“Besides, if someone wanted to get in here, they probably wouldn’t use the front door!”

Marty knew he was right. He hated this part of town, and he hated Los Angeles. Nothing good ever seemed to happen, and he often thought he was willing to kill to get out.

About half an hour later, other employees made their way in, only to see Vinnie standing in the corner looking at his watch. He knew how hard it was to find

new hires in that part of town, so he gave his staff a lot of leeway. But tardiness was something he had little tolerance for. Last was Lucas and Maria. Lucas worked part time at the restaurant while attending college. He was in his second year, studying pre-law with the goal of becoming a city prosecutor. His older brother had been killed in a turf war with a rival gang. Shortly after, his mother died of cancer. But he refused to give in to a pointless life of violence and drugs and vowed to himself to do better. Everyone at the restaurant saw him as being, basically, a good kid who had taken a few more punches from life than someone his age should.

Maria was twenty-one and a waitress at the restaurant. Her brown, almond-shaped eyes and long, black curls could bring a man back from the dead. She was strikingly beautiful and turned heads wherever she went. Her parents were from Greece and made the mistake of believing that L.A. held a better life. They used what little money they had and opened a small store selling oriental rugs. The local gang had also demanded protection money from them. But Maria's father had no patience for those he referred to as punks and promptly chased them out. One night soon after, his store mysteriously caught fire. As the firemen did their best, her father stood weeping as he watched their livelihood burn to the ground. The fire had been determined to be the result of arson and the insurance claim was enough for him to start over with a new store. But he did so with a new understanding that L.A. was a world of its own. And if you don't play the game, you lose by default.

Lucas was attracted to Maria like a moth to a flame. Everyone at the restaurant saw it, except Maria. Her parents were simple people who held a great appreciation for what little they had. Maria, however, did not her parent's values and by the time she entered high school, she realized how attractive she was and became self-absorbed. To say that she didn't have time for Lucas would be wholly inaccurate. When he spoke to her, she ignored him. When he smiled at her, she looked the other way. For all appearances, they walked into the restaurant together. But she was busy ignoring him while he was busy trying to think of something to say. Upon entering the restaurant, they went in different directions. She went toward the lady's room to get ready for her shift, and he went to the kitchen to help Marty.

"Still trying, huh?" Marty asked.

Lucas quickly tied an apron around his waist and headed to the sink to wash his hands.

"Hey, she's starting to come around," he answered.

Marty grinned slightly as he arranged several cooking utensils a spatula, a fork, a whisk, and a bowl.

"If you say so," Marty said.

Lucas approached his side and spoke quietly.

Hey, a couple more days and you might have to spend a night in a hotel.

Marty looked at him in disbelief.

"Oh, really?" he asked. "You really think so?"

"Hell, yeah," Lucas replied.

"I don't know, Luke," Marty said. "That's some pretty big talk, considering she barely knows you're here at all."

"Well, thank you for your support," Lucas replied.

“Hey,” Marty said. “I’m just calling it like I see it.” Vinnie appeared in the kitchen doorway with a look of impatience.

“Hey, guys!” he said. “I don’t pay you to talk. Now, we got customers coming soon, so let’s step it up!” Maria and the other waitresses were busy getting plates, mugs, and utensils ready. They made sure that the tables were clean and menus were out as customers began to wander in. It was Monday and become crowded with people who were not at all happy to see their weekend come to a close. And they seemed too willing to vent their unhappiness at whoever was standing in front of them.

Unfortunately, it was the waitresses who were most often on the receiving end of this abuse. Aside from that, it was a fairly average day for everyone. Both the restaurants T.V. were set to CNN. Marty didn’t have time to watch the news, but he listened intently. He felt it was important to be well-informed about what happened in the world. The news was also an effective distraction from the world outside that often seemed to resemble a war zone. He was listening to coverage coming out of the middle-east. He sometimes thought he’d be better off back in Iraq. Tracking down Saddam Hussein gave his life purpose back then. Now, on the battlefield of L.A., life was anything but meaningful. Marty went home at four o’clock. As he unlocked the door to his apartment, he noticed that someone, again, had attempted to pry the lock open. He cracked open a beer and collapsed on his bed. Lucas would be back from work in about two hours, so he had some time to himself. He picked up his T.V. remote and turned on the news. Marty

preferred to watch the national broadcast, as opposed to the local reports. He got more of the city than he could stomach every day.

“Fucking people,” he said quietly to himself. “Why couldn’t I reenlist? The desert was a lot better than this shit hole.”

He spent four years in the Army, with three of those years in Iraq. As a member of Special Forces, Marty had seen his share of human carnage and at the end of his term, he was desperate to leave it behind him. But Los Angeles proved to be a different kind of war. There was no support, no battle plan, and no chain of command. One did not fight this war; they only survived it. Looking around his room, he saw everything he had acquired during his time in the military. His uniforms hung in the closet. His field pack and web belt sat in the corner as if waiting to be called back into service. He had saved everything in the event that the Army accepted him for reenlistment, not that he didn’t try to reenlist. But when his record showed that had been at the battle of Fallujah, the Army refused his request for reenlistment. They believed that he’d been traumatized and would not adjust well to another term of service. The real problem, as he saw it, was that he wasn’t adjusting to life as a civilian. At least in the military, your life could have a purpose, and Marty ‘chose’ to fight the Taliban. That was his purpose. Now, he was sharing an apartment in one of the worse areas of L.A., a city he quickly grew to think of as the armpit of the world.

Chapter 2

“In the weather, it’s going to be a bit warmer with highs in the mid-seventies and in the upper sixties in the mountains. Later tonight, an onshore breeze will cool things down just a bit and ocean conditions this weekend should be smooth sailing.”

Friday had been too slow in coming and Marty was looking forward to hiking Iron Mountain. It was a rocky peak that lay east of the city and Marty needed to check the weather before driving to the trailhead. It had been a long week, and he desperately needed to get away from people. He knew that hiking alone in the mountains was a bad idea. But he wanted to be alone and being in the outdoors helped him to retain his sanity. Besides, he didn’t plan on hiking to the summit. It was spring, and the rattlesnakes were just coming out of hibernation. So, Marty took the proper precautions, taking a hiking staff and wearing snake proof boots. He sat on his bed, exhausted from a long week at the restaurant. He switched the channel on his T.V. to CNN. It was broadcast as a thirty-minute repeated loop that played, uninterrupted throughout the day. The news stories coming in from around the world were almost predictable. Shootings, global warming, politics, civil uprisings, and natural disasters. It always seemed to be more of the same shit. And right on cue, a report was broadcast about the new avian flu coming out of China. Every fall and spring, reports were released by the CDC. They were simple, bland and seemed to be worded exactly the same every year. Marty didn’t really take the news seriously anymore. He had come to see it as a

different form of entertainment. And when he picked up his T.V. remote, he would say to himself, “Well, let’s see how much the world sucks today.” It was eight o’clock at night. Marty and Lucas had ordered out and split a large pizza between the two of them. It had become a weekly ritual that both of them looked forward to. He would never admit it to himself, but Marty needed the company and Lucas had no family. His mother and brother were dead and his father had disappeared years ago. So, Marty took it upon himself to look out for him and Friday night Pizza seemed to be a good way of maintaining their connection.

“So, Marty,” Lucas began. “What have you got going on this weekend?”

Marty spoke between bites of Pizza.

“Well, if the weather holds up, I’m going to hike through Iron Mountain,” Marty answered.

“How about you?”

Lucas took a sip from his beer.

“I’ve got a paper to write,” he replied.

Marty pretended to be interested.

“What are you writing about?”

Lucas took a moment to organize his thoughts.

“Well,” he began. “It’s going to be about how the civil war affected civil liberties by looking at the fact that Lincoln suspended something called the writ of habeas corpus.”

Marty was clueless.

“Habeas what?” he asked.

Lucas washed down a mouthful of pizza with another sip of beer.

“It says that you can’t be detained without formal charges or trial.”

Marty looked a bit dumbfounded.

“Can they do that now?” he asked.

Lucas put some thought into Marty’s question.

“Um, I think that depends on the situation,” he replied. “Our rights are a lot more complicated than people think.”

Marty found the conversation somewhat interesting. But mostly, it just gave him a headache. He wasn’t someone who understood complex issues and leaned more toward simplicity. Getting up early the next morning, he filled a large day pack with everything he needed for an overnight in the woods. He had been trained by the Army to use a GPS receiver, but couldn’t afford one, so he often resorted to using a map and compass. Pausing momentarily on his way out the door, he turned to Lucas.

“Hey, Luke!” he said. “See you later!”

There was no response. Lucas was buried in books and hard at work on his paper. Unlike other students, Lucas was never one to wait until the last moment to complete his assignments and seemed very aware that as his education progressed, it would become more challenging. He also understood that if he wanted something badly enough, like an education, he could expect to work for it. Marty locked the door behind him and walked down the street. He drove a ten-year-old Chevy. The body was covered with Bondo, but the car’s age and appearance served as an effective disguise for a finely tuned, customized engine and transmission. When Marty got out of the Army, he

immediately felt the need for a hobby. He picked up what he felt was a true beater car and turned it into a work of mechanical art. He left the body as was so as not to attract attention to it. But under the hood roared the soul of an enraged tiger.

The engine came to life as he turned the key while putting a slight amount of pressure on the gas pedal. He drove northeast out of the city and made his way to Big Tujunga Canyon Road. Following it west, he pulled into a parking lot just beyond its intersection with Doske Road. He put on his pack, fastened its belt around his waist and walked toward the head of Long Valley trail. Out of the concern for safety, he wrote the date, his name, and address in the registry and started up the trail. He decided not to go as far as Iron Mountain, due to the fact that he was only there for two days. So, his plan was to hike to the top of Condor Peak. But he wasn't about to push himself. He knew that even a mild injury could be potentially fatal, being alone in the middle of nowhere. So, if he didn't get to the summit, that would be okay. He would try another time. The trail wove its way uphill with a few downward slopes, crisscrossing through the mountains. It was easy for Marty to lose track of time as he walked through the low-lying brush of the southern California mountains. He preferred to walk the valley trail where it was cool and shaded, as opposed to the open heat of the ridge. He knew it was always easier to warm himself up than to cool himself down. At the trails halfway point, Marty stopped for water. He turned to look back down the valley and was struck by its incredible beauty. He'd hiked the

Long Trail before, however, he never seemed to tire of the view. The valley sat low between two mountain ridges that stood like the columns of some ancient Greek temple. They were as old as time itself and a constant reminder of the ongoing march of nature's power.

Marty spent the night beneath the shadow of the summits' southern slope. He reached the top of Condor Peak, but the day was growing short, and he needed to make camp while there was still enough light. Finding a small group of boulders, the first thing he did was to inspect the area for rattlesnakes. The southwest was teeming with snakes. At night, they would curl up against the rocks that had been warmed by the heat of the day. After making a close inspection of the ground around the boulders, Marty decided it was the ideal place to camp. The boulders would give him shelter from the wind and reflect heat back from the warmth of a small fire. As darkness overtook the valley, Marty watched as Los Angeles slowly lit up in the distance. With a small fire crackling near his feet, he sat mesmerized by the glow of the city. He wondered how such a violent place that, for many, was an inescapable hell, could be named city of angels. If he didn't have to worry about money, he would simply drive out of the city and never look back, and where he'd go would also be of little concern. Marty spent the night in a makeshift tent using an insulated rain poncho he'd saved from the Army. Before turning in for the night, he stoked the fire to ward off predators. The California mountains were also known for its

scattered population of mountain lions. Marty had a strong feeling that he was being watched, but knew that the fire would keep any curious eyes from becoming too curious. His suspicions were confirmed as he rose the next morning to discover a pile of scat about fifty feet from his camp. By its appearance, he knew it was from a carnivore. Something had marked this area as its territory, and it was enough to prompt Marty's hasty departure.

Marty took his time hiking back down the trail. He was certainly in no hurry to return to L.A., but within only two hours, saw the parking lot coming into view. He signed out on the registry and loaded his gear into the back seat of his car. The drive back was far too short and within the space of forty-five minutes, found himself parked in front of his apartment. It was the second floor of a run-down, red, brick building that looked as if it had been built around the turn of the century. Marty's room was in the back, just off the kitchen. He was very comfortable being away from the street and felt that the less he was noticed, the better. He walked in to find Lucas still hard at work on his paper. In spite of the fact that he had no family, he seemed almost obsessed with succeeding in his college career. On a deeper level, it was the tragedy of his past that drove him to make a better life for himself.

"Hey, Luke," Marty said. "How's the paper going?" He stopped in front of Lucas room to let him know he'd returned, but mostly, he was checking to see how Lucas was doing. Marty felt that as long as he was around, Lucas would never have to be alone. He

unlocked the door to his room, walked in and dropped his pack in the corner. Stepping back into the kitchen, Marty opened the refrigerator and took out a cold beer. Back in his room, he sat up on his bed and turned on the T.V. He switched back and forth between news channels until stopping at CNN. Among other things, there was a report of this seasons flu and that people in some large cities were being advised to wear masks. The usual warnings were announced that the flu was potentially deadly to the very young, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems. Every spring and fall it was the same thing. Wash your hands, get the flu shot, cover your mouth. Not interested, he said to himself. He was more interested in what was going on in the middle-east and switched to the BBC. The next day, Marty got up at five in the morning and got ready for work. Monday had arrived far too soon. It wasn't his turn to open, so he had a little more time. Upon arrival, he noticed that the restaurant was still dark, and the waitresses had gathered at the front door.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

Tiffany, a nineteen-year-old girl, straight out of high school was the first to complain.

“Thank fucking God!” she said.

Tiffany had a child at a very early age, even by L.A. standards. In high school, she developed a reputation for being a girl who had a problem keeping her legs closed.

“Can you get the door open? It’s fucking creepy out here.”

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