

The background of the cover is a vibrant blue sky filled with soft, white, fluffy clouds. Sunbeams, or crepuscular rays, are visible, radiating from the upper left towards the lower right, creating a sense of depth and light. The overall atmosphere is bright and serene.

HEAVEN

The Novel

Steve Carlson



Phillip Chapman died and went to heaven...but that was just the beginning. Phillip was a good man, but not a great man, and seldom made it to church. Yet, when he died, he awoke in the most wonderful of Heavens that contained everything he wanted...except answers. Why? What had he possibly done to deserve this? What did God want from him in return? Ah...questions. And. so it began...

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First Edition

HEAVEN

DEDICATION

To the too many people I have known who left life too early and are,
hopefully, habituating a place as wonderful as this.

Steve Carlson

FOREWORD

The bus was twenty minutes late which was not how Phillip Chapman wanted this weekend to start. It was bad enough that he had to be there... but to delay it! Cruel and unusual punishment. Thirty of the top employees of Arnie's Restaurants were off that day to Camp Eagle's Crest, an hour or so outside Columbus, Ohio. The camp specialized in a naturalized type of corporate bonding which was intended to heighten moral, increase productivity, ease workplace tensions while, hopefully, providing everyone with a much needed break.

Executives, like Phillip, took turns accompanying them. The only solace he could take from this was that he wouldn't have to do it again for another five years. It was the waste of a perfectly fine day. It was Saturday, for crying out loud, he should have been in his back yard with a book.

At last the ancient, yellow chipped school bus arrived and squeaked to a stop in Arnie's parking lot. The minions started boarding. When Phillip entered he glowered at the driver and went in search of a seat. He remembered walking down similar aisles when he was ten. He didn't like it then either.

Phillip spied his goal, a seat near the back that was still empty. He quickly commandeered it, sitting comfortably in the middle so no one could join him. It was claustrophobic enough. People found other places to sit and they soon drove off. Phillip lowered a window. Fresh air helped.

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Being the ranking executive on board, Phillip could have run the show if he chose. He didn't. He quietly sat on the worn, cracked upholstery of his very own seat and left the organization and herding of the masses to Sandy in Public Relations who seemed bred for such occasions.

“So, when we reach the camp,” Sandy announced nearly an hour later, standing at the front, next to the driver. “Those with names starting in A through N will go the left of the bus, all others, to the right. We will then form two lines that will take us to... ‘

At that moment, a deer bounded off the side of the road directly in front of the bus. The driver quickly cranked the wheel to the left causing the bus to swerve. The deer continued on it's way, oblivious to the fate it nearly missed. The people weren't so lucky. Sandy was violently flung into the metal doors near the front of the bus. Everyone else was also thrown brutally to the side.

Having missed the deer, the bus was now headed straight for a twenty foot embankment that fell off from the side of the road. Claspng the wheel hard, the driver turned it back to the right as quickly as he could, thankful there was no oncoming traffic on this stretch of isolated forest road. The bus, however, did not respond. The front wheels turned but did not grip, they skidded sideways closer to the drop off.

Then they caught. The bus suddenly lurched to the right. Too suddenly. Momentum carried the bus onto it's two left wheels where it balanced for a moment before continuing to topple over and roll down the embankment. There being no seat belts, people were tossed about like raggedy dolls. Screams and blood were everywhere. After three revolutions the bus slammed against a large tree and lurched to a stop.

At first it was quiet, then moans began being heard, crying, then a high-pitched shriek pierced the air. That cry may have been what woke Philip. The bus lay on it's left side, the seats on the right side of the bus hovered over them like so many stalactites. Bodies, some perhaps alive, lay unceremoniously strewn around on top of each other. He tried to move to get a view of the rest of the bus but a sharp

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pain in his side stopped him. He looked down to see a piece of broken glass stuck there. The smell of gasoline caused a wave of fear to surge through him. If anything was to get done, it better get done now.

He reached down with two bloody hands, grabbed the piece of glass and quickly pulled it out of him. The pain not only took Phillip's breath away but forced a sharp yell at the same time. Blood was unleashed. Phillip tried putting pressure on the wound which hurt like hell but he knew it was needed to quell the bleeding. He still smelled gasoline and knew he had to get out of there... but so did everyone. Hoping he hadn't cut an artery, he pulled his belt off and put it around him higher up on his abdomen, right over the cut. He then cinched it as tight as he could which brought tears to his eyes.

He quickly pulled out his cell phone and dialed 911. Nothing. Between the mountains and the overturned bus, he barely had a bar. He returned the phone to his pocket, fought to his feet and looked around. Shock was subsiding, he was starting to shake. Everyone had been hurt. What could he do? He wanted to run but couldn't. Too many were not moving, some were unsuccessfully trying while others lay immobile in pain, crying.

He forced himself to move. Stepping on the sides of the seats, Phillip worked his way to the emergency door at the back of the bus and tried to open it. It was frozen. The bus had torqued in such a way that had wedged it closed. That realization plus the ever present smell of gasoline made him start to panic. He had to get out of there, now!

He looked up to the windows. Some could be knocked out in case of emergency, he remembered, but they were now seven or eight feet above him. He painfully climbed back to the front of the bus, talking to people along the way, trying to appear calm while inside he was a volcano.. Like it or not, these were his people. He was responsible. "Good, you're awake, Barb. Let me get a door opened and we'll get you out of here. Keep pressure on that arm, Ken. That's the only thing that going to help now."

The driver was unconscious. Phillip turned the ignition off, then tried to open the doors with the long handle the driver used. After a

couple of sharp jolts, he got them to release. They opened upward. The unresponsive Sandy lied crumpled at his feet.

Not knowing quite how this was going to work, Phillip climbed back to get Barbara, a secretary in accounting who was starting to move.

“Come on, Barb the front doors are open, we just have to get there.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. We’ll piece that together later, for now let’s just get out of here. C’mon.”

He showed her how to stand on the seats and, with him steadying her, slowly made their way to the front.

“Do I smell gas, Mr. Chapman?”

“Yes. Hurry, climb up here.” Using the pipe hand-rails around the front doors of the bus like monkey bars, they climbed out. As Phillip pulled Barbara up, they quickly slid down onto the front fender of the bus, then onto the ground. He led her a safe distance away, made her comfortable against the side of a tree and tried his phone again. This time it went through. He reported the incident, giving the particulars as quickly as he could then, as much as he wanted to run away, turned and went back to the bus.

After climbing up the way they’d slid down, Phillip noticed that his belt tourniquet wasn’t working, way too much blood was flowing. Lowering himself down inside the bus, he grabbed a nearby jacket, wadded it up into a ball, stuffed it hard against his wound making him cry out again and put the belt over it, tightening it again.

Being a sedentary sort of guy, this type of activity was not normal to Phillip but he persisted. Looking for the next person capable of making an escape, he found two others who were ambulatory. He told them how to get out of there and that they should grab somebody and go.

His makeshift tourniquet would probably have worked if he’d laid down and rested but, of course, he didn’t. After safely removing an injured person, he’d go back inside the bus for another. The pressure kept sliding off his wound which permitted the blood to flow

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unabated. As determined as Phillip was, he was getting weaker. The pain had hurt so much for so long, it had become numb.

He was back for yet another time and had just lowered himself down through the doors, reaching for Lloyd in sales when the fumes from the ruptured gas tank found a spark.

Phillip saw a flash out of the corner of his eye but heard or felt nothing. No one did. Suddenly, it got very dark and very quiet. Very dark. Very quiet.

Steve Carlson

CHAPTER ONE

The dream was everything. Vague, partially glimpsed images made themselves almost known before being immediately forgotten, but then, Phillip never remembered his dreams. He laughed out loud and didn't know why. That was all right. Answers would have led to questions and he didn't feel like questioning.

His dream journey continued, leaving everything behind to be obscured by an all-pervading haze. There was no past, no future, just this non-thinking allusive moment which felt wonderful. But, change! He became aware of change. Light. He progressed cautiously, waiting in anticipation as the mist became lighter and brighter. Occasionally the sun would peep through only to be covered over again until suddenly the fog lifted and everything became clean and clear and he could see forever.

Forever, in this case, consisted of four carved mahogany bed posts that twisted toward the ceiling. Phillip lay upon the bed, blinking, trying to get used to the light that was streaming into the room through the large French doors off to one side. He sat up, hoping to clear his head. He was in a tastefully decorated bedroom, large enough for a marble mantled fireplace and lovely sitting area. He'd never seen it before in his life.

He slipped from bed, fully clothed, and looked for something familiar but failed to find it. His mind was still a haze. He couldn't remember anything. He crept out of the bedroom into a long hall with doors interspersed among a gallery of large, lovely paintings. Midway down the hall, a carved wooden staircase spiraled down to the main

floor. Off to the left he could see a formal living room with large, over-stuffed comfortable looking furniture; to the right, a warm, paneled den leading to an exquisite library.

Phillip was not in the habit of wandering about other people's homes but it was rather important to find out where he was. He continued looking for someone, hoping he would see them first and not be caught unawares. He was sure that the first glimpse of whomever would trigger his memory and make perfect sense of all this.

But there was no one. What there was, was a magnificent estate that was as foreign to him as it was beautiful. Phillip ventured a "hello" which seemed very small against the considerable silence.

French doors off the marvelous living room led outside to gloriously sculptured lawns and gardens which Phillip walked through in a daze. Looking back, he saw that the house was a Tudor mansion, a masterful blend of wood, mortar and brick. He'd always loved the style but couldn't remember actually being in one before.

A storybook quality was added to the scene by a pond which hugged one side of the house like a moat. There was even an arch stone bridge with ivy, lily pads and two graceful white swans. The beginning of an oak forest lined the pond on the far side.

But where was he? Whose place was this and what was he doing there? He had difficulty remembering beyond the dream. Even the attempt became momentarily impossible when he noticed the grounds on one side dropped off into ... an ocean. Phillip lived in Ohio. (He remembered that.) Wait a minute!

Phillip forced himself to sit down on a bench overlooking this enigmatic ocean and took a few deep breaths. What had happened before the dream? Where had he gone to sleep last night? His memory scanned back through the fog searching for clues. Forms and images started to become feelings and events as the mist was left further behind.

Remembrance came as a shock. The accident. My God, what had happened to everybody? There were so many hurt. So many to get out... then nothing. Had he passed out? Who had come to help? Some

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people were badly in need of... But, hadn't he been hurt, too? He felt around his side. It felt fine, obviously healed. How long had he been here? He looked around at the estate again, realizing again that he had no idea where 'here' was.

Obviously, he'd made it, probably lay in a coma for a while and had been sent to this place to convalesce. The surroundings were certainly ideal, but where were the other patients, the doctors, nurses, staff? They'd have to suspect he'd be waking soon.

And what about the ocean? Phillip walked to the edge of the grounds which fell in stepped, green terraces to the water. Below was a private boat dock with a large sailing yacht and a smaller, sleek sailboat that looked like some kind of racer. Confusing.

Inland and off to the left, was a corral with four horses. Someone was living very well around here.

"Hello. Hello." The horses seemed reasonably interested as they turned lazily. That was it. Nothing else. Odd. He went back to the house more determined this time.

What had happened to the others? Had most of them also made it? He would find out where he was and ... make a phone call or something. In a warm, comfortable den, there was a massive inlaid wooden desk, surrounded by furniture groupings of the softest leather.

Feeling somewhat like a thief, Phillip rifled the drawers but found nothing. The desk looked as though it had never been used. It was stocked with everything a desk should have, including filing folders but they were new and empty. There were no phones, clocks or computers. No computers! How old was this place?

Needing something familiar, he went back up the magnificent staircase to the bedroom he awoke in. Had he packed? Were his clothes there? No. The closet was full but not with anything he'd ever seen before. He stood there a moment trying to decide what to do. On the back of the closet door that still stood open was a full-length mirror. He casually glanced over to it... and froze.

The image was of a stranger, a young, handsome stranger. Phillip stepped closer to the mirror, so did the image. My God, it was him! He moved again. The image moved. Fear raced through him and

quickly turned to panic as he ran from the room. He bound down the stairs, out into the backyard and kept running.

"Hello. Hello. Answer me, please! What's going on here?" He ran until he ran out of land. He stood at the water's edge, panting. The horses seemed to look at him as though he were crazy. Perhaps he was.

Curiosity, soon, got the best of him. He returned to the house and found another mirror. This new image appeared to be in his early thirties, trim, maybe even a little taller (he'd always wanted to make six feet). The reflection did resemble him but not exactly. He had to admit that he'd never looked that good even when he was thirty. He'd always carried a few extra pounds around the middle and had never been in such taut condition.

But the eyes were his. The nose, the line of the chin, even the basic expression. Individually, everything was the same, but collectively...! Actually, the more he looked, the better he felt. There was nothing offensive about him anymore. Perhaps that was it. His flaws were either gone or they didn't appear to be flaws anymore. The fear subsided another notch when it occurred to him that if he could have looked any way he wanted, this would be it, and it was still him, completely.

He sat down again. Something very strange was happening here. He wondered briefly again about being crazy? Could he have died? A chill went down his spine at the possibility. No. He vaguely remembered a flash. Could it have been an explosion?

Perhaps he needed plastic surgery? That would account for his new look. Sort of. Dead, really?

Where was this place? It was too lovely to be hell but it didn't seem like Heaven either. Purgatory? Limbo? For the first time, he tried to seriously visualize what Heaven might be like and came up with Angels and wings and puffy clouds and Gabriel blowing his horn. He probably never thought about it because none of it seemed realistic or even appealing. He never cared much for harp music and wings would get old unless there was someplace interesting to fly to. Besides, he wouldn't be able to sleep on his back.

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He looked quickly around as if to reassure himself of the reality of his world. If solidity was reality, then it was real. Beyond that, he couldn't be sure.

The more he thought about it, the more unacceptable it was. He couldn't be dead, not now! Arnie's was doing so well and he had that meeting next week about the Kyzinski acquisition that he'd worked for months to set up and he needed to find out how the other people on the bus were and, even though he didn't see his son Tom that much, Tom unfortunately wasn't nearly ready to survive in the world without his dad... and his yard was a mess. He'd been meaning to get after that for a while now. Dead? No, there was too much he still needed to do.

But... could this be Heaven? If so, where were the others? There was no St. Peter at any golden gates, no Angels, no one to say "Welcome to Heaven", give him a hearty handshake and maybe explain a bit about what was going on.

He couldn't buy it, even though nothing else made sense either. But, alone?

He roamed back through the gardens trying to clear his head and get a different perspective. He was acutely aware of his new physique as he walked. Whoever the doctor was had done a nice job. He felt strong, agile, healthy. It was a new feeling to Phillip, one he was enjoying already.

Of course, it was just a matter of time. Sooner or later, he would meet the owner or someone in charge of this place and he would get his answers. Until then, Phillip decided to relax, or try to. He strolled across the old stone bridge over the pond, honked back at the swans (ah, trumpeters) and reveled in the peaceful fragrance of it all.

In-depth exploring of the house followed, the high point of which was the most charming, well-stocked private library he had ever seen. One side of the room contained a large, paneled inglenook with a frieze of roses above the rock fireplace and large, comfortable couches lining either side. As much as he had enjoyed his house in Columbus, the main drawback had been that there was no fireplace. He'd always wanted to add one, he could have afforded it, but...

never got around to it. Well, here at last was a fireplace he could enjoy, at least, for a little while.

The hard wood floors and the warm smell of leather made the library instantly his favorite. Three walls were floor-to-ceiling books with a slidable ladder to help reach the higher shelves. The other wall consisted of leaded glass panes looking out on the estate's lush gardens.

He thought briefly about checking his email but still hadn't come across a computer. He also noticed that his cell wasn't in his pocket where he always kept it. He may have lost it in the accident.

Getting back to his explorations, Phillip took the liberty of pouring himself a glass of wine from a delicate crystal decanter and made a silent toast to the other people on his bus. Well, he knew little about wines except that that was the finest he'd ever had. The glass lasted just long enough for him to discover that everything he'd ever wanted to read, study or experience was in that library. He was also pleased to note that there were CDs and even some good old fashioned records, that encompassed the full span of his musical taste.

While pouring another glass, he noticed it getting dark outside. So much for this death and Heaven nonsense. Obviously, he was still on Earth or, at least, spinning away on some other globe somewhere. He went outside, sat on top of the terraced cliff, sipped the wine and enjoyed one of the most beautiful sunsets imaginable. The sky and ocean glowed alternating colors like a slowly revolving prism. He'd never seen anything like it. He was so enthralled watching the sky go by, he didn't move until long after dark.

Starting back toward the house, he was surprised to see it fully lit, lights on inside and out. Finally, someone must be there. He ran to the house, calling, looking, but there was no one. Could the lights be on a timer? Standing there alone in the middle of the house, Phillip realized how tired he was. He was still concerned about the others on the bus and everything that had to be done at home but he really did need to lay down right then.

After another quick glance around, he walked slowly up to his room. He still couldn't help wondering if it was all right, but he

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imagined they'd let him know if they didn't like it. He had no idea who 'they' might be.

Down deep inside he knew that someone was playing games, that all this had a rational explanation. Yet, down deeper, he certainly suspected that might not be so.



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