



Soul View

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To Joan, your soul is brighter than any star.

To Lucky, thanks for being in charge.

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Chapter 1

Most everyone knows life isn't always comforting. Life can be hard and sometimes events occur to accentuate that very point. When that happens, we end up in places we'd just as well not be. Emergency rooms and intensive care units in hospitals come quickly to mind.

To be fair, medical centers were never really designed to be welcoming destinations for vacationers, tourists, party seekers, and day travelers. They don't have to be. Let's face it; folks don't seek out hospitals for the food, drink, and entertainment, although some do end up in one after a long night of such frolicking. People go to a medical facility because they are running low on alternatives, or they are brought there because they are in no condition to move on their own. If they could, they probably would start running in the opposite direction the moment they sensed that antiseptic smell.

As distressing as these facilities can be, hospitals are usually always busy. Not everyone runs away, even those that are capable of doing so. Most incoming patients and their family members do not savor the need to be present, but there are others that walk the halls of health providers and remain there by choice. They stand readily available to assist, not out of need, but out of some desire to help. They are incredibly caring individuals that choose to offer their services, and many do so on a volunteer basis.

I give these people monumental credit. They choose to serve in a place where broken bones, illness, blood and vomit are commonplace. If it were me, I'd much rather help out at a candy store or an ice cream parlor. I like it when sugar is commonplace. The volunteers I see, however, don't need such sweet incentive. These people are not even being compensated in money, let alone sweet, decadent treasures.

The reason I see these people is because I also spend a great deal of my free time volunteering for a hospital in one of the busier sections of Philadelphia. I do so under the guise of offering assistance to others. In truth, however, I'm here for my own selfish reasons, though no one else knows that. The hospital staff, supervisors and administrators think I'm one of the noble volunteers. They think I've chosen to help those in need out of the goodness of my heart.

I won't sell myself completely short. I do help, even though that's not my true incentive. That's why they allow me the latitude I've been given. I'm a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, or MFT for short, and I initially offered to help out as a grief counselor.

In the beginning, I waited in visiting areas and back offices, and I allowed the nurses and doctors to guide people to me. Eventually after proving I could truly provide support, I became bolder in where I would wait. I stood in the ER administrative and triage areas, chatting with doctors, nurses, and emergency medical technicians.

Ultimately, however, I wanted more than this. I wanted free and complete access to the entire ER including treatment rooms, and my focus did not end there. I also wanted the ability to journey about freely in the intensive and critical care units. I can't see what I am there to see from the waiting room, from an office stashed away in a corner, or from behind some curtain. I need to be closer, closer to those that are about to die.

At first, I heard my request to roam about the facility was met with resistance by supervisors and eventually by the hospital board--the group of doctors and administrators that make all the decisions about how millions of dollars get spent and that get to sit wherever they want at the annual fund raising dinner. They did not think it appropriate for a grief counselor to be stalking about as if waiting to pounce. I guess they believed I might have aspired to be some kind of grim reaper.

In truth, I could see their point. A person that makes a request to walk about any facility in order to be physically present when a patient dies sounds more like a ghoul than a counselor. I tried to defend my appeal

by stating the act of simply being near gave me greater empathy towards those I intended to help. My presence at the end removed the sense of detachment and it allowed me to better understand the grief of those that just lost a loved one. The people that suffered the loss would also be more willing to talk with me if they knew I had witnessed the actual passing. It gave them a connection to me. It sounded good on paper, but I didn't have much faith in a positive answer.

Still, a young doctor that has become one of my few close friends went to bat for me. His name is Dr. Paul Paxim. He's a young fellow that appreciates my ability to talk with some knowledge on most sports topics. It doesn't take much to do this, just a good memory and a daily perusal of the sports page. I assume he liked having me around the emergency room and wanted to make sure I didn't leave because I might be insulted by the board's decision.

When they took up my request, he met with them to explain that I never get in the way, that I never pounce on anyone, and that I am extremely respectful of the circumstances around me. He insisted I was about as obtrusive as a bedpan waiting on a shelf. No one really pays too much attention to it, but it comes in real handy when it's needed. He insists he actually said that at a meeting, and I have no reason to doubt him.

I was given the go ahead to move about the hospital at will with the understanding that if there was one complaint from a patient, from a patient's family member, or even from one of the staff, this privilege would be revoked. If no such complaints surfaced, I could go anywhere I wanted.

The first few times I took full advantage of this opportunity, I had to fight back severe doubts regarding my decision. It's not easy to look at the dying up close and personal, especially those that were dying from some extreme trauma.

As I previously implied, an emergency room can be a very disturbing place and I'm not here to hold hands with the guy that has a bad back or the lady with an upset stomach. The people I'm looking for in particular are usually wheeled inside covered in crimson soaked bandages with plastic tubes sticking out of their bodies. They can't raise their heads to look at you, and at times their faces are so swollen and bloodied that they wouldn't be able to see you even if they could.

Roaming about the intensive and critical care units is not much better. These are the people balanced between the border of life and death. They are fighting illnesses and diseases that can kill you as quickly as an oncoming truck, but don't always give you as much warning. People fight bravely, but many end up looking weak and frail. It's often difficult to look them in the face and find comforting words when you really know what they are up against.

It's hard enough to watch these injured and sick people from a distance. When you are close enough to really get a good look at nearly every wound, at each expression of hurt and fatigue, it's downright painful--probably more so for me as most of these sufferers are unconscious or on some serious pain medication.

As bad as the patients appear, there is an underlying scene that has become apparent to me which is even more difficult to watch. After spending time with the hospital staff and the EMTs during less stressful moments, brief however they might be, I gained a greater insight toward their inner sentiments. It's not all that surprising. I spent years training to be a therapist so I've learned to watch for clues that reveal such things. When a badly injured victim is brought into the ER, I can begin to sense the personal prognosis of the staff almost immediately.

Emergency personnel, as well as nurses and doctors, often wear a near constant mask of fatigue. They smile through it and move without hesitancy, but it is there to serve as a shield. It is difficult for patients to judge an expression when it simply appears tired. I, however, have learned to look past this mask, and I can see the expectations in their unseen expressions. I can pretty much tell which patient doesn't have a chance just by

looking into the faces of the EMTs before I even take a glimpse at the body they are wheeling through the electronic doors.

Then, I watch the nurses, and I see the same glint of sorrow that is etched ever so slightly across their brow. It is their own understanding that it's too late even before the doctor is called over.

As the doctors move in, they each in turn listen to reports of vital signs knowing full well they are hearing the recipe for death. It is difficult for me to watch people that are dedicated to save lives face a situation that is beyond hopeless.

Still, they all shift into a gear of desperate action, always believing that this particular patient might just have the will to beat the odds and hold on. Their job is to make sure they give every possible chance for the injured or sick to find something to grab onto. No one wants the patient to die, except maybe for me.

Well, that's not really fair to say. I don't want anyone to suffer loss, to go through tragedy, but it's not as simple for me, because I'm actually looking past the blood, the sickness, the broken bones, as well as the tubes and machines that keep people alive by a meager thread. I try not to see the horror of some terrible accident or the heartbreak of some dreadful disease. For me, I watch for something different because for some reason I see something others can't.

When I look deep into someone, I start to see a glimmer of light. It quickly takes the shape of a human body, but one with no real distinctive features. There's no distinguishable face--nothing like a pair of glistening eyes, a charismatic smile, or a pronounced nose. In fact, there's very little to substantiate the form beyond the border edge of this shadowy figure. For certain, there are arms and legs. I think there are also fingers and toes at the end of each limb, but the shape gets rather fuzzy around the edges so I really can't say with certainty about that. The form is like a glowing shadow of a person that resides within the body as opposed to outside on the floor or against some wall. I am certain that what I'm seeing is a person's soul. I will explain why in a moment.

In my experience, souls come in all different colors. I'm not sure what that means, but they cover the full spectrum of the rainbow along with white, black, brown and gray.

One time I spoke with a psychic that professed she could see auras. I never revealed my own gift to this woman. I just explained that I was interested in her ability. Apparently, this is quite common for her, and as she saw my interest was genuine, she did not hesitate in her explanation.

Anyway, she told me she sees different colors surrounding people. She tried to explain to me that certain colors meant certain things. The hues often change depending on the person's mood, their health, or on the circumstances the person is currently facing.

That may be, as I never watch one soul long enough to see if the color alters over time. Under normal circumstances, I have to focus to see this ethereal figure, and although every now and then I will see a soul without concentrating, that is usually rare. For the most part, if I don't actually try to look, then I'll see what everyone else sees. For those occasions that I willingly focus on seeing this inner spirit, I only watch for a short time, but it's usually a very important time--death is an important time for a soul, and once it occurs I usually no longer have to concentrate to see the spirit.

I don't get too caught up in the colors, but what I notice most of all is the magnitude of the light and the size of the form. I have fashioned the belief that a happy, healthy soul is large and bright. It fills the room with brilliance just as it fills the body it occupies. A sad, weak soul is small and dim. It appears almost lost in the cavern of the body and barely defies the bleak florescent light that filters down from the fixtures in the ceiling.

In an emergency room, death is ready to happen at almost any time--night or day, weekend or weekday, summer or winter, rainy day or snowy night--you get the idea. It doesn't happen regularly, but it does happen. It also happens quite often in intensive and critical care units. That's why I wanted unregulated access throughout the hospital. I want to be there when a person's time comes.

It is when I see a bright, large soul in a very broken body that I begin to hope the end is quick. As I said, I don't like to see anyone suffer through loss, but I can see what happens for that soul at the end, and I know what they're about to enter is so much better than what they are currently facing here.

I retain vivid memories of what I have seen and the beauty of my special gift washes away the otherwise disheartening aspects of my encounters. I try not focus on the tragedy of death, but rather the hidden truth of what death really is.

While I remember several particular instances, there is one that always comes quickly to mind when I wish to recall the grandeur of what I have witnessed. It was a middle-aged man in a car accident. He was brought in alone. His vehicle was struck at the driver's side door by someone that ran a red light. He wore a seat belt, but that just served to keep him alive long enough to get him to the hospital.

When they wheeled him in, I didn't even have to look at the body to know there was little hope. As I said, I've learned to read the expressions of the EMTs as well as the hospital staff. They wouldn't say it, but they were baffled that there was still a pulse.

As for looking at the soul, that didn't take much effort, either. I think the soul becomes more apparent to me when it knows its time is near. This soul burned as bright as a bon fire on a clear October night. The bright shadowy essence was also very large. Here was a man that had a very strong and happy soul, and it was about to be set free.

I always stand in a far corner. I don't always have a direct view of the patient, as so many medical personnel surround the body, but I always make sure I am not separated from the area by a wall or a curtain, unless the wall has a window. When things get very frantic at the very end, when the heart stops and the monitors go into a flat steady pitch, my focus rises just above the body. Here is where the glory begins.

This particular man died about five minutes after they brought him into the treatment room. His large, beautifully bright soul leapt into the air very much like a small child leaps into her long absent father's arms. Once the soul is free of its host body, my view is unspoiled, and spectacular doesn't go about explaining what I can see.

Like other souls, this one hovered in the air above the now lifeless body it once called home, appearing to look down at the hectic activity. I've always viewed it as a last goodbye, and it never takes very long.

I've never seen a soul pulled back into the body once it has left. I'm not saying that doesn't happen. I really don't know for sure. I've just never seen it. I've also never seen Neptune, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

Anyway, now free from the body and floating in midair, the man's soul glowed with unequaled brightness. I've never seen a nuclear explosion, and God help us, I hope I never do. I've read that if you look into the blast, it is so bright it will melt your eyes. I can't possibly believe it is brighter than what I saw here, and yet, my eyes did not melt, they simply filled with tears.

What happened next didn't take long--it never does--perhaps only a few seconds. All of the space around the floating form filled with light and color as if a thousand fireworks exploded in one exact instant and the pulsating flashes were frozen in time by some incalculable force of will.

Now the truth of the matter is that I can't hear anything when this happens, not a sound. The entire spectacle is completely visual and apparently for my eyes only. No one else notices this grand display, which at times blows my mind. There are no scents or tastes in the air. As for feeling, well my body always bursts with a tingling sensation I can't describe, but I'm sure this feeling comes from the joyous wonder inside me.

As I said, I never hear anything, but trying to explain this event in terms of what I see really doesn't come close to doing it justice. A painting, a photograph, even a motion picture--no matter how dazzling in light and color--always seems limited to me. Your eyes focus on a single rectangular space. Even if I try to describe something grander in scale like a mountain scene with a rainbow, lightning, and the pyrotechnics of the latest rock and roll concert, it still doesn't seem to capture what it is I witness. What I see is much more encompassing, and that's why I like to compare it more to music than to a visual image.

Music always seems to fill an entire space, it covers all angles and with a wide array of force and measure. It contains different emotions all at the same time. There are so many different instruments that can make so many different sounds. When put together with a genius mind and a single purpose, hundreds of different sounds can be brought in concert to make perfect harmony.

With that in mind, imagine that what I see is like a wave of music from a stadium filled to capacity with choirs and symphonic orchestras. There are church bells in every corner and drums encircling the rooftop. Instruments and voices are brought together with a single focus, and they join simultaneously to play and sing a song written by a team of the most talented writers ever assembled. The arrangement is so hypnotic and so elaborate that it is a wonder that any one instrument or any one voice can be heard above the rest, and yet it seems almost possible to define each and every one.

Now imagine being in the center of that arena and what it would be like to have all of that beautiful music focused directly at you. If you can conceive of what this might sound like, take that sensation and turn it into a display of light and color. If you can envision this, then you might picture a fraction of what I see at that moment. This is why I believe what I see is a soul because I believe when this occurs, I am looking into the entrance of heaven, and this is beyond anything I can possibly describe.

Encompassing the entire ceiling of the treatment room, a magnificent aurora encircled the shadowy, floating form. The man's soul began to swirl and shimmer just as the other colors and lights matched his movements. The beauty of this moment was just as glorious as I tried to previously describe and I almost lost my breath. Within an instant, the lights and colors and this one man's spirit meshed together into one glorious wave of exuberance, and then they all disappeared together.

I heard the doctor on-call announce the time of death a moment later.

Chapter 2

My name is Dr. James Sagacity, but I want people to just call me Jim. I earned a graduate degree in psychology and went on to a doctoral program in Marriage and Family Therapy. It is this training that opened up the door for me to become a volunteer grief counselor. The fact that I am a doctor probably also assisted in my request for unfettered access throughout the hospital.

Had I aspired to be something else in life, such as an IRS auditor, I doubt the board would have been as willing to let me go probing around. Then again, they might have been too petrified to deny my request. Now that I think about it, an IRS auditor not only would have been granted complete access, but might have been given a golf cart to get around that much faster. Scooting around in such a vehicle, I could have played bumper cars in the hallways with the patients in wheel chairs. IRS auditors can get away with such things. Now I'll have to reassess my career choice.

Despite the lack of a golf cart, I still have been able to get around the hospital with great efficiency. While not prying into patients' medical histories, I have asked the staff to inform me of situations where my counseling services might be needed. Thus, they advise me in advance of those individuals in critical and intensive care units that are facing difficult times, especially those with Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders and those patients with such illnesses so advanced that treatment beyond hospice is no longer an option. I do my best to be available when the time comes for these individuals.

In the ER, it's never as clear cut. They have to deal with what comes through the door, and no one can predict that. I have often left the ER certain that it would be a quiet night only to be called back moments later. ERs just don't work on an appointment basis.

On many of my volunteer shifts, I do not get the opportunity to see what I'm there to see. Not everyone that is brought in suffering from a heart attack or a stroke dies right in front of me. Many, most in fact, recover. Others are not so lucky, but they often pass over to the other side before they even reach the facility. Sometimes I miss the event because I'm just at the wrong place at the wrong time. I know that sounds horrid, but please remember why I'm there. I'm just not at the facility 24 hours a day. I have my own paying patients I must see at my office. I also have to eat and sleep, thus I'm not always lurking about the medical center corridors waiting to seize upon every dying patient.

With all of these constraints and obstacles, it's truly a wonder I ever get the opportunity to be present at the actual time of passing. Achieving this objective makes those marvelous spectacles even more rewarding when I am right there able to witness a transition up close. I wish I could watch them all, but time and space are not physical restrictions I have discovered how to overcome.

In any event, I have learned to cherish the moments I am at the right place at the right time. There are, of course, considerations I must keep in the forefront of my mind during these episodes lest I make a very bad impression. As much as these scenes are uplifting events for me, I always have to remind myself where I am.

For everyone else in a room where I've just witnessed something spectacular, there is no wealth of joy, no epic celebration. There is nothing here but death. I am the only one that can see the awe-inspiring event of a soul's departure into another realm of existence. The family members and staff do not share my gift, and thus they only see the end of life.

With that understanding, I realize I can't share what I've just experienced. I can't go around yelling "Hallelujah!" or explaining that the person is so much better off now. I can't even attempt to describe the lights and colors I've witnessed. If I started talking like that, you can bet my privileges would be revoked before the next patient was wheeled through the ER doors.

Unfortunately, it is not so simple to remain dour faced or even detached in a corner as the dejected staff move on with greater optimism to another patient in the next battle against that very grim reaper. The difficulty for me lies in the simple fact that I just witnessed the spirit of an individual leave for some place extraordinary. It's not something I can easily just bury inside.

There are things you can witness that you can keep to yourself--quiet, serene moments that become special memories just for you. You don't have to speak of them if you don't want to and no one will really notice. There's no inner need to share them, no sense that if you don't speak of them you will just burst. These can be wonderfully fulfilling moments that become etched into your spirit and you remember them until your own passing, but they are moments for you and you alone.

What I see is not like that at all. I'm bursting with elation because I don't see death. I see that death is a lie. This wasn't the end for some poor person, it was just the beginning. That's not something you just bury inside with a wave of the hand.

It's kind of like the moment a couple trying to have a baby realizes that they're about to move forward with success. I wouldn't expect them to simply shrug their shoulders and go about folding the laundry or cleaning up after dinner like nothing ever happened. Most likely they would want to tell people, they want to share their joy.

Of course, sharing the news that someone is pregnant is very different than explaining what I see. No one is going to call you a nut for announcing a baby is due.

Well, actually that's not really true. I think a lot of people are nuts for having kids, but that's because I've had the joy of counseling teenagers. I know that a little bundle of joy is going to grow into a big mess of a terror, but that's for the parents to find out on their own and well after there's anything they can do about it. You can't even sell teenagers, no one in their right mind would buy one. You can only wait until they're old enough to send to college and then spend an obscene amount of money to get them out of the house.

Be that as it may, announcing a pregnancy is certainly within the realm of reason. Announcing that I just saw a soul enter heaven is sufficient reason for a competency hearing.

Another problem that forces me to hold my tongue has to do with my immediate circumstances. I am in the emergency room of a hospital or some critical care unit with family members gathered around a loved one. There might be blood everywhere and a corpse on the table, or an empty withered husk of a cancer patient with tubes sticking out of every visible portion of the body. Someone has just died, and in some cases very suddenly and very traumatically.

There are people around that tried valiantly to prevent that conclusion. They fought to deny the passing of life in a pitched sometimes exhausting battle. These people all feel defeated, not victorious. I simply can't be wearing an expression that reveals unbridled joy. Remember, I'm the grief counselor. Put the two together. It doesn't work.

In order to bury my inner emotions, I have learned to wear that same exhausted expression many of the other hospital staff utilize to hide their own emotions. When the transition is complete and the soul and the swirling colors have evaporated into some distant dimension, I usually bow my head so no one can see my face. I appear as if I'm collecting myself from this tragedy and preparing my thoughts in case I am needed to counsel any relatives.

A couple of times nurses have come up to me and asked if I was alright or if I needed something. I simply mumbled that I was fine and thanked them. Eventually everyone has become used to my silent, stoic presence, so they leave me be.

The next difficulty I face is actually doing what I'm there supposed to be doing. I have to go from witnessing a soul transcending the physical bounds of life to counseling a grieving family member. The unfortunate part is the timing of the two. I wish the process was reversed. It's like getting the good news first and then the bad. It's really not unusual; much of life is like that. You eat dinner, and then pay the check. You enjoy a night out with friends, and then face the hangover. Still, I would prefer it the other way around, but it's the price of my admission so I accept it.

Not everyone utilizes my services--I would say less than half of those affected by a death in the hospital end up talking to me. Most that do, thank me for being there and this has reinforced my position that it is indeed helpful that I am present at the end. As for how the counseling goes, that usually depends on the circumstances.

There are a few times I've been yelled and screamed at. I've been told it's not fair, and I always agree. Life isn't fair when you look at it from their point of view. I can't argue that. I see anger, I see unbridled sadness, I see despair.

I do what I can to help and I always rely on my training as a grief counselor. I don't try to tell them what they're feeling, but I do try to let them know that whatever it is, it is normal. I listen and I allow them to dictate the flow of any conversation. I always stay very focused on the blueprints of grief counseling.

The truth of the matter, however, is that I don't want to stick to my training. I want to throw those blueprints and all the checklists right out the window.

From my own special experience, I have the ability to share with them some greater insight. The desire to reveal the truth is overwhelming, and I can't tell you how much I really, really want to tell them what I've actually seen. I want to give these people, especially those that are suffering through enormous misery, a sense of hope. Yes, they have lost a loved one, but not lost forever, not by a long shot. And even though I know I can't put into words the beauty of the transition, I want to give it a try.

This, of course, would be going well off the normal guidelines for grief counseling. I mean, it's not even close. We are talking opposite ends of the earth here. I just don't remember anything in the text books or manuals that indicated 'if you see the deceased's soul enter the great beyond, make sure you advise the next of kin.'

Despite my desire, the truth of the matter is I have never once intentionally revealed what I saw to a relative. Beyond the fact that I know it will get my butt kicked right on out of the hospital, I'm also afraid that I'll convince too many to join their loved ones right then and there. Someone that just lost a spouse, a parent, a grandparent, or God forbid a child, is going to be riding an emotional roller coaster as it is. If I start throwing that bone into the soup, I'm just asking for trouble. I realize that if I start describing a transition of unfathomable beauty to someone in that kind of mental state, there's going to be an overwhelming urge within those that are suffering to determine if I'm telling the truth. Actually, that fear did in fact come to pass just once, but I really try not to blame myself.

After a man had a massive heart attack and died in the ER, I went to counsel his wife. I spoke with her a bit like I usually do, but only after a few sentences, she stopped being angry and sad. She peered deep into my eyes as if she could see into the dead center of my own thoughts.

"You saw something here, didn't you?" the new widow asked me in a tone that didn't sound accusing, but it defied me to lie with every fiber of her being. "You saw where he went? You saw it and it's nothing to be afraid of."

Now, I'm not sure, but I've always wondered how she was able to know this. She didn't waste a lot of time and got right to the point of my thoughts. Maybe she could read my mind. Heck, if I can see souls, why not?

She actually smiled at that moment. The husband she cherished was dead not more than 10 minutes and she smiled as if the world was new and free of pain, as when it was first created.

"You won't tell me what you saw," she said through that smile "but that's ok. I can still tell. Thank you."

She left me without another word and in less than 24 hours she was in that same emergency room as a patient. Her car struck a utility pole at some absurd speed and she wasn't wearing a seatbelt. I wasn't there when she passed, and that's probably a good thing.

I've had to live with that one for a while, and I'm still not sure how to deal with it. Whenever I want to reveal what I have seen to some despondent, suffering relative, though, I think of that woman. It keeps my mouth shut.

I keep to my training, I remember the guidelines and I help as best I can. The medical center staff always seems very happy for the times I'm there. They've even given me a pager in case something happens in the emergency room or a critical care unit while I'm wandering about other wards of the facility. I took that as a great gesture of confidence in me.

Still, it's not easy to go from the heights of watching heaven open up to the depths of consoling the grief stricken. It takes something out of you to listen to the wailing, to hear the cries and curses. Even when family members take loss with courage I can not comprehend, the feeling of loss eats at my own core. Yes, I experience great exhilaration at the passing of souls, but I also must face the suffocating strain of loss. This accumulates over time, grows like a cancerous tumor that weighs down my own spirit. Luckily, I've learned how to deal with this as well, another great benefit of this gift I have.

After too many trying days or nights at the hospital, I always go to a dog park that allows owner's to set their pets free in a fenced, tree-lined area. I like late Sunday afternoons the best. I can tell you with absolute certainty that people are not the only ones with souls. Any one that tells you differently is the most short-sighted of human beings and is going to be as surprised as the atheists when he or she gets to the other side. I've seen the most stunning souls in dogs and horses.

Whenever I need a boost, I go to this nearby park and watch a bunch of happy canines race around like nuts. If you don't think heaven exists, see what I see when a dog gets to romp around with other dogs with a big stick or a ball in his mouth. I don't even have to concentrate to see their souls, and they shine here like the sun.

As for horses, I have to go over to some stables and that's more of a trip for me. Still, it's worth it. Horses glow with brilliance when they are running through the fields or even when they are rolling around on their backs. Apparently both of these activities make them very happy indeed.

I've also seen souls in cats, but these are things I have difficulty describing. I've never understood cats, and well, this new revelation didn't make it any easier for me to figure them out.

Sometimes, however, I need a bit of a pick-me-up and I just can't leave for the dog park. I've always tried to schedule my volunteering time in blocks. There are times a difficult session occurs right when I arrive. Since I've pledged to be available a certain amount of time, I can't simply call it a day when I want. There is, however, a vending machine that sells candy in the waiting area. If I can't watch dogs running free, at least I can have a chocolate bar.

One day, I witnessed a young woman die of an embolism. Her passing into the next life was indeed glorious. I had to counsel her just-as-young husband immediately afterwards, and he did not take this curve ball into his life well, not that I blame him. This was a difficult meeting and I needed a break. I went to my trusty vending machine to grab a candy bar, and my life changed right then and there. Who knew a lust for chocolate could

lead to so many consequences.

Chapter 3

"Dr. Sagacity, did you enjoy the show?" the unannounced stranger asked.

He walked up to me by the candy machine as casually as someone would walk up to a high school buddy he's known all his life.

"I'm sorry?" I stumbled over these simple words, and they came out garbled and almost indiscernible.

The man understood me none the less.

"Nothing to be sorry about. Listen, I don't want to make you feel uncomfortable, but I'd like to talk to you, and I think we both would be more relaxed with some privacy."

I looked the man over and immediately realized, as opposed to making people feel uncomfortable, he was well equipped to put people at ease. In fact, everything about him was made to make others feel quite comfortable around him. He was handsome but not so striking as to make you feel you were in the presence of a movie star celebrity. He was dressed neatly, but not to appear formal or even picky about what he wore. His clothes seemed as relaxed on his body as the smile that adorned his face. He moved with a simple grace that was neither threatening nor defensive. He appeared like a regular guy, the kind of guy you hoped to have as your next-door neighbor.

Still, his approach caught me off guard and the way he looked at me gave me the impression he knew something about me, something more than just my name or that I was a volunteer grief counselor. Despite the calming nature of his gestures, his appearance, and even the musical tone of his voice, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of anxiety.

"Do I know you?" I asked somewhat suspiciously before I agreed to move. "Have we met before?"

"No, never, but I will admit I know about you. My name is Stan Adanais. I'm not a stalker or anything. I just have sort of this gift." He paused here and gave me a very knowing glance. "I know about people and I know about their gifts as well. If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to you about yours for a bit."

At this point, I didn't know what to do. This man didn't say anything concrete. 'Enjoying the show', as he put it, could have meant anything. The truth of the matter is emergency rooms are made out to be dramatic places. I think they've made about nineteen thousand television programs using one as the main theme. I personally liked the one in the 1970's where the exam rooms were pretty bare. I think the paramedics were the true stars of the show and the focus was on the scene of the accident. Still, they had to get the patient to some place after they removed him from underneath a bulldozer. They couldn't just drop him off at the curb, so the ER became the logical area to conclude most scenes.

Still, the woman dying of an embolism was really not all that dramatic. She went very quietly. There wasn't a lot of blood or gore, so I was still rather puzzled as to what this man was referring to, and thus, also a little reluctant to go somewhere private with him. After all, he might have had a grudge against people that liked chocolate.

The gentleman picked up on my hesitancy. If it bothered him in the least, he didn't show it.

"Listen," he said, "I know you're a good counselor, but I also know that's not why you're here right now." He looked around to see if anyone else was paying attention. He then turned back to me, and with that same very relaxed smile said something that surprised the hell out of me. "You see beyond the pain that happens here--you see deep inside. I think we both know what I'm talking about."

It was a very clever line. It revealed much, but only to me and no one else. Anyone else listening would have thought that I was simply very good at my job and had great perception, but nothing out of the ordinary.

I nodded my head and decided privacy might not be a bad idea. "If you'd feel more comfortable talking in private, I can accommodate that. I have a small office they let me use around the corner. I think it was a broom closet once, but they cleaned it out and it fits a few chairs."

I led him out of the visiting area and down a hall to the aforementioned space that I use for counseling. It comes in handy for those that are very distraught and need some privacy.

"Have a seat," I offered as we moved through the door which I closed behind him.

"Thanks," he replied as he casually turned and sat down. "I don't want to make you feel any distress, so let me get right to the point. Your name is Dr. Jim Sagacity. You volunteer here as a grief counselor. You are very helpful to everyone you assist, but that's not why you are really here. You see things when people die. Actually, you can see the inner essence of people even when they are alive, but you come here to see this essence escape the body."

I really didn't know what to say at this point. Maybe I didn't feel distress, but I sure as heck felt shocked. As far as I was aware, no one else knew about what I could see. I hadn't told anyone since I was a little kid, and at that time, I didn't get far with the one person I spoke to about it.

I tried to tell my sister when we were both very young. Right after I announced I saw something inside of people, something that looked like a ghost but I thought it was their souls, I got a look that I can not describe. It wasn't simply disbelief, it wasn't simply disgust. It was a combination of the two and a whole lot more. I never got the chance to tell her everything I could see because she put a stop to it very quickly. I was happy she did because once I saw that expression of hers, I really didn't want to continue.

We never grew up to be close as most other brothers and sisters, never had that type of relationship. I believe that particular moment was the reason for it. For myself, I knew right then I could never share this with her. That was tough for me. I had this ability and now I felt it was something I had to keep inside. I didn't have any other siblings, and I didn't want to tell my parents. You give them a story like that and you face two options--a visit to the doctor or some severe punishment for making up lies. I passed on those. That left my sister, and after that one attempt, I knew I didn't even have that.

I'm not sure how she felt about the whole thing. Perhaps, she was equally upset at me. Maybe she thought I was trying to scare her, or make myself sound more special. Whatever she thought, she had no problem in keeping a nice safe buffer in our relationship from that point on. We grew up together more like casual business partners than relatives of any sort.

As time moved on, we grew even further apart. She married a man she met in college and we don't talk much anymore. The last time I saw her was when my mother died. My father died years earlier and I guess there really wasn't any reason for us to see much of each other since.

Putting that little family tidbit aside, now I faced a man that knew my secret and I couldn't guess how that was possible. I doubt my sister suddenly remembered our conversation, filled in the gaps, had me followed to see what I was currently up to, and revealed all of this to some casually dressed, handsome stranger. I like conspiracy theories as much as the next person, but even if you believe in the government hiding dead aliens in the desert, this set of circumstances remains a bit of a stretch.

Still, he seemed to know what I could see. He made that much pretty clear and he didn't even beat around the bush or waste much time in doing so.

I'm also professionally trained to see things in people and take cues from their behavior. Yes, he was straightforward with me, but he didn't come off the 'blunt' or 'callous' kind of guy that just says things because he doesn't care. He dropped this on me quickly because he wanted it out in the open right away. He did it on purpose. He also noticed my discomfort with the situation and wasted no time in working on that as well.

"Stop worrying about it," Stan said in a very soothing tone. "I know I have you at a great disadvantage, so let me change that. I also have a gift, just like you. Mine is rather strange, though."

Strange? I thought to myself. More strange than seeing souls leave a body? I wasn't sure I wanted to hear this. Perhaps at this moment, I understood how my sister felt. Instead of cutting him off just as my sister once did to me, however, I let him continue.

"I see other people's gifts. Well, it's not like I see it, but I sense it. It's deeper than sensing. It's kind of hard to explain. It's just that I know when people have a special talent."

I still didn't know what to say at that moment, as I worried that this might be some kind of complex trick to get me to admit to something I really shouldn't say. I decided to fall back on my training and simply allow this newcomer to do most of the talking, and I would do so by asking simple, open-ended questions.

"How do you know these things about people?"

"I just do."

"Can you explain it in a bit more detail? Is it a gut feeling? Do you see things in a dream?"

"It's basically just an understanding that comes to me. I don't think I can describe it any better than that."

"So you study people for a long time, and then make assumptions on what you see?"

"No, I don't have to watch them for long at all. I just have to take a quick look at them."

"So you just look at people and basically know they have a gift?"

"That's pretty much it, but don't let that make you think you're not special. Because you are... very special. I can look at a thousand people a day, every day, for a month and not find anyone that has a gift. Then I'll come across someone like you, someone that I know has a truly great talent."

"I don't mean to press you on this," I stated with what I regarded as an apologetic tone, "but I would like to understand it better. Can you describe what it is you see that makes you think one person has a gift? Do they glow? How do they look different from everyone else?"

"No, they don't glow, and they don't look different from everyone else. I don't see anything like an arrow pointing down at you, or some magical light over your head. All I really have to do is take a good look and the understanding forms in my mind. I guess if you really need something to illustrate it for you, imagine what it's like when an idea hits you. It doesn't matter what kind of idea, maybe you're trying to figure out a problem or wondering what kind of present to get someone for her birthday. All of sudden it comes to you and you know what to do. It's like that for me. In my mind, I get the undeniable understanding of your gift. Without you or anyone else telling me, I know exactly what it is you can see. You see ghostly forms inside of people, you can sense the strength of the spirit by the brightness and size of what you see, and you come here to watch this essence leave the body at the time of death. You watch spirits leave this plane of existence and enter the afterlife."

Once more, I was shocked at just how much this man knew. I never got to explain much of what I saw to my sister, so this man was spouting information I had never, ever revealed in my life, to anyone. It's also not information he could have gleaned simply from watching me. He knew the full extent of my gift in a way I could never have imagined possible.

I'm sure I appeared baffled, wearing an expression of utter confusion as if I just walked into a room where aliens were analyzing mangoes, and the large fruits were actually responding verbally to some rather probing questions. I did my best to force this astonishment from my thinking, but just like trying to forget talking fruit and aliens, I doubt I did a very good job.

"And you get this insight just by looking at people?"

"Just as you do."

Being a doctor of psychology, I decided to treat this as a more clinical situation. Here was a person explaining that he had insights that extended far beyond the normal abilities of others. Such delusions are not uncommon and there are ways to deal with it. The problem was I knew his claims were not delusional. It would have been easier if he said he saw me talking to aliens that liked to hold conversations with mangoes. I would have been better prepared to deal with that little problem.

"Do you see many people with gifts?"

"No, very few indeed."

"Do you see anything else within these people besides these gifts?"

"What else is there to see?"

"I'm not sure, there are endless possibilities." I was hoping he might say he saw Martians, then at least I would know which planet the aliens came from. "So you don't see anything else out of the ordinary about these people?"

"They're regular people, just like you. They just have a gift, a special ability."

"What kind of gifts have you come across?"

"All kinds and some gifts are much stronger than others. Yours is a very strong gift."

Try as I might to keep the spotlight off of my abilities, he continued to turn the conversation back toward me. I, however, wouldn't give up.

"Stan, can you tell me about some of the other gifts you see in people?"

"I can, but do us both a favor and try to lose the doctor-patient routine here. I'm not here to get psychological treatment from you. If you think I'm crazy, let's just call it a day and I'll take my leave."

I had to give him credit here; he boxed me in pretty good. I didn't want him to just leave. I wanted to know more of what he could see and how he knew the things he knew, but he wasn't going to let me do it by simply asking open ended questions. I was going to have to admit in some way he was right. I did the best I could to acknowledge his ability without admitting too much myself.

"No, I don't think you're crazy. I'm just curious as to what other gifts people have. I think if we speak a little

bit about that, it might help me understand what you're talking about."

"Fair enough. I'll make a deal with you. Let's just put this discussion in hypothetical terms. I'm not asking you to flat out admit that what I know about you is true. I see that's making you uncomfortable, and that's not why I'm here."

At that point, I almost stopped him to ask him why he was here, but I sensed if I did, it would send us back to where we started. I held my tongue and let him continue.

"For argument's sake," Stan offered as if making a concession, "let us, for the moment, simply assume that you can see a spirit within a person's body and I have the ability to know you have this gift simply by looking at you. Neither of us are confirming or denying anything, but rather discussing the aspects if such phenomenon were true. Now at this point, you want to know what else I have seen within other people. You are curious as to what other types of talents people might have. I will not reveal their names, which should reassure you somewhat, because I don't think it's right to reveal their abilities without their consent. I do not, however, have a problem revealing some of the gifts I have seen in general terms. One person I met could tell exactly how many children some people are going to have. Another could tell how long someone was going to live. One man could see another person's physical health much in the same manner you see the inner ghost. A strong healthy body was very bright to him. A sickly person appeared faint, dim, and hollow. One person was able to determine another's level of happiness, and another can see character."

"Character?"

"Yes, you know their levels of honesty, integrity, courage. That sort of thing. The embodiment of what makes up a person's values."

I considered that for a moment and I unthinkingly blurted out the first question that came into my head.

"Wouldn't seeing someone's character be the same as seeing someone's soul?"

"I wouldn't think so."

I raised my eyebrows revealing my surprise. "Really? Why not?"

"I'm sorry to do this to you, but I have to turn the question back on you. Why would it? Why would someone's character be an absolute reflection of someone's spirit?"

"I don't know. It just seems logical to me. If the soul is the essence of the person, wouldn't that mean it would be a collection of their actions and intentions? You just said that character was the embodiment of their values. I would think the soul would be considered the same thing."

"I don't necessarily agree. If it were, that would mean the spirit is simply defined by the person's past. Have you ever stopped and thought what makes one person's spirit appear so big and shine so bright versus another's that is small and dim?"

"I try not to think about it."

Stan flashed a quick smile. "You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

I kept quiet.

"Ok, if you don't think about it, then why would you assume seeing character and seeing the spirit is seeing

the same thing?"

Here I spoke up with a bit of certainty.

"Like I said before, it seems a logical assertion that someone's character goes a long way in shaping their spirit and probably vice versa.

While I don't wish to make judgments, I think if someone is a good person they probably have both a strong character and a bright soul."

"What's your definition of 'good'?"

"I'd rather not dwell on that, either. As I said, it really isn't up to me to make judgments."

Stan waved his hand as if allowing me a small favor.

"Fair enough, I'm sorry. I won't put you on the spot. I've already done that. Instead, I'll explain how I see it, and then you can tell me if you still think someone's character and someone's spirit are the same thing, if they are somehow undeniably linked."

He rubbed his hands together gently as he appeared to place his thoughts in order. When he spoke, his tone was nearly emotionless, the topic mundane, as if he was reciting the steps it takes to boil water.

"If we say, hypothetically of course, that when you look inside a person and see their inner essence, the brightness of that essence is dictated by that person's spiritual strength. We would have to come to grips with what that might mean. Spiritual strength may mean nothing more than one's ability to comprehend and accept that the essence does not end when the body dies. It may simply be nothing more than an intangible quality that allows not only for the possibility of life after death, but a determination to see the transition through. It may have nothing to do with whether someone has led a 'good' or 'bad' life, but rather how willing the person is to accept an existence beyond this physical realm. If that is the case, then character and spiritual strength are even hardly related."

"I never thought of it like that," I was forced to admit.

"Something new to think about."

I, however, was still not ready to give up.

"It's still hard for me to believe," I said, "that someone would have great 'spiritual strength' as you put it, and not be concerned with how they live their lives. If you don't want to put it in terms of 'good' or 'bad', I have no problem with that. Like I said before, I don't want to judge people. I do, however, have to draw a correlation between someone's willingness to accept an afterlife and someone's character. It does take a level of introspection to accept that we all die and that death might not be the final moment for us. It also takes courage to face up to one's own mortality. An acceptance of a future existence is not merely believing in myths or legends. In some ways, it is a personal statement that we can be more than we appear. Recognizing these elements takes a good deal more than just intelligence. It takes an ability to think beyond certain limits."

"Very well put and I will give you your due and agree that in most cases there probably is a strong connection between the inner essence and character. I would also agree in most circumstances a strong character would in fact lead to a strong spirit, but you said seeing character and seeing the spirit were the same. My point is that it is not always the case. You are giving me correlations but that doesn't mean the two qualities represent the same thing or that they are even always in agreement. I can give you examples of how they can be very far

apart in the same person."

"Ok, let's hear them."

Stan nodded his head with a smile. "Think of a religious man that has great strength in his beliefs and in everything he is taught. He is very accepting of his mortality and he fiercely believes his spirit will walk some heavenly kingdom when it is finally released from his body. If you looked at his spirit, it might appear very bright because he has so much confidence in the afterlife. He accepts his mortality and does not think that moving on beyond this physical world is some simple fantasy. He accepts it as fact.

"That is not to say, however, that this man necessarily has strong character. Even as he holds strongly to his religion, what if all around him he sees perverse corruption? What if he knows of indecent acts, even criminal activity, but he does nothing about it? He lacks the courage and integrity to do what is right. What is this person's true character?

"When my other associate that has the gift to see character takes a look at this man, he might see something completely different from what you see. Where you see a bright essence accepting of what is beyond our world, he sees a dim, hollow core without the strength to do what he should. Character and spirit not exactly in harmony."

I considered the concept in a way I had not before. I really did not like to dwell too much on the reasons for why sometimes I saw a bright soul and sometimes I did not. Now, I was being forced not only to consider the reasons, but to compare them to other concepts such as character.

Stan would not leave me with this lone consideration for too long.

"That is only one way to look at it," he continued. "Let us twist it the other direction to an example of which I firmly believe you will have an even better understanding. Let us take a person that does not believe in anything spiritual, someone that focuses purely on the scientific. He does not believe in a god, or an afterlife. He thinks things can always be explained in rational terms. There are no miracles, there is no spirit world--to them it's all a bunch of superstitious nonsense. You know people that are like this right here in this very hospital.

"Still, a person with such beliefs can act with nobility and honor. He can dedicate his life to helping others, to healing the sick. He can be honest and courageous. He always acts with great conscience. Is he not weak in spirit as we define it, but very strong in character?"

It was true. I knew of several doctors that were outspoken atheists. They believed death was the end, pure and simple. I knew they were headed for a surprise, but for them I felt it would be a great surprise indeed because their lack of faith in the spiritual sense did not make them any less dedicated toward helping others. They indeed had strong character, but I wondered how bright their souls really were. And as it was not my way to pry into the personal lives of others, I never made the conscious decision to actually look for myself to see simply out of curiosity.

"From your silence, I can see that you begin to understand what I mean," Stan interrupted.

"I won't argue with you."

"Thank you, but we are getting slightly away from the point."

I finally gave in and asked the question I've wanted to know from the beginning.

"What is the point? What is it you actually want from me?"

"I want to help you."

"You want to help me?"

"Yes, I do. I see you've been given a gift, even if you don't want to admit it to me. The problem is you aren't using this gift to its fullest potential and that's how I want to help you."

"I'm not sure I'm looking for help," I said with uncertainty.

Stan laughed slightly. "Still trying to avoid the obvious? Ok, that's fine. To prove to you I know what I'm talking about, I'm going to give you information I have received from others with similar gifts." Stan took a quick glimpse at his watch. "Based on what they have told me, I know that a man will be brought into this emergency room in just under ten minutes. No one will tell you this, but he is a drug dealer and he got into an argument with an unsatisfied customer. The customer decided to shoot him in the right eye. The staff here will try to save him, but he will die within two minutes of being brought inside."

"You know all of this for sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Can you stop it from happening?"

"No one can."

"How is this going to help me?"

"It's going to prove to you I'm not just some lunatic that's playing a mind game with you. I have insight and I have spoken to others that have a gift just like you. In order for you to be more open with me, I see I'm going to have to prove it. I want you to go in the emergency room and watch just as you normally do. You will look at this man's inner spirit and you will see a very small and dim form. Now, normally you don't see many of these, especially this poor in spirit, but this man is a rather bad sort. Normally when you see spirits this faint, you don't see any great transition. I know that just as I know what your gift is. I just know, so let's not worry about that now. I also know that these faint spirits are your disappointments. You are here for the big show. The problem is you stopped looking for the truth. Deep down, you don't want to see what happens to these other spirits--the ones that don't rise up and meet your expectations. When you don't see what it is you are looking for, you give up and walk out."

He looked deadly serious before continuing. "Don't give up this time. You won't have to worry about doing any grief counseling, no family will claim this man. When all the doctors and nurses have left and it's nothing but you and the body in that room, focus on that body, take a good look and concentrate."

Chapter 4

It is difficult to describe just how I felt when I heard the EMT crew arrive and rush through the automatic doors. There are times things move much too fast and you just can't get a handle on all the events that seem to bombard you at once. It's somewhat similar to watching a ping-pong match while driving on the freeway and trying to play bingo. That should give you an idea of my mindset at the moment. Confusion ruled.

I had just been instructed to go into the ER by a man I had never seen before, someone I knew nothing about but who knew plenty about me. He revealed secrets he should not have known, secrets I would have bet he could not have known. Despite my reluctance to acknowledge his insight, he would not lose confidence in his own pronouncements. In order to prove his declarations, he no less than ordered me to the ER to bear witness to an event he described in detail that had not yet occurred.

Without really questioning him, I followed those instructions. Maybe I did so in hopes I would prove him wrong. Unfortunately, it didn't look as if that was going to happen.

"Male, mid 30's... gunshot wound to the right side of the head! Entry wound through the right eye. No apparent exit wound. Pulse irregular, breathing shallow, blood pressure 50 over 35 and falling."

This is what I heard one of the EMTs call out as they rushed the stretcher passed the admitting desk and into an available treatment room. Once all the nurses and ER physicians moved into the area, I carefully stepped inside and took my usual place against the far wall. No one pulled a curtain at this point and the door was left wide open to allow for the free flow of supplies into the room.

Normally by this time I would have already taken a focused look at the body, obtained an idea of the size and brightness of the soul within, but for some reason, I didn't yet. Actually, I know the reason. I wasn't sure I wanted to look.

A man that knew my secret described this scene before me in advance. He claimed with certainty that a male patient would be wheeled into the emergency room in a matter of minutes--a drug dealer that would have been shot in the right eye. I had no idea if this injured victim was indeed into dealing drugs, but the gun shot wound was pretty hard to dismiss. Taking a look at this victim's soul might possibly lead to another confirming detail of the stranger's prophetic knowledge, and I was already feeling quite alarmed as it was, thank you very much.

Instead of trying to peer around the attending staff to get a look at the body, I glimpsed down at my watch. I monitored the second hand as it made one complete circle around the face. Before it came close to completing a second revolution, I heard the heart monitor tone go flat and the frenzied activity of the ER staff trying to revive the patient.

Something inside me turned very cold.

I really didn't know what to think at that moment. I did, however, realize that for the first time in a very long time, I confronted death in a very different manner. Despite my own abilities, I simply could not get a solid grip on this situation.

In many ways, I had become accustomed to death. I had seen it countless times. Where I lacked experience was having advanced notice to how and when it was going to happen. As to what was occurring before me now, a complete stranger already narrated this story for me, like revealing the killer in a mystery novel before reading the final chapter. This just wasn't right.

Now another person might have believed that this stranger probably had something to do with it. Sure, he could have hired someone to shoot some poor bystander in the eye, perhaps a homeless vagrant a few blocks

from the hospital. That would guarantee the wound and the timing of the arrival. Still, how could he have known that the man would die in less than 2 minutes from entering the ER? You just can't plan things to that level of detail. I don't care how well you're organized.

Of course, there was something else I had to face. He said the soul would be very dim. That it would not rise up into the air and make that glorious departure into the next realm.

Reluctantly, I raised my own eyes toward the ceiling over the ring of doctors and nurses. Nothing. I expected as much.

I'm not exactly sure how long the ER staff attempted to revive the patient. I was still trying to get a hold of my own unsteady emotions. I've seen death more times than I can remember. I can see souls! Yet, something about this staggered me.

Was this guy for real? I thought to myself about Stan. He knew more about me than I believed possible, yet he obviously had insight into far more. I couldn't even guess how much he actually knew. He said he got some of this information from others.

That in itself led me to a whole new consideration--it was possible, actually now very likely, that there were others out there in this world that had gifts very similar to my own. It's not that I cared so deeply about being special; it's just that I never conceived of such a possibility. I always felt rather isolated when it came to what I could see. Now, there was more than a dent in that consideration, there was a gaping hole.

Of course I was aware of the so-called psychics that professed to have heightened senses and abilities. Sure, a few seemed rather amazing. I liked the guy that went around the country talking to dead people and giving messages to their families. Yes, he was making a pretty nice buck off of it, but he was also letting people know that there was something beyond this world. Because I understood his message was actually helpful, I never thought of him as a shyster. He seemed to do some good, and because I knew what he was selling at least held some truth, I always gave him the benefit of the doubt.

Still, I never really considered the idea that there were other people that were like me. I thought most of the psychics were just good at picking up on small details. I mean they always talked in really open terms. They were hearing from some guy whose name started with an "H" or something like that. It might have been a father, brother, grandfather or friend. That's a big pool to choose from. They saw an old house with a fireplace in the corner. Somebody died of cancer--all that stuff sounded pretty general, not very focused, no where near what I could see.

Now, here comes a guy that tells me that someone is going to be wheeled into the ER with a gunshot wound to the eye, that the patient is going to die in less than 2 minutes, and that I'm not going to see a soul rise up when it's all over. He's right on all counts. This goes beyond a psychic that gets some general or vague sensation. This is some pretty serious detail.

The 'death in less than two minutes' prediction had me shaken, but the fact he knew I wouldn't see a soul did a bit more. Because I've kept my ability a secret, I've always dealt with the inconsistencies on my own terms. The entire final scene was for my eyes alone. Only I could see if souls rose up and passed over or if nothing happened at all, and thus, I could ignore things as I saw fit. I didn't need to explain variations or ponder different circumstances if I decided not to.

For the first time, that was no longer the case. Most times I see the soul rise out of the body, but sometimes I do not. It's rare, but it happens. If I chose not to think about it, there was never anyone else to question me.

In truth, it's not that I never gave it much thought. It's more like I decided I'd rather not consider it. If I didn't

see anything, I figured there was a reason for it, and I never had the desire to know what that reason was. I admit that this goes against everything I've been trained to do in my profession. I'm supposed to look deep for answers and probe for that which is hidden or suppressed. Then again, seeing souls wasn't a chapter I can remember in any Psychology text book I was assigned at school, so I felt it was ok to separate my professional training with the oddities of soul watching.

As I said, this was not the first time I had not seen a soul rise up out of the body. It's happened before. When I don't see anything--when the gateway to heaven doesn't appear--I have to admit, it doesn't make me happy. Stan Adanais was right about that as well. It is disappointing to me.

Over the years of volunteering and being present for so many deaths, it's gotten to the point where I can almost tell what I'm going to see as soon I get my first look at the soul. Whether it's in the ER or in an intensive care unit, it all depends on how big and how bright the spirit is. I can't really accurately measure the brightness of the souls I see. It's not like I have a magnitude scale and a light sensor. I doubt waving such a device over a dying patient would go over well with the hospital board.

Still, there are differences and my eyes alone can make them out. It's pretty obvious when I have a pretty bright soul or a pretty faint one. The bright ones I know are going to be a spectacular sight. With the extremely faint ones, I know I won't see anything at all. The ones in between, usually turn out positive, but there's never a guarantee.

When I don't see any wonderful transition, I would just let it pass. For the most part, I always figured the soul simply wasn't bright enough for me to see.

As I pondered the situation, I barely realized that the commotion had ceased and most of the staff had left the room. An orderly called in to assist in the cleanup moved over to me and offered a quick hello. He gave me the low down on what he knew. I guess he figured if I was waiting around for family members, he should tell me it might be a long wait.

"It's a John Doe at the moment," the orderly revealed. "They don't have any identification. Cops at the scene are apparently questioning people in the area, but I heard they didn't expect to know anything soon. We'll send him downstairs until they can get an ID or until someone shows up with a missing person's report."

Not much of a surprise to me. Of course I'd seen this before. Someone comes in with no family and no ID and dies--they take him down to the morgue and wait a certain number of days before they go through the paperwork to release the body for the state to handle. I wasn't surprised this was the case here because Stan told me there'd be no family around. Why should he be wrong now?

"I doubt anyone's going to be coming to you for this one," the orderly noted as if to confirm my own thoughts.

I heaved a heavy breath in apparent agreement. Then I surprised myself and said, "Let me take a look at him."

The orderly shrugged. "It's not a pretty sight, but you do what you want."

I've never done this before. There was no reason to. The souls I wanted to see rose right up into the air. I always had a great view. When I saw extremely faint souls wheeled into the ER, I just lost interest.

Stan, however, forced a change of that perspective. He told me all of this was going to happen. He also told me that once it was all over to take a deep look into the body.

Reluctantly I stepped over to the table in the center of the room. I didn't look up at the head where the wound was and I forced my attention beyond the blood. I looked into the center of the man's chest.

I blocked everything else out. In order to do so, I thought of a blank movie screen--that large grey surface that appears before the lights go out and the creepy dancing candy and popcorn appear to tell you to go the lobby and get a snack. I then placed the image of the man's body on that screen. When I do this, I can remain focused and ignore everything else around me.

Slowly, I began to see the faint whisper of a very small form glowing within the body. Just like every other soul I had seen, it had no detail beyond its outer silhouette. I could not tell if it was happy, sad, scared or angry because there was no expression. It was, however, very tiny compared to the other souls I had seen.

Despite the fact that the luminous quality of the soul was indeed meager, I could discern it fairly clearly. It appeared to cling to the inner depths of this body. It took hold with ferocity as if it were afraid to let go. It shuddered and trembled, looking weak and sick, but showing no willingness to free itself.

As I said, I had never done this before so I didn't know what to expect. Now, I wish I hadn't looked at all. Whereas seeing the soul leave the body in a glorious departure to the afterlife left me upbeat and joyous, this site left me cold and depressed.

I turned away and left the room.

Chapter 5

I knew Stan Adanais was still waiting for me back in my tiny private counseling room. Once I reached the hall, I turned in the opposite direction. I needed a moment to myself. I just gained two very new wrinkles to deal with in my life, and I wasn't about to simply walk back toward one of them without pausing to consider the implications.

I dashed to a stairwell door, opened it and ran one flight up. I turned past the volunteer office and headed toward a storage room where they kept plenty of wheelchairs for moving patients about the hospital. I poked my head inside and found that aside from the slew of folded up rolling chairs, the room was unoccupied.

Leaving the light off, I moved quickly over to the closest chair, unfolded it so I could sit in it, and dropped myself into its center. I kept the foot rests folded out of the way so I could place my feet on the floor and roll myself back and forth.

As I said before, I didn't think anyone knew of my ability. I wasn't able to share it with my sister, and thus I decided not to share it with any one. I've dealt with this and utilized it on my own for all of my life.

The doctors, nurses, and EMTs had no idea why I spent so much time in their midst's. I didn't have a wife that I could share my secret, I lived alone. My parents were both dead, and I have already revealed the nonexistent relationship I had with my sister. There were friends, associates, and colleagues, but no one I confided in, no one I would go deeper than the normal chit chat involving the weather, a planned vacation, or a new car purchase. I had a receptionist at work. She knew my schedule, all my phone numbers, and that was about it.

There you have the depth of my personal relationships at that very moment. My ability to see the soul within a person was known only to me, or so I thought. Now, I had to deal with a very big change in that perception. Not only did someone else know it, it was someone I had never met before, and someone that had some rather extraordinary talents of his own.

I realized I knew very, very little about Stan Adanais. He told me his name, but I couldn't be certain if he was telling the truth. Maybe his real name was Jack the Ripper, or maybe Merlin.

I considered all that he told me. Digging back into my memory, which was usually pretty good, I focused on what Stan, or perhaps Jack, or perhaps Merlin, had revealed.

He knew my name, he knew I was a doctor, and he knew that I volunteered here at the hospital. None of this was out of the ordinary or raised an alarm. That information could be obtained in about a minute by just talking to one of the doctors or nurses here at the hospital. He also, however, knew about my ability and knew that was the reason I came to this hospital. This was not something he could learn by simply interviewing one of the staff.

What made this even more discomforting was my secret was not one that most people would even believe. It's not really something all that rational, like stealing library books and selling them to used book stores. Even if I started revealing my secret to people, ninety nine point nine out of a hundred would laugh at me and call the cookie truck. The one tenth of a person that might believe me would do so only because he had one tenth of a brain.

This guy not only knows my secret, he treats it almost like it's a normal every day occurrence. He appeared to have more than a tenth of a brain, so he truly was an anomaly.

When dealing with such absurdities, the mind fights to find a logical solution, one it can place into the realm of normalcy. My mind did just that. I considered how Stan Adanais might have discovered my secret, and I

decided to examine it in an analytical manner.

My sister might have talked.

It was a possibility. Actually, it was the only thing that offered any type of logical sense. It was indeed a long, long time ago, but I did in fact try to tell my sister about my gift. Was it out of the realm of reason to think that maybe she decided to tell someone else about what I said? I knew it was not. Heck, patients tell me a boatload of stuff about their childhood during therapy. Maybe my sister did so under similar circumstances.

My brain, obviously liking this reasonable solution in my otherwise unreasonable life, took hold of this possibility with a vengeance. I suppose I can't blame my rational side. I witness so much that is beyond explanation that when I can throw a bit of clarity at an otherwise inexplicable event, perhaps I'm a bit more willing to sing along.

I thought of my sister and considered what might have led to this situation. I didn't speak with her, so maybe she's having marital problems, or maybe she's still getting over the death of my mother. She might have elected to speak with a counselor. Maybe one day during the course of therapy she recalled that little episode where I started to spill the beans about my gift. Of course the therapist would leap all over something like that. It was an important event and explained why she had a very distant relationship with her brother.

The logical seeking side of my brain liked the concept and dove further into possible scenarios. If the event was brought back into her focus, perhaps she started to talk about it openly. She might have even explained it to a friend later in the day. It happens. You don't remember or you dismiss a childhood event all your life, and then it comes out in therapy and you place importance on it.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. I admit I was guessing here, but it seemed to be a logical assumption. I couldn't say for sure that my sister was even in therapy, but if she was, any therapist worth a dime would have asked her about her family, asked her why she didn't talk with her brother. She would have said 'Well, he told me once how he could see things...' and now it's back in the forefront of her mind. She talks to a friend about it. Maybe this friend isn't all that scrupulous a character, finds out I'm a doctor and decides to check me out.

It's amazing the direction the mind can take when it wants to find reasonable explanations for the strange events we encounter. That's what I was doing right then and there. I was making sense of how this Stan Adanais knew what I could see. Unfortunately, there was still a large gaping hole in all of this.

Stan Adanais not only knew about my ability, he knew way too much about the patient that just expired in the emergency room. I had already tried to put reason to that earlier when I considered he might have had the guy shot. The problem is how did he know I wasn't going to see the soul rise up out of the body? For that matter, why did he tell me to take a look at the body when it became a corpse? He knew I'd see the soul clinging in there. How could he have known this?

With all of this swirling in my mind, I broke it down into simpler terms. I realized I could explain some of what happened, but not all of it. There were simply too many variables that went beyond the extreme and into the inexplicable.

A normal person might have simply decided to chalk the whole thing up to wild coincidences, maybe even hallucinations. I couldn't. I was not normal. If I accepted that I could see souls, then I had to accept there was an equally astonishing, but no less factual explanation for what Stan was able to tell me.

No doubt, he had some special knowledge. The next logical question was where did he get it from? He said he had some special abilities of his own. He could see the gifts in other people. That's how he said he knew about

me. It came to reason that he would then be able to find others.

Based on what little I knew, I really couldn't tell for sure where Stan got his information. I also didn't know what he wanted to do with it. That also meant I didn't know what he really wanted to do with me. I needed to be careful around this man.

As I sat in the dark room rolling back and forth in the steel wheelchair, I realized I was focusing on only half the problem. Stan represented a true wrench in the sprockets, a fly in the peanut butter, but that wasn't the only thing that was eating at my insides. Believe it or not, Stan was the lesser of two quandaries I now faced.

It was time I pressed aside the curtain and faced the other dilemma that I tried to bury, time I retrieved my internal shovel and dug it out to examine in full light. This was far more difficult than throwing around possibilities explaining Stan Adanaïs. With this new predicament, I had to reconsider my own assumptions about death.

My previous experiences with dying almost always led to a very awesome sight. Even as there was carnage before me in this physical world, I was able to peer into the mystical world of the spirit and see something that made my own soul leap with jubilation. This is why death no longer terrified me.

For me, death was not some enormous mystery we all must face with no hint of what awaits us. I know there's something more, a continuation. And until Stan Adanaïs walked into my life, that knowledge contained only a positive outcome.

For the instances when I saw nothing, when there was no grand exit of the soul, I left it at that. If there was no joyous scene at the passing of some poor victim, it might have left me disappointed, but only to the extent I did not see something spectacular. I never considered the true predicament went anywhere beyond that. I left it alone, moved on, waited for the next passing. Bottom line, I never gave it another thought.

That all changed. On that day, I saw something that lacked all joy. I witnessed something that depressed the hell out of me. Apparently, not everyone has a happy ending. This was the second wrinkle that just appeared in my life, and it was much more difficult to contemplate than the mystery of a stranger waiting for me in my small office downstairs.

The body was dead, but the soul wouldn't let go. It didn't pass over into the great beyond and I could no longer rationalize this in any fashion. The thought that the event might have simply been too faint for me to witness was nothing more than a placebo for my mind. It allowed me to dismiss the situation, ignore the truth.

Unfortunately, I now knew the truth. It wasn't because the soul was too dim to see. It was because it didn't pass over at all. The inner essence hung on, refusing to let go of this mortal life. No matter how I tried, I could not understand why. The mystery of death returned to me. That is a painful consideration to contemplate.

I pressed that thought out of my mind when I heard footsteps outside in the hall. The shuffling sound stopped at the door, and then the light came on. I was not really surprised to see Stan's face.

"There you are," he said with an almost sorrowful smile. "I guess you saw what I asked you to look for. I really am sorry about that. I know it's not something you wanted to see, but in the long run, it will do you good."

I looked at the floor as I considered how to handle this moment. I was not given a chance.

"I don't mean to press you," Stan continued, "but there really is one more thing you need to see and we don't have a lot of time."

Chapter 6

"Don't you want to know what eventually happens to a spirit that won't let go of the body?" Stan asked. His expression didn't convey any exhilaration in revealing a potential surprise, in fact, just the opposite. He spoke in a plain, matter-of-fact tone that I could only compare to a sixty year old English professor that was giving the same stale lecture he had spoken for years. "It doesn't all just end there. There's obviously more to it. You can't possibly believe that it just stays there forever."

I stayed in the wheelchair and made no attempt to rise to my feet. I simply looked over to him with a tired expression of my own, just like the ones the nurses wear to hide their emotions.

"I don't know what to believe about anything," I admitted.

While it was true I was not surprised to see him, I was also not in the mood to listen to him at the moment. He created this dilemma I faced, and I still wasn't sure how to respond to it; or to him for that matter.

Now he was talking about something I didn't even consider. The soul hiding in the cave of the corpse was enough of a dilemma for my overtaxed mind. I didn't have time to contemplate what might happen next under such circumstances. Maybe the soul did stay there forever or maybe only until the body decayed to nothing but dust. I didn't know, and considering the myriad of possibilities as well as the implications, I also didn't rightly care.

"Right now, I'm not thinking that far ahead," I revealed with more honesty than I thought Stan deserved. "I have a good deal else to think about right now as it is."

"That's true, but you should get the entire picture before you leap to any conclusions. There's a piece of the puzzle that's still missing for you, and if we don't hurry, you're going to miss out on this particular opportunity. It will happen again, so it won't be the end of the world if you're late. But I do think it's important that you get the whole show at once, so to speak."

I gritted my teeth, but curiosity began to hammer its way through my mental fatigue and it eventually got the better of me.

"What is it you want me to see?"

"I think it would be better if you see it directly rather than me trying to explain it here first."

"That doesn't fill me with inspiration."

"It should. Basically, I'm saying this is something you have to see for yourself. Words would not properly address what you have an opportunity to witness. If that's not enough to gain your interest, then you surprise me. Am I correct to understand you can go anywhere in the hospital?"

"Yes."

"Take me to the morgue."

It was all I needed to hear. It raised my curiosity just enough to force me out of my rolling chair.

We headed down to the basement and through an unmarked door. I nodded to a couple of attendants that were busy filling out paperwork. They gave me an odd look when they saw I was with a guest. People that came to the morgue to identify bodies usually came with someone of greater authority than a volunteer.

"It's ok," I said. "I'm just taking him on a quick tour. He's not here to claim any relative, to ID anyone, or anything like that."

At first, the attendants didn't know quite what to do. Although I didn't spend much time down in the morgue, as a grief counselor I was needed in the area a few times. Identifying a body is about as traumatic as it gets.

Both workers knew me and knew I could go just about anywhere I pleased as long as I didn't break any rules or create a hazard for myself and others. In the end, they waved me by and returned to their paperwork. I guess it was easier to simply accept the situation and refocus on their work as opposed to asking questions that might just complicate their own lives.

We walked through a set of doors that swung open automatically when they sensed our weight. We stepped into a very large and very stark area with large drawers all along the walls. Here is where they stored bodies while families made arrangements with funeral parlors. This is also where they placed Jane and John Does until they could be identified or turned over to the state.

Surprisingly, Stan walked right past me and over to his left. He turned and looked at the drawers on the wall in front of him. There were no names, just numbers. He stopped and pointed to the one in front of him.

"Open that drawer."

I was surprised by the request and I explained why.

"I don't think our John Doe is processed and placed in a drawer already. If they brought him down here, he's got to be still on a gurney. There's a place just around the corner where..."

"We're no longer interested in that one. You need to see another one, a different one. You need to see this one. Please do so quickly."

Hesitantly, I moved past Stan and pulled open the drawer. The body was covered with a thick paper shroud.

As I reached for the top of the covering, Stan called out.

"What are you doing?"

My hand stopped.

"I'm removing the cover."

"You don't have to do that."

I gave him a puzzled look.

"You want me to take a good look inside, right?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Well to do that I have to be able to see him."

"You can see him just fine through the paper."

"No I can't. It's a covering. It's like a nurse pulling the curtain in front of me. If the curtain is between me and

the patient, I can't see anything."

"That's really your own doing. You've put that mental block up all by yourself."

"Excuse me?"

"You've created your own mental block when it comes to things like barriers," Stan stated. "It happens quite often. Actually as a psychologist it shouldn't even surprise you. You think there's something between you and what you want to look at, and suddenly in your mind it becomes an impenetrable wall that blocks your vision. The truth of the matter is that even if that shroud was made of lead, it can't block what you're here to see."

"I might understand about mental blocks, but I don't see what that has to do with me wanting to remove this cover."

"But it's just a fairly thin layer of paper," Stan insisted. "Think about it for a minute. You can see the spirit as it resides inside the body. You're looking through flesh and bone."

"But I'm not an X-ray machine. I don't see the internal organs or bones. I see the exterior, just like everyone else sees. I focus on it and the soul appears. When something's in the way like a pulled curtain, it blocks my view. That means I can't focus. If you want me to look at the inner spirit of this person, I would need to have an unblocked view of the body."

"Again, that's your own doing. When you look at the spirit, you're not seeing things like you see everything else. Light isn't reflecting off the soul and being captured by your optic nerves. You're seeing something that's beyond the material world, so material objects should not get in your way, unless of course your mind forces them in the way. I never said you were an X-ray machine, but you can see the soul when it's clinging to the inside of a body. That means you are looking through flesh and muscle, both of which are more solid than this paper shroud or even a plastic curtain that's pulled between you and someone lying on a gurney in the next room."

"But the soul is connected to the body--the plastic curtain is in the way. It's a barrier. Just like this covering is a barrier."

"That's because you think of it as a barrier." He shook his head, but continued his explanation. "Look, don't worry about barriers for now. We don't have time for that. Forget about curtains and walls for a minute. Think about when a patient is wheeled into the emergency room. You take a good look right then to see the soul, yes?"

I was hesitant again because Stan was asking me to absolutely confirm my gift. Even though we were talking about seeing spirits in bodies through paper shrouds and curtains, I still could have argued I was only speaking in hypothetical terms. Rather than come right out and admit I look for souls, I decided to be somewhat vague.

"Yes, I look at patients when they come in."

Stan ignored the subtlety of my statement.

"Is the patient uncovered?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean don't they have blankets or sheets or something covering the patient?"

"Yes."

"You can see the soul through those can't you?"

I didn't answer.

"And how many are naked?" Stan pressed onward without waiting.

"How many are what?" I asked in total surprise to the question.

"How many are not wearing clothes? I assume very few of the people in car accidents are driving around buck naked. Heart attack victims also don't usually fall over every time they get completely undressed. I would guess the large majority of people are actually brought in wearing clothes, and you can see through those, right?"

"The clothes are part of the patient."

"Then think of the shroud over this poor guy as a really cheap leisure suit, or think of it as a very uncomfortable blanket. It's not there as a barrier like a wall or a curtain. It's just a wrap, like all the other things that are on patients when they first get wheeled in this hospital."

"Fine. I'll leave it be. Now what is it you want me to do?"

Stan took a long moment as he looked about in the air. I gave a quick glance in the direction he seemed to stare, but I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Finally, he instructed me on what to do.

"It's time. Take a deep look. Find the soul inside. You don't have to tell me what you see. You don't have to tell me anything. Just watch. You should see something in a few moments."

I focused on the center of the mass beneath the long paper covering. At first, all I could see was the shroud. Eventually, I cleared my mind of all that was confounding it at that moment. Let me tell you, there was a lot creating havoc in my head, and it was no easy task to push it aside.

I ignored my suspicions of Stan. I forgot about the scene I had witnessed previously in the ER. I stopped worrying about how I was going to view deaths from that moment on. I even ignored the stupid paper shroud that I felt was in the way.

After a few moments, I began to make out the very faint outline of a very small form. It was the tiniest I had ever seen, smaller than even an infant. This soul was very dim and very difficult to see. For whatever reason, it held onto a greenish hue. Not a healthy green, though. More like that green you associate with mold on spoiled food. The green color probably allowed me to see it. It was so faint that had it been white or gray or yellow, I probably would not have been able to make it out through the paper covering.

The small entity was still inside the body. It looked as if it had curled up into a defensive position, like a porcupine does when a predator is too curious or just too stupid to leave it alone. It was a very sad sight and it did little to expand my understanding of what was going on this day. It was simply another faint soul that had refused to leave the body, just like the one I had seen in the ER.

I was about to ask Stan what all this meant when I saw the tiny spirit move. It was almost like a convulsion or like the jiggling, nonsensical movements of a microbe on a slide under a microscope. It looked almost as if it wanted to leave the body, but then changed its mind and rather simply shook inside instead.

What I saw next is difficult to describe. I don't want to say it looked like a large, dark spider or the shadow of a clawed hand. Both of these images sound too much like the bad horror movies I used to watch on Saturday afternoons when I was a kid. Still, if you combine those two descriptions you get a vague idea of what I saw.

Whatever it was, it didn't have substance in the physical world because it could pass through objects with ease. When I first saw it, it appeared low in the ground, perhaps deeper in the case of drawers behind the body that was pulled out in front of me. It glided upward at a slow methodical pace. Undeterred by the metal shelf that extended out into the room to hold the body, it eventually reached the center of the corpse. It wrapped itself around the insignificant soul and then both simply disintegrated away.

I watched for long moments more, but the soul was gone. The shadowy claw thing was gone, too. There was nothing left for me to see but that plain empty paper shroud that covered the body. I felt just as empty inside.

"You and I have a great deal to talk about," Stan stated simply. "But now is not the right time. You've been through a lot today and you need to think about it. I'll come by your office in the next day or two."

"I'm usually booked up," I muttered without thinking. I'm not even sure how I managed to answer him. My ears heard him and I guess most of it got through, but I really wasn't thinking about appointments or my schedule. I suppose part of my brain was still functioning, even if I wasn't conscious of it. I didn't even look up at him. I simply stared at the long sheet of paper that covered the body before me. "It takes at least two weeks in advance to get an appointment, sometimes more."

"Are you telling me you never get a cancellation? I have an open schedule. I'll tell your receptionist to give me the first opening that comes up. I'm sure I'll be seeing you soon. I also want you to take the time to come up with any questions you might have. I'm sure once your mind clears a bit, there's a good deal you're going to want to ask me."

Chapter 7

Two days after the incident in the hospital, Stan was sitting in my office. Admittedly, I wasn't surprised to see him. I knew he would follow through with his promise, or at least I sincerely hoped he would. You don't instruct someone to watch a dark shadow ensnare a soul and simply leave it at that. That would be like telling someone you're related to Bigfoot and then walking away. You owe a bit more in the way of explanation unless you wished to be labeled a lunatic. The one thing I remained certain of was that Stan wished very much to be taken seriously.

He had previously contacted my receptionist, Sally, and requested to be notified when there was a cancellation. When a patient did in fact cancel, I told her to call the number Stan had left and to have him come in for the open slot.

Welcoming him into my office, I let him proceed as he desired. Without waiting for instruction, Stan sat in the chair in front of my desk. We obviously weren't going to turn this into a doctor-patient relationship, and the truth of the matter is I wouldn't have known if I should put him on the couch or me.

I moved around the corner of my desk and sat down. I picked up a pen, and then placed it back down. Notes would probably not be appropriate at this time. First, I didn't think I really wanted documentation of this little visit. Second, my hand writing is downright awful and I often ask Sally to transcribe them into a word processing file. She has enough difficulty translating my hieroglyphics, as she calls them, and I couldn't imagine what she might think if she tried to decipher this conversation.

"You've had some time to think about what happened the other day," Stan jumped right in without waiting for me to start the conversation. "What do you think about it all?"

Was he serious? This man approached me as a total stranger only two days ago. He revealed he was aware of an ability I believed to be a closely held secret, informed me a man would die in front of me in the ER, and then had me go to the morgue to watch the equivalent of a late Saturday night horror show. These are not the kind of events that create tranquil reflections.

"What do I think? Well, I have about a hundred questions. I wrote most of them down, but I forgot the list at home."

"I'm sure you can remember most of them. If not, you can ask me another time."

"There's going to be another time?"

"That's up to you."

I frowned. He wasn't here for more than a minute and already I was perplexed again. Not only perplexed, but also annoyed. I didn't want to begin a question-and-answer session where we thoughtfully, yet playfully, tried to get the better of each other. I wanted to know how the hell he knew what he knew; about me, about people dying, and about souls being enveloped by some dark spider thing. I decided to settle down and start at the beginning.

"I'm going to admit to you right now that I do see something inside of people, I believe it is the soul and I see it leave their bodies when they die." This was actually a big step for me, but one I needed to take. In order to confront the problems I faced, I also needed to accept certain truths. I had the ability to see the inner essence of others and this man knew it. I didn't want to try playing games on that level any more. There was nothing to be gained by avoiding the issue. It was better just to throw it out in the light of day and hope it didn't get sunburned or disintegrate like a vampire.

"I know that," Stan replied casually.

I assumed his response was a good thing--no sunburn and no dusty vampire remains to clean up.

"You made that perfectly clear," I continued. "What you did not make very clear is why me. Now understand, I don't want you to try and describe what it is you see in me, but what I do want to know is what led you to me specifically in the first place?"

Stan nodded as if I just made an excellent card play in a game of bridge.

"Because I have the ability to see the gifts inside of people, I've learned a lot about those that have them. You see, you're not the first I've approached."

"I'm aware of that. We discussed that previously."

"What we did not discuss is how I've learned to find people like you. That will explain why I came to you specifically, and that is the question I'm trying to answer." He seemed a bit annoyed at being interrupted, but he quickly continued with a much more relaxed attitude. "At first when I wanted to find people like you, I simply relied on random chance. I would go out and walk around and hope to stumble on one. But as I have told you, people with gifts like this are rare. Simply going out wandering around without a plan doesn't yield many results. Still, I was able to find some."

"How many have you found to this point?"

"Several," was the vague answer he gave me. "My first meetings with such talented individuals didn't always go well. Timing is important. I learned that later. That's why I met you where and when I did."

"That's another one of the questions on my list as well, but I'll get to that in a minute. I'm still waiting to hear how you came across me in the first place? Did you look me up in a special directory? Did you call operator assistance and ask for the location of people with special abilities. Is my face on the post office wall?"

"I wish it were that easy. No, as I said, I've learned a good deal about people with special talents over the years. Believe it or not, they tend to hang out in hospitals. They also volunteer at senior centers, homeless shelters, housing for runaways and displaced youths, AA meetings, things like that. They also tend to hang out in certain places like cemeteries, sporting events, even health clubs. It all depends on what the gift is and how the individual wants to use it."

"Health clubs?"

"I know it's hard to believe, but it depends on the gift. Sometimes a person with a certain talent just wants to get lost in a crowd, sometimes they want to watch people while being somewhat inconspicuous. Sit on a stationary bike and pedal away for an hour and you can watch a constant flow of people without ever looking out of place. Shopping malls are another good place for that."

"So you came to the hospital because it was likely you would find someone with a gift and you just happened to stumble on me?"

"Yes and no. The hospital was a good starting place, but I didn't just stumble on you. I went into the hospital stating I was interested in moving to the area, but I had a sick wife that needed special care. I do not have a wife, by the way, sick or healthy. Yes, it was a lie, but I wanted to look around. I asked questions about volunteering and counseling. Yours wasn't the only name that came up, but it did come up. I checked into your background by simply looking through ordinary information--things like directories, medical

associations, and business listings. Loads of this stuff is available with just a visit to a library computer. Then I went to the hospital a couple of times and waited in the visiting area. You walked by me once, but you didn't notice me. Through all the information I had on you, I suspected you were gifted. When I saw you, I knew what that gift was."

"Why did you suspect I was gifted?"

"Successful Marriage and Family Therapist, single, no children, spends a good deal of time in the hospital, has privileges to move about that hospital at will, lives in a small apartment. To me that spells something unusual. Usually successful people do a little more for themselves than you do. If you were just a regular doctor, I would have expected a big house in a nice neighborhood, family of some kind, nice car, that kind of thing. But you don't need that because you have your gift and that's something that the largest house in the most sought after community could never equal."

"What else do you know about me?" I asked wondering if he would state that he knew I had a sister.

"That's about it, but it was enough to take a chance on meeting you to see if I was right. And I was." He looked at me curiously. "Don't get all paranoid on me. As I said when I met you, I'm not a stalker. Everything I've said to you, all of this information, is very easily obtained that anyone can get in very little time for free. You can try it yourself. When you get the chance, look up your name on the computer. You'll be amazed at what you find. Most people are."

The truth is I had already done that. Most people, in fact, do. I searched my name and reviewed the results many times over the years. I couldn't argue with him about the available information.

The hospital once gave me a volunteer recognition award that was carried in the Local section of the daily paper. That article alone included just about everything he just said about me. I wish they hadn't done it then, and I was more annoyed that they had done it now. I never wanted acknowledgment. As I said before, I wasn't giving over my time to the hospital for truly altruistic reasons. I was there for myself. If they wanted to recognize someone, they should have recognized a real volunteer.

Actually, I've talked to some volunteers and I honestly believe that most don't want that kind of recognition, either. Oh, there are some that want the praise, but others really don't want the attention. They volunteer because they believe in it and want to believe in themselves; believe that they are good, honest, caring people, which they are. They really don't want some pin or plaque, their name in the paper, and a free dinner. Well, the free dinner is nice as long as it's not something like the hospital meatloaf. Anyway, that kind of recognition just brings unwanted attention, attention that I had now received and believed would have been better off without.

"That explains how you found me," I allowed. "The next question is why were you looking for me?"

"I wasn't looking for you in particular. I was looking for people with a gift. I told you that hospitals were a good place to find them."

"So you go to these hotspots--senior centers, homeless shelters, malls, hospitals!--and you look for the gifted?"

"It's somewhat like why you go to the medical center where you volunteer. You have a gift, I have a gift. You go to where you can exercise your ability. I go where I can exercise mine. Think about it. If you're going to judge what I do, then go get a mirror."

He was right again, and I was starting to dislike it. He had too many answers that made sense, answers that

left very little open for any debate. I kept feeling like I was being setup, like I had been studied for months.

"I wasn't going to judge what you do," I replied. "I'm still trying to understand it."

Finally, I decided to hit him back. "Put yourself in my situation. You're at the mall looking for people with so-called talents. A stranger steps up to you, not the other way around. He asks if you found anyone interesting yet. You've never seen the guy before, yet he seems to know an awful lot about you. He points to some woman over at a department store and tells you to take a good look at her. You see a gift in her, but it's not a real pleasant one. Maybe she doesn't see souls, but instead she sees something terrible."

This seemed to intrigue him rather than give him a sense of empathy toward my situation.

"Terrible? Like what?" he asked.

"I don't know, I didn't think that far ahead. How about her gift is she can hear the screams of the murdered before the act happens?"

"That is terrible."

"Good, we agree. The thing is the stranger knew about your ability and pointed out this woman to you. You looked at the woman and you weren't happy with what you saw. How do you feel about this?"

"Probably like you felt two days ago."

"And how do you think I felt two days ago?"

"Mostly confused, probably a little scared, angrier than scared, and very defensive."

"Congratulations. That pretty much sums it up, so you're simply going to have to understand that and deal with my skepticism as well as my annoyance with this entire situation."

I felt good about that, felt like I scored a point.

"That's why I am here like this today," Stan conceded.

"And we will get to that, too, but first I want to stay focused on what happened in the hospital. You mentioned you've learned about timing, about approaching people in the right place. Why did you come to me at the hospital? Why not come here and talk to me like this?"

"People like you are very protective about their gifts. They don't like to talk about it, especially to strangers. I have found that if I meet up with people when they are actually utilizing their ability, they are more willing to talk about it. It's not like I want to trap them. I just want to be able to get them at a time when they are most open to their own ability. I must admit they are also much more defensive and suspicious when I do this, but I can get around that. It's important that I have them in the right frame of mind. If they are actively using their gift, or at least prepared to use it, they are much easier to approach."

"I'm not sure I agree with that. I don't think it makes sense."

"No? Ok, let's say I called for an appointment and met you here first. I unloaded the bombshell that I know you can see spirits, but I said it to you right here in your office. What are you going to do? You're going to treat me like a nut, schedule more appointments for me, and try to talk to me about my parents. We wouldn't get very far at all. Instead, I meet you at the hospital and I catch you at a time when you're actually exercising

your gift. You're defensive, you feel like you've just been caught. Most deny they have a gift, but they also don't simply dismiss me as some kind of nut. You were much more willing to go along with me at that time."

"So you came to the hospital because you knew I was there looking at souls."

"I came because I knew you were there to enjoy your gift. I also came prepared to have you look at more than you usually do. I was able to get you to use your gift even after I talked to you. Do you think I could have gotten you to do that here in your office?"

I didn't answer him. Instead, I tried to remain on the offensive. "And that's another question..."

"I told you you'd remember them."

"Yes, well, you just said you came prepared for me to see more. How did you know that man would come into the hospital with a gunshot wound and how did you know he would die two minutes after he came in?"

"Less than two minutes."

"Fine, less than two minutes."

"I thought I already explained that. I know others with gifts. One has the ability to see the cause and time of death."

"I'm not sure I'm willing to buy that. You knew an awful lot of detail. How did you know he would be shot instead of stabbed? How did you know he would be brought to the ER as opposed to left to die in some alley? How did you know he was shot by an angry customer? How did you know he would be a John Doe? When you put it all out there, there are loads of possibilities, yet you knew he would be there at that time in the exact condition he was in. Are you going to tell me that there's a person out there that was able to see all of that?"

"My associate has a very powerful gift. He can see great detail regarding the surroundings of a person's upcoming demise."

"How did you know about the soul?" I threw that at him quickly. This was the one question I didn't think he was going to be able to answer easily.

"I don't know what you're asking," Stan asked with a somewhat dubious expression.

"How did you know the soul would be small and dim, and how did you know it would cling to the body? Do you have another associate with a gift just like mine?"

"No, I believe your gift is indeed rare."

"Then how did you know those things?"

"That's a bit trickier to explain."

"Try."

"When I first saw you and realized what your gift was, I was very intrigued. I considered what it meant to see what it is you see. You can look inside someone and see the strength of their spirit. I knew that was why you came to the hospital. I knew you wanted to watch what happened when people met their end. I thought about it and realized if you came here often and were willing to help others, you must have seen something very

good. You were very focused on the positive. I, however, have enough experience to know all things are not pleasant. I guessed you were simply ignoring the part you didn't want to see. You might feel that's a stretch, but you have to understand that it's not for me. I not only see the gift you have, I comprehend how you use it."

I shook my head. Suddenly, there felt like there were more than a few holes in his story. "Even if I accept that as a reason for how you knew I didn't follow the fainter souls, that doesn't explain how you knew the gunshot victim would actually have one. He could have had a bright soul. How did you know he wouldn't?"

"Ok, for the most part it was a guess, but a very calculated guess. I needed to find someone that was going to die in the ER at a time you'd be there. It would also have to be someone, as you might put it, 'very weak in spirit'. I had my associate case some of the less desirable parts of the city in the hospital's district. I sent him looking for a pimp, a pusher, a thug, a thief, a gang member, or anyone like that that was about to die under extreme circumstances. We finally found one that would end up in the ER where the time of death actually met your schedule for volunteering. I knew you would be there and so I made sure I was, too."

"So you went looking for someone with a bad reputation and just hoped the soul would be small? That's a pretty big chance, don't you think?"

"To some degree yes, in other ways no. Just like I obtained information on you, I did some research on our John Doe. He was not a pillar of the community. I don't have your gift, so I didn't know for sure, but I believed the odds were on my side. If I had someone like you helping me, then I would have been sure. Since I don't, I had to rely on my judgment."

"And what about the soul clinging to the body? How did you know that would happen? Why did you make me take another look after everyone left?"

"As I said, I understand your gift and how you use it just by looking at you."

I shook my head again. "You have to admit, that's a bit thin."

"How is it you can see the spirit inside a body?"

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Explain to me how you can see what it is you see."

"I just do."

"That's a little thin, don't you think."

I heaved a heavy sigh. "Do you do this with all the people you discover that have a special talent?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you come to their office and offer these ambiguous explanations?"

"No, most people with gifts I don't even talk to anymore. I admit I enjoy finding them, but when I do, I leave them be."

"You chose not to leave me be."

"That is very true."

"Why not? Why wouldn't you leave me alone? Why did you talk to me the other day and why did you come here now?"

"Because your gift is very rare, and I saw that you weren't utilizing it as much as you could."

"So you want to help me expand my abilities?"

"Sort of. It's like the associate that I've mentioned earlier that can see the time and circumstances of a person's death. His gift is rare as well. I met with him a lot like I'm meeting with you now."

"One day I think I would like to meet your associate."

"I'm hoping you do. And to answer your question, that's the real reason I am here, the reason I wanted to talk to you once I understood your gift."

Finally we reached a point where I hoped to finally find some comprehension. I didn't say a word. I simply waited for him to explain.

"I'm hoping you will join me and some other associates and actually use your gift to do some good," Stan said with a gleam in his eye and a proud smile on his face. "Don't take that the wrong way. I'm not saying you aren't doing any good now. You counsel people that need help and that's fantastic, but you're not using your gift to do that. You're using your training. Others can learn to be grief counselors. I doubt anyone else can see the strength of a spirit inside a person. You can, and I want you to use it to assist people as opposed to just watching on the sidelines."

I couldn't refrain from asking the obvious question that popped into my head. "And just how do you want me to use my gift?"

"You may not believe this, but I'm sorry to have to do what I'm about to do. In order to answer that question, I have to ask you a couple of personal ones of my own. Let me first ask you this," Stan said but paused before finishing, "do you believe in heaven?"

I was not really prepared for that particular question and responded rather too quickly. "I really never thought about it."

"You've never thought about it? You see spirits and you see them leave the body in this exquisite fashion and you never thought about heaven?"

I tried to explain what I actually meant. "Well for me, it's not a matter of whether I believe in it or not. It's kind of like a fore drawn conclusion."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, for me, it's not a matter of believing if heaven exists anymore. I know it exists."

"How so?"

I pointed to the floor.

"Do you believe in carpet?"

"Pardon?"

"Carpeting? Do you believe in it?"

"I didn't think carpeting was something you had to believe in. Is this some new religion I haven't come across yet? The great god of floor coverings? I kind of like it."

"No, I'm just making a point," I stated. "You don't have to believe in carpeting because you know it exists. It's right there in front of you. It's all over the place, you walk on it every day. For me, that's what heaven is like. I see it, I know it's there."

"How do you know what you see is heaven?"

"What else could it be?"

"Some might say you simply see the afterlife, not necessarily heaven. There is a difference. What I need to know is if you believe in a place that rewards those that are strong in spirit."

"I know what I've seen. It is so wonderful any description I try to give it would not do it justice, so yes, I believe in heaven."

"Do you believe in hell?"

"Hell?"

"Yes, hell."

If you think I wasn't prepared for the question about heaven, you can pretty much bet your last chip that I wasn't prepared for this one, either.

"I don't know what to think about hell. I really didn't think about it at all until you made me look in that drawer two days ago."

"Do you think that spirit ended up going to hell?" Stan pressed.

"Maybe... I don't know. Probably."

There was a long silence that sort of swallowed up my thinking at that moment. I had always seen the spectacular side of what waits for us. I never had to dwell on the thought that maybe for some people death wasn't going to lead to a pleasant experience. The dark shadow of a claw or some kind of spider spirit--whatever it was that I had witnessed in the morgue--brought yet another new twist to my life.

It's a whole lot easier to face life, as well as death, when you think it's all happy endings and a round of drinks for everyone. When you realize there might be a bill collector at the end of the line, it makes you think about how to avoid running up too large a tab. There are times you can come up a little short, but if some unthinkable place is waiting when the final buzzer sounds, that's not one of them.

Stan finally broke that silence. "You present a very interesting opportunity. Your gift allows you to see spirits before people die. The gift of my associate allows him to see when people will die. Put the two together and we know when people are in real danger of going some place they'd rather not go. What if we could help them?"

"How so?"

"I have already assembled a small group of people that has been trying to help others. I believe we have been successful, but the truth is, we don't know for sure because we could never really tell how much danger a person was in of ending up in the wrong place. With your help, we could focus on those individuals that we know are the weakest. We wouldn't have to guess. You could direct us."

I quickly considered the implications of what he just offered. "Let me get this straight. You want me to just go around looking inside of people, looking at their souls, and then telling you what I see so you could guide them back to the straight and narrow? I'm sorry, but it sounds almost like some religious cult."

"First of all, it would be nothing as random as you just made it out to be. We're not going to send you out without a plan. Remember, I am working with others that have gifts. We will ask you to look at particular people in particular areas, people we know are about to exit this world. And I never said anything about any religious endeavor. Our purpose is not to indoctrinate people into one way of thinking. We are simply taking people at risk, warning them of that risk, and trying to get them to think about their lives and where it might lead them before it's too late. Think of it as an intervention."

"But with an intervention, you confront people and make them face the truth of their problem. You show them how their addictions are causing pain for people that love them. How in the world do you expect to actually convince anyone that you talk to that you're not a bunch of loons? What are you going to say to them, that you know they are going to die soon? And, oh yeah, see that guy over there, he can see your soul and we know you're in trouble."

"That would not be our approach, and the truth of the matter is that how we approach people after you identify them is not something you have to worry about. As I said, I have assembled a group of people with different gifts. We already use those talents to figure out how best to deal with someone we think is in danger."

"You're already doing this?"

"For some time."

"And people actually listen to you?"

"Most actually do, yes."

"Do you think you've done any good?"

"That has been somewhat up for debate. We've had to guess at the level of danger for those we have approached. With your ability, we wouldn't need to guess. You could tell us the strength of the spirit right at the very beginning. That's why you are important. We need you to identify those that are the most in need."

So many things were swirling in my head at that moment. The whole concept sounded absurd. Still, I could not forget what I saw just two days ago. Stan's question regarding my belief in hell hit a raw nerve. This was all very new for me, but I couldn't disregard what happened to that weak soul. Even with a desire to help others, however, I still fell back upon worries of my own well-being.

"Do you think it's right for me to go looking into people like that? Isn't that an invasion of their privacy? You want me to use my gift to look at what is probably the most personal thing anyone has."

"You look into people when they are brought into the hospital."

That was true. I didn't ask anyone's permission, yet I felt there remained a difference and I tried to explain as much.

"But people that are brought into the hospital are looking for help. They know that people are going to prod and poke them, hook-up monitors and take tests. I suspect you want me to go looking at people before they end up in the hospital."

"Yes, I do, but it's still no different than what you do now. Those patients in intensive care didn't agree to have you look at their spirits. You do it without their permission. They expect doctors and nurses to check their vital signs and take tests that are explained to them. How many would agree to give their permission if you went up to them and asked if it was alright to look at their inner essence?"

That one stung. It made me feel like a peeping tom. "Maybe you're right, maybe I shouldn't be looking at anyone's soul."

"You want to ignore your gift now? Pretend you're just like everyone else?"

"I don't know what I want to do. I just don't like the idea of making judgments and interfering in people's lives."

"This from a psychologist? So just let them go to hell?"

That one stung as well. I wanted to help people. That was the whole reason I chose my profession. I believed it was something I should do. In the back of my mind, I always felt the need to do something in return for what I was able to see. Many people live in fear of death. I never did, well not until the other day. I saw absolute beauty in the trip to the other side. Now, however, I knew something existed that was quite the opposite of beauty--something sinister, something to be avoided.

Then I faced a question within my own mind that I was very afraid to answer. If I chose not to help, chose to turn my back because it was safer, was I taking a chance on ending up like the soul I saw in the morgue? Was I putting my own soul in danger of disintegrating in the grip of an indescribable horror? I didn't get the chance to answer at that moment.

"Look," Stan said with an edge of finality, "you now know why I confronted you, why I'm here, and what I want. Your help would make our task easier, but it's up to you. You don't have to decide this instant, in fact, I don't want you to. Think about it. Your receptionist has my number. Call me if you want to talk again. If you don't, I'll understand and you'll never see or hear from me again."

Chapter 8

In the wake of Stan's offer, facts were in short supply. At a time like this, I wished to be normal. If I lacked the ability to see the essence of a person's spirit, I could dismiss Stan's the entire proposal as madness and simply setup a block of appointments to try and help him reestablish contact with reality. The problem, of course, was that I was not normal. Unless I was willing to consider myself delusional, I would have to seriously consider everything that Stan told me, no matter how bizarre.

As for me being delusional, that was simply not an option. I went down that path once a long time ago, trying to convince myself that what I saw inside of people was nothing more than a self-created illusion, like strange voices in someone's head. My visions, however, were not of my own making. I'm sure that won't convince everyone that hears my story. For those that simply don't want to accept the possibility of another plane of existence, it's too easy to call me crazy and move on. Unfortunately, these people won't see what I do until their own end, and at that point, they are more than welcome to judge my sanity.

Based on the limited information before me, I would not make a decision right away. I needed time to think about everything I had seen and heard. There was very little I could do to check on Stan Adanaïs, other than look up his name on the computer which returned meager results. I couldn't really go to the police, what would I say? 'There's a guy that knows I can see souls and he wants to use me to keep people from going to hell.' I've met criminal psychologists at conventions and other such gatherings. The idea of being forced to talk to one was just not on my 'to do' list.

I resigned myself to the understanding that the only way I would really be able to learn more about Mr. Adanaïs was to talk to him again and possibly even join him. I was not ready to take that step. He promised if I never called him, he would leave me alone, and I took him at his word. I could not dismiss the prospect of forgetting the entire episode, and thus, avoiding another meeting with this gentleman for the rest of my life.

There was a potential benefit to going back to the way things were before. But could I go back? I had never focused on the fainter souls before. I really don't know why. I guess it wasn't what I was looking for. I wanted to feel good about things. Now that I had looked, I really didn't think I would be able to simply wipe the thought from my mind. Every time I saw a patient wheeled into the hospital, I would now have to wonder if I was going to see something wonderful or something dismal.

Knowledge might be power but too much information can simply wreck your ideals. It's like giving money to some campaign that promises to end hunger. You feel good about yourself thinking you saved someone from starving, but two weeks later you read a piece in a magazine about corrupt warlords buying mansions with money they extorted from some world hunger organization. You want to believe your contribution did some good, but once you read that article, you're never really sure.

The day after I spoke with Stan, I went into the office, just like normal, and saw all my patients. I went to the hospital after work. I had skipped out the past two evenings and I really couldn't put it off forever. If I simply stayed away, the hospital staff would begin to wonder what happened to me.

At first, the evening proved uneventful. The ER had its normal activity of cuts and falls and fevers and vomiting. The intensive and critical care units were busy, but no one there was really sitting on the edge. When I was meandering down the oncology wing, I felt the buzz of the pager on my hip. The ER sent a message asking me to make a quick visit.

I held my breath for a moment, but that wasn't going to help. Your body won't let you pass out, even if you want to. Your head starts to throb and your lungs start to hurt and eventually you open your mouth and breath. I think it's a safety device in the brain that causes that. It doesn't like being deprived of oxygen, so it makes you inhale even when unconsciousness is a much better alternative. The brain can be awfully selfish at times.

I made my way to the ER and asked what was up. I was told a helicopter would soon arrive that was transporting a patient that had been badly burned in a house fire. The prognosis was not good.

The helicopter pad for the hospital is on a concrete block at the top of a parking deck fairly near the ER doors. Helicopters are loud when they come in for a landing. I wanted to ask my brain if it still thought it was a good idea to be conscious, but I didn't think it would be able to hear me.

They wheeled the stretcher past me very quickly. It was a blur of motion. Still, I got a good look at the body and I saw the glowing form inside with very little concentration. I knew this person wasn't going to survive. When death is this close, the soul is just that much easier to see--even when it is fairly faint, and this spirit was indeed dim.

It was no where near as small or as weak as the soul of the drug dealer, but it was one of those souls I would have had doubts about in the past. Forced to bet, I would have guessed I would not see anything rise above the body at death. Previously, I would have faced this situation with near indifference. Not this time, this time I felt compelled to watch closer, as if I had a rooting interest.

The doctors and nurses immediately began inserting IVs but the sudden monotone sound of the heart monitor ended any hope before they even really started. They tried to revive the patient, but as I said, there was no chance.

For the first time, I found myself actually moving my head about trying to get a look at the patient, trying to see past the doctors and nurses to get a clear view. I wasn't focusing on the space above their heads because that's not where I expected the soul to be.

Now that there was no longer life within the patient, I had to actually concentrate harder to keep the inner essence in focus. I took this as a bad sign. I was able to get quick glimpses of the faded spirit, and just as I feared, it stayed close to the body.

"Come on," I muttered under my breath. "Don't stay in there." I didn't really think the soul could hear me, and as if to confirm that theory, the faintly glowing form did not move.

I shook my head once, but I would not give up hope. A week ago, I simply would have walked out of the room and waited for the family to see if they needed or wanted counseling. But that was then, back when I really didn't pay much mind to those souls I could not see depart this world, when I didn't look into the body after it had died, when I didn't know what happened to the inner spirit if it didn't rise up in the air, when I didn't think about ghastly alternatives.

"Come on," I repeated only slightly louder. The nurses and doctors began to depart the room and I now had a much clearer view of the corpse. The form that I saw did not appear to cling to its former host the way the spirit of the drug dealer did, but it made no attempt to leave the body, either. If I had to describe it, I would say it appeared indecisive, like a lady without an umbrella not sure if she really wanted to walk out into a rain storm, and instead just stood in the doorway motionless, hoping the rain would stop.

I was starting to get looks from the orderlies that were there to clean up and assist with the body. As I said, normally I don't stick around this long, but here I was staring at the somewhat gruesome remains of a badly burned victim.

Despite their growing concerns, I wouldn't look away. This meant something to me now, and I needed to know what would happen one way or the other. To my astonishment, I would not have to wait long.

The ethereal form appeared to stir, more importantly it appeared to grow in intensity. The faintness gave way

to a more distinct outline and a much greater radiance. It lifted slightly away from the body, almost hesitantly. It did not rise up with the joyous freedom of others I had seen before. Instead, it lingered much closer to its former host. It kept part of its shadowy form attached to the body, but its brightness continued to swell. It still had not reached a brilliance of a soul I was sure would reach the afterlife, but it was getting close. My own joy began to expand exponentially with the vivacity of the spirit before me.

As if to reward my growing optimism, the room began to fill with light and color. I doubt it was as dazzling as some of the other scenes I had witnessed in the past, but this one meant much more to me and the beauty staggered my own inner spirit. I felt a tear roll down my cheek as I took in this sight with unbridled enthusiasm. I wanted to cheer, but thankfully I kept quiet.

Still, my own elation rose to unheralded heights when I watched the ghostly outline finally break completely free of the burnt remains and rise high into the air. There would be no disappointment on this day. The multi-hued glow that surrounded this now free soul exploded in a swirl of majesty and wrapped around the jubilant spirit. Together, the lights and colors along with the freed spirit all disappeared.

Now I'm certain that I've seen dozens of transitions that were more colorful, more sparkling, more spectacular than this one, but the simple fact is I couldn't remember seeing anything more magnificent. It was a simple matter of finding victory in expected loss, in finding hope in utter despair, in finding life in death.

I took a long look at the body. Nothing remained. The soul had indeed left.

An orderly stepped before me.

"Doc, you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm alright. And remember, call me Jim. It's just sometimes... well, you know. I'll be outside for a moment. If the family wants to talk, I'll be available. Just give me a minute."

I moved quickly out of the ER and outside into the evening air. I looked up at the stars and thanked the heavens for what I witnessed. I decided at that moment that I would agree to help Stan.

Chapter 9

Wednesdays are my full days off. As an MFT that often counsels married couples, I have to be available a good many nights as well as weekends. People work, and people that need my help usually can't take time off during the day. I have to make allowances for that, and I work my schedule around their needs. That means I don't have weekends free. Instead, I have Wednesday as my day off and a few hours of freedom here and there during mornings or afternoons as my schedule allows. I think I picked Wednesday because it's smack dab in the middle of the week. You don't have that overall Monday depression or that Friday 'we might as well not be here because it's almost Saturday' euphoria. On Wednesdays, it's pretty much business as usual for the rest of the world.

It's actually not that bad working off a different schedule. I find that when I do have my time off, I'm not dealing with the same crowds. Mostly I end up doing shopping, taking day trips, doing odd jobs, running errands, buying groceries, and the like, when the large majority of people are at work.

The people I tend to run into a good deal are the retired folks that happily no longer have to contend with working Monday through Friday, or on the weekend for that matter. Sometimes they look at me suspiciously, wondering what I'm doing getting in their way at a time that I should be at work and funding the government accounts so their social security checks won't bounce. Often I shrink under their disapproving stares and feel the need to explain that I do work the rest of the week, but I don't think they would believe me. Seniors tend to be cynical of someone that has taken a place in line in front of them at the express check out lane. I guess I'm taking up their time, and that's something that makes people in their 70's very irritable. I can't blame them. Still, I got there first and I never have more than ten items.

Beyond the skeptical looks of the retired, there's no one else I really have to answer to, thus there's no pressure on me to conform to a normal schedule. I don't have any immediate family, so I don't have to worry about being home on Saturdays to watch the kids play baseball, or being available at nights to meet my wife for dinner. Some times I have to miss a friend's dinner party, but that's really not a big price to pay. The friends I have are not that close to me.

With a full day of no other responsibilities, I agreed to meet Stan outside my office on my next Wednesday off. He rolled up to the front of my building in a gray Nissan sedan. The model name had fallen off and there was enough street dust to cover the outline of what used to be there. I'm not good with cars, so without a substantial clue, I couldn't identify it on sight alone.

As he pulled to a stop beside me, I peered through the dingy side window. Stan was alone, so I got in the front passenger side.

"I thought I was going to meet your associate." I stated as I pulled the seatbelt over my shoulder and down to my hip.

"You will," Stan stated as he pulled away from the curb before I finished fastening the seatbelt. "We're going to pick him up now. He lives closer to the area I want to take you to today, so it's easier to get you first. I also wanted to talk to you before we met up with him."

"Where are we going today?"

"Camden." He didn't elaborate any further. "My associate's name is Ralph Finst. Ralph is not a very confident person. He's a bit unsure of himself, so I'd like you to be somewhat considerate of that."

"I deal with self-conscious people all the time. Remember I'm a trained psychologist."

"That's exactly how I don't want you to think. You're not here as a counselor or a therapist. I don't want you focusing on Ralph at all. You're here to find other people in need. You're here to look for inner spirits that we can help, ones that we can strengthen. If you start turning your attention on Ralph, he's going to stop helping us, and to be blunt, he's more important than you."

"I see." I really didn't, but I felt that was as good a response as any.

"I'm not trying to insult you. Your gift is very rare, and very important, but you can't tell us when someone is going to die. Ralph can, and getting him to join me was not an easy task."

"Can you at least give me some idea of what to expect before we pick him up?"

"Certainly. He's a little younger than you, but not by much. He grew up in this area, in Pennsauken, NJ. He's not very educated. At the moment, he's unemployed, but I've been helping him out with money. He doesn't do drugs, but he drinks a little."

"Alcoholism?"

Stan was silent for a moment or two. Finally, he did answer. "No, he could stop if he had to, it's not excessive, and he's not neglecting other activities. He's always showed up where and when I've asked him, and he doesn't show up drunk, but this is exactly what I'm talking about. I don't want you to make judgments about him or try to label him."

I felt I needed to defend myself. "Don't you think it's reasonable to ask if someone you want me to work with is an alcoholic?"

"I suppose it's a legitimate question, but I still want to remind you not to focus on Ralph and what you think you can do for him. He is very insecure. If you even look at him too long, he's going to think you're judging him--by his appearance, by the clothes he's wearing-- and none of that is going to do any good. Just nod to him, say hello, and leave it at that. Don't stare. That kind of thing."

"Fine. Not a problem. Now, that I know what to expect with Ralph, can I ask why we're going to Camden?"

"Sure."

"Ok, why are we going to Camden?"

Stan snickered slightly. "I see it's going to be fun having you around."

"Don't worry, I don't charge for the comedy. Seriously, why Camden?"

"Well, look at what we are trying to do here. As bizarre as it sounds, I am bringing together two people with very amazing gifts. One can see the intensity and strength of an inner spirit, the other can see the time and circumstances of an upcoming death. Together we are hoping to find someone that is weak in spirit that is in danger of dying in the very near future so that another group of my associates can try to strengthen that spirit."

"When will I get to meet these other associates?"

"In time, but that's not really your concern. It's your job to identify those we want to try and help. We don't expect you to do anything more. There are people with other gifts that are very good at approaching and assisting those that need some guidance. The people working with me all have their own ways of dealing with things. If I start throwing too many people together at the wrong time, I can guarantee that we're going to start

having problems. Right now, the one person you need to work with is Ralph. Once you and Ralph develop a good working relationship, we'll start bringing you along in other areas if you're still interested."

I wasn't sure I liked the sound of that, but at that point in the game, I decided not to rock the boat. I was the rookie, and rookies did what they were told. I returned to the topic of where we were going. "Well, that tells me what we're doing, but not why we're doing it in Camden."

"It sort of does, if you think about it. I don't mean to be depressing about our goals, but we're looking for people that are weak in spirit that are about to depart this world. A place like Camden, NJ is about as good as we can find in this area."

Considering that statement, it was hard not to feel a sudden twang of depression. I remained silent, and Stan sensed a need to explain.

"Actually, don't misinterpret me here. I'm not saying Camden is filled with people that are weaker in spirit than some ritzy, high income area in say North Jersey, or Idaho for that matter. In fact, I believe it takes a strong spirit to survive and live in a place like Camden. Those people that live in well-to-do areas don't require the same vigilance. Worse, their money and their surroundings create an environment that offers them much more chances to lose their, how shall I say it..., perhaps moral compass is the best way to put it. They have everything available to them including all the vices that can corrupt them."

"So why don't we go to one of those neighborhoods?" I wondered aloud.

"Because while people of a low crime neighborhood may be at higher risk in regards to their spirit, they're not in the same immediate danger regarding their lives. The odds are in their favor that they have time to grow older and wiser, to consider the consequences of the path they have chosen. They will most likely have an opportunity to clean up their ways, to gain a better perspective of life. The bottom line is that people in richer neighborhoods don't face the same kind of threats as the people that live in a city like Camden, and thus, they will get the chance to save themselves."

"Poor people can't save themselves?"

"Poor people are surrounded by violent crime and may not get the opportunity to save themselves. The life expectancy is shorter here because the dangers are greater. There are stabbings, shootings, drug overdoses, drive-by killings, gang wars, all the violent activities that go along with a high crime rate. I'm not going to apologize for my plan. I said it before--I think it takes a great deal of strength in spirit to survive in a city like Camden. Those that will survive and live a long life, I am not worried about them. Some people, however--many people in fact, never get the chance to survive. Their lives are snuffed out very young. Youth lacks wisdom because wisdom comes from experience. These are the people we need to find, and that's why we are going to Camden. We need to find those that are about to die."

That last statement finally opened a huge understanding in my mind. I had agreed to venture out with strangers to find people that were going to face their own mortality very soon. I was, in fact, very much like a ghoul, like the assistant to the mad scientist looking for a fresh brain.

The thought ate at my consciousness and I realized I needed to ask a very important question. "If this Ralph can see when and how people die, don't you think rather than focusing on saving their soul, maybe we should try to save their lives first? I mean if we could prevent someone from dying then we wouldn't have to worry so much about what happens to their spirit."

"So you want to cheat death?" Stan asked.

"What?"

"You're talking about cheating death."

"I suppose... no, maybe not. I'm talking about saving someone's life."

"What's the difference?" Stan pressed with a curious tone.

"First, I'm not sure what cheating death really means."

"It means you want to use Ralph's ability to start making decisions that have a much greater consequence than you can imagine."

"That sounds rather obscure. All I'm talking about is seeing someone in danger and doing what you can to get them out of danger." I paused for a moment and tried to come up with a better explanation. "It's like a lifeguard at the beach. The lifeguard sees someone drowning and he jumps in to stop that from happening. Someone was about to die, but the lifeguard prevented it. That's not cheating death. That's the lifeguard doing his job, doing the right thing, acting responsibly--call it what you want, but that's what I'm talking about. If we're going to know how and when someone will die, we can act to prevent that death, especially if it's senseless."

"It's not the same thing. Ralph doesn't look at the current circumstances and base his understanding on what he sees at that moment. He sees someone standing on a corner and suddenly he knows that this person will be dead seven days from now in a gang fight. Does the lifeguard look at a person, decide that this person is going to drown, and then tell that person that he can't go in the water? Can you imagine that scene? He's not doing his job anymore. He's interfering in people's lives. Don't people have the right to decide for themselves if they want to go swimming in the ocean?"

My example got thrown back in my face in a way I didn't expect. "I don't know. It just seems to me that if we have information that can save someone's life, maybe we should use it. Maybe if we know there's going to be a gang war, we give the police a tip in advance."

"And how will you feel if a police officer is killed in trying to stop that gang fight?"

I didn't know how to answer that. I was getting confused and frustrated. All I wanted to do was save someone from an unnecessary death and suddenly Stan was making it seem like I wanted to interfere in personal choice or get innocent people killed. Still, I could not fathom how it might not be a good idea to try and stop the tragedy from happening in the first place. "Ok, maybe that's a bad example."

Stan, however, was already prepared with more ammunition. "Ok, perhaps you'd rather warn the person he's going to die in a gang fight. How are you going to warn him? Just go up and tell him? You think he's going to believe you? Maybe you want to tell one of his friends. How much you want to bet the friend is in the same gang? What happens if the friend dies instead?"

"I don't know, it just seems wrong to me to do nothing."

"We're not doing nothing, we're doing what we can."

"But from what you're telling me, you're concentrating on saving a soul as opposed to saving a life."

"Maybe we do save a life now and then. Maybe by trying to help that young man on the street corner in our own way, he decided to drop out of the gang, and because he wasn't in the gang anymore he never dies in a

gang fight. Maybe the end Ralph envisioned never comes true because we intervened to save the spirit."

"Has that ever happened?"

Stan was quiet again for another few moments. He finally answered with a very determined tone. It was the kind of tone an experienced teacher uses when she's had just about enough of a troublesome student.

"You know what, I'm not sure I should answer that for you just yet. I think you need to consider what we've talked about first. Once you see Ralph and work with him a bit, then you can reconsider whether you think we should get involved in trying to change the outcome of things that are much bigger than you currently comprehend."

"So you're not going to tell me?"

"Not now, especially not now. We're almost at Ralph's and I don't want you talking about this in front of him."

"Why not?"

Stan turned his head toward me and gave me a look that was not at all comforting. It was not blazing anger that I saw in his eyes, it was more of blistering impatience, as if I went ahead and pushed that experienced teacher a little too far.

"I want you to think about what it's like for Ralph. He doesn't see spirits rise up and enter the afterlife. He doesn't see lights, and color, and glory. He sees death, most of it violent and painful. And whether you want to admit it or not, there is nothing he can do to stop it. It would be like putting your finger in the dyke, but it's not just one hole. It's a hundred holes, a thousand holes, a hundred thousand holes. And to make things worse the holes are as big as softballs. If you start talking about how you think we should work to stop these violent deaths, he's going to laugh in your face and tell me to kick you out of the car. And I will listen to him. Before you think I'm being harsh, ask yourself if you would like to have Ralph's gift instead of yours?"

"I don't think I would," I admitted.

"Then I suggest you follow my instructions on this without questioning me."

Chapter 10

Stan's sedan pulled up in front of a brick apartment building. A casually but somewhat shabbily dressed man ran out of the building's entrance. His clothes looked a bit big for him and he appeared to hunch over as he walked, but that was all I could gather from my quick glance. I did not want to stare.

I heard the back door behind me open. The car shook slightly as Ralph threw himself inside. It shook a whole lot more when he slammed the door shut.

Stan never turned his head, but I caught him take a quick glimpse in his rearview mirror.

"Hello Ralph. This is Jim. He's the one I told you about. He'll be taking a walk with us today."

I turned my head quickly to the back and nodded toward Ralph and then set my eyes immediately back to the windshield in front of me.

"Hello." I stated simply.

"Hey," was the simple response I received. The following question was obviously directed back at Stan. "Camden?"

"Yes. I want to get him comfortable with the area and let the people see him with us."

That raised a question, but I declined to ask it. I would remain silent for the rest of the trip as I wondered what I got myself into.

"Did you pay the rent in advance for the next six months?" Stan asked.

"Yeah, nice to know I'm set for a while. Thanks."

"No problem. I'll get another six months to you long before it's due. If there's anything else you need, you just let me know. I need you to concentrate on what you have to do and not to worry where you're going to be staying, or if you have enough to eat, or anything else for that matter. You're very important to us and we need you to be focused."

"Whatever, doesn't take focus, comes whether I focus or not."

I really wanted to ask about that one, but again I realized silence was my best ally at this point.

After some twists and turns, a stretch on a busy highway, then some more turns, the sedan eventually brought us to an open air parking lot surrounded by a chain link fence. Stan obviously knew the attendant. He waved and the gate opened.

Stan and Ralph exited the vehicle after parking in what appeared to be a lot for impounded or perhaps better described as abandoned cars. Stan ran over to the attendant, handed him something and returned back to lead the way through a small side gate.

Being late morning, closer to noon and very sunny, the world appeared bright even here in Camden. The surrounding buildings looked older, a bit worn down, some appeared empty, but I didn't feel as if I was walking through a dangerous crime ridden city. Scraggly grass or perhaps weeds appeared here and there within the front lots where dirt had collected, but there were no trees I could find in the area. A few cracks etched through the concrete sidewalks and a few pieces of trash dotted the curb next to the street, but again I

did not feel the alarming, suffocating sensation of a dangerous slum.

If anything, I felt a sense of age and neglect, not abandonment, but more like indifference. It was almost as if this portion of the world simply didn't warrant any great attention and it was left to exist on its own.

Stan walked a few steps, stopped and turned his attention directly at me. "Understand the main purpose of why we're here today. I don't want you using your gift unless and until I say so. I'm doing that for your own safety. You start staring at people at the wrong time and in the wrong way, you're not going to last long here."

"So what is the main purpose for me being here?" I asked.

"I want the people of this neighborhood to see you with me. They know me, they know I'm not a threat. Most people think I'm just another zealot trying to save the world from crime one person at a time. Other than trying to help people, I really don't interfere, and that suits everyone else around here just fine. Others look at me as a kook. That's also just fine. As long as they don't think I'm a threat to them, I don't care how crazy they think I am."

"So we're just going to walk around together?"

"At first, like I said, I want people to know that you're with me. That's going to help you in the future. It's helped Ralph. He can pretty much go wherever he wants and as long as he doesn't do anything stupid or stumble on anything carelessly, no one's going to pay him any mind. That's how I want things to work for you. I want you to feel at ease here, not worried about your own safety. I understand that's going to take some time."

"Probably a lot of time," I admitted.

"Not true. You'll be surprised. As long as you follow my instructions, you'll be taking strolls through the streets around here on your own without a second thought."

I found that very difficult to believe.

Stan nodded to the brick buildings surrounding us. "We're in a warehouse area. Some of these are still used, some are abandoned. Not many people around us right now, but that's going to change. We're going to walk a few blocks and turn toward a more residential area of the city. There are some row houses and some apartment complexes. There will be people standing on corners, sitting on steps, lying on the sidewalks, walking past you in every direction. For now, ignore all of them."

"Just walk by them?"

"Just keep following me. If someone says hello to you or greets you in any way, just nod, and say 'Hey'. If someone asks you a question, just shake your head and move on, don't make eye contact. Walk with purpose, don't stare, look at street signs and always make it seem as if you know where you are. Don't linger or appear lost at any time, even if you don't have any idea where you are. I know this area and Ralph knows it, too. I assure you we won't be lost, even if it feels like it. If you start really getting nervous about something and you need a break from all this, ask me if I think it's going to rain. I'll take care of it from there."

"There's not a cloud in the sky."

"You want to come up with your own phrase?"

"How about 'I want to go home', that sounds more realistic to me."

"Maybe more realistic, but also more likely to get you in trouble. You want that?"

"No."

"Then let's just stick with asking me about rain."

"Fine."

"From here on in, don't say or do anything other than what I've instructed you to do. Just follow me and remember what I've told you."

The next few minutes rushed past me in a blur. I focused on everything Stan said. I also concentrated on trying to commit to memory the path we were taking. I tried to memorize turns, recognizable landmarks, street signs, and so on. That lasted for about maybe a half mile. We made enough turns that I no longer knew which direction was which. The sun was directly over head, so I really couldn't even tell which way was east and which way was west. I read so many street signs, I felt like a novice travel guide for triple A. The buildings all began to look the same, and I realized I was hopelessly lost. The only thing I knew for sure was that we were certainly walking past a lot more people than I anticipated.

Thankfully, no one said anything to me, so I didn't have to nod or ask a question about the rain. I never looked directly at anyone. I didn't even consider trying to see someone's soul out here, not for one instant. That would require some concentration on my part, which means I'd have to stop and stare. You don't have to be an expert in sociology to know that action is guaranteed to start trouble. Instead, I stayed near Stan's back and continued to look about the streets as if I really knew where I was. Nothing could be further from the truth.

This went on for over an hour. I think we circled back a few times. Some street names started looking familiar and some areas less foreboding. The faces of the strangers we passed on the street didn't look as ominous, either. I can't say I was feeling at home just yet, but I was worried less about the bogeyman jumping out from a dark alley and ripping off my skin. Not that this happens in Camden, but when you're in my situation, the mind prepares for the worst. Just as I was starting to lose some of my anxiety, Ralph cleared his throat, and Stan abruptly changed his path.

He walked up to a corner newsstand and quickly bought a magazine. He seemed to pass a questioning glance toward Ralph, but I was too slow to see if Ralph responded in any way. At this point, I certainly didn't want to ask. Stan walked a bit over to an open street corner all the while flipping through the pages of the periodical.

Ralph followed in his wake. I realized at that moment how well Ralph fit in. He moved without concern, but instead with a casual certainty. Not a single step betrayed any sense of nervousness or unease. He followed behind Stan as if it was his sole mission, and even along these tough streets of Camden, NJ, he revealed not a single moment of hesitation.

I don't know if I was impressed by this or simply stunned. I know I had to concentrate on what Stan had told me. I tried to move without indecision, not to look lost, not to stare at one place too long, but I also knew that this required a great deal of effort on my part. I was quickly becoming mentally exhausted. The fear of the bogeyman might have died away, but I certainly had not reached a comfort level where I could ignore my surroundings. I couldn't fake being relaxed on these unknown streets any more than a fly can act relaxed while caught in a spider's web.

Not so with Ralph. He moved with the casual ease of a man rising out of his sofa and heading toward the refrigerator for a beer.

Stan suddenly stopped and turned back to me. "Stop where you are and look at me. I'm going to hand you this

magazine. I want you to take it, and turn around. You're going to see a group of about seven people standing together over by a stone stairway. It's across the street. They can't hear us from where we are now. Face those people, but don't look directly at them. Open the magazine in front of you and hold it in front of your face. This way you will be able to see them from over the top of the magazine. From their perspective, it's going to look like you're reading the magazine and not looking at them. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

And with that, Stan handed me the magazine. I took it, and turned about slightly while fanning through the pages. I kept my face pointed downward, but I raised my eyes to scan across the street. I found the group Stan referred to and I stopped turning pages. I think it was at an advertisement for antiperspirant. I'm not sure if that was by my unconscious decision or if it was just fate having a bit of a cosmic laugh. I kept the magazine up in front of most of my face, so I had to peer up over the top to see anything.

Stan seemed pleased with my performance and said so. "Good job. Now I'm going to point to things in the magazine, but ignore that. Just nod your head. Ralph is going to tell you which person across the street to concentrate on. Focus and stare as long as it takes, just don't lower the magazine from where it is now. They have no idea you're looking at them."

Ralph spoke up without waiting for instructions.

"The second one on the left, male, the one in the blue and white shirt, he ain't long for this world."

"How much time left?" Stan asked.

"A week and four days."

I never noticed Ralph take a look at any of those people and I could not imagine how he knew this.

Stan's hand came up close to my chin as he pointed to some inane portion of the advertisement in the magazine. "Do you see the one he's talking about?"

"Yes," I answered somewhat reluctantly.

I did in fact look across to the individual that Ralph had described. He was a young man, maybe in his late teens, maybe early twenties. He paid me no mind.

Before I even began to think about this person's soul, I thought of what Ralph revealed to me. This young man was going to die and soon. I can't begin to describe the hollowness I felt at this moment.

Granted, I've dealt with death before on many levels. I've seen people die young. I've seen them die very old. I've seen people finally let go after long periods of illness, and I've watched people expire after a completely unanticipated accident. I had become very familiar with death, but none of my previous experiences really prepared me for this.

When you're in a hospital and someone points to a patient in intensive care and says 'that one has about a week to live,' it can be depressing, but it's not really unnerving. If someone gets wheeled into the ER covered in blood, it's not a tremendous leap to think that this person's life is in jeopardy.

The problem was that I was not in a hospital. I was not looking at a patient in a bed with tubes sticking out of his arms or going through his nose and down his throat. I was not looking at an ambulance stretcher with a victim of a car accident or some other tragedy.

At that moment, I was looking across the street and watching an apparently healthy young man stand in the sun without a care in the world. I was just told that this young man did not have his whole life in front of him, he had less than two weeks. This goes beyond depressing and unnerving. It shoots into the realm of mind-bending. It's almost as if reality doesn't exist anymore.

"How's he going to die?" I blurted out.

"It doesn't matter," Stan interrupted quickly in a somewhat irritated tone. "Please just do what I ask you to do and don't worry about anything else. It's not your concern at this time."

It might not have been my concern, but I couldn't simply whisk it out of my mind. I was staring at a person that I was told had less than two weeks to live. You can't just blot that out as if you just entered the wrong number in a calculator and needed to hit the clear button. This kind of thing has a bit more staying power.

"Sorry. I'll take a look now."

I focused on the individual in question. I concentrated on the middle of his chest. When I try to look deep into a person to see their soul, I really don't do anything beyond clearing my mind of distractions. I try not to think of anything else but the person in my sights. While focusing on this apparently healthy young man in Camden, slowly I began to distinguish a pale orange glow. The form took greater shape and I could distinguish the miniature size of the ghostly silhouette.

"You see something now, don't you?" Stan asked.

"Yes."

"I know you can see how bright and how large the inner spirit is, that is the essence of your gift, and it's my ability to understand that essence. The problem is it's going to be difficult for you to describe just how bright something is to me without a point of reference, so for that, we are going to use the spirit of the drug dealer I asked you to look at when we first met. Consider his essence to be the starting point of zero. If what you see is smaller and dimmer than that spirit, just tell me it's in the negative numbers."

"It's in the negative numbers," I responded sadly.

"I had a feeling," Stan replied somberly.

I didn't take my eyes off the young man, but I still could not refrain from asking, "How did you know?"

"I know him. He doesn't do a lot to help himself around here. Let's just leave it at that."

Ralph then chimed in. "There's another. The girl two over from him. The one in the yellow pants. Same time as the guy."

I assumed this meant they would die together. I still wanted to know how, but I knew not to ask.

"Focus on her," Stan requested.

I didn't have to move at all. I just shifted my eyes and kept the magazine in front of my face. I pushed thoughts of the young man out of my mind and focused on the girl. Her spirit came into focus much quicker.

"This one's bigger, brighter," I noted with a degree of enthusiasm.

"How much bigger, how much brighter?"

"Uhhmm... a fair amount."

Stan wouldn't let that stand. "I need a bit more than that."

"I don't know what else to tell you. It's not very big or bright, but nothing like the other one."

"Ok, do it this way," Stan offered. "Consider the patients you see that enter the hospital with spirits so bright you know without a doubt you will see them enter the afterlife. Make that a ten on a scale. The drug dealer is still at zero. That's the kind of measuring stick we're going to use, from zero to ten. On that scale anything over a five you feel pretty good about, below that you start to worry. Does that make sense?"

"Yes. Kind of like magnitude measures for stars in the sky."

"Somewhat like that, yes. I'm looking for spirits that are faint," Stan declared, "but one's we can still reach, ones that still hold hope. The one's you feel are strong enough to make it on their own, we don't have to worry about them. Those are the ones at five and over on our scale. The ones that are not that bright, not that big, those are the ones in danger and those are the ones where we need to focus our attention. Do you still understand?"

"Yes." I answered honestly. It made sense. Stan was looking for souls that I would have possibly dismissed in the past as not really having much of a chance of showing me anything spectacular at their final passing.

"So on that scale what would you call the girl?" Stan inquired.

"About a two, maybe a three."

"Excellent." He paused and took a longer look at the girl. "I don't know her name. Ralph?"

"Don't know her." Ralph said plainly.

"We can find out easy enough. We have time."

"Is that it, Ralph? Anymore?" Stan asked.

"Nah, just those two."

"What are you going to do about the young man?" I asked while putting down the magazine and turning back to face Stan.

"Nothing."

"So he's going to die in a week and four days, and it looks like he's not going anywhere pleasant when he does die. And that's all there is to it?"

"That's all there is to it for us. He's too far gone. I doubt we could save him if we had five years, forget about a few days."

I looked down at the curb and shook my head.

"What's his problem?" Ralph asked somewhat belligerently.

"He's not used to it yet." Stan replied. "He doesn't understand things yet, but he will."

"I don't think I will ever understand this," I admitted.

Stan spoke with authority, not with anger. "Look, you're not happy. I can understand that, but there is nothing we can do. If you want to go talk to him, go right ahead. But what are you going to say? What do you think will make him even listen to you? He'll laugh at you like a nut, or do something worse because he can. That's the plain simple truth."

I looked up, but away from Stan, away from the crowd across the street. I looked up the road at nothing in particular.

"Look, you shouldn't be feeling this way," Stan continued. "You should be happy. We can work with the girl. You did good work today, you both did. Leave it at that."

I wanted to believe I could let it go as Stan advised, but I wondered how long thoughts of that young man would haunt me.

Chapter 11

Stan guided us unerringly back to the parking lot near the warehouses and once we placed ourselves back in the car, he drove us away. Ralph muttered a few things that didn't sound important and I didn't take notice. His words weren't intended for me, so ignoring them was not a problem.

After dropping off Ralph, Stan pulled away and said we were going to stop for something to eat at a diner.

I simply shrugged.

Once inside and led to our booth, I threw myself down on the cushy, vinyl covered seat.

"I'm really not hungry," I stated unenthusiastically.

"Yes, you are," Stan contradicted. "You just don't want to accept that you are. You've got a lot on your mind and you don't know how to deal with it. It's all understandable. But you are hungry. Pick something light--scrambled eggs, waffles or French toast, but not too much syrup. You'll be surprised how much you eat."

I ordered a glass of juice and the waffles.

While we were waiting for our food, I looked up at Stan. "So what happens next?"

"You get to relax for a while. You don't have to do or worry about anything for the next few days. Get back into your routine, do the things you normally do. Eventually this will all begin to settle and you'll start feeling good about what happened here. Then you, Ralph and I will go out again in a few days, maybe next week. Wednesdays are good for you, right?"

"That's really not what I'm asking."

"No?"

"What happens next with the girl?"

Stan looked at me with raised eyebrows. It appeared as if he wanted to scold me for focusing on someone else rather than myself, as if I shouldn't even be asking such an inane question. Obviously to him, the girl was his problem, not mine. In the end, he decided to answer me without reprimand. He gave me much more detail than I expected.

"I will talk to my associates over the next day or two. We will put together a plan and approach her when it is safe for everyone. We certainly won't approach her when she's in a group like she was today, and we don't want to do it when it's late or when she's alone. We'll watch her and decide what's best. As for exactly what we're going to say or do, that depends on many things."

"Such as?"

"Such as what some of the others see in this girl. Like I told you before, I have a group of people and they all have gifts like you. Some can see things that will help us identify the best way to talk to her. So, I really can't tell you what we're going to do until I know more about her myself."

"You only have a week and four days."

"I'm aware of that."

"That's not a lot of time to turn someone's life around."

"It's more time than we need."

"You're pretty confident in this group of yours."

"Yes and no."

I almost laughed. Of all the ambiguous answers Stan gave me over the short time I knew him, this one pretty much served as the definitive example. He answered both in the positive and the negative exactly at the same time and did so without a hint of uncertainty, as if the answer should be as obvious to me as sand in a desert.

"Well, which is it?" I said through a snicker.

"It's both."

"Of course it is. Mind explaining?"

Stan tilted his head to the side as if he could not fathom how I did not follow his logical analysis.

"You said I was pretty confident in my group. I am, so the answer to that part of your question was yes."

"There was another part of my question? Actually, I don't even remember asking a question. It was more of a remark."

"Yes, but your remark was both correct and flawed."

"Clearly," I responded while truly not understanding anything he was saying. "I work very hard at being accurately incorrect. It helps my digestion."

"Good, that will help you eat. Here comes our food."

The waitress placed our respective plates in front of us and asked if we wanted anything else like coffee. I refused, but Stan responded in the affirmative while holding out his cup. Actually, I think I would have expected him to hold out his cup but decline the offer. It would match the 'yes and no' answer he just gave me. I could then watch the waitress for clues on how to act.

Unfortunately, she simply poured out the coffee in his mug and moved off to another table, leaving me to unwind these riddles on my own.

"Not too much syrup now." Stan reminded me.

"Actually, I'm more of a butter man."

"Better to clog the heart than rot the teeth, eh?"

"Nah, butter is good for you. It's natural. Better than that fake stuff. God knows what that really is. As far as I know, it could be the oil from pressed elf meat."

"Is that what happens to them after they make their quota of toys and cookies?" Stan asked playing along.

"They get thrown in a vat and cooked down to make margarine?"

"It's possible."

Stan shook his head. "Sure it is. And you're a doctor. What about those studies on cholesterol?"

"Those studies were probably funded by the manufacturers of elf oil. Anyway, I don't really believe in all that stuff about bad cholesterol and good cholesterol. It's like the eggs. First they were good for you, then they were bad for you, then part was good and part was bad. To tell the truth, I don't think they have a clue. And if butter is going to kill me, better that than being run over by a train."

"You should make a commercial for the Butter Makers of America."

"I've sent them letters, they don't respond."

"Well, eat your waffles, you'll feel better."

I cut off a small piece of waffle, stabbed it with my fork and stuffed it in my mouth. As I started to chew, I realized I was indeed very hungry. Stan was right again. This both annoyed me and reminded me of what we were discussing before elves somehow entered the conversation.

"You said my remark was both correct and flawed," I stated through a mouthful of waffle. "Right now, I don't even remember my remark."

"After I said that we had more time than we needed, you said I must be pretty confident in my group," Stan assisted.

"Oh yeah, that's right and to that you said, 'yes and no.' I'm still trying to figure that out."

"It's not that difficult really. I am confident in my group, that's the yes portion, but that's not why a little over a week is more time than we need. That's why I can say yes and no. The 'no' part has to do with the fact that your remark is flawed. You are inferring that the effectiveness of my people will determine the outcome and the time needed. In the end, it's really not up to me, my group, or you for that matter. It's all up to the person we're trying to help. She's either going to listen to us and decide to make a change, or she's not. For all the people we've tried to help, it's not like we try to brainwash them or coerce them into believing what's best for them."

"I don't mean to contradict you on this, but I'm having a hard time buying into that. Remember, I'm a psychologist, a trained therapist in Marriage and Family Counseling. You're not talking about something I'm unfamiliar with here."

"You don't think it's up to your patient to want to change or not?"

"It's partially up to them, but there are things I can do to help. And sometimes it does take time, a great deal of time. It doesn't happen over night or even over two weeks."

"Apples and Oranges."

"Excuse me?"

"You're comparing apples and oranges," Stan declared. "You're thinking of your patients that are trying to cope with all of the problems they face in society or in a relationship. Yes, that takes time and there are things

you have been trained to do that can help them better face these challenges, but that's not what we're trying to do. We just want to strengthen the spirit enough so that it can let go of this world and make the jump to the next."

I considered that phrase, and at first it sounded rather empty, as if it lacked the nobility I imagined this endeavor would hold. I wanted to believe I was on a task of momentous significance and extraordinarily deep meaning. It was my desire to save people from the dreadful and send them to the magnificent, not for just a moment in time, but for all eternity, or so I imagined.

Now as Stan puts it, he simply wants to put the soul on a bit of an exercise regiment, to build up its stamina enough so it can escape the body when it's time comes, or that's how he made it sound to me. To hear him explain it in such a casual way, it almost sounded like one of those bad infomercials for a piece-of-junk equipment that will tone those flabby muscles in just three seconds a day. The entire nobility of the venture evaporated. Maybe that's what he wanted.

"Sounds like all you think you have to do is give them a shove in the right direction and they'll either start walking that way, or they'll fall down."

"That's a very insightful way to put it." Stan replied with a smile. "But you are forgetting again that the people I will use to do this have gifts of their own. We will stack the deck in our favor; we will approach this girl in a way that will give us the best chance of success. We will cut to the very core of her being and allow her a clear path to choose, but as I said, in the end, it's going to be up to her. She is either going to change directions or she is going to stay on the same path she is currently on. Her decision shouldn't take more than a week."

A question nagged at me, one that I knew would irritate Stan, but I asked it anyway.

"Are you going to warn her about what's going to happen to her?"

"Maybe," was his very simple answer, almost too simple as if it was said only to pacify me. "I can't give you any more definitive answer than that because as I said before I still don't even know how we're going to approach her. It's possible that telling her that her time is near might just be the wakeup call she needs. If that's what it takes, I will consider using it. I know you think we should warn her and somehow try to save her life, but you don't have my experience in this yet. There are things that require caution and our intervention must be balanced against these concerns."

"You're already going to let the boy die without intervening," I said with a hint of frustration.

"I'm not letting anything happen. I can't control what happens. People are going to die whether I intervene or not, you're just going to have to get used to that."

"I don't know if I can."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be here," Stan responded flatly.

Maybe I shouldn't, I thought to myself, but then I thought of the faint spirit of the victim from the house fire. I was so thrilled to see that soul move on, I was so happy and I wanted to feel that way again. But I also wanted to feel as if I contributed to that. Then, I thought of the girl I saw today. Maybe the boy was a lost cause, but the girl wasn't. Her spirit was dim and small, but maybe Stan and his friends could do enough to get her to understand. Maybe she would die no matter what we did, maybe that was her destiny, but I had to believe there was a chance she could be saved in another way.

"I'm sorry," I said abruptly. "I'm still getting used to all this. You do what you think is best." I paused for a

moment and then I thought of something I hadn't before, and I had a new request. "If you can't prevent the girl from dying, maybe I should be there."

"You want to be there?"

"To see what happens to the soul, to see if we succeeded."

Stan appeared as if he was considering it. He looked at me, and then he looked at his coffee. Eventually, he shook his head. "Not a bad idea, but I don't think so."

I couldn't imagine why he wouldn't want me to check at the end, to ensure we accomplished what we set out to do. Again, I remembered the feeling I had at the hospital the last time I saw a soul enter the afterlife, when it felt like a personal victory. I wanted to witness that again.

"At first blush," Stan explained, "I'm all for it, but it raises too many potential problems."

"Why would there be problems?"

Stan raised his hand to his face and rubbed his chin. "Actually, a whole lot of problems, some that might raise the wrong questions."

"What are you talking about?" I demanded.

Stan looked at me through a serious expression. "I'm talking about you being at the scene of someone's death, but not in a hospital. Think about that for a moment. You're not a volunteer waiting to be a grief counselor, you're waiting in some dark hall, some lonely alley, some back room. You'd be a stranger walking around in Camden, NJ with no real reason for being there. That won't look good. And what are you going to say when people see you looking at a dead body in one of these places?"

I didn't expect that, wasn't prepared for it. Still, I wanted to be part of this, more than just identifying those who needed help. I wanted to see what we accomplished. I blurted out an admittedly stupid response. "Maybe I can hide?"

"Oh, that's great, like they won't find you. You have to be close enough to see the body so you can see the spirit, but no one is going to notice you hiding in a corner."

"Ok, that was dumb, but if I know the circumstances of the death, maybe I can be at the right place at the right time and then get out of there before anyone notices me. You said Ralph can see how it's going to happen. Maybe based on that information, we can find a safe way for me to be present without alerting anyone."

"That's hoping for way too much. And what if the circumstances of her death are extremely violent? What if she's murdered by a jealous boyfriend that thinks she's cheating on him? Suddenly you appear. You think Mr. Jealous Boyfriend is going to believe that you just want to take a look at the corpse? And if he does buy that, do you really think he's going to let you live so you can identify him in a police line-up?"

"Maybe it won't be violent. Maybe she'll just be alone. Maybe she'll fall or something like that and I can just be someone that passes by."

"Just passing by? That might work once, even twice, but how many times are you just going to be just passing by a corpse before someone makes a connection?"

With that, I thought of something I hadn't before.

"Well, how do you deal with it?"

"Deal with what?"

"You approach people right before they're going to meet their end. Eventually, that person dies. Then you approach someone else, again that person dies. It happens again, same result. Hasn't anyone started wondering about you? You said no one around here views you as a threat, they see you as a zealot that tries to save people. And yet, the people that you try to save all end up dying. How do you avoid suspicion with that?"

Stan's eyes narrowed. "We are very careful. Do you really want to know?"

I paused and thought about that for a moment. I remembered how too much knowledge might be a bad thing, but this wasn't that case. This wasn't going to change my opinion about something I felt good about. This was a serious matter and I needed to know the truth.

"Yes, I want to know."

"Very well. First, I never send the same group of people to approach those we know are about to die. I mix it up. Let's say three people died in Camden in a four month span and all were contacted by the same person right before their passing. That indeed would raise suspicion. If, however, it was a different group each time, it lowers that suspicion."

"But even if it's a group of different people, it's still under your direction," I countered. "You would still be the common denominator and that would have to raise a few eyebrows. You would be like the mob boss or the cult leader. You don't do the actual killing, but you order your followers to do it. I know if I saw what was going on and saw some of your people walking to me, I'd run in the opposite direction."

"You didn't let me finish. Second, we approach people in a very private manner. We don't advertise what we are doing in these cases. Do you think we are that stupid? There are times we can't avoid it, but for the most part we keep contact with those about to die as secret as possible. This way no one makes a connection to us."

Something didn't sound right, like it didn't add up. I tried to piece it together in my mind, but it was feeling jumbled. Eventually, I pinpointed part of what was bothering me.

"You said you brought me here today mainly so people could see me with you. That was the big part of the plan. You wanted people not to think I was a threat because I was just part of your group. Now, it sounds like the group is somewhat of a secret, like you really don't want anyone to know about you. What am I missing? I think you even said before that most people accept you as just another zealot trying to save people from a life of crime. If you keep your contacts with people here a secret, then how can people form any opinion of you at all?"

Stan gritted his teeth. "Because I'm smart enough to have anticipated this problem. I've set up a second group, one that has no gifts; it's full of a bunch of volunteers that want to save the world, religious fanatics mostly. I use them as a front. I go around with them just enough to make my presence known. I let them hand out leaflets about avoiding drugs, staying out of gangs, not going into prostitution. They try to spread the word so to speak, and they speak to everyone. I help setup this association of volunteers and I'm looked upon as their benevolent spokesperson and benefactor. I give them what they need, I facilitate meetings between them and other community organizations, I make sure they are viewed as a well-meaning association just trying to lookout for the well being of Camden."

"So the people of Camden associate you with this other group and no one questions your motives."

"Why would they?"

"I guess they wouldn't"

Stan shook his head. "They wouldn't and they don't. This visible association of well-meaning do-gooders serves as my cover. They speak to hundreds of people a week trying to get them to live right, find the path of the righteous, or whatever. And all the people they contact don't die in a matter of weeks. So, it's not a situation where it looks like every person my associates contact end up dead. My association in Camden is much larger than you think, and this allows proper cover for what I'm truly there to do."

"Does the larger group know what you're really up to?"

"No, they have no need. For the most part, I leave them be when it comes to their outreach programs. In return, I feel no need to explain to them my true intentions. In the end, we both get what we want."

"It must have taken a great deal of time and money to setup such a group."

"Actually, no. You just have to find the right people. Two or three well-intentioned people with good leadership and organizational skills will do all the work for you. You just have to find them, put them in charge, and push them in the right direction. It's amazing how much these kind of people can do. After a while, they even start putting together fund raisers that solves the money problem."

I nodded my head as I began to appreciate Stan in a new light. "And you can find good leaders and organizers easier than other people because you know people with gifts. I would bet you know someone that can read leadership ability in a person, just like that person that can see character, or I can see souls."

Stan simply gave me a toothy grin and admitted nothing.

"Alright," I conceded, "that explains why no one questions your connection with the people that end up dying. Isn't there a way we can use it for me as well? Maybe if I join this other group it will give me a reason for being there in Camden."

"It's possible," Stan allowed. "I don't want you to think I've just ruled it out completely. There's still a chance. I just have to think about this. There's a lot more to consider than meets the eye. As I said before, there are still risks other than people suspecting you of foul play. There is the potential of danger. We can't just put you in jeopardy."

"Ok, but what if I take a look a day or two before the expected end? This girl, for example, maybe I can come back a week from now and take another look at her. Maybe I can see if her soul actually is bigger and brighter. Wouldn't it be good to know?"

Stan unexpectedly frowned and then explained why. "What if it's not?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if it's not brighter? What if you give a look and you tell us it's even dimmer than before?"

"Maybe you can change your tactics."

"Or maybe it means she's not willing to change hers."

"At least we'll know."

"And how do you think that will make us all feel? How did you feel when I said the young man you looked at today was too far gone to help?"

"Terrible," I admitted.

"And how do you think this will affect the morale of people trying to do some good here? Maybe it's better we don't know for sure. Maybe we are better off having you take your first look and stopping there."

"But if we know what we're doing is not working, then we can stop and not waste our time."

"Is that what you think this would be if we failed? A waste of time? Maybe we will fail ninety nine times out of a hundred, but what about that one time. Would it be worth it? It would be for me, but I can't say about everyone else."

I wasn't so sure. One out of ninety nine was better than none, but it still sounded like failure.

Stan finished his coffee. "Look, I just need to think about this for a while. I'm not saying it's a bad idea, I'm just not sure if it's a good one. Do you understand my concerns?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Then be patient and give me some time. Maybe we can work something out eventually, but not now. For now, I'd rather you focus on helping us find the people we can help the most. You still need some time to get comfortable with what we're doing. As I said before, take a few days and get back to your regular routine. What we're hoping to accomplish didn't start today and it won't end today, either. Next Wednesday I'll pick you up and we'll go for another walk. You're going to start to like Camden. You're going to get used to it, and it is going to get used to you."

I probably could get used to Camden. I just wondered if I would ever get used to Stan.

Chapter 12

When Stan picked me up on the following Wednesday, he already had Ralph in the car. For some reason, Ralph sat in the back which allowed me to get in the front passenger seat.

We went our merry way in relative silence and that was fine with me. I didn't have any new questions for either of them. Well, that's not really an accurate statement. I had about a quarter of a zillion questions for them both, but none that I was prepared to ask at that very moment.

Instead, I focused on the task I expected to face. We were headed to Camden, NJ to look for someone else that was going to die in the next few weeks that had a soul that needed saving. Good ol' Camden, if you can make it there, you can make it anywhere.

Sinking into the vinyl seat covers of the sedan I realized I was indeed much more at ease at the prospect of heading into the city that has annually been rated one of the most dangerous in the nation. Certainly I didn't have the same ecstatic anticipation that would have engulfed me if we were headed to some place like, say Disney World, but at least I felt there was a better than average chance I would actually return this time. That in itself was a remarkable improvement from the previous week.

Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that I had indeed spent my last few days returning to a normal routine. I met with patients at my office, and I went to the hospital to wait for and to watch people die. You should know enough about me now at this point to realize that that last statement is not as awful as it sounds.

Unfortunately, however, my timing was off all week. For all the long hours I spent in the ER and the critical care units, no one passed when I was there. This is not unusual and normally it would be somewhat disappointing for me, but that's when all I experienced was the grand display of transition into the afterlife. Enlightened with the knowledge that some deaths are not as pleasant to witness, spending the week without observing someone die left me somewhat grateful. Perhaps now I was feeling less like a ghoul and more like a normal person.

With a fresh new outlook on death, I realized that I was regaining those natural apprehensions as well as curiosities regarding our mortality. Indeed, driving along with a man in the backseat that could foretell the time and circumstances of someone's death left me wondering just what I might come across on this day.

I found it rather amusing at that moment. Instead of looking forward to seeing someone actually die, I was now looking forward to finding someone that was going to die in the next few weeks. It sounded like an improvement. Perhaps eventually I'd stop looking for people at death's doorstep all together and just live like a normal human being.

As for most of my experiences with Stan, however, I was about to be surprised. He had a mission to accomplish before we went on any type of soul search, and if I knew our first intended stop, I would most definitely had asked to be brought back home.

Instead of pulling into the open lot surrounded by warehouses, Stan drove us to a busier part of the city. He drove into the parking area of a three story commercial building, grabbed a parking token from the automated dispenser, and drove under the lifted arm of a security gate. This was a one way entrance as tire spikes prevented cars from exiting in this direction. Well, they could exit, but not with their tires intact.

"Jim, you follow me. Ralph is going to stay here," Stan called out as he exited the sedan after pulling into a parking space.

As I opened the door and extricated myself from the dusty sedan, I watched Ralph stretch across the back seat and close his eyes. Obviously, that's why he wanted the back. I looked about the surrounding area. Security gate or no security gate, I don't know if I could be that calm to take a little nap right here and now.

Stan stepped forward and motioned for me to follow him toward the front of the building. "Just relax today. We're going to meet Arthur Greenfree, which is actually a rather funny name. I can assure you his green is not free. It's quite costly."

He then lost his humor as he looked over at me. "Do not make any jokes with Mr. Greenfree. Be polite, talk only if he asks you a question, and answer him honestly. Don't look at me before you talk, it will look like you're lying. You don't want to do that. Do not tell him about your gift or Ralph's gift. I am introducing you to him so he can check you out."

"Wait a minute. What's going on here?"

"You're meeting someone that is very important here, but not very accommodating to strangers or to people he distrusts or dislikes. It is, however, important that I introduce you to him. If I had to label him, I would call him a modern age pimp and loan shark."

"And you want me to meet him?!" I blurted out.

"It's a courtesy call on my part. We have to show him the proper respect before I start having you stroll around Camden with Ralph."

I slowed my pace a bit in order to clearly illustrate my uncertainty with this entire situation. "But I already walked around with Ralph last week. Isn't it a bit too late to ask for permission?"

"No, no, no. Last week was just a test run for you to see how you would do under a bit of pressure. You did great, which means we are going to do it again. If it didn't work out, I needed to know that before I wasted Arthur Greenfree's time."

"Heaven forbid we wouldn't want to do that."

"No, we wouldn't," Stan remarked in a serious tone that indicated he didn't even want me joking about that.

I, in return, had no problem being very serious about the situation. "Well, then let's not waste his time now."

"We're not wasting his time. Trust me. Everything is going to work out fine."

We passed two or three security cameras as we made our way around the front of the building and through the spacious front doors. Large blocks of green tinted glass established that warm corporate feeling you get when you walk through the doors of some institution that wants to welcome you as a friend only because you have money they wish to extricate from your pocket or bank account.

As I passed the directory sign, I noticed plaques for a bank, an accountant, a lawyer, a credit counseling service, and a few names that sounded very technical like Mass Digital Computational Algorithms or something like that. I did not notice any entities listed on the third floor, but that's where we ended up going.

We trotted up the open stairs in the foyer as opposed to taking the elevator. After reaching the third floor, Stan led me down another corporate looking corridor, one with clean eggshell white walls, florescent light fixtures, and nondescript paintings of commercial buildings filling city blocks.

At the end of the hall, the floor opened up to a reception area where a young woman sat behind a large counter area that served as a welcome point as well as her desk. She peered up at Stan and then at me.

Stan said nothing at first. He waited to be acknowledged by the young lady.

The receptionist apparently recognized him. "Have a seat Mr. Adanais. I'll tell Mr. Greenfree you are here."

"Thank you," Stan finally replied.

We took a seat and waited, I'm not sure how long. I didn't hear a buzz or a phone ring, but eventually the receptionist directed us through the mahogany door behind her desk/counter.

We stepped into a very impressive office. The room and the lone individual that occupied it were nothing like I expected.

In hindsight, I'm not sure what I expected. Stan indicated to me that we were basically going to meet the pimp that held sway over the neighborhood in Camden we had already visited. Perhaps I believed I would walk into a multi-colored room with lava lamps, shag rugs, pornographic paintings, and hip-hop music blaring from a stereo large enough to hide a Buick.

Instead, I found a tastefully decorated office with modern and professional looking furniture. High quality brand name office technology filled the empty spaces and desktops. Once more, I got that corporate feeling of being in the office of a top executive that was maybe in charge of all the accounts in the Eastern Seaboard Region.

As for Arthur Greenfree, he looked nothing like a pimp, or at least what I imagined a pimp to look like. No fur hat adorned his head, nor did he drape himself with a purple and orange suit. He did wear a suit, but a dark gray, conservative one that I'm very certain cost more than I would ever dream of paying. As a professional in the medical field, I know what these expensive clothes look like. Some of my associates like to dump their pay and then some into their wardrobe. Greenfree didn't play cheap with his attire, either, but again, what he wore fit him impeccably and appeared extraordinarily professional. He did wear a great deal of gold jewelry--necklaces, several rings, and an earring--and this was the only hint to his true profession.

The man sat at his desk, but he was alone in this room. That also was a surprise. I expected body guards or thugs, or maybe a combination of the two, something like a guard thug.

Despite my musings, Arthur ignored any surprise that might have etched itself on my face. He looked at Stan and then took a quick glance at me. After about a half second inspection in which I felt this man size me up and than disregard me like a sack of cabbage during a lettuce festival, he turned his attention to Stan with an expression that could be best described as indifference.

"Is this the one you wanted me to meet?" Arthur asked.

He got to the point. I gave him credit for that. No hellos, no small talk. He looked like a 'time is money' kind of guy, so it made sense.

"Yes, his name is Jim Sagacity. He's joining my association, but he's not going to be part of the regular group. For the most part, he's going to be hanging around with Ralph."

During most of that explanation from Stan, Arthur appeared slightly annoyed, but that sentiment certainly drained away at the end.

"Ralph?" Greenfree asked with apparently greater interest.

"Yes, that's why I felt it was necessary for you to meet him. Otherwise I would not have bothered you."

Matching me with Ralph changed the entire nature of this meeting and it turned all of Mr. Greenfree's attention right where I didn't want it, right on me. He stood up from his chair and walked around his desk to get a better look at me. He eyed me no longer like a sack of cabbage, but more like a host of rabbits at that same lettuce festival--not dangerous enough to warrant outright anxiety, but a potential nuisance that might have to be contained. If I felt like any rabbit at that point, it was like one that was looking at a stew pot.

Mr. Greenfree the executive-looking pimp fixed his stare upon me. "What do you do, pal?"

It was more condescending than friendly as I knew I really wasn't his pal, but I guess that's what he decided it was best to call me. He didn't want to call me by my name as that would place too much importance on me. He certainly wasn't going to call me 'sir', either. Thankfully, he didn't call me dumb ass, so I wasn't about to complain about 'pal'.

"I'm a psychologist," I said.

"You have people come and lay on a couch and they tell you all about their problems?"

"I have a couch, but most people just sit on it. Yes, they tell me their problems and I try to help them find ways to cope."

"You ever have to deal with people accused of a crime, insanity pleas?"

"No, I do almost exclusively family counseling."

"Are you going to do that here in Camden?"

"I wasn't planning on it."

"What are you planning on doing?"

I really wanted to look over at Stan for some instruction on this one, but his early warning of not doing exactly that exploded in my ears. If I looked over at Stan, then Arthur Greenfree was going to think I was lying. I really didn't want that. Stan told me to tell the truth, so I shouldn't have needed his help. Of course, I was also instructed by Stan not to reveal my gift or Ralph's ability.

Point of fact, I was left in a very large quandary. I'm not supposed to lie, and I'm not supposed to tell the entire truth, either. I wanted to call time out and review the rules of this ridiculous situation, but I realized there was no referee to stop the clock. I did the best I could with time running out and just hoped I would be allowed to exit to the locker room.

"I'm planning on hanging around with Ralph, that's about it. Wherever he goes, I'll go. I'm not planning on doing any counseling or setting up an office, but I hope to learn enough about Camden to be a little more comfortable with it."

I left it at that. I didn't lie, but I didn't come right out and admit my true purpose, either. I'm not sure how Arthur Greenfree would have reacted to that. Pimp, loan shark, crime lord, whatever you wish to call him, he just didn't come across as open to the idea of souls and transitions to heaven. It just looked to me that the focus of his rewards remained very much grounded in this material world. I'm certain that mentioning goals of

a more spiritual nature would only serve to antagonize him, and probably serve to get me a few broken bones, if I was lucky.

"You sound like you're worried about insulting me," Greenfree said as he now obviously both wanted to toy with me and test me at the same time. "What do you think my business is?"

"I don't really think it's my place to make assumptions on something like that."

"So you think you know your place?"

"Not necessarily, but I can make some guesses as to what my place isn't. And as I said, I don't think it would be wise of me to try and speculate what your business is."

It seemed as if Arthur wasn't sure whether to be pleased or annoyed with this response. I guess he was wondering if I was just being smart enough not to say anything that might insult him, or just a little too smart by avoiding his question.

It seemed Arthur wanted to press me a bit further. "And do you know my place?"

"I don't think I'm anywhere near high enough on the food chain to know your place exactly. I just know it's a great deal higher than me." I felt good about that answer as I did not avoid the question but I did keep from being specific enough to cause any trouble.

"That's right, and that means when I ask you a question, you try and answer it," Arthur shot back in a slightly more belligerent tone. I guess he didn't like my answer as much as I did. "So, let's try this again. What do you think my business is?"

I swallowed a heavy sigh, I didn't think letting one out would go over too well. I spoke quickly through my breath to hide any indication of frustration and simply decided to do the best dancing around the subject I could muster.

"I can only guess what your business is as this is the first time we've met and I really don't know anything about you. I would say you are a businessman with most of his enterprises focused on Camden. You're an executive that makes high level decisions and delegates authority to the people in your organization. That organization is probably in the field of finance. I saw a bank on the directory of this building, so it wouldn't surprise me if you were on the board of that bank. I also saw some technology companies, so I wouldn't be surprised if you financed startups in that field as well."

Whether or not Arthur Greenfree liked my answer or not, I'll never know. I can only guess it satisfied him because he simply turned his back and never looked at me again.

"Ok pally, you go out and have fun doing whatever it is you're going to do. Just make sure you don't get Ralph in trouble." Arthur sat down in a chair by his large desk but managed enough interest to shoot a glance over toward Stan. "I don't want to see anything happen to Ralph."

Stan simply nodded and said, "Thank you." And then he motioned for me to leave, a request with which I was more than happy to comply.

We wasted no time and exited just as we entered, past the receptionist who ignored us, down the stairs, and out the front doors beyond the security cameras. When we got closer to the car, I finally slowed down. I had some new questions to add to the other quarter zillion, but this time I wanted these answered, and I wanted them answered before we got in the car with Ralph.

"I really want to thank you for putting me through all that," I said. "And thank you very much for all your help. That was sarcasm in case you didn't notice. You hung me out to dry."

"I had to put you through that," Stan stated. "I had to see if you could think on your feet. I can't put you out in potentially hazardous situations if I don't have confidence in you. It's not fair to you, and it wouldn't be fair to the other people that work with us."

"So this was some kind of test for me?"

"Yes, and again, you passed with flying colors."

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

Stan put on his comforting expression as he tried to ease my growing anger. "Relax, you were never in any danger. Nothing was going to happen to you here. And don't you feel good about yourself? You were placed in a very high stress situation and you performed admirably. If you're planning on walking around with us in areas we have to go, you're going to need the confidence in yourself you just gained here."

I was not going to allow him to butter me up to get past this without further questioning. "That's not the whole story, either. Why else was it necessary for you to bring me here?"

"I told you before, it was a courtesy call to Arthur Greenfree. Arthur is the only one that really presents any type of real danger here in this neighborhood. The cops don't bother us because we don't break the law. The mayor has no gripe with us because we don't get involved in any politics. When we start trying to turn people away from crime, we're stepping on Arthur's turf."

"So you paraded me in front of him and now you think he has to just leave me be?"

"Arthur isn't dumb by any means. He realizes he has to accept organizations that want to come in and clean up the neighborhood. It's all part of the game. The important thing is that we recognize the larger scope of things. We come here and pay him his due. He knows what we're about and sees that we show him the proper respect. He's ok with that as long as we all play by the rules. He's not going to care if we cost him a nickel while he's making a dollar, but if you start costing him a quarter, it's going to start annoying him."

"I don't want to cost him anything."

"But you are, just by being here. We're walking around on his streets. People have to know that we're doing it with his permission. We just got that today. He will put the word out in his own way that he knows you. Don't you understand what that means? As long as you don't do anything stupid, you're pretty much free to walk about Camden without worrying about much."

I was still angry but I was finding it difficult to argue. With every question I asked, Stan answered in a way that made it seem he just did me a great favor. From his perspective, he instilled me with confidence and he got me free access to Camden, NJ. My cup was running over.

I decided to move in another direction. We were closing on the car, so I stopped so I could ask my next question without Ralph overhearing.

"Why did Greenfree take such an interest when he heard I was going to be with Ralph?"

"I had to tell Arthur a little more about Ralph than I would tell other people," Stan admitted. "Ralph is the key to what we do. He's the one that has to be able to walk around without getting in any trouble. Ralph tells us

who we have to work on, and how long we have to do it. I can't afford to lose Ralph, but I also need him to go in some rather dicey neighborhoods."

"So you told Arthur about Ralph's gift?"

"Yes and no."

"Here we go again."

"I told Arthur that Ralph was a savant, that he had certain personality issues, but he also could do some amazing things. Sometimes people are born in this world that no one can explain. I said Ralph was a simple guy that couldn't figure out much on his own, but for some reason he knew when someone was upset at someone else, upset enough to actually do something about it."

"Upset?"

"Arthur didn't press for more of explanation, so that's what I said."

"And Greenfree bought that and didn't throw you out as a loon?"

"I'm not a loon when I can give him valuable information. Basically, I've been able to tell Arthur when things are going to get hot. When I'm right, he can't just dismiss me. He wouldn't have reached the position he has by doing that. The good thing about Arthur is he understands the value of good information, and that's the one area where I can deal with him."

"You're losing me again."

"You have an idea of what Ralph sees, right?"

"He sees when and how people will die."

"Exactly. In most cases, that information is probably only important to the individual that's about to expire, but what if the circumstances surrounding the death are something big? A gang war, a mob hit, a drug deal gone bad? Don't you think that would interest someone like Arthur?"

"I guess."

"Well, it does. I don't tell Greenfree who's going to die and when, but sometimes I give him information involving those deaths, especially if they have anything to do with his business. I told him Ralph could sense when someone was upset enough to cause a major incident. It may sound absurd, but when I can back it up with actual information, then it doesn't sound so crazy. That's why Greenfree was very interested to hear you were going to be around Ralph. Speaking of Ralph, let's go wake him up and get to work."

Chapter 13

We headed back to some familiar areas in Camden. Stan parked the car in his favorite lot by the warehouses and he led us through the streets of the city. Ralph and I followed like sheep without the bleating, well at least I didn't bleat. Ralph muttered a few times under his breath. I couldn't make out any words, so he might have been baaing like a stranded goat.

We meandered around several blocks. Being closer to lunch time, there were far more people about than on our previous outing. For the most part, people ignored us, walked by us without a second glance, as if we belonged there just like them.

Still, I did not press my luck and I recalled the instructions Stan gave me when we last walked these streets. My focus remained on Stan's back and on street signs, but never on any individual that we passed. I would not do so until instructed as such by Stan, and for that, we had to wait to find the right person.

It took a while, but eventually Ralph stopped us and had me look over at a man in his mid-thirties that would be facing his own demise in the coming days. I thought I heard Ralph say 'stroke' to Stan, but again his words were beyond my hearing.

I took a focused glance at this man's back. As he was turned away from us, I didn't need to use a magazine or any other ploy to avoid the appearance of staring him down. A ghostly shape residing within the core of his body became apparent almost immediately. It glowed strong with a dark blue tint and it filled most of the man's form. Sparkling like a sapphire held out in front of a full moon low in the horizon, it was a beautiful thing to behold. The dark blue color added serenity to the obvious strength inherent in this man's inner essence.

It was difficult to remove my glance from this grand spectacle, but I had to disclose my findings. Smiling broadly, I turned to Stan to reveal the news.

Clearly taken aback by my expression, he questioned my sentiment. "What are you so happy about?"

"We don't have to worry about him, not at all."

"Oh," was Stan's rather simplistic reply and he turned about and started us on the move again, disregarding the man as just another resident of this busy neighborhood.

I, on the other hand, could not dismiss this gentleman so easily. For whatever reason, it felt very good to see this man. On the outside, he looked no different than anyone else trying to survive in this city, but on the inside I knew he was doing more than simply surviving, he was thriving.

Spending so very little time in this neighborhood, judging it was as ignorant as it was arrogant, but I must admit I had my preconceived notions even before I set foot on a single street. While traversing these sidewalks, I focused more on the signs of age and disrepair that supported my assumptions.

Older buildings lined the streets in a crowded manner with little regard for aesthetic appeal. I never considered that such criticisms held little merit in an area that probably placed much more value on functionality as opposed to curbside charm. Storefronts on the ground floor advertised a myriad of products and services, but I always found myself noting those neon signs that reinforced my judgments--like bail bondsmen or pawn shops and so on. Dull gray, steel gates that could be pulled across the display windows during the dark of night simply added to my belief that this was a dangerous place to be.

Despite my view of this city, as prejudiced as it might be, here stood a man with a soul that rivaled anything I had seen before. I never would have imagined I could have seen such a glorious sight, especially in a place like this. I was learning, however, that souls didn't need exclusive neighborhoods, fancy storefronts, or vividly landscaped mansions to roar with brilliance. Souls fed on feelings that went much deeper, on thoughts that were so much more discerning, and on beliefs that were far more significant.

In the face of such enlightenment, I declared what I felt was an obvious sentiment. "I almost wish I could see his passing. I bet it would be amazing."

"No time for that," Stan admonished. "We may not have to worry about him, but there are others we do have to worry about, and it's our job to find them before it's too late."

I looked back one last time at the man with the dark blue soul that now in my mind stood as glorious as any sea. He started walking away in the opposite direction and I lost sight of him in the crowd. It was time to move on.

Eventually we did find a young man that according to Ralph had only a few weeks to live. He would die from a drug overdose, alone in a small bedroom.

Upon the examination of his inner essence, I found his soul to be small and frail looking, but not so faint that I would give up all hope on him. If I saw this man being wheeled into the ER, I wouldn't have great expectations of seeing a majestic show, but I wouldn't have dismissed him entirely, either. I believed he had a chance to move on, but I would have been much more confident if his ghostly inner form was a bit bigger and just a bit brighter.

Stan seemed very happy about this find. A small problem arose when neither he nor Ralph could identify the subject in question. Doing our best not to appear obvious, we followed him a bit to determine where he would go, to see who he might talk to, and to watch for any clues that might help Stan make contact in the future. When he went into a barber shop, Stan slapped me on the back.

"Nice work again, Jim. I can take it from here."

"You can find out who it is?"

"I'm pretty sure. I know the barber and it's a pretty safe bet the barber knows his customer. Even if he doesn't know his name, he can point me in the right direction, far better than we could do on our own trying to follow him. We can go now."

And that was that, with my help we found another one that Stan believed could be helped.

From that point, we made a direct path to the car. This time I believe I could have found the way on my own if I had to. I was indeed becoming more familiar with this area, and with familiarity came greater confidence as well. I had now survived two trips into Camden, and with Arthur Greenfree not making any declaration to have me exterminated, I believed it was possible for me to survive several more. Perhaps Stan was right about handling things in this manner. Why not, he seemed to be right about everything else. At least this time, he was right about something that benefited me.

Right when I felt that Stan was not as much a mystery as I made him out to be, he surprised me once more.

"Ralph," Stan said as he maneuvered the car through and out of the parking lot, "I'm sure Jim has a few questions for you. You mind answering some of them?"

"Don't care either way," Ralph responded.

My eyebrows shot up and I glanced over at Stan with an obviously shocked expression.

"You don't have any questions?" Stan asked in response to my silent albeit clear dismay.

"You want me to ask him questions?"

"There's a guy in the back seat that knows when someone's going to die and how. Any normal person would want to ask about a dozen questions at least."

"I just didn't think it was a good idea to put him on the spot like that."

"Ralph," Stan called out to the backseat, "you feel like I'm putting you on the spot?"

"Nah, what do I care what he asks."

Stan turned a nod to me. "See? Ask away, it won't do any harm."

At first I remained silent. If anything, I felt as if I was being put on the spot. That already happened once today at Arthur Greenfree's office, and I wasn't too pleased with it happening again. Weary of Stan's antics, I decided to play by a different set of rules.

"What if I have questions I want to ask you first?"

Stan didn't give me any sideways glance this time. His eyes remained on the road. A stoic expression moved across his features, just like a fast moving thunderstorm blots out a once blue sky.

"Ask either of us anything you want," Stan replied, but his body remained somewhat stiff and he still refused to look at me.

Emboldened and no longer worried about insulting or embarrassing anyone, my first question decidedly placed Stan in the hot seat.

"The last time I was in the car with you and before we picked up Ralph, you told me not to ask him any questions, you didn't want it to appear as if I was judging him. Why is it ok now?"

Having experience dealing with people when asked highly sensitive questions, I know enough where to look to sense a reaction. In truth, I was most surprised by Stan's control. Certainly driving the car assisted him. He couldn't cross his arms at his chest or shift his legs about with a steering wheel in front of him. His feet had to remain planted on the floor in order to work the gas and brake pedal. Still, the muscles on his jaw did not tense, his breathing remained steady, and his hands did not clench any tighter about the wheel. He did not shift his weight even faintly, nor did his head turn slightly away from me or tilt in an exaggerated lean. The eyelids did not blink and the nostrils did not flare, and I did not notice him swallow hard before speaking.

Behind those eyelids, however, his eyes betrayed an annoyance with me. He focused on a single spot far ahead in the distance and his pupils narrowed as if to subconsciously reduce his own peripheral vision so as not to see me. There was emotion behind that stare and it carried a hint of venom. He did, however, answer me none the less.

"You didn't know Ralph a week ago. You never even met him. I didn't want you throwing a bunch of questions at him before spending time with him."

"We haven't spent that much time together now. Just two trips. You think I won't offend him now?"

"You might, but he's had a chance to see what you can do. If anything, you two have more in common than he has with me. I would think you might understand each other better now."

"And if I ask a question that outright annoys him, do you still think he'll tell you to get rid of me?"

"He might, but I would think you'd be smart enough to avoid asking anything that would be so moronic that it would bring him to that point."

It was a dig at me, a response for putting him on the spot. I accepted it as deserved, but then again, I was only dishing out what Stan had already done to me. A little payback was not completely uncalled for and I was not yet ready to let Stan off the hook.

"Hopefully, I won't disappoint you, but I can't guarantee it. In fact if Ralph is aware that I'm a psychologist and therapist, isn't it possible that he might view any question I ask as judgmental?"

"Ralph knows what you do," Stan admitted. "I told him before he met you."

"So Ralph is one up on me. That's good. I don't want him to think I'm trying to psychoanalyze him."

"I think the only one you're trying to analyze right now is me."

"Does that make you uncomfortable?"

"Not at all."

"Good, because sometimes I just can't help myself."

"I don't believe that for a moment. I think you could stop whenever you wanted to. Right now, you just don't want to."

"Yes, well that's because we all have a limit, and when we reach that limit we tend to become defensive."

Stan finally looked over at me and then flashed that old familiar smile of his, the one that made you feel like everything was ok because there was really nothing to worry about.

"Understood, and I'm sorry if I you feel I pushed you to your limit. I only had your best interests in mind. However, I still believe you have a few questions for Ralph and this actually is a very good time for them. If you feel you've made your point with me and can move on, perhaps you'd like to ask him something now."

I shrugged acceptance and turned my shoulders so I could get a clear look in the backseat. Ralph looked out the side window as if no one had been speaking. I couldn't imagine a more disinterested person than what I saw right there, and yet a good deal of my conversation with Stan focused on Ralph. I found that intriguing. It seemed as if he could simply turn himself off from what was going on around him.

"Ralph?"

He turned his head toward the front of the car as if I was speaking for the first time. "Yeah?"

"How do you know when someone is going to die? Is it a thought that just comes across your mind like reading words on a page or is it more of an image, like seeing something on television or the movies?"

"It's an image."

"Does it last a long time?"

"Nah, it's like on TV. I get this flash of a scene. I can see it all real clear like. It just goes through my mind, like I see it one second and it's gone the next."

"Is it in color or black and white?"

"Color."

"You're sure?"

"Yep, blood is red. I'm sure."

"Do you see all kinds of images or just violent ones?"

"Huh?"

"When you see a person die, is it always violent or is it many different kinds of death, like do you see people get sick or old people just pass?"

"I see all kinds, people dyin' in bed, in car accidents, from falls, gun shots, stabbings, all kinds."

"Do you have to concentrate on someone to see their death?"

"Nah, I don't have to think about it or nothin' it just happens. I'll just be walkin' around and see someone and boom I get the scene. Like I said, it's like those TV shows where they get a flash of what's going to take place. It's just there long enough to see what's going to happen and then it's gone."

"I imagine some scenes would last longer than others, though. Someone that dies in a struggle like a fight would take longer to watch than someone that just dies of natural causes in bed, yes?"

"I don't know, maybe, I guess. I just get something that pops in my head and I can see it play out, but it happens real quick."

"You mean like in fast motion, as if everything was sped up?"

"Uh uh, no fast motion. I see it clearly like it's happening at a regular speed."

"But you said it happens real quick."

"It does."

"Then I don't follow you."

At this point Stan interrupted. "Jim, think of some of the things that happened to you this morning. Forget about Ralph for a second. Just go through in your head what happened today. Think about Arthur's office, walking through the building, meeting him, talking to him, leaving."

I really didn't want to get away from my discussion with Ralph, but I complied with Stan's request.

Stan pressed on. "Now, think about what you did after; walking on the streets, looking for people, concentrating on seeing what's inside of them. Get a clear picture in your mind of all of that. Are you still with me?"

"Yes."

"Ok, now stop. In your mind, you recalled things that took all morning to accomplish, hours--but you did it in a few seconds. When you thought about the people you saw and met, were they moving in fast motion?"

"No, but I was just taking samples of moments in time, not playing out the whole scene."

"Would it have been enough to describe what you experienced today, where you were, the people you met, and so on?"

"I suppose."

"Ralph doesn't see a whole morning of activity, he just sees a particular instant in time, and though it might take several minutes to act out that scene if it was a play, it's not a play. It's more like a recollection of a memory. Time and space don't have the same meaning in your mind that they do outside in the real world."

I eyed Stan with more than a shred of doubt. "Why are you explaining this to me? How do you know what it's like?"

Another confident smile washed across Stan's features. "You forget I have a gift, too. I can see other people's ability. I look at Ralph and I know what he can do, just like I know what you can do. I have an understanding of that gift. And that's why I know what it's like. That's why it's also easier for me to explain it to you than it is for Ralph."

"I see," I then turned my attention to the backseat once more. "Is that how it is, Ralph?"

"I guess. I just see stuff. It doesn't take long at all. I get a flash and I know what's going to happen."

I decided to accept that. I really couldn't argue. Ralph saw things that were going to happen, events that have not yet occurred. My ability, however, was based in the here and now. Yes, it was amazing I could see souls, but I saw them as they exist in that moment of time, not what they will experience in the future or what they might have experienced in the past. I had no reference point that could match Ralph's ability regarding the passage of time.

With that consideration, however, I thought of another question that now had me puzzled.

"How is it you know the date? If what you see is an image, where do you get the knowledge of how long in the future the event is going to take place? You seem to know when something is going to happen with a fair amount of accuracy. I can't see how you could determine that from the flash of a scene. There would have to be something more. I mean do you see something like a calendar with a big red circle on one of the days?"

"Not a calendar with a circle or anything, no date. I don't even know the exact date. I'd have to look up the date. I just know the time left. It's like a countdown that appears on the image, but I don't really see it, I just know it's there. After I see whatever it is I see, I just know it's going to happen in 5 days or 6 weeks or whatever. If I had to figure out the date, I'd have to look at a calendar and count forward."

"So you just know that after seeing the scene of someone's death that it's going to happen so many days in the future."

"Yep... days, weeks, months, whatever."

"Have you ever seen one that's been extremely long in the future, say over a year?"

Ralph looked up in the air over his head as he tried to think, as if the answer was in a filing cabinet in his mind and he had to take time to rifle through the drawers.

"A few. Longest one I think I saw was five years in the future."

"That long, wow. What's the average time?" Realizing Ralph might not be very good at math, I chose to be clearer. "For the most part do you see people that are a few days away from their end, a few weeks, a few months, or maybe even longer?"

"It's usually around two weeks, maybe three. I don't get too many that are longer than that. Sometimes I get ones that are a few days, but not too often anymore now that I go out looking at the same people all the time."

"I'm not sure I understand that."

"I only get the image once. I never get to see it a second time. So if I see someone that's going to die in a few weeks, when I come across them again, I won't see anything. That's why I don't see many that I know are going to die in a few days 'cause I've already seen it a few weeks ago."

"Only once, hmmm." I found that interesting. Trying to accept and understand the ability Ralph possessed was not an easy task

"Ok, so you don't have to think about it and you only get it once. I would think that would severely limit your effectiveness."

Stan chimed in again with a pointed tone of interest. "Why would you think that?"

I turned back to face the front windshield as I pieced together the complexities of the dilemma in my own mind. "He goes out walking in a neighborhood, just like we did today. He doesn't focus on an individual, it just comes to him, but it only comes once. If he walked through a crowd, I would assume he would be inundated with scenes. He could get a dozen or two dozen or more all at once, and then another two dozen right after that. There's no way he could possibly keep track of them all. If he only saw them once, he could miss something and he'd never get a chance to catch it at some later time."

"Nah, you don't get it," Ralph responded from the backseat. "I don't get hit with it the first time I see someone and I don't get a whole bunch at once. I get one here and one there maybe at most ten or twelve a day and they don't come all at the same time."

"But why? You don't control it by focusing on one person. Why wouldn't you get them all at once? We're all going to die. The scene of our final moment exists for each and every one of us. Why would you see the death of one person and not another?"

"Maybe it's just not set yet," Stan offered. "Maybe he only sees it when the final moment becomes set."

I considered the explanation and it seemed reasonable. This, however, led me to an even more confounding dilemma. "That would make sense, but then I wonder about the person he saw that was going to die in five years. You would think the person in question could do something different to avoid it."

"What if it's cancer that's completely untreatable?"

"So what, what if he decided to walk in front of a bus next year? For that matter what about the people we saw today? How can we be so sure that they are going to die when Ralph sees it? What if the guy that Ralph thinks is going to OD in a few weeks decides to pull a bank job next weekend and gets shot by a guard? Actually, when you get right down to this, all of it seems a bit shaky. There are so many different variables, so many different things that can happen. How can we be so sure that something Ralph sees happening in five days, let alone five weeks or five years, is actually going to take place?"

"As long as I have known him, Ralph has never been wrong."

I could not let that stand on Stan's simple announcement. "Have you ever been wrong, Ralph?"

"I'm not wrong or right. It's not me makin' the decision. I just see what's going to happen."

"And it always happens like you see it?"

"As far as I know, I don't really check."

At that moment, a stunning realization dropped upon my consciousness and forced me into sullen silence. Ralph's visions involved the future and it now sounded as if that future might not be as open-ended as I would have liked to have hoped. Just the opposite, the future now felt almost tightly woven and pre-determined. This concept could shatter my own sense of reality.

I looked out through the windshield and watched cars whiz by. I wondered how many we had passed in just the last few minutes. I looked at all the buildings along the side of the road--simple structures containing businesses, apartments, and offices. These cars and these buildings carried and catered to so many different people, so many different lives all of which were interrelated in some ways and completely separate in others.

The individual in that car might never meet the couple going into that convenience store, unless of course the driver of the car decided to stop for coffee. A meeting might still not occur, but then again it might. For whatever reason they could exchange words; they could become friends or even enemies. It's difficult to determine how the choices of one person will change his or her life as well as the lives of complete strangers, even if it's the simple choice of stopping for coffee.

Complexity of a staggering magnitude existed in such an understanding and yet this belief flew counter to the fundamental truths of Ralph's ability. Ralph saw events in the future that were bound to happen.

Believing that there was some kind of order in the world, some kind of structure keeping things from simply breaking down to mass confusion held certain reassurances, but was I really ready to accept this now that I faced what it meant? Was there such a force in the universe that could control things in such a complex world that it could indeed dictate when and how someone was going to die? Even if it was just a few hours in the future, let alone a few days, this notion remained at odds with my own belief that we control our actions, that we are responsible for our own fortune or misfortune for that matter.

We are told we can accomplish whatever we set our mind to, but what about the man with the large dark blue soul back in Camden? He's going to die soon, and according to Ralph and Stan, there's nothing he can do about it.

Contradictions abounded in every path of my thinking. I might have struggled with this internal debate for hours had Stan not interrupted my inner turmoil.

"Is that all the questions you have?" Stan asked, his soothing voice pulling me out of my self-inflicted zone out.

"Uhhmm, no. Sorry, I was just thinking." I then turned to look back at Ralph. "From what I can make out, you don't control what you see, it just happens. You don't decide to look at a person and see his or her fate. It just comes to you at random. Is that right?"

"Yup."

"Have you ever met someone for the first time and saw nothing and then met them at a later date and then saw their death?"

"Yeah, that's happened a few times. People I actually knew, not strangers on the street."

"So maybe people do have some control over what happens to them for the most part. Maybe that's why you didn't see anything at first, and maybe that's why you don't get inundated with scenes from every person you see. You can't see their deaths yet because it's not certain how they're going to die."

Ralph didn't respond in anyway. It's possible he agreed with me. It's just as possible he didn't understand what I was talking about. For a moment it made me feel better.

I had no other questions I could think of at that moment, save one. It's a question I wasn't sure I should ask, but it gnawed at me relentlessly since I was told of what Ralph could do. I decided to approach it from a round about fashion.

"Do other people know what you see?"

"Not many."

"Has anyone asked you if you saw their own death?"

To his credit, Stan saw where this was going and decided to intervene. "You want to ask him if he's seen how and when you're going to die?"

"Maybe," I admitted. "Well, I won't deny my curiosity. That's just natural. If you met a psychic that said she gets messages from dead relatives, it wouldn't be out of the realm of reason to ask if she received any messages from yours."

"Perhaps, but it would depend on the person. Some people might like to leave the dead be and not worry about any communications from beyond the grave."

"True, but I don't think it's unreasonable to be curious about what Ralph might see."

"I'll allow you that. A bit of curiosity is understandable. The question is would you really want to know?"

"That's the big question isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."

"I might want to, especially if I could avoid something stupid. Let's say Ralph saw me dying because I dropped a hair dryer into a sink full of water. I have to admit, I'd like to know that before it happened."

"What if he saw you shot dead in a robbery?"

That thought had not occurred to me. What if Ralph foresaw something beyond my control? A heart attack or

a stroke would be bad enough. Sure I could go to the doctor and get a checkup, but he might not find anything. I could try to eat better and exercise but maybe the exertion is exactly what leads to the aforementioned heart attack. Something like dying during a robbery, however, would be far worse. How could I possibly deal with avoiding my demise if it was seen to occur at the hands of another?

If I knew I was going to be shot dead in advance, what could I possibly do? Wear a bullet proof vest? Stay locked in my home? Avoid any place that might be robbed? It's almost not possible. People have been killed by stray bullets simply walking past the wrong liquor store at the wrong time. I know. I've seen them die in the ER.

And what would that do to me? I might live in absolute terror for whatever time I had left. Every time a door slammed I would leap out of my skin. Every time I saw some shady character with something in his pocket, I would run panicked in the other direction. This did not encourage me.

"I don't think I'd want to know that," I admitted.

"If you're not ready for all the possible answers, you probably don't want to ask the question." Stan paused to turn the wheel and then revealed that the point was moot, at least for now. "You can't ask today anyway because we're here, and it's time for Ralph to go."

We pulled up to the front of Ralph's apartment building and he exited the car with little more than a mumbled goodbye. When the rumbling sedan once more was on its way, I turned my attention back to Stan. I wiped away the internal debate about knowing the time and circumstances of my own death, and focused on a question I had prepared for when I was alone with Stan.

"In all seriousness, why did you do that, put me on the spot with Ralph? Last time, you didn't want me asking him anything or even looking at him the wrong way."

"I still don't want you looking at him the wrong way. I don't want him to feel he's being judged. However, it is necessary to get you a bit more comfortable with Ralph. I can't deny that Ralph's ability raises certain curiosities, especially to a psychologist, but I don't ever want you analyzing him. On the other hand, I also want you to ask those questions that will help you two understand each other."

"Why? Are we going to get married?"

"Not likely. But very soon I want you two to go out on your own without me."

"You're kidding?"

"Absolutely not. That's another reason why I brought you to Arthur Greenfree's today. I want the word out on you that you're ok as soon as possible. As long as you're not a complete idiot, no one's going to bother you."

"So you think that's enough to now simply allow me and Ralph to go stumbling around on our own?"

"You really have to work on your self-confidence. You being a psychologist, I'm a bit surprised at you."

That felt a bit like a slap in the face and I felt the need to defend my reservations. "There's a steep difference between self-confidence and outright recklessness. People with self-confidence still act in a responsible fashion. It doesn't take self-confidence to jump off a bridge with a bungee chord tied to your leg. In my opinion, that's much closer to stupidity."

"Many brave adventurers would disagree with you."

"Let them, but it doesn't change the fact that you want me to go venturing out with Ralph in a city I've only visited twice."

"Millions of people go venturing out in cities they've never visited at all. It's called a vacation."

"I don't remember getting the Camden vacation guidebook in the mail!"

"Don't worry so much. You'll do fine. For the most part Ralph will take the lead. I've let him go into the city dozens of times on his own. He's still around."

"Why can't you just come with us a few more times?"

"I would just slow you down. Ralph has already agreed with me on that. He can move much faster when I'm not there."

"Won't I slow him down just as much?"

"No, because he won't follow you like he follows me. He'll move at his pace and you just have to keep up. Look, Ralph knows what to do. He's been doing it for a while now. And you know what to do as well. He's going to point someone out to you and you have to carefully look inside. If the spirit is strong enough to make it on its own, you move on. If it's so small and weak it really can't be helped, move on. But if you find one that's on the fringe, just let Ralph know and he'll take it from there."

"You keep throwing me right into the fire, don't you?"

"It's the best way for you to learn, and look at how much you've accomplished in such a short time. I have no regrets of throwing you in the fire, so to speak. You shouldn't, either."

I had my doubts.

Chapter 14

Stan was nice enough to pick us up the following Wednesday. He drove Ralph and me into Camden, but said he would not be accompanying us. Apparently, he had a few errands to run. That's Latin for 'you are on your own boys!' He asked if I had a cell phone and his number. I said I did. He instructed me to call when we had found at least one person that we could help.

I started to dial his number to tell him I found someone right away, namely me. I didn't think he would appreciate the joke, so I cancelled the call before ever connecting.

Trailing Ralph was an entirely different experience than when I followed Stan. Stan had moved in a nonchalant manner, unhurried and confident. His pace always remained fairly constant. While he did not necessarily pursue a structured path, he also avoided rambling uncertainty. He always moved with obvious intentions.

As I recall, Stan guided us through the more crowded areas of the city, and I imagine he used his knowledge of the streets to accomplish this task. I assume he simply wanted to expose us to the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time. It's kind of like if you want to find food--you go to a diner, fast food joint, or restaurant. It's just logical. You don't go to a hardware store for breakfast or a barber shop for lunch, unless you put nails in your waffles and hair in your peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I'll pass on both, especially hairy peanut butter. Fiber might be good for you, but I draw a line there.

Whereas Stan moved with focus and purpose, Ralph moved with a more unpredictable step. He paused to peer down one road and then another. He circled back and changed directions without warning. Jaywalking was apparently a necessary evil or simply not one of Ralph's concerns, and I found myself running after him across busy streets hoping I would not end up stuck in the axel of a city bus.

I'm not sure why it's called Jaywalking, perhaps there was a guy named Jay that a long time ago was run over by a horse and buggy. He became the poster child for bad street crossing etiquette and now he had a crime named after him. If I was indeed run over by a bus, maybe they would feel the need to update the name and change it to 'Jimwalking' in my honor. I imagine my mother would be so proud when I met her on the other side.

Ralph cared less about crowds than Stan. While he avoided empty alleys that simply lead to dead ends, he had no aversion to lonelier, less populated streets that passed through the more neglected portions of town.

Through it all, he appeared almost lackadaisical. If the lonely streets gave him greater or lesser comfort than those filled with a throng of people, it did not show. He simply moved onward, ignoring anything and everything beyond what he was looking for.

Shuffling about at an uneven pace, Ralph looked more like an old man searching for his car in a crowded lot than a hunter stalking prey. At this point, I began to second guess Stan's conjecture that we would move faster on our own. I began to fear that we might become hopelessly lost, or worse, stumble foolishly upon something we should obviously avoid. I'm sure if that happened, I would be blamed for it.

We did not talk, at least for a while. I did not want to interrupt him or even appear to doubt him. I wanted this over and done with as soon as possible and any doubts that I voiced about our direction would certainly only serve to complicate matters.

Thankfully, I would never have to profess such doubts. Ralph led me to a place and pointed to two women standing at a bus stop. He had positioned us to a point where I could watch them carefully without being obvious.

"See those two; the one on the right, closest to the sign for the bus?"

"The one in blue?" I asked

"Yeah, take a look at her. Tell me if she's a good one."

I concentrated and eventually I could see a ghostly silhouette cling to her form. It shined pinkish pale and appeared rather small in size. This woman's soul met Stan's criteria for one that he believed we could help.

"She's a good one," I declared.

Ralph did not stop there. "Ok, down the block the other way. There's a guy smokin' a cigarette. He's wearing jeans and a brown shirt. You got him?"

"Yes," I replied as I looked in the direction toward this new subject.

"What about him?"

I focused. He was a bit brighter than the woman and probably could have made it on his own. Still, his soul was not so bright I would be absolutely certain about him. I felt a nudge might not necessarily help, but it might not hurt, either.

"He's a maybe," I said.

"Whatta ya mean?"

"He probably could use a push in the right direction, but wouldn't need a big push."

Ralph looked at me as if I just spoke in Taiwanese. He blinked once than again. "You can tell Stan what that means, but we'll need to follow him for a while."

"Why?"

"I don't know him, never saw him before. Don't know anything about him so there's no way I can tell Stan who to check out."

"What about the woman?"

"Don't know her, either, but I'm pretty sure I've seen her at that bus stop before. We give Stan a good enough description and he can find her here again. I'm not worried about her, but the guy's a problem."

I imagined Ralph faced this before. Actually, the more I thought of it, the more I began to question just how easy it would be for two people like me and Ralph to spot a total stranger on the street and than have someone else try to make contact at a future time. The odds of being successful seemed almost astronomical.

I couldn't fathom how many people I pass each day--hundreds, thousands? I didn't know a single thing about ninety nine point nine percent of them. How in the world was it possible to follow up and meet someone in that situation? Add to that the fact that we couldn't talk to them, and it really hampers the effort.

Think about it, I don't think we could have just gone up to them and said, 'Howdy, sir. Can we have your name and address? We know you're going to die in a few weeks and we'd like to talk to you about saving your soul.' I'm sure everyone would be more than willing to set up an appointment with us, as about as likely as

they would give their names and addresses to the Hare Krishnas at the airport.

"How have you dealt with this in the past?" I asked of Ralph.

"Happens all the time. I don't know these people, I don't live here."

"So what do you do?"

"First, we make sure we know where we are. Most people don't hang around places they don't belong."

"You mean like us right now?"

Ralph gave me another sideways glance and then just shook his head. "We watch where he goes. If he goes to someplace like a clinic or a dentist or some place he has to make an appointment, we're done. Stan told me just to note the time and he'll do the rest."

To some extent, that made sense. Stan could check at the place and ask around. It was kind of like what the cops do with a description of a person in some neighborhood. They'd ask around and eventually they would find someone that knew the person in question.

It also, however, sounded somewhat risky. Stan was going to ask questions about someone that was supposed to die in a few weeks. That raises suspicions of its own. From what Stan told me, he did everything possible to avoid that kind of attention. Perhaps, he knew enough people to get the information in all different kinds of ways. I always had to remind myself that Stan had the ability to find people that had a special talent, and then he found a way to make those people work for him.

We stood around for a while, but the man we were interested in showed no sign of moving from his spot. He already went through three cigarettes and was on his fourth.

"This ain't good," Ralph lamented. "He's not talkin' to anybody, he's not going anywhere. He's just waitin'. We don't know what he's waitin' for. He could be here for a minute or for hours. Call Stan."

Happily, I followed this order.

Stan pulled up to us after a few minutes. We got in the car and Stan looked us over curiously.

"Any luck?"

Ralph decided to give the report as I just sat there and looked out the front windshield at the gentlemen that obviously had no place to go and all the time in the world to develop lung cancer.

"We found a girl," Ralph began. "She got on a bus. I'll give you a description of her later. I've seen her at that bus stop before. I think we can find her again easy." Ralph then pointed to the man puffing away at the end of his fourth cigarette. "That guy over there, Jim says he's a 'maybe', whatever that means. He's not going anywhere. He's waitin' for something, don't know what."

Stan took a long deep look at the smoker that appeared to have taken root. Stan never took his eyes off him as he asked me for my outlook.

"On a scale of zero to ten, like we talked about the other day, I assume you mean he's close to a five. Correct?"

"Yes, he's not that dim or small, but I wouldn't be absolutely sure I'd see anything if I saw him die right now. It's close, about as close to going either way as it can come."

"Fair enough. I think I understand where you're coming from. I've got a good look at him. I don't know if we can find him again, but we'll see what happens. Maybe we'll get lucky. What about the girl? Where did she stand on our scale?"

"Much fainter, probably a solid two."

"Excellent. I'll have someone watch the bus stop over the next few days. We'll get her."

I felt like we just obtained critical information for making a drug bust.

"I told you that the two of you would do better without me. You were barely out here for two hours. You now have the rest of the day to yourself." With that said, Stan brought us home.

Ralph and I went out a couple more times and again we found suitable candidates. I soon found that locating people that met our criteria--people that would die within the next few weeks with fairly dim souls, certainly not a category on a college admittance form--that was the easy part. Ralph tracked them down fairly quickly, and with a glance, I knew just how strong the spirit was.

Speculating on how they might have proceeded without my ability, I realized why Stan wanted my help. Ralph could find them easily, but then someone else would have to do some background work on the individual to find out what they were like. My ability cut out the guess work. I could tell Ralph when we needed to keep looking for others because we didn't have to worry about a very bright spirit or there was nothing we could do for an extremely diminutive one. Working together in this fashion allowed us to find several more candidates than if Ralph had worked alone.

After several trips with Ralph, just as Stan predicted I had indeed become much more comfortable with the situation. Unfortunately, for some reason the situation also did not fulfill me with the kind of satisfaction I had hoped. I had entered this arrangement because of what I felt that day in the hospital when I witnessed a weaker, hesitant soul decide to break free of the body and move on. I remembered the jubilation held in that moment. I wanted to experience it again. Despite my efforts over those past weeks, such delight eluded me.

A growing dissatisfaction gnawed at my belly. Unlike the volunteer that rejoices in an unselfish act, I remained unfulfilled. Sleep proved to be more of an effort than usual, and yet fatigue gripped relentlessly at both my body and mind. Focusing on my work became difficult, and I found myself avoiding the hospital as well. For what was supposed to be an effort towards self-fulfilling altruism was turning out to be a process of some inner turmoil.

Digging deeper into the entire situation, I realized that the underlying factors of the activity itself certainly bore some responsibility for my growing unhappiness. Call it any type of grand effort you'd like, we were still out there looking for people that were going to die. That was the goal, and that was what I found each time I went out with Ralph.

I didn't see people that were about to be cured of cancer, or taught to walk again after losing a limb. We weren't helping the blind achieve independence or giving food to the homeless. We weren't even assisting the elderly with some grocery shopping. There was no other way to say it. We were out looking for lives that were going to be cut short. Even if that was not the ultimate goal, even if it wasn't the focus of what we hoped to accomplish after finding these people, it is still all that I saw.

Ralph and I were at the front of the process. I got to see the drowning person fall into the water, but I never

saw anyone pulled into the lifeboat. I could remind myself each time that what I saw on those streets of Camden was not the final verdict. I could imagine the souls growing brighter and given a better chance toward an eternity of happiness. I could even convince myself that my ability alone assisted Stan in finding many more to help than he could have without me. Unfortunately, all of the imagining and convincing occurred within my own mind. My place in the process prevented me from actually seeing the happy ending.

I decided I would ask, or perhaps even demand, that I be included or at least allowed to see the fruits of my labors. I didn't know exactly how I would ask or what I would ask for, but I knew I wanted to have more to do with this activity than simply identifying those souls that needed the most help. Even after a few short weeks, I believed I earned that right. As important as Ralph was to this endeavor, I knew my own abilities were almost as valuable. I sincerely doubted Stan would refuse me.

Unfortunately, I made a major blunder before I ever got the chance to make my request.

On an overcast, cool Wednesday morning, Ralph and I passed a fairly young couple in a more quiet part of the city. They moved by us without a word, but after a few seconds, Ralph told me to turn and take a look.

"Which one?" I asked.

"Both of them. In two weeks and a day. There's going to be a fire. Neither one of them is going to make it out."

I did not focus on either the man or the woman. Instead I turned to Ralph with growing alarm.

"A fire?"

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"Who cares?"

"I do! Where?!" I demanded. My eyes narrowed and for the first time I made it clear that Ralph was no longer in charge.

"It doesn't matter," Ralph said making an almost laughable attempt to reassert his own authority.

Inching closer to his face, I made it abundantly clear that such authority did not exist in this particular case.

"You will tell me where you saw this fire and you will tell me right now!"

"It's an apartment building," Ralph finally revealed. "I don't know where. It looks like they live there. They were sleeping in a bed, just sleeping. It wasn't a hotel or anything."

"What color are the walls and the bedspread?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I'm not going to ask you again!"

"The walls are green and the spread is like a green and brown design with flowers."

"You're sure?"

"Yes, why does this matter?"

"Because I'm not going to let these people die, not in a fire. I can stop that. This doesn't have to happen. This can be stopped. They can be warned and they can get out in time."

Ralph's eyes flew open in shock. "You're going to tell them?"

"You're damn right I am."

"You can't do that! It's wrong!"

"Not telling them is wrong!"

Not wishing to waste another moment, I jogged after the couple.

Looking back now, I know why I did this. I was tired, tired of hearing about how people were going to die, and in some cases in a very pointless manner. I heard about gang killings, street races, drug overdoses, fights, and holdups gone bad. I had to look at the souls of people that were going to be taken from this life far too young.

I remembered what Stan told me about not interfering in that way. How it might be dangerous or it might lead to unintended consequences. I could see no danger here, no policeman getting shot trying to stop a fight or a friend ending up in the wrong place at the wrong time because I said the wrong thing to the wrong person. This was a fire and two people were going to die because they were asleep. If they knew in advance what was going to happen, they could get out on their own. No one would be taking additional risks. I just had to tell them.

In my haste to warn them, I didn't realize just how difficult that would be.

"Excuse me, sir, ma'am. You don't know me, but I think I know you."

The two stopped, turned and eyed me suspiciously. I felt the best thing to do was to try and get their trust first.

"I have some information that is important to you. I think I know the building you live in. You have a bedroom with green walls and a brown and green bedspread with a floral pattern, right?"

Saying this was admittedly beyond stupid, but I obviously did not plan this with any great forethought. As in all such things, it blew up in my face.

The man's eyes suddenly flared with anger. He looked me over in a split second and then turned on his girlfriend with menace. "Who is this guy?!" He demanded with a hands clenched in tight fists and fury in his voice.

"I don't know!" the woman cried as she cringed. "I don't know who he is?"

"How's he know what our bedroom looks like?!"

"I ain't never seen him before, I swear!"

It looked like he wanted to slam his fist into her right then and there, but instead he turned to me and now I believed it was my face that might be the ultimate landing zone for his tightly clenched hand.

"How many times you been in my place?!"

"No, you don't understand," I pleaded as I opened up my hands in front of my chest with my palms outward. It's a subtle body language attempt of trying to diffuse the situation by calming down the aggressor. It's also as close to surrendering as I could go without holding both hands high above my head. Nothing I did helped in any fashion.

"No man, it's you that don't get it. What you expect? You braggin' on me about how you been in my place."

"Look, that's not what I'm here to tell you. I'm trying to help you."

"Help me? How? By proving this whore cheated on me?"

"You've got it all wrong."

The angry man did not like me telling him he was wrong. He stepped closer to me and clearly wanted to separate my head from my body. "You gonna tell me how things are now?"

"All I want to tell you is that there's going to be a fire. Your apartment building is going to catch fire, and if you're not careful, you're going to get trapped and both of you might die."

Thankfully, this tidbit of unexpected information caught the man off guard. He restrained himself enough to consider what I just said before he decided to beat me to death.

"There's going to be a fire? What are you talking about?"

"Your apartment building, there's going to be a fire. That's why I told you about the color of the walls and the bedspread, so you'd believe me."

"How can you say there's going to be a fire? No one knows that, unless you gonna set it." The man's eyes narrowed as he lifted his chin to peer downward at me in an even more menacing fashion. "Is that what this is? You threatening me? You going to set fire to my place?"

This entire situation continued to unravel before me. "No! I'm not going to set it. If I was going to do that, why would I want to warn you?"

I gave the man some credit, for at the very least, he listened to everything I said and he took a moment to consider the validity of it. I can't say much for the conclusions he jumped to so far, but at least he wasn't kneeling on my chest at this point and pummeling my face into raw hamburger.

I believe, however, the gentleman really wanted to do just that. I had saved myself so far with a few well placed questions, but he obviously had a limit that we were quickly approaching. His next question made it clear we were at the end of that line. He asked it with a tone of finality that reminded me of a test facilitator saying, "Times up!"

"Alright then, who the hell are you, how do you know what my bedroom looks like, and how do you know my place is gonna burn?"

I don't know if it was my own doing or a gift from a greater power, but an idea of sheer brilliance burst into my mind.

"I don't know you and you don't know me. We've never met and I've never met your lady friend, but I'm an

electrical inspector. I've looked at the blueprints of your building and inspected some of the inner rooms and exterior walls. That's how I knew what your bedroom looked like. I've seen the wiring and it's faulty. There are other buildings that have similar wiring that have already caught fire. That's how I know your building is in danger."

He didn't say anything, but at least for the moment, I believed he accepted my story. I paused and considered what to say next. That probably saved me from a concussion and several contusions. If I had blurted out the exact date of the fire, my story of being an electrical inspector would have lost any of its potency. I don't care how good of an engineer you are, no one could say that an electrical wiring problem is going to cause a fire in exactly two weeks and a day. Only someone that intends on actually starting a fire would be that certain.

Still, I wanted to give them some reference of time. My warning wasn't going to help them if they dismissed me as a nut, and the fire wasn't due to start for another two weeks.

"Look, I really don't know you but I recognized you from the building when I did my inspection. I saw you here and that's why I want to warn you. You don't have to worry about anything right away. The building is safe for now, but in two weeks the wiring could corrode to a point where it might be dangerous. You may want to get yourself a smoke detector and make sure you have a plan to get out of the building."

I stopped right there. I felt if I said anymore I might ruin it. I did my best to get the message through to them both without receiving any damage to my facial tissue in return. It was more than I could have ever hoped.

The man looked at me one last time and decided to put in the last word. It was not a thank you.

"I don't care what kind of inspector you are, you don't ever go in my place again." He shoved his finger into my chest to accentuate the point. He turned and walked away. The woman ignored me and simply followed.

Nothing went as I hoped or expected. To make things much worse, as I turned to walk back to Ralph, I watched Stan's gray sedan pull up to the curb. Ralph jumped inside as I shuffled like a zombie toward the car.

"Get in," Stan commanded without looking at me. "Don't say anything, just get in."

Chapter 15

Stan's hands gripped the steering wheel as tightly as a man that holds on to a single railing forty stories above the pavement. I really believe he wanted to apply the same kind of hold and pressure around my neck.

Thankfully to a degree, Stan decided direct physical confrontation was not necessary, especially now that I was sitting within the vehicle he controlled. He stepped upon the accelerator with angry foot stamps and the Nissan lurched hastily away from the curb in such a disruptive fashion that I found myself bouncing about the front seat.

I attempted to latch my seatbelt, but a sudden swerve and another uneven acceleration sent the belt snapping back up over my shoulder. Undeterred, I grabbed the notched end and hastily drew it across my chest and shoved it into its proper receptacle before Stan could make another sudden lurch that would send my face into the glove compartment. Successfully belted into place, I sat silent and waited for my punishment like a child caught passing a note during class.

Stan made me wait. He no longer swerved or accelerated unevenly. I guess he realized the seatbelt kept me in place. Any violent thrusts of the wheel or irregular pressure on the accelerator were now wasted gestures. The only thing he could conceivably do at this point was to drive headfirst into an oncoming dump truck. Seatbelts wouldn't save me, but the act would do little for Stan and Ralph as well.

Thankfully, he was not so motivated to punish me that he would attempt such desperate measures. Instead, he remained quiet, staring straightforward and ignoring me, letting the silence fester.

One thing was certain, as Stan navigated the Nissan out of Camden and on a highway leading to Pennsauken, we weren't going to find any new potential people to save today. Ralph had only located that couple, the two that were supposed to die in the fire, and I never took a look at their souls. Worse, if you could say that, I forewarned them of their possible fate, and they might escape death altogether.

I found that thought rather bizarre. I sensed obvious hostility toward my actions from both Ralph and especially Stan, and yet, it's possible I just saved two people's lives. To complicate matters, I actually felt very good about what I had done. Deep inside, I believed my actions mattered today, the kind of feeling I had hoped to obtain when I first decided to assist Stan and his friends.

As I contemplated this inner sense of accomplishment, Stan finally broke the silence.

"I hope you learned your lesson."

In truth, I wasn't sure I had. In fact, I felt the need to defend my actions. "I did what I thought was right."

"What you thought was right? You obviously haven't even considered the depth of all the things you did wrong today."

I simply could not agree. Everything I did, I did for someone else's benefit, not my own. A fireman that rushes inside a burning building to save a life is considered heroic. I might not have put myself at risk in the same fashion, but my intentions were no less noble. As for the concept of risk, apparently Stan wouldn't even agree with me on that point as he continued to question my actions, if not my motivation.

"Do you have any idea of the risks you took?"

I simply looked at him with a bewildered expression.

"Obviously you don't," Stan growled. "You put yourself in a very dangerous situation. You didn't know those people. You have no idea how they might have reacted to what you were going to say."

"It was touchy there for a while, I admit it, but I worked it out. You once tested me in Arthur Greenfree's office to see if I could think on my feet. I did ok then, and I think I proved myself here as well."

"You idiot! Arthur Greenfree's office was a controlled environment. First of all, I was with you. Second, we were dealing with Arthur Greenfree and not some unknown punk. Third, I put you in that situation in the middle of Greenfree's office, not the middle of the street. Do you think Arthur is stupid enough to do something in his office?! He didn't get to where he is by being careless. You were safe there. You are not safe when you confront some unknown thug out in the streets."

"It's not like it was dark and we were alone in some alley. There were people around, witnesses..."

"You have got to be kidding. Witnesses? Witnesses? Who? The girlfriend? You think she's going to say anything? You think her being there would have stopped him for one second?"

"Ralph was there, too."

Stan gritted his teeth in such a fashion his jaw jutted down to his Adams apple. "Hey Ralph, if our friend here got himself killed just now, what would you have done?"

"Ran in the other direction. I didn't see nothing," Ralph stated calmly.

"Thank you. That's exactly what I would expect you to do. You are never to put yourself in danger because of the stupidity of our friend here."

I wanted to turn and look back at Ralph with an expression of sheer dismay, but I knew that would not help matters. Stan simply continued to beat on me.

"You see? You didn't even realize just how dangerous the situation was. That's beyond stupid. For some unfathomable reason, you actually thought you were safe to go spout off to this guy. You're in a tough section of town, you're dealing with a complete stranger, and you have a false sense of security. Put all of that together and tell me you still don't think it was risky!"

"Ok, I obviously misjudged my surroundings, but..."

"Not just the surroundings, you totally misunderstood the circumstances around you! You have to realize the difference. Your surroundings can be dangerous. I'll be the first to admit some parts of Camden are very dangerous. Still, I'm not worried about you being there because the circumstances are controlled. If you take the proper precautions, you're not in any real danger. It's when you change the circumstances to make them dangerous, that's when you get yourself in trouble. That's exactly what you did today. You almost got yourself killed today, worse you could have gotten Ralph killed. You want to take risks with your life, that's your problem, but I will not have you making decisions that put other people at risk."

Stan paused long enough to shake his head and curse under his breath and still he was not finished with me. "What if this guy had a gun? You walk up to him, he goes off the handle, and boom, you're dead. He doesn't want witnesses, boom, Ralph's dead. They walk away and Camden has two more murders on its stat sheet. If you don't think that was a distinct possibility of happening today, then maybe you shouldn't be out here."

I did not think of it before, but perhaps I should have. If the guy did have a gun, I might already be dead. When Stan recited the scenario in such a matter-of-fact manner, I had to admit it sounded much more

plausible than I ever imagined.

"Alright, maybe it was stupid," I admitted.

"Not maybe, definitely stupid."

"Fine, definitely stupid. I didn't think the right way, I'll be more careful in the future."

"You don't get it, do you? There may not be a future. Your little episode here creates countless other problems. There are so many different things that can go wrong that I don't know if we can afford to have you come here again."

"I don't understand," I said. "It's over. It's done with. It was obviously riskier than I thought and it was a stupid move, but I got lucky and nothing happened."

"Nothing happened now, that doesn't mean that there won't be consequences later."

"What kind of consequences?"

"Ralph told me he saw the two die in a fire. You went to warn them. What did you tell them?"

I reiterated the conversation I had with the couple.

Stan shook his head. "You lied about being an electrical inspector? Are you insane?!"

"I thought it was pretty smart."

"Smart?! What happens when the fire occurs and there's an investigation. Maybe you did save this couple. Congratulations, that's wonderful. Guess what, they tell the investigators that some guy claimed to be an electrical inspector and he knew there might be a fire. You don't think that's going to raise some questions?"

"Who's going to question me? I didn't tell anyone my name. That couple doesn't know me. How are they going to find me?"

"Because I made sure to introduce you to Arthur Greenfree and told him that you'd be out with Ralph. Enough people around here know about Ralph that someone might recognize him, that's how it gets connected to you. Can you follow that?"

I didn't think of that. A flood of worries raced across my mind and Stan found the need to add to them in a big way.

"It can get worse than that, you know. Pretending to be a fire inspector is one thing, how about being considered a suspect in a crime? You've just connected yourself with a fire. How smart was that? What if the fire is arson? I bet you didn't even think about that."

I didn't, so I kept quiet.

"The couple might not even survive. You might have interceded for nothing. They might think you were just some kind of crackpot, but maybe they tell a friend of what happened here. Suddenly the couple is toast and their friend decides to talk to the police about some strange dude that had an argument with them. Maybe the friend tells the cops that this dude was going to set a fire."

"I never said I was going to set a fire."

"Who cares what you said? All that matters is what they think you said."

More worries. These actually hit a bit harder. The guy in the street even accused me of wanting to set the fire. I didn't tell Stan about that and now he's making the same type of connection. Suddenly, my good feeling inside was turning into a stomach churning, pre-ulcerous nightmare.

"I'm not done," Stan announced. "You also brought attention to yourself. Think about what you're doing out here. Think about why you're walking around Camden. You're looking for people that are going to die. In order to protect you from a great deal of suspicion, I've tried to set things up so there's no connection between you and all these people that you're following. I did that for your own benefit, to create a buffer so no one starts to ask you questions about what you're up to. Now, there is a connection. You managed that all by yourself."

"You're right, but I didn't do it so that people would know me or thank me. Look, I've told you all along I'm here because I want to help people. I saw an opportunity and I took it. You think it was wrong. Fine, you're entitled to your opinion. I just did it because I couldn't stand the thought of such a waste."

"We talked about this before," Stan reminded me. "It's not just my opinion versus your opinion. You have to accept that it goes well beyond that. When you start interfering in things, you affect things you can't possibly imagine. It's not just between you and this couple that you want to save. It now could involve people we don't even know about. We have no idea who will say what and how people will react. How big is the apartment building? What about all those other residents? What if word spreads about it being dangerous and it starts some other kind of panic? What if more people die in the panic? I told you it wasn't as simple as you thought."

"I know, I know, but this was just a fire. I just wanted to warn them."

"But it doesn't end with just that warning. Don't you see how complicated this thing is? And it could get even more complicated for you. If someone connects you to a fire, how do you explain yourself when you can no longer say you're an electrical inspector? How are you going to explain how you knew there was going to be a fire in the first place? Are you going to tell them that Ralph can see how people die? Good luck getting them to believe that. I can also guarantee you that they won't find Ralph to backup your story."

Stan released a heavy sigh as if he finally let go of all his pent up anger. After a brief silence, he slowly offered me some solace. "I know you only meant to help, but you might have helped no one. You don't know if that couple is going to listen to you. In the end, you simply have to accept that you can't explain what you know to rational people. You also have to realize that you put yourself and Ralph in physical danger, and you've opened up a can of worms that might not be able to be sealed up again."

"What do you want me to say? I'm sorry? I don't know if I am. I understand everything you're telling me and I don't know how to argue with you. The thing is I just thought it was the right thing to do."

Stan decided to cut right to the chase. "If you had to do it all over again right now, would you still do what you did?"

I didn't want to answer because deep inside I believed I still would have tried to warn those two people, even after seeing what kind of person the guy was, even after all the problems Stan told me I now might face. I still believed it was the right thing to do, and so, I said nothing.

Stan shook his head for the last time.

"You don't want to answer, that's fine. Maybe you need to think about it a little more. You may also want to think about something else. You abused Ralph's gift."

"Excuse me?" I stated, surprised at this sudden change in the direction of the conversation.

"You want to believe you acted nobly and that somehow justifies what you did. Well, you also have to consider how you got your information. You had no right to tell those people anything. Ralph never gave you his permission to tell anyone else what he revealed to you. You went ahead on your own with something Ralph told you in confidence. Ralph trusts you enough so he confides in you now directly. You broke that trust. As a therapist and a counselor, that should mean something to you."

"What are you talking about? I thought we were all in this together, all helping to save people."

"WE are, but you went off on your own today. Ralph told me what happened, how you demanded information from him. You did this all on your own even after Ralph objected. Did Ralph ever tell you it was alright with him for you to go off and warn people of an impending tragedy?"

"No, but..."

"But you assumed you could do whatever you thought was right. You made a judgment based on your own considerations without once consulting Ralph. You didn't come upon this information on your own. Ralph gave it to you out of trust, trusting that you would stick to the program."

When my ethics were questioned, as they were obviously being questioned at this moment, I became belligerently defensive. "So you're saying I somehow abused a privilege? What privilege?! When did I agree to some sort of professional relationship? If anything I remember how you wanted to make damn sure this didn't become any type of doctor-patient scenario. I'm just a safety check to save you time so you know who to target. Oh and by the way, I don't remember anyone promising me any special privilege for the information I offered."

"And no one has gone against your wishes, either," Stan fired back as if he was ready for this charge. "You were told up front before you started what you'd be doing and what was expected of you. If you had any reservations, you've had plenty of time to voice them. If you think someone has taken advantage of you, give me a good example right now in what way. You tell me where and when someone has gone against your instructions. Have I done anything you've asked me specifically not to do? Has Ralph? Where's the great wrong committed on you?"

Still very much upset over having my integrity questioned, I seethed but also struggled to point out a concrete instance to contradict what Stan was saying. I tried to focus on an example, but my anger clouded my thinking.

In truth, there was no one particular instance, but rather a general all-encompassing sensation of injustice. I felt as if I was being dragged along somehow. Not against my will, because I had agreed to everything I had done, but perhaps without my full acceptance. It was like I agreed to buy something, but the price was never really discussed. I felt like I overpaid and was given foreign currency as change. I felt cheated, slighted, but not in such a way that I could clearly define the deception.

In the end, I pointed to the entire process. "There's no specific incident I can name, but maybe that's the problem. I don't really see everything that's going on. I don't feel included."

"You've got to be kidding me," Stan interrupted. "You can't possibly be saying you did this because you don't get to watch the process from beginning to end. If that's the case, forget it. It's not just me now. The rest of my

group is going to hear of what you did here today. The people that contact those that Ralph pinpoints work under very dangerous conditions. They need people they can count on. I can assure you, you didn't gain anyone's trust with what happened today."

After that, I realized I was in no position to make any demands about being more involved in the process of saving people. Then again, I wasn't sure I wanted to be.

Chapter 16

A few days passed before Stan contacted me again. He told me not to worry about the couple I tried to warn about the fire. It was all taken care of--I didn't have to worry about anyone questioning me in the future or of me being the focus of any suspicion. I was about to ask how this was accomplished, then I realized I probably didn't want to know.

As far as I could guess, Stan probably found someone with a gift to erase short term memory and did just that on the couple I tried to warn. If he did indeed have such a person working for him, I would have liked to have utilized those services for myself. It'd be awfully nice to have a memory cleansing brain wipe from time to time.

Unfortunately, I doubted that Stan would avail such services to me even if he had found a person with that kind of power. Although he might have been happy to ease my worries, I'm certain he didn't want me to forget the problems I caused just so I could go running off to warn others in the future.

I mumbled a half-hearted thank you and hoped that would be the end of it. Just because I couldn't forget what happened didn't mean I wanted to dwell on it.

Stan was gracious enough to comply, but then he dropped a bomb that made me wish he never called at all. He told me because we were unsuccessful in finding prospective individuals that needed our assistance on that past Wednesday, he wanted me to go out with Ralph on Monday evening. He didn't want to let opportunities slip away.

At first, I protested and claimed I had appointments at my office that I would not be able to cancel. He said that wasn't a problem. He could pick me up after I was done. He wanted us to go out much later anyway. Suddenly I realized he wanted me to head into Camden late at night. Not a good idea.

When I raised my concerns, he scoffed. He told me there wasn't a need to worry. Monday's were almost always quiet. He told me just to follow Ralph, as if I were just going to a new mall and simply needed someone to show me around a bit. He also ensured me that Ralph wouldn't cause me a problem. I wasn't so certain about that, either.

I wondered if this was actually punishment for my past actions. Fretting over the prospect of wandering around Camden in the dead of night, I also recalled my own misgivings over the entire endeavor. Cascading doubts about my participation still crept about my mind. Avoiding a night time jaunt might have been just the stimulant needed for me to call for a momentary halt and reassess my decisions.

I actually told Stan I might need to take a break. He never voiced outright opposition, and my announcement didn't even seem to catch him off guard. He told me to do what was best for me. He did, however, confirm what I once believed, that my help was proving invaluable. He assured me they had never been as effective in finding people to help as they had been in the past several weeks. That's why he wanted us to go out on Monday night, so as not to squander the opportunities before us.

The only thing he requested was that I make a decision immediately. Either I would be available on Monday night or not, but either way, he needed to know at that moment. If I wasn't going, he was still going to send Ralph, but Ralph would need greater assistance. Without my help, they would be forced to target more individuals. It was inevitable that they would waste time on people that didn't need guidance.

I did not want to head into Camden in the middle of the night. I also wasn't sure if I really wanted to continue doing this at all. The way Stan phrased it, however, left me feeling that if I said no, I would be responsible for an entire evening of a wasted effort. That also meant that someone would slip by, someone that could have

received help would not get it.

Once more I thought of the dark spider-like thing that wrapped around the small soul in the morgue. Could I sleep knowing that I allowed my own prideful misgivings to get in the way of saving some poor individual from that fate?

I didn't think sleep would come easy either way. For the sake of expediency, I simply decided to agree. I would accompany Ralph and deal with the risks as opposed to shrinking from my responsibilities. I could not allow myself to waste my talents and let others potentially suffer because of my own inner doubts. That's the kind of decision that can haunt you far more than any night time excursion into Camden, NJ.

Monday night arrived after a rainy afternoon. The rain ceased by the time Stan picked me up, but the roads remained wet and the sky cloudy. The air smelled of late spring when the tree blossoms have already fallen and the scent of freshly mown grass becomes so much more prevalent.

As we drove, Stan spoke to me as if the incident involving the couple never happened. He displayed no further animosity towards me. He also didn't appear to be trying to butter me up as if he might be afraid I was ready to quit. He simply chatted about normal events, offering that friendly, comforting personality that he so easily displayed.

"Did you go to the hospital over the past few days?" he asked with seemingly genuine interest.

"Just once," I replied.

"How many times in the past would you have normally gone in that span of time?"

"Probably at least three times."

"Is this causing you any problems with them?" And again, his tone carried sincerity as if he wanted to ensure that this new endeavor was not causing too many constraints on my schedule.

"No, I've told them I haven't been feeling well. I've spent so many years volunteering there, they really can't complain. They have their own counselors available on their psych wing, so there's always someone that can do grief counseling if it's necessary. My being there just relieves them of that burden, but it's not like they can't get by without me."

"And what about you, are you missing it?"

That was certainly a question that couldn't be answered with a simple yes or no. I missed rejoicing in what I used to see when a patient with a strong soul passed with a swirl of exuberant lights and colors, but I did not miss facing the reality that a weak soul faced a much darker fate. Death was so much more complicated for me now.

Once more I thought of the ability to wash my own memory clean. What if I really did have that alternative? What if I really could have the slate cleaned and forget everything I had seen, done, and learned since Stan Adanaïs entered my life? Would I agree to that? I couldn't answer that honestly while driving towards Camden well after sunset, because I wanted just about everything wiped from my mind at that point.

"I miss it the way it used to be," I confessed. "But sometimes you just can't go back to the way things were. Once you belch you can't just swallow back the same air."

"Interesting way of putting it," Stan chuckled. "I always thought the saying was that you can't put the genie

back in the bottle once you let him out."

"I like to be original."

"Good for you."

"Yeah, good for me."

I hardly sounded convincing and I guess Stan felt the need to offer any kind of support he could make available.

"This is your first time in Camden at night. Is there anything you think you might need?"

At first I wanted to say a lead suit and a bazooka, but then I realized that would probably just weigh me down so I couldn't move. That would be wonderful, a stationary target. Great. I also didn't know how to fire a bazooka, so I'd probably end up blowing a big hole in my own lead suit. In fact, I doubted I could be effective with any kind of weaponry.

As I considered this, I wondered if that was Stan's intention. Not a bazooka, but he might really be referring to a gun. If he was, I wasn't even going to approach the subject. I did, however, make one request.

"A flashlight might be nice, just in case."

He told me to grab one from the glove compartment. I opened the latch and the compartment door fell down towards my knees. Four small but surprisingly powerful handheld lights waited for my choosing. I looked about the case, but I saw no sign of any gun. I must admit I was substantially relieved.

"Do you want anything to eat after we pick up Ralph? We don't have a lot of time, but we can grab a drive-thru burger if you want."

"I'm not hungry. In fact, I'd just assume we get this over with as soon as possible."

After we picked up Ralph, Stan simply brought us to a spot near the center of Camden and sent us on our way with a smile.

I looked about the dark streets which I realized weren't really that dark after all. There was plenty of light and plenty of activity, but nothing that would make me cringe in fear for my own safety. People simply mulled about. Some just stood on porches or corners talking to neighbors. Others walked past us indifferently, perhaps intent on going to get some coffee or catch a late night movie.

Yes, it looked somewhat more dramatic at night. The shadows stretched longer, the alleys appeared darker, but the people really didn't appear all that different. They appeared the same as when I saw them in the bright sunlight of noon time.

Ralph took the lead. He showed no sign of altering his movements based on the time of day, or in this case night. He displayed no reluctance toward the darker, emptier passages and he started off down a one way street. As we moved, he looked about at a few people, but said nothing.

I decided to offer the first olive branch. "I'm sorry if you think I put you at risk the other day."

"Don't do it again," he replied.

I must admit the tone annoyed me. I really didn't like Ralph telling me what to do. Yes, he was important, but I was realizing I was, too. As a counselor, however, I also realized that an argument over who was really in charge wouldn't be very constructive. If I was going to continue with this project, I would be spending more time with Ralph. That meant we needed to find a working solution. I decided to offer the one I had already conceived earlier in the day.

"I tell you what," I began, "let's make a deal. When you see one of those scenes about someone dying, I'd like you to keep most of the details to yourself. You don't tell me how or when they're going to die and we won't even have to risk me doing something you don't like. You just tell me to look at someone and I'll tell you if it's someone we're interested in or not, and we'll leave everything at that. Ok with you?"

"Yeah, sure. Whatever."

Once more, Ralph's response did little to enhance my feelings toward him. I felt the solution held a great deal of merit. There really was no reason for me to know how these people died. Revealing such details only served to satisfy my curiosity. I convinced myself I didn't need to know such things and that I could keep my curiosity in check. For this to work, however, I needed Ralph to cooperate, and I couldn't simply accept his detached attitude.

"No, I'm serious. Don't tell me anymore details. I don't want to know. It doesn't help and can only lead to problems."

"If that's the way it's got to be, that's the way it is." He stopped and nodded to his left. "Over there, the tall lady in white and green, she's..." then he stopped and simply asked, "What about her?"

At first, I wanted to thank Ralph for catching himself and not revealing additional information. I changed my mind. I thought it might sound condescending, so I refrained.

I casually glanced over to where Ralph nodded. The woman in question was not looking in our direction so I was able to concentrate and look deeply into the core of her being. I saw a fairly bright spirit in a pleasant shade of purple. It made me think of grape soda for some reason.

As a kid, I loved that drink, and looking at her actually brought me back to a much more pleasant time in my life. I thought of bright, hot days during summer vacation, that marvelous period of time that seems to go on forever. When you're only ten years old, two and a half months is almost like a lifetime. It's all the time in the world to do all the things you want to do as a kid. You can go fishing, or swimming, or play baseball, or just lay in the grass and do nothing but look at the sky.

When you went inside, you grabbed some cookies and some grape soda, at least that's what I did. Sugar is different when you are a kid. It's more valuable than gold. If I ate cookies and drank grape soda now, I'd probably go into shock, but it doesn't alter my memories of that time in my life. When I looked at this woman's soul, I thought of grape soda and that wonderful time of summer vacation. I think I could have stood there and watched her for hours.

Ralph, however, was obviously on a tight schedule and wanted to move along one way or the other. "Well?"

"She's fine. We don't have to worry about her."

"Crap," he muttered.

I attributed his surliness to the time of day, or rather night. Otherwise, I could not imagine why he would be upset to find someone that didn't need our help.

After a half hour and several blocks, he pointed out another woman. This one's soul was no where near as bright as the one that glowed like grape soda, and I believed it fit the profile of what Stan wanted. Ralph appeared thankful and then looked at his watch.

"We have more time before Stan is going to pick us up. Let's see if we can find some more."

I shrugged in acceptance. I was still thinking of long summer days and very sweet drinks.

Ralph meandered about and eventually led us to a darker part of the city near an older apartment complex. The buildings were comprised entirely of brick, but even stone can show its age.

I looked up and down the streets that appeared very deserted. Very few lights were on in the apartment units. There were not a lot of people around, in fact, I couldn't see any. I heard a few voices here and there, but I couldn't determine where they were coming from. I was surprised Ralph brought us here and even more surprised when he appeared to slow down.

We continued to move about for some time without encountering anyone else. Considering what we were hoping to accomplish, I found this odd and decided to question the tactics.

"Ralph, what's up? There's no one around."

"Nah, there's someone around. I can hear 'em."

"Well I hear people, but they're probably inside. I can't see anybody."

"Sometimes I go on a feeling, and I'm feeling something here."

I figured that was true. Ralph never seemed to move about with great certainty. He always moved as if some kind of external force pulled at his shirt sleeve. Still, this time I noticed he moved with a more apparent reliance on street signs to get to this point. It looked as if he was traveling to get to someplace specific. Then again, maybe that was a byproduct of his gift. Maybe he got an image flash of someplace in his mind and now he was just trying to find it.

We moved slower and Ralph peered into a dark area by a dumpster. He bent over slightly to look from a lower level. I followed his gaze and I noticed movement.

"Someone's over there," I announced.

"Yeah, no kidding," Ralph added with a snide tone.

"I can't see who it is," I said as I ignored Ralph's sentiment.

Ralph remained quiet. He didn't move forward, but he took a moment to glance both up and down the street. He then turned his attention back to the dumpster area. After a moment, he straightened up.

"Aaah, it's nothing. Just that nut lady."

"Nut lady?"

"Yeah, she goes around lookin' for strays."

"What do you mean strays?"

"Stray cats, stray dogs. She takes 'em over to the shelter."

"You're kidding, she goes around Camden, at night, looking for stray animals?"

"Yeah, like I said she's a nut."

Well, if she's a nut for walking around Camden at night, what did that make us? I didn't ask this question outright to Ralph, but it certainly was banging around my own head.

"Most people know her," Ralph acknowledged as he began looking around as if he hoped to find someone else in the area.

"I've never heard of her."

Ralph turned his focus completely away from the dumpsters. He no longer cared about the shadowy movements in that area. He did not move on, but he went about peering into the darkness trying to find whatever it was that seemed to call for his attention.

I, however, could not shake my concentration from this so-called "nut" woman. I considered the courage it must take to go out into these dark and dangerous areas and look for animals that needed aid. I thought of all the bright souls of the happy dogs I saw in the park on Sunday afternoons. Here was someone who obviously understood what I knew to be true, that animals needing help required our attention not our indifference.

"How long has she been doing this?"

"Long time, who knows."

Suddenly a voice called out from the darkness. "If you're going to talk about me, I'd appreciate it if you either asked me directly or held your conversation where I didn't have to listen to it."

I didn't know what to do, but I did not want to simply ignore this woman or continue talking about her as if she wasn't there. If she was indeed out trying to help strays, she didn't deserve that.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you could hear me," I apologized to the empty night air because I still couldn't see her.

She moved around the side of the dumpster where she could get a look at me, and I in turn got a better look at her. She appeared to be an elderly woman, my guess was about maybe mid-sixties. I based that mostly on her face for otherwise she looked to be in excellent shape.

"What, do you think I'm deaf? I'm standing right here. How could I not hear you?"

"It's dark."

"What does it being dark have to do with hearing? Do you go deaf at night but can hear perfectly fine in the day?"

I smiled at the sarcastic reply, then in my defense, I tried to explain. "No, darkness doesn't affect my hearing, only my sight, but that was the problem. I couldn't see where you were standing, so I didn't know how close you were. Now distance, that does affect my hearing, so I hope you can understand I meant no offense."

"I don't offend easily."

"Are you really out here trying to help strays?"

"Yes. You care?"

"Actually, I do. I give you a lot of credit."

"Why? Don't you think I'm just some kind of nut, too?"

"Not at all. I would say you just know the value of life, all life. You're doing a very noble thing."

She eyed me and then gave a quick glimpse over at Ralph. "What are you doing hanging around with him?" If it came across as insulting, she apparently didn't care.

"He's a friend."

She frowned. "You should get yourself new friends."

"Uhhmm..."

She didn't wait for an answer. She seemed much more concerned with her own objectives. "You don't have to explain it to me, but do you think you can take your conversation somewhere else. There's a cat around here and you're just going to scare it away."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Well, what is it you do mean to do?"

There was no right way to answer that question. I mean what could I possibly say, that I was walking around in the dark with a guy looking for people that were soon to expire? There's a bevy of ways to take that, and none of them are good.

"I'm just hanging out."

"Great, that's constructive. Well, like I said, can you hang out somewhere else? I'm not going to convince this cat to come out in the open when you're skulking around here."

I could have just walked away, but I didn't want to. There was something about this woman that sparked something more than just curiosity. She was doing what I wanted to do--she was out in the streets trying to help. Only she was apparently doing it all by herself. I wondered if maybe she also had a special gift, a gift that let her approach animals. I know I didn't feel threatened by her in anyway. In fact, I felt drawn to her, perhaps just as the dogs and cats she saves are drawn to her.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

She eyed me again, but never got the chance to say anything.

"This ain't a good idea." Ralph announced.

I thought he might simply be reacting to the unveiled insult the woman gave him, so I disregarded him.

"Don't worry about it, Ralph. I'm not going to get in any trouble."

"No man, you don't understand."

I sighed. "You go do what you have to do. When you need me, let me know."

"You're nuts, too. Just like her," and with that said, Ralph strolled slowly away, but stopped before he got too far.

I redirected my attention back to the woman.

"What's your name?" I asked

"Vivian... Viv."

"Hello Viv, I'm Jim."

She nodded her head toward Ralph. "I meant what I said before. You need to find new friends."

"Don't worry about Ralph. He's harmless."

"It's not him I'm worried about, it's you."

"You're worried about me? Why? You don't even know me."

"I don't have to know somebody to see they're headed for trouble." She stopped and turned around. "Never mind. Forget what I said, it's not my business. You want to help me with this cat or not?"

"Yes, I would, but I don't know what to do."

"Don't do anything other than keep talking. We're going to have a friendly conversation right here."

"That's going to help?"

"It might. Poor thing is spooked right now. He's hiding under the dumpster. Don't try to look at him. You might scare him more, but he's there. I've got food out on the other side."

"But how is talking going to help? You just told me to take my conversation elsewhere, now you want me to stay and keep talking. I have to tell you, you have me confused."

"When you were talking to your friend, you were scaring the cat. You're not scaring him when you're talking to me. Big difference."

"Shouldn't we just walk away and let him come out and eat?"

"And then what genius? We're here to catch him, not just to feed him. If we move away and let him eat, and then try to move back, what's going to happen? He's going to take off. Then I'll probably have to wait a week before I get another shot at him."

"So how does talking help?"

"We ignore him, but we don't leave. We just go on talking about ordinary things and he realizes we're not out to do him any harm. He'll get used to our voices, to our movements. He won't be so threatened by us. Eventually, he'll move out to the food. He'll think we're just part of the whole dinner scene. If he's going to let

me grab him, it'll be then."

"How do we get to the other side of the dumpster without scaring him?"

"We walk over casually while we're talking. I don't think he'll mind as long as we don't go diving for him. Like I said, right now, we're just part of the surroundings, and he needs to realize we're nothing he has to be afraid of."

"I have to be honest. I can't believe this is going to work."

"It wouldn't for most people, but it does for me. Dogs and cats can sense things about people. They know I'm not going to hurt them." She then looked me straight in the eye and I could see the courage that allowed her to walk this place in the dead of night. "They also know I would do everything in my power to keep someone else from hurting them."

"I just want to help," I proclaimed.

"Yeah, I can sense that about you. You like cats?"

"Cats confuse me," I answered honestly.

"Welcome to the club, it's a big one."

"I do like animals, especially dogs, and horses."

"But you're not sure on the cats?"

"As I said, cats confuse me, I don't know how else to put it."

"I do, cats are like people. They have many of the same qualities. Some cats are nice, others not as nice. Some cats are extroverts and some are introverts. People have all different kinds of qualities, some that are good, some that are not so good. It's the same with cats."

"I always thought dogs were more like people."

"Dogs are better than people."

As someone that could see a dog's soul, arguing with her would have proved pointless. I simply nodded.

"So you like dogs, and cats confuse you, so you're a dog person. Do you have any?" she asked.

"No, never have. Though I do believe I am indeed a dog person."

"You should adopt one."

"I wouldn't have the time to devote to one."

"You can find the time. Give up whatever it is you're doing around here. That should free up some time."

"I don't know. I'm not home much at all actually. I spend a lot of time at my office."

"If it's your office, does that mean you work for yourself?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no one that can tell you not to bring your dog to work."

"My clients might object."

"Any client that objects to having a dog around is not a client worth having."

"I'm a therapist. I counsel people; a good many people with family problems. I can't really tell someone that's looking for help to find another doctor because they might be afraid of dogs."

"A dog in the office would probably help them."

"Maybe some, others might be distracted or afraid or even allergic."

"So you like to help people and it sounds like you put their needs before your own. Is that what you think you're doing out here, helping people?"

"What is it you think I'm doing out here?"

"Hanging out with the wrong people."

This was the third time she did more than simply infer that she thought Ralph was not the best of characters. I wondered what created that kind of animosity.

"Do you know my friend over there?" I asked.

"I know the word is out that he's protected."

"Protected?"

"If you mess with Ralph, you mess with the so-called power structure of this screwed up city. He's got friends that have a lot of pull here. He gets to go wherever he wants."

"That doesn't mean he's doing anything wrong."

"It doesn't mean he's doing anything right, either. I just know when you associate with the people that are protecting your friend, you end up getting just as dirty as they are. I know enough about how things work down here. You don't get the kind of clout your friend has without doing some favors for some pretty bad folks."

"I'm not sure if that's true. I haven't seen him do anything that I find questionable."

"I don't see him doing anyone any good, either."

"Just because you don't see him doing good deeds, doesn't mean he isn't. Not everything is done in the open, not everyone wants to advertise their good works."

"That cuts the same in the other direction, you know. Not everyone wants to advertise the work that's not so good. Just because you haven't seen him do anything wrong, doesn't mean he's clean."

"I'll admit I don't know him that well, but I know that he's ultimately trying to do some good for some people

here."

Viv gave Ralph a suspicious glance. She shook her head as if she simply could not accept that premise. "I know what I know, and I know he's connected with the wrong people. Maybe he thinks, and maybe you agree, that those connections don't matter because of some greater purpose you hope to achieve. Doesn't matter what your intentions are, the path you travel goes a long way in making you what you are, not just your intended destination."

"Maybe he's just using those connections to gain protection so he can help people he couldn't normally get to."

"Didn't you hear what I just said? The ends don't justify the means, the path to hell is paved with good intentions, haven't you ever heard of that before?"

"Of course I have, but maybe the means isn't as bad as you think it is, and maybe it's absolutely necessary."

"You're burying your head in the sand if you believe that one. If you think there's nothing really bad going on with your friend there, then you're not looking deep enough. And nothing is ever absolutely necessary. It may just be laziness. He may have convinced you that there's no other way, but there's always another way. I don't have his kind of protection and I get along here just fine."

It was at that very moment I heard the car. I didn't pay it much mind at first, until I heard it slow down. My back was to the street, so I had to turn around before I could see it. I did so with almost near disregard, wondering if Ralph had maybe called Stan. I figured Stan was now pulling up to us so he could yell at me again for not following orders.

Certain orders, however, I'm not obliged to follow and I stood ready to argue my point. I didn't go running off to warn someone of an impending catastrophe, I didn't abuse Ralph's or anyone else's trust in me. I simply wanted to know more about this so-called "nut lady" that did her best to save some animals. The argument with Stan never occurred because it was not Stan's car.

Through an open window on the passenger side, I watched a gloved hand thrust outward holding a gun. I have no idea what kind gun it was, I don't know much about these things. It wasn't very large, nor was it very small. It was all black. Based on my description and a review of the shell casings at the crime scene, the police informed me later that night it was a 9mm handgun.

I couldn't see anything inside the car, it was too dark. The flash from the muzzle of the pistol only served to add spots to my vision. There had to be at least two people in the vehicle. The hand holding the gun came from the front passenger side and someone else had to be driving, but my eyes could not pierce the obscurity of the interior of the car to determine what the occupants looked like or if there were more in the back seat.

The hand that held the gun jerked back four times and the staccato reports echoed through the corridors between the brick buildings that surrounded us. I don't remember it being very loud. I don't even remember jumping at the first discharge. I would have bet a year's salary that a gun being fired that close to me would have made me leap into the next county. I guess I just couldn't fathom the situation. My brain couldn't process the data.

I never dove for cover or turned and ran. I simply stared vacantly at that anonymous hand thrust out the car window. It was almost cartoonish, so completely beyond my comprehension of reality that I felt more confusion than fear. While the confusion remained, fear quickly made its presence known with my next realization.

I heard Vivian moan, and I spun about to watch her crumple to the ground. I turned just fast enough to see the

cat extricate itself from under the dumpster and take off in the opposite direction. Viv never saw it, she never saw anything of this world again, but I'm sure she saw something more than she could ever have hoped possible in those next few moments, because I saw it, too.

I will never forget what I witnessed that evening, and it has nothing to do with the incalculable and senseless violence associated with Vivian's murder. It was more of a testament to her life and what she dedicated herself to achieve.

I barely knew her, spoke with her for a few scant minutes, so I know it's not right to make such broad assumptions about a stranger's ambitions. Still, there are certain inferences one can make from knowing why she was out there in the dark by that dumpster in Camden. It cost her her life, but she took that risk and probably countless others in order to help those that could not help themselves. I can only guess that she wanted to find loving homes for all the animals she saved. In the end, she found a home for herself, one that I am convinced she would never ever want to leave.

Four bullets found their mark, and Vivian died almost instantly. Her eyes remained open as her head hung lifeless to one side, and I was all too familiar with that vacant stare into nothingness as every organ ceases to function.

It is not, however, nothingness that claims the spirit, and I watched as Vivian's soul darted upward from her now lifeless husk of a body with epic enthusiasm. Her soul was indeed big and bright, but in all honesty, I have to admit I have seen larger and more vivid souls that leapt higher into the air. It was not, however, these aspects which filled my own soul with unforgettable wonder.

Her glowing spirit remained the singular source of light for only a moment. The swirling colors that came to greet her lit up the night sky with vivacious audacity, but again, I have seen more vibrant scenes during the transition of others into the afterlife. It was not the appearance of the gateway itself, but rather what flowed out of this aura of energy that burned an everlasting image into my own memory.

The spinning, sparkling shades that welcome a soul always seem to have a life of their own. The remarkable hues throb, dance, gleam, and twinkle with a breath and a pulse that reminds me of life itself. They swirl around the freed spirit with a joyous beat that if audible would sound like a Sousa march during a holiday parade. To say it simply welcomes the soul is an injustice to the reception. It is much more accurate to say the vortex of light gleefully embraces the entrance of the spirit.

What normally occurs at this moment is that the shimmering gateway encircles the freed soul. It usually moves in breathtaking patterns just as the spirit of the departed opens up to become one with the pulsating aurora. I had never seen a soul hesitate to join with the swirling mass until this very evening.

Viv's spirit remained apparently uncommitted to entry as if waiting for permission or perhaps verification of some necessary element that only Vivian herself could communicate. If she did make such a request, she received a most remarkable response.

From within the swirling current of colors, glowing forms took shape and moved toward Vivian's soul with welcoming and enthusiastic support. These shapes clearly portrayed the silhouettes of literally hundreds of cats and dogs. I could unmistakably discern short pointed ears as well as long floppy ones. I saw big round heads and small flat ones with snouts both long and short. The wraithlike creatures scampered happily across the sky on four legs, many wagging tails wildly back and forth.

All of these forms dashed toward Vivian's own floating shadow and leapt into the core of her ghostly being, and then departed back to join the glowing swirling mass that surrounded her. The mass itself began to shift, its own shape changing from a swirling amorphous cloud into the clearly defined shapes of countless cats and

dogs that stretched beyond my view as well as my comprehension.

Vivian's momentary hesitation evaporated and her spirit form darted after those ghostly animals that led her back into their midst. Her soul melded into the glowing rainbow and then everything disappeared.

Vivian's body was at my feet, but I stared upward into the darkness of the night sky. The sky remained cloudy, but I doubted I could see the stars even if the clouds broke. Too many lights in the city, too much man-made illumination drowning out what I wanted to see. I wanted to see those stars, to see where Vivian was now residing with all those she hoped to save and so many more. They had brought her home.

The pure serenity that resided within my soul allowed me to forget that I just witnessed a murder. I did not dwell upon the violence, for something inside me would not allow me to associate the scene of Vivian's passing with any brutality. Despite the fact I stood within a few feet of a murdered corpse, I focused on the well being of the spirit and not the body. I might have stood there for hours contemplating what I had just witnessed and what her new existence must be like, but Ralph made sure that my introspection was short lived.

"We got to get out of here!"

His voice broke me from my trance and I realized the car from which the fatal shots were fired was long gone.

"We can't leave. We have to report this," I said.

"Let someone else find her," Ralph insisted.

"What?"

"You heard me. We need to get outta here now."

"You've got to be kidding. She's dead. She's been murdered!"

"That's why we gotta go."

I shook my head in absolute disbelief as I pulled my cell phone from my pocket. I started to dial 911, but Ralph grabbed my hand.

"What do ya think you're doin'?" Ralph demanded.

"I'm calling the police," I responded as I pulled my hands free. "We can't just run. That's crazy. We're witnesses to a murder. You don't leave the scene. We run and there are all sorts of problems we face. Someone could see us fleeing. Someone could have seen us here with her. Someone could be watching us right now."

"You're the crazy one. You think anyone is going to say they saw something? In this neighborhood? Let me guarantee you something, even if they did, they didn't. Ain't nobody saw nothing."

"You may be willing to take that risk, but I'm not. I'm going..." I stopped and stared at Ralph as a realization hit me that left me bewildered. At first, I couldn't get a complete handle on the complexities of what I now comprehended, but one thing was for absolute certain, and I blurted it out with an accusatory tone.

"You knew! You knew she was going to get shot. You had to have known!"

"Yeah, I saw it a while ago, I don't remember when. I forgot about it."

"How could you forget about something like that?!"

"You have any idea how many people's death I see?"

"Yeah, but you knew her, you knew she was the 'nut' that went around chasing cats. You wouldn't have forgotten that! Why didn't you tell me she was going to die?!"

"Why should I? So you could warn her? Didn't you learn from the last time?"

"But you always tell me about the ones that are going to die. You never told me to look at her."

"We only look at ones that are going to die in a few weeks from now. What good is one that's going to die right away? We can't do anything for them. We're also not worried about her kind. Did she need any help from us?"

I thought of the amazing display revealed to me at Vivian's passing. No, she didn't need any help, she had more than enough waiting for her on the other side. Just as she guided cats and dogs to a shelter, the ones that had already passed to the next existence guided her to a new eternal home.

"We can't stay here anymore, we gotta go now!" Ralph insisted.

I stepped back away from him so he could not interfere with my second attempt at calling 911.

"You want to go, go. I'm staying here and calling this in."

"You don't tell anyone I was here! You got that?"

Ralph didn't wait around for an answer. He took off into the darkness around an apartment building and disappeared out of my sight.

Chapter 17

When the Camden police arrived, I began to wonder if perhaps Ralph made the right choice. Several police cruisers pulled to a stop and blocked off the street from both sides.

The very first officer on the scene asked if the shooter was still in the area. I told him they drove off several minutes ago. I didn't know what kind of car it was, let alone the license plate, which didn't make him happy. I did tell him it was dark blue with at least two passengers. He asked which way the shooter's vehicle left and I pointed down the street in the direction the suspect's car faced. That of course was a guess on my part. I didn't actually see the car leaving, but I assumed it didn't drive off in reverse.

The officer quickly scanned the area and then asked for the number of victims. I said just one and pointed to Vivian's body near the dumpster.

"What about you?" the cop asked with apparently little to no true concern.

"I'm fine. I don't think they cared about me."

"Did you touch anything?"

"Just my phone to call you."

"Alright, take a few steps back and have a seat on the curb. Someone will be with you in a very short moment."

I did as I was asked and sat down on the concrete curb next to the sidewalk. I watched as two squad cars pulled away in opposite directions just as another one approached the scene and parked several feet away from me.

A female officer exited this cruiser and walked up to me with a notebook in her hand. She wore what I believed was a very phony smile. Regardless, I stood up to greet her. She didn't extend her hand, so I kept both of mine at my sides.

"Hello, sir. My name is Officer Taglan. You're the person that called in the shooting?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"The shooter pulled up in a vehicle?"

"Yes."

"But you don't know the license plate or the make or model?"

"I didn't think to look at the plate and I'm not really good with identifying cars from sight. They all kind of look alike to me."

"You said the car was dark blue?"

"That's right."

"Any other colors? Two tone paint, different color top, anything like that?"

I tried to recreate the image of the vehicle pulling up toward me. I could see the hand holding the gun vividly. As I explored this memory, I believe I recalled more of the car.

"It was just dark blue. No other colors. Solid blue all around."

"How many doors?"

"Four."

"Did it look fairly new, very old, rough idea of the age?"

"It didn't look like a very old car, but not brand new, either. It could have been three years old, five, maybe even a little older, but certainly not fifteen years or more. It's not like it was a broken down clunker."

"Hard roof or soft like vinyl?"

"Metal roof, same color as the rest of the car."

"Any other distinguishing markings? Shiny chrome bumpers, extravagant wheels, lifted high up off the road, anything like that?"

"No, very plain."

She made several notes on her pad. "Did you see inside the car?"

"No, it was too dark. I just saw the outside of the car and the hand sticking out the passenger side window holding a gun."

"So there were at least two people in the front seat, any in the back?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. As I said, it was dark."

"Alright, wait here, I'll be right back."

She forced another fake smile and turned and walked several yards away from me. She spoke into the radio microphone on her shoulder. I assumed she was informing the two cruisers that left the scene more of what I had just told her.

She came back to me as she reviewed her notes.

"The hand that held the gun; the color of the skin, was it white, black, brown?"

"There was a glove, so I don't know."

"What color was the glove?"

"Black, looked like leather or fake leather, but not a cloth glove."

"Any loud music coming from inside the car, did you smell any cigarette smoke, or anything else?"

"Don't remember smelling or hearing anything other than the gun going off and the gunpowder."

"Did anyone say or shout anything, did you hear a voice with an accent or a language you didn't understand?"

"Again, I didn't hear anything."

"Anything else you can offer that might help us identify the car or the suspects?"

"No, sorry, nothing."

"Ok, you can have a seat again. Someone else is going to have more questions for you. If you think of anything else that might help find these people, alert an officer that you need to talk to me. Again, my name is Officer Taglan."

She didn't wait for me to say anything else and no additional fake smile. She was obviously done with me. She whirled about and hurried back to her own cruiser.

Based on what I could tell them, I felt I at least narrowed things down a little bit. It's not like they had to check every car, just the solid blue ones with four doors and at least two occupants in the front seat. Still, I didn't really have much hope for anyone finding the suspects and I doubt she did, either.

As it turns out, the inquiries from Officer Taglan were the easy questions. More questions would follow from another member of the Camden police force and many of these I was not prepared for.

I sat for a while and watched a bevy of activity. More individuals showed up at the scene, some in plain clothes, and some in uniform. They took pictures, they marked off areas with yellow tape, and they scoured the surrounding grounds. They all ignored me until a thin, slightly balding man walked up to me and announced himself.

"I'm Detective Webster and you are?"

"Dr. James Sagacity," I replied as I stood up in front of him.

"Would you have some identification on you?"

I nodded and pulled out my wallet. I handed him my driver's license which he reviewed. He jotted down a few notes and handed it back to me.

"Doctor, huh? What are you a doctor in?"

"My doctorate is in Marriage and Family Therapy. I'm a psychologist and a counselor."

I could tell that opened an entire line of questions for the detective, but it wasn't something he was about to throw at me right away. Instead, he directed me closer to Vivian's body. It appeared they were just about ready to move her when he waved his hand in her direction.

"Do me a favor, would you Dr. Sagacity? Show me exactly where you stood when the shots were fired."

I walked closer to the dumpster and eyed the patch of ground where Vivian's body fell. I recalled the scene of her spirit passing and I placed it in proper perspective to the buildings that surrounded me. I then turned about and looked at the street where the car had pulled up. I stepped into the exact spot I had stood when the shots were fired, and I announced as such to the detective.

"I stood right here. I was facing Vivian. I heard the car pull up. At first, I didn't pay it much mind, but then I

heard it slow down. I turned and saw the gun. There were four shots, I remember that. I heard Vivian groan and I turned around and saw her fall. I didn't move. The car drove away. That's about it."

"So you knew the victim?"

"No, I didn't."

"But you just said her name was Vivian."

"She told me that during our conversation. I just met her this evening."

"And what were you talking about."

"We talked about animals. That's why she was out here. She was trying to get a hold of a cat that was hiding under the dumpster. She put food out for it over there." I pointed to the food that had not been touched.

Webster looked under the dumpster. "No cat there now."

"No, it ran away when it heard the shots."

"So you noticed the cat taking off?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did you touch the body in any way?"

"No, I didn't touch anything."

"You didn't check for a pulse?"

"I didn't need to, I could see her eyes. They were totally unresponsive and she wasn't breathing. I knew she was dead."

"You ever have any first aid training? Even as a psychologist, I imagine you've had some, yes?"

"Yes, but as I said I could see she was dead. It wouldn't have helped."

"How long after the shots were fired did you call 911?"

"About a minute or two."

"Where did you make the call from?"

"Right here, same place."

"So you never moved? Never ran for cover, didn't take off and then come back, nothing like that?"

"No, I stayed here the whole time. Actually, I haven't left this area since I started talking to her."

"So the shots were fired, she hit the ground, the car drove away and in a minute or two you called 911. That's what I have here, that's what you just said. Do I have it right?"

"That sums it up."

"So what were you doing during that time?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You didn't touch anything; you already told me and another officer that. You're trained in first aid, but you made no attempt to treat the victim. You made the call from right here, so you didn't have to leave to find a phone. You even said you didn't move at all. You don't have a very detailed description of the car or the people inside it, so I can't believe you spent a minute chatting with them or watching the car drive away, and yet you just said you called 911 about a minute or two after the shots were fired. Doesn't make sense."

"I just stared at the body, I couldn't believe what was happening. Maybe it was less than a minute, maybe it just seemed that long."

The detective didn't press the issue, which surprised me. I knew that I spent that minute or two watching Vivian's soul depart and then arguing with Ralph, but I decided to keep him out of it. I was now realizing that might have been a mistake, but one that I was not ready to give up on completely.

Ralph made it clear he didn't want me to say anything about him and he was long gone now. Bringing him up now would probably cause me more problems than help solve any.

Still, I didn't like how the path of the detective's inquiries turned on me. As a counselor and psychologist, I understand that many questions are asked only to setup more questions. I realized I now admitted to some rather damaging details. I stood right next to the victim during the time of the shooting and it took me a while to dial for help. Even I knew that sounded suspicious.

"How long did you and the victim talk before the car arrived?" Webster asked as he moved on to a new line of questions.

"A few minutes, maybe five."

"And you didn't know her before tonight?"

"No, I don't even know her last name. She only introduced herself as Vivian."

"You know she comes out here to pick up stray animals?"

"She told me that, did you know that as well?"

I don't think he liked me asking questions, but he answered anyway.

"We all knew that. Pretty much everyone knew what she was up to, which makes me wonder about you."

"Why's that?"

This time he didn't answer me right away. Instead, he wanted a bit more background on me.

"Where do you live, Dr. Sagacity?"

"I live in Cherry Hill. I also have an office in Maple Shade."

"An office for your psychology practice?"

"Yes."

"What were you doing here?"

I was actually ready for this one. I had been kicking this answer around in my head while I was sitting at the curb. I knew that at some point someone was going to get around to asking me why I was lurking around Camden at night. I didn't think telling them the entire truth would help my case, so I prepared what I felt was at least a plausible explanation that wasn't quite a lie.

"As I told you before, I'm a psychologist and a therapist. I've dealt with different issues as a counselor--drugs, domestic violence, dropping out of school, broken families. I'm trying to understand it better. You can't understand it by sitting behind a desk in an office. Sometimes you have to go out and get a look for yourself. I also volunteer at a Philadelphia hospital as a grief counselor. Again, I have to deal with some difficult situations like shootings and stabbings and drug overdoses. I can help people better when I'm better informed, when I have some experience with such things."

It wasn't the complete reason, certainly not the main reason I was out there, but let's face it, I couldn't say I was out there looking at souls. There was truth to my answer. I was indeed trying to understand things better and trying to help people deal with a difficult environment.

The detective, however, painted it in a different light.

"And now you have some up close experience with a shooting," he said as he eyed me carefully.

"I certainly didn't want to see this," I said with stoic honesty.

"So you don't live here, work here, or even volunteer here, but you went out in the streets of Camden at night to better understand your patients?"

"I've done it in the day as well. It's not like I've never been here before." I told him of some of the areas I've been around. "I'm not a stranger here. It's just this is the first time I was ever out at night."

The next question I was not ready for.

"But why did you come to Camden? You volunteer in Philly, right? Why didn't you go walking around there?"

I answered as quickly as I could with an explanation I hoped sounded somewhat reasonable.

"I volunteer in Philly, that's true, but I have clients from all over. I see Philly when I go to help at the hospital there. I never get a chance to see what it's like here in Camden."

I decided to press a question of my own with a genuine tone of disbelief.

"Your questions seem to have a lot to do with me and not what I saw here. I get the feeling you think I'm a suspect. Do you think I'm a suspect?"

"I'd say you're more a person of interest at this point." Detective Webster answered. He then made a request I also didn't expect. "Mind if I take a look at your cell phone?"

I hesitated and then I decided I wasn't going to offer it willingly. "Actually, I do mind. I am a licensed doctor and I have patient information on this phone, contacts and text messages. I don't think I can just hand that over to you. Why do you want to see it?"

He did not answer my question. Instead, he simply restated his request, but now it sounded more of an official demand. "That kind of information isn't privileged if that's what you're getting at. It's not like your patient files. It's just a phone. May I see it?"

I didn't let that phase me. "That may be but I'm just not sure what kind of information I can hand over due to all those new health privacy laws. You must know about them, every time you go into a doctor you have to sign a form that you received the guidelines. I'm always told I have to be very careful with patient information, all kinds of fines and so on."

"I'm going to have to insist."

I decided right then and there I didn't like Detective Webster one bit. He was all about control and having his own way. He used his badge and his authority to pressure people to meet that end. There was absolutely no 'serve and protect' about him at all.

In fact, the phone suddenly became the symbol of what was turning into a contest between me and this detective. The phone represented in some ways my very obedience, and if I handed over the phone, in essence I caved into his will. I wasn't ready to do that.

"I tell you what," I countered. "Let me call this attorney I know. He offers me advice on this kind of thing. If he says I'm not putting myself in any jeopardy by handing over the phone, not breaking any of those privacy laws or committing an ethics violation, I'll give it right to you. You can even watch me and listen to the call so you know I'm not doing anything you don't know about, fair enough?"

Detective Webster frowned. Obviously, he did not want a lawyer getting involved just yet. "No, that's ok. I just wanted to check the time you dialed 911."

That was a flat out lie because I knew the time would be recorded by the emergency desk that received the call. I decided not to point that out to him and instead simply waited for his next question which he did not hesitate in asking.

"If you don't live in Camden, how did you get here?"

Luckily I knew enough about NJ public transportation to take care of this one as well. "I took the PATCO train, there's a station in Haddonfield right next to Cherry Hill. I didn't want to drive because I didn't want to worry about parking. I got off at the city hall stop right here in Camden. I walked the rest of the way."

"Pretty far walk."

"Not that far, and like I said, I'm here to get a sense for what life is like in neighborhoods like this. Can't get that from driving around."

"You mind if I pat you down?" the detective asked out of the blue.

"Excuse me?"

"I'd just like to make sure you're not carrying a weapon of any kind. If you knew you were going to come out here at night, you might have taken precautions."

"Sure, you can search me. The only thing I have on me is my cell phone, my wallet, and this flashlight."

I held the flashlight in one hand and the cell phone in the other. I was not about to lose control of that, and I held up my hands.

After patting me down around the waist and at the shins, the detective muttered that I could lower my hands.

"Do you own a gun?" Webster asked as he watched me closely.

"No, never have. Doubt I would even know how to fire one." For not being a suspect, I sure as heck felt like one now.

"Can you describe the gun for me that you saw being held out the window of the vehicle that left the scene?"

I did my best to describe it, but I could only do so in very broad terms. I never was very interested in guns. Detective Webster was kind enough to inform me that it was a 9mm. He could tell from the casings found at the scene. He asked if I ever owned a 9mm. I told him when I said I never owned a gun that included the 9mm kind. I didn't think they were somehow exempt. At this point, it became pretty clear that our dislike for each other was mutual.

"One last question, Dr. Sagacity. Since you don't know her, explain to me how you ended up talking to the victim in the first place."

"I don't know her," I insisted. "I really don't know anything about this apartment complex, either. In walking around, I just ended up here. I really had no destination in mind. I was just trying to get a feel for things, see what life is like in all different places. I noticed some movement over by the dumpster. I didn't go over right away because I was trying to be at least a little careful, even if it doesn't sound that way to you. When I saw it was an older woman I asked her if she needed some help. She told me she was trying to get a hold of a cat that was hiding under the dumpster. We talked for a bit about cats and dogs. After a few minutes, the car drove up. I turned and saw the gun as it fired, then I turned back around and saw Vivian fall to the ground. I know I just stared at her for a while. I couldn't believe it."

"And you just stood there. Weren't you afraid you might be next? When shots are fired, people usually run."

"The plain simple truth of the matter is running never occurred to me. Everything seemed so surreal."

The detective scribbled some more notes, but said nothing. I stood passively in front of him in equal silence. I wasn't going to ask if we were finished, and I wasn't going to pretend I was in a hurry to get somewhere. I remained patient as if I had all night.

In the end, Detective Webster asked if I had a business card he could have in case he needed to contact me again. I handed one over, but again said nothing about wanting to leave. Eventually, he ended the conversation.

"Alright, Dr. Sagacity," he said while examining my business card, "we're done here. Actually, one last question." Seems I had heard that before about two questions ago, but I decided not to call him on that, either. "This cell phone number listed on your card, is it the same cell phone you used tonight, that one in your hand there?"

"Yes, it is."

I'm not sure if this answer pleased him or not, but he did dismiss me.

"You can leave now," he stated as if it was only by his decree that I could walk away. "If I have any other questions, I'll be in touch."

I didn't waste my time thanking him. I quickly got my bearings as best I could, and I started off in the direction I believed would take me to the city hall area. There was no way I was going to call Stan for a lift. I was going to walk back to the train station no matter how long it took me or what type of streets I had to travel. I had a feeling that Detective Webster was keeping an eye on me.

Chapter 18

Relying mostly on my sense of direction, intuition, and a belief that the brightest sections of the city would guide me to my ultimate destination, I made my way safely to the Camden City Hall Train Station. Once out of Camden in one piece and without handcuffs, I called a 24 hour taxi service to get me from the Haddonfield train station to my home. I had used the service before when utilizing the train for extended trips to Philly. They charged a steep fare for the nighttime pickup, but I already walked enough through the dark for one night and had no intention of traipsing on foot from Haddonfield to my apartment.

The next few days passed like a turtle stumbling across the Rocky Mountains with snowshoes. As if an anvil floated over my head, I waited with dread for a phone call from the ominous Detective Webster. Blistering deep within my bones, a sense of incompleteness festered within my consciousness. I knew the detective had more questions for me. As I went over our conversation in my mind, or perhaps I should call it what it was--the interrogation--I realized my story lacked credibility. From any reasonable person's perspective, there really was no good rationale for me to be in Camden at that time at that specific place.

Every time my phone rang, I expected to hear the detective's voice asking me to come down to the Camden Police Headquarters to answer some more questions. Perhaps, he wouldn't even bother to call me. Someone would just show up with a warrant for my arrest. My muscles tightened whenever I noticed a police cruiser or walked past a uniformed cop.

For whatever reasons I could not fathom, the call never came and no one appeared to take me away in handcuffs or even a straight jacket. My days returned to normal and my late nights were spent at home as opposed to the streets of Camden.

I also never heard from Stan. This, in fact, actually delighted me. I was in no hurry to return to Camden during the night or day. I also felt it might be a good idea to reduce our contacts until the murder investigation of Vivian blew over. Perhaps Stan thought the same. I'm sure Ralph informed Stan of what happened. If Stan was as smart as I gave him credit, he would realize that being seen together would not be good for either of us.

As time passed, I eventually felt relaxed enough to take the trip to Philly and spend some time helping out at the hospital. When I arrived, I immediately noticed an undercurrent of tension. Everyone welcomed me and appeared genuinely happy to see me, but I didn't need to be a psychologist to know something else was amiss.

Not long after I arrived, my doctor friend that stood up for me before the board when I asked for permission to roam the hospital, Dr. Paul Paxim, called out to me.

"Hey Jim, can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure. Just let me get a chocolate bar. It's been a while since I had one and I've been looking forward to it since I walked in the door."

I took a quick trip to the vending machine, and slid my dollar in the electronic sleeve that tends to be a picky eater. It eats only bills without creases and tears and they must be of a certain freshness. If the bill has been handled too many times, the machine spits it out like rancid crackers. Luckily, the sensors must have approved of my dollar's taste for it accepted my money and dropped a chocolate bar to the metal bin below in return. I grabbed it and made my way to an empty exam room where Dr. Paul was waiting for me.

"How are you feeling, Jim?" he asked with apparent concern, but I got the sense he really wasn't worried about my health at the moment. Otherwise, he might have snatched the chocolate bar from my hands fearing I might be exceeding my daily recommended dosage of saturated fats.

"I'm not bad. I know I've been away a lot, but I'm ready to get back to it."

"Look, Jim," my friend interrupted as he obviously wanted to cut right to the chase. "We got a visit from some detectives from the Camden police department. They asked a lot of people around here a lot of questions about you. Word is out that you were in Camden the other night when some woman was murdered."

"So he came here," I said more to myself than Paul. "I guess he figured he'd check up on my story before he contacted me again. Probably getting all the details together so he can contradict me before I even say anything."

"What is this all about?" Paul asked.

"It's about me being in the wrong place at the wrong time. That's really about the size of it."

Such a simple excuse failed to satisfy my friend mostly because he knew much more of the incident than even I did.

"Look, I need to be honest with you," Paul emphasized. "We haven't seen you for a while and I got worried. I have some friends on the Philadelphia police. They have some contacts with Camden cops. I asked them to check on this for me as a favor. What they told me doesn't sound very good."

"What did they tell you?"

"That you weren't just in Camden, you were actually at the scene of a murder of some woman that volunteers at an animal shelter. Apparently there are a lot of people that know this lady and her murder isn't making anyone very happy. You were the one that called it in. A few people on the investigation are questioning your story. They don't think you were being completely truthful."

I knew the few people equaled Detective Webster, and probably the female officer that first questioned me as well.

"I didn't tell them anything that wasn't true," I said confidently. It's accurate to say I might have left out some details, but I never lied, either. Of course, I didn't mention this to Paul. No reason to concern him with such particulars, but I did want to know more of what he knew. "What do they think I wasn't being truthful about?"

"From what I hear, they don't buy your reason for being in Camden, something about being a psychologist and studying people. It didn't make sense to them. They're wondering if you were really there looking to buy drugs instead." He said this without any tone of accusation for he knew me well enough to know that my only addiction was the chocolate that was already in my hand.

"If they're looking for a drug connection, they're not going to find one because there isn't any."

"I was sure of that myself and that's what I told them, but you also haven't been around a lot the past few weeks. They kept asking if you've been unreliable lately. For some reason, it didn't sound good."

"That's alright, not a problem, don't worry about it."

"I am worried about it. You've seriously cut down your hours here at the hospital and now you're in Camden at the scene of a murder. It's not something that you can simply ignore."

"I suppose not. What else did your police friends tell you?"

"They think the people running the investigation have you as a major person of interest. No one there is going to be surprised if you had more to do with this than you're letting on."

I looked at him, but said nothing. I found my anger with Detective Webster beginning to simmer again.

Dr. Paul took my silence as possible disregard for the matter, and he clearly found that somewhat troubling. "I don't think you can shrug this off so lightly. From what I hear, they've got two problems otherwise they might charge you."

That got my attention. I knew Webster didn't like me and didn't believe my story, but I couldn't believe he'd actually thought I was truly responsible in any way for Vivian's murder.

"What are the two things?" I asked.

"They couldn't find a weapon on you or at the scene. They think you might have hid it."

"Hid it? How could I have hid it?" I asked in disbelief.

"They've searched the area for the gun, but haven't found it. If they do, you might be in some serious trouble."

"They're not going to find it because the person that shot the woman was in a car and drove away! The gun went right along with them. I told them that."

"That's good to hear."

"What's the other problem they have?" I wondered in dismay.

"They can't find a connection between you and the woman that was killed so they don't have a motive, but apparently they're working on one."

"Really? They're working on a motive? For me? That's ridiculous! They're not going to find a connection because I only met the woman that same night. We only talked for a few minutes and then some car drove by and someone from inside shot her. Good God, these people are idiots! How could they possibly find a motive in that and then try to fit it on me?"

"From what I've been told the investigators don't think there was a car. They think you had more to do with it then just being a bystander. You looking to buy drugs is just one theory. Apparently, they have another idea, one they got after they asked some questions around here. They think that you might have killed that woman because you have a death obsession."

Absolute shock kept me quiet for about a second and then I exclaimed the only thought that erupted in my head.

"You're kidding?!"

"No, they asked a lot of questions about what you do here at the hospital, and they were very interested to hear that you have full access to all areas. They kept focusing on the fact that you want to be around when people die."

"I'm a grief counselor, where should I be? In the maternity wing?"

"Apparently, you've also been to the morgue recently."

Paul watched me with interest, and I made no attempt to hide the truth or explain my actions. I did not mention that I was with Stan, but I did not deny the fact, either.

"Yes, that's true, but that doesn't mean I'm going to go around murdering people!"

Paul didn't leave it at that. "They also know you get notified when critical care unit patients are coded as DNR and that you are paged when badly injured patients are brought into the ER. They think you like being around death."

I was amazed. I had absolutely nothing to do with the murder of this woman, and yet my friend Detective Webster was obviously trying to force fit the facts so it pointed right at me. He wasn't trying to solve the crime, he was trying to twist the facts to make them fit his own assumptions. If I thought about this for too long, I'm sure it would have left me near comatose in concern.

As a defense mechanism, my mind momentarily shut out the possibilities of where this all could lead. I would have time enough for that later when I was alone and I could worry myself sick in private. For the moment, I brushed it aside as the absurd maneuverings of a control freak detective, and instead, I focused on the amount of detailed news my friend had obtained. I couldn't believe he was able to get so much from a casual acquaintance on the police force.

"How did you get all this information?"

"As I said, I have a few friends on the Philly police."

"Yeah, but it seems like they told you an awful lot. More than they would normally tell someone that was just curious."

My friend appeared hesitant to explain, but did so just the same. "The Camden people contacted the Philly cops asking if they had any files on you. They want anything on you they can get, even if it comes from a friend. Basically me. I'm not sure if I should even be telling you this. I'm guessing the cops told me this to raise my own suspicion, so I would keep an eye on you. I guess they think I would report anything you did that I considered strange."

Things were clearly spiraling out of control faster than I could have ever guessed. Webster was not only trying to twist the facts, he was trying to use my friend against me. I wouldn't allow that to happen. I tried to lighten the mood for my own sake as well as for Paul's. I felt maybe if I laughed it off, Paul would realize the whole idea was beyond ludicrous. "If I do anything strange, I'll make sure it's right where you can see it, and I won't hold it against you if you do report it."

"I'm not sure if this is something to joke about," Paul stated. "The board isn't happy about this situation, either. I'm not sure if they're still going to want you to go around the hospital as you please. They haven't said anything yet, but maybe they were waiting for you to show up to tell you in person. I've got to tell you, your not being around hasn't helped your cause."

"I just needed a break. It's not like I was hiding. Everyone knows where to find me."

"What really is going on, Jim? I don't believe for a minute you had anything to do with this murder, but I have to say I'm confused. What in the world were you doing in Camden?"

I couldn't avoid the question here anymore than I could avoid it with the Camden police. I considered telling my friend the truth, every last unbelievable morsel. I wanted to, with every fiber of my body. He helped me before, heck he was helping me more than he should right then and there.

In the end, however, I realized telling him the complete truth would only make things more difficult for all of us. What would he do if I told him I could see souls and I was in Camden to look for those about to die in hopes of saving them from a bitter fate? He wouldn't have a choice. I would sound as crazy as a chicken looking to personally meet the Colonel, and he would have a responsibility to report me. That wouldn't do either of us any good.

Still, I wanted to be as truthful as possible. I didn't want to hide anything from him, but I simply couldn't reveal my gift. I explained in a way that fell just short of that.

"You know, we see people come in to this ER from pretty rough parts of the city all the time. We see gun shot victims, stabbings, drug overdoses... none of it's good. I'm here helping people deal with grief, but I'm helping the families of the victim, not the victim. And I'm helping after it's too late. I wanted to see if I could do some good before someone got shot or stabbed or took too many of the wrong drugs. I'm not going to do that waiting in this hospital or by waiting in my office, either. I had to go out and see what life was like for some of these people. I had to see if there might be something I could do for them before it was too late."

My friend looked at me and nodded. He understood all too well what I was saying. I'm guessing he felt it himself. He did his best to save lives, but he had to make the attempt closer to the end of the rope as opposed to the beginning. He saw them when they were wheeled into the ER already shot, already stabbed, already drugged up with some toxin.

Still, he saw them when they were alive. Most of them had a chance, and he could possibly save them, give them a second chance. Me, I only came into the game after it was over. He had to see that, and I'm guessing with that realization came the one question he needed to ask.

"Do you have a death obsession?"

I smiled and held up my candy bar. "I think I'm more obsessed with chocolate than I am death." Seeing the look on his face, I gave up trying to joke around the issue. "No, I don't have an obsession with death and I certainly didn't shoot that woman just to see her die. I see enough of that right here in this hospital. I'm learning to deal with death, just as I'm trying to help others deal with it. I don't like to think of the pain people suffer when someone dies. I wish there was a way we could avoid it, but you know what they say about death and taxes. I don't like either one."

"Neither do I," my friend replied with a heavy sigh.

"You know what else I don't like?"

"What's that?"

"The way they put the nutritional information on a candy bar. That really bugs me. Look at this." I pulled what was left of my candy bar out of the wrapper and held up the back of the packaging so he could see the label information. "There's like zero percent of every vitamin. Why in the world to they have to tell me that? Do they think I'm eating this with the belief that it's some kind of nutritional supplement? It's a friggin' candy bar. Why can't they leave us alone? I mean really."

Dr. Paul gave me a smile, which is what I hoped for when I started that absurd rant. "Eat your candy bar and don't worry about it. There's probably nothing that's wrapped in paper or plastic that's really that good for us anyway. As for me, I have patients I have to see."

We walked out of the room and Paul took a look about. He saw something that sparked a memory. "Oh by the way, some guy came in two days ago looking for you. It looks like he just came in the door again now, he's

over there. I don't think he's a cop, so you don't have to be worried about being arrested. Looks more like a reporter to me."

Dr. Paul pointed over to Stan and then went on his way to an exam room with a patient waiting.

Chapter 19

Stan walked up to me and again flashed that relaxed comforting smile. I almost expected him to wink. This, however, was not the time or the place for a familiar slap on the back and a little pleasant chitchat.

"Good to see you, you holding up ok?"

"I'm fine," I said through a frustrated heave as I peered about the visitor's area ensuring no one was paying too much attention to us.

I guess my paranoia became rather apparent or perhaps Stan realized that meeting in the open like this was about as smart as slippers on rhinos. It's not really a smart fashion statement and I don't think rhinos really care about keeping their feet all warm and toasty. He at least offered a suggestion I could accept.

"Do you still have that broom closet office of yours for privacy? We should probably talk in there."

"As far as I know I do. Let's go take a look."

Rushing out of the waiting room, I led Stan down the hall as fast as I could without appearing to be fleeing from an erupting volcano. I don't think I did a very good job.

A small degree of relief washed over my jumbled innards when I saw that no one had put a padlock on the door and I was able to get inside with Stan and close the door. We both took a seat and I wasted no time in moving this conversation right along.

"Why did you come here?"

"Better than coming to your home or office," Stan said bluntly.

I had to agree with him there.

"I assume Ralph told you what happened."

"Yes, he did."

"So you know about the shooting?"

"I do. Not a good situation."

My voice could not hide my sarcasm. "Gee, and I thought it was frolicking, fun-filled evening. No, it's not a good situation at all! And are you here to tell me all the mistakes I made?"

"Actually, no. I don't know all the details, but from what I do know, I don't think you made any mistakes."

I almost fell out of my chair. "You think it was the right idea for me to stick around and call the police?"

"Absolutely."

"You don't think I should have taken off with Ralph?"

"Absolutely not, in fact I'm more than a little disappointed in Ralph for leaving you like that. He's the one that made the mistake."

This time, not only did I almost fall out of my chair I nearly coughed up the candy bar I just finished a moment ago.

"You think Ralph should have stayed?" I asked clearly revealing my bewilderment.

"It wasn't smart for him to leave in that situation. If someone saw him flee the scene, he could have gotten you both in big trouble. Better for him to stay and just say he didn't see anything."

I almost wanted to ask him if he was an impersonator.

"You are aware the police questioned me?"

"Yes, I am. Again, I don't know everything you said, but I can make certain guesses. You must have done an admirable job because they didn't take you in to custody, and I haven't heard anything on the streets of you being an official suspect."

"Official? No, not official, but here are some guesses you don't need to make. Some of those idiots actually think I did it! They think I shot that woman! I told them exactly what I saw, described the car, but apparently they don't want to believe there was a car."

"But you didn't shoot her, so there's nothing to worry about."

"Nothing to worry about? How can you possibly say that? Gee, I've never heard of the police making a mistake before and going after the wrong person." I paused to give my sarcasm more dramatic emphasis and then I switched over to pure panic. "If they decide to charge me, that could ruin me. I have no idea what it would cost to defend myself, but I'm guessing it's not going to be cheap. And that's not something you mess around with, either. You don't go to the local five and dime to look for a lawyer in the discount bin when you're charged with murder! And what about my practice? I've seen how this stuff works. Even if they can't prove I did it, that won't stop them from destroying me in front of the public. Who's going to come see a therapist that they accuse of having some kind of obsession with death?"

"Is that what they think?"

"Apparently!"

"How did you find that out?"

I almost blurted out that Dr. Paul just told me that, but I caught myself before I said anything. My friend did me a big favor by telling me what he knew. I owed it to him not to go around revealing as much to anyone that asked. I did a quick dance around the subject, and made it seem as if the information came from several different sources.

"Because everyone around this hospital was questioned about my activities here, how I'm always looking to be near the people that die. They asked about what I do in the ER and in the critical care units. They focused on the fact that I tend to be around the deceased. It doesn't seem to matter to these geniuses that I'm a grief counselor. It also doesn't take a genius to figure out what they're trying to do. You weren't there when they questioned me. This one detective kept trying to twist things around. He asked me what I was doing there, and how I knew the victim. He even searched me for a gun."

"He didn't find one, did he?"

"Of course not, but what if they think I took the time to hide it?"

"I would think it's very difficult to hide a gun."

"I think that's the only thing that's saving me, but they could get around that if they wanted to."

Stan switched gears from the gun. "What did you tell them about Ralph?"

"I didn't tell them anything about Ralph."

"You didn't say anything at all about there being someone else at the scene?" Stan appeared to find this rather incredible.

"No."

Stan eyed me with a sheer blast of surprise. "That was a bit risky on your part, I have to admit. You probably would have been safer saying there was another bystander that took off at the sound of gunfire."

I gave Stan a sideways glance that revealed my ever growing amazement in his apparent attitude. "You think I should have told the police about Ralph? He told me not to. And last time we discussed this regarding the couple I tried to warn about the fire, you made it very clear that if I had involved Ralph in any way, you'd make sure he wouldn't be around to back me up. Based on how important you think Ralph is, I would have guessed bringing him up would have simply gotten me in more trouble. No one would have believed me and Ralph would be gone. That would have really put me in the soup and that's probably why I didn't bring him up at all."

"I'm not exactly sure what you should have said, but you have to admit it was a risk lying about Ralph."

"I wouldn't call it lying. It was more like not offering any specific information that I figured was only going to come back and bite me on the butt."

"Whatever you like."

"Whatever I like?" I wasn't about to leave it at that. "What I would like is for you to realize that I didn't have much choice. You should know that, being the one that told me I somehow betrayed Ralph's trust the last time I disagreed with him. Speaking of which, I want everyone to now understand that things are all even between Ralph and me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm talking about when I went against Ralph's so-called will and tried to warn that couple about the fire. You said I betrayed a confidence, a trust. I never accepted that, but you and Ralph don't seem to agree with me. That's bothered me a great deal. That doesn't matter anymore. Now, I've more than made up for it. Ralph took off and left me hanging in the wind. I took the heat and never mentioned Ralph. If anyone thinks I did him wrong in the past, well now we're square. No one can argue that. And I don't want anyone holding that over me again."

"You're right, no one could argue with that."

Stan gave in much faster than I anticipated. I could not hide my growing uncertainty. "I have to admit this has me nearly unglued. To make matters worse, you're not acting at all as I would have expected. I was ready for you to yell at me for all the mistakes I made."

"Then you have misjudged me."

Confusion simply ruled at this point. Nothing about this meeting met my expectations. In the end, I gave up trying to make sense of it and just asked what was really going on.

"Alright, I give up trying to figure this out. What do you make of all that's happened?"

"Well, let me ask you this--I'm sure they asked you what you were doing in Camden, what did you tell them?"

I explained in detail what I said and how I was there trying to learn about the sociological environment in order to assist my patients. I must admit, the more I said it, the better it sounded. Stan also appeared to appreciate my response.

"That's pretty good. It's a shame you got put in that situation, but I have to admit you really do well in a tight spot. You don't lose it and fall apart like most people. This incident is just bad luck mostly. I don't know how else to put it. If it's worth anything, I give you a good deal of credit to how you responded. If you panicked, you'd probably be in jail right now."

"That's comforting."

"It should be somewhat reassuring for you to know that you were able to handle the situation on your own."

"How can you say it's handled? A murder happened right in front of me and now I'm a suspect. When you start thinking about it, that can be more than a little scary. A murder charge is as intimidating as it gets. You know, the more I think of it, the more nervous I get. I mean what if they do decide to accuse me of the murder? What am I going to say? Change my story? What good is that going to do me now? Should I even contemplate telling them the truth about why I was there? Who in the world is going to believe me if I say I see souls?"

"I believe you."

"Oh, that will help in court. I'm serious. This isn't turning out right at all."

The fear enveloped me all at once and it was now near suffocating. Everything my friend, Dr. Paul, told me was now really hitting its mark. I wasn't just trying to elude some difficult questions from an overly authoritative detective, I was quite possibly facing criminal charges, and not for shoplifting, but for murder. It took a few minutes for me to really understand that, but now that I did, I couldn't imagine what I should do.

Stan took it all with an absolute level of serenity. "I understand the gravity of what you're saying, don't think I'm underestimating this, but I also don't want you to make too much of this."

"Are you kidding? I'm just realizing I may not have taken this anywhere seriously enough. Some woman was murdered right in front of me, and I stood there answering questions from a homicide detective as if all I witnessed was someone littering." That much was very true. I looked back now at my reaction to the whole thing. I know I was calmed by the scene of Vivian's passing, but she was murdered right in front of me. I can't imagine how guilty I looked to the cops that talked to me. "No wonder he thinks I did it! I didn't run, I wasn't shook up... Good God, I acted as if it was no big deal."

"You were in shock. Your response was completely normal," Stan advised.

"I wasn't in shock, I'm just too used to death! That's why they think I'm obsessed with it. They didn't think there was a car with a shooter, they really think I did it, and I don't know if I can blame them!"

"Wow, what's happening to you? You're getting worse by the minute." Stan asked.

"A minute ago I was too stupid to understand everything that was going on. All I was worrying about was that the cop was going to catch me in a lie. I never even considered they might actually believe I murdered that woman. My God, none of this is good."

"Now, you're overreacting."

"How can I possibly be overreacting?"

"Because now you're starting to worry about everything you said and everything you did and even things you didn't do. You just need to relax."

In a way, he was right. I'm not sure I was overreacting, but there really wasn't much I could do about any of it at that moment. Worrying about every little detail simply added gray to my hair and removed years from my life. Normally, you want that to work the other way around. "Ok, maybe I do need to just calm down, but at least you know what's going on now and I don't have to explain to you why I have to stay away from Camden from now on."

"That would be the biggest mistake you could make," Stan stated flatly. "You have to go back."

Words could not describe my astonishment. I simply stared at him as if he just gave birth to a giant ladybug, which would be obviously wrong on so many levels. Apparently, my expression revealed my thoughts better than any words ever could because Stan realized I had no intention of doing any more soul reconnaissance missions. He did not, however, share my opinion.

"One of the reasons I'm here is to discuss how we can get around this setback," Stan offered. "Obviously we need to make some changes in how we operate, but the best thing to do is get you back on the streets as soon as possible."

This time I found some words that matched my expression.

"Are you insane?! Are you totally and completely out of your mind? Have you not paid any attention to what I said, or do you just have a severe case of short term memory loss? I can't go back to Camden and look for people that are going to die. Think about it. Why don't I just tape a sign to my head that says 'Arrest Me!' That's all I need."

Stan was rather stoic in his reply. "You can't afford not to go back. If you just sit at home from this point on, you're going to look very suspicious. Guilty people change their behavior, innocent people don't have to. Look, it's quite simple. If you go back to Camden and continue what you were doing, they're going to have to admit your desire to learn about the area to assist your clients actually has merit. If you stop, they're going to wonder why. Think about that for a minute."

Instead of a minute, I thought about it for five seconds. I didn't like how it sounded in my own mind. Once more, the entire situation mushroomed out of my control. "So how in the world am I going to go back?"

"Well, we obviously have to make some changes. You can't go back with Ralph, that's for sure."

I was in complete agreement with that line of thinking.

"Ralph will have to go back to finding people on his own," Stan continued. "I don't think he'll mind."

"I don't care if he minds or not. You can't convince me it would be a good idea to go out with him again."

"I'm not going to try because I know it isn't," Stan replied with a bit of a condescending tone. "Still, there are three objectives we need to meet."

"And they are?"

"We need to get you into Camden again and soon, so if the cops question you about your recent activities, you can tell them that you are continuing your studies. That's the first and most important goal. Well, actually you might think the second goal is more important."

"I doubt it."

"The second goal is keeping you safe. When you were with Ralph, I knew people wouldn't touch you thanks to Arthur Greenfree. Without Ralph, all bets are off."

I shook my head in disbelief at yet another consideration I now had to face. Camden was going to be a dangerous place for me now. Imagine that. "I changed my mind. That is more important, but only slightly."

"Fair enough," Stan answered. "The third objective is to make use of your talents. If you're going into Camden anyway, the least we can do is make sure some good comes from it."

I eyed Stan uneasily, but said nothing.

"You're just going to have to rely on me. You and I will have to go out together when Ralph is out looking. We'll stay in the car at first. When he finds a target, I'll drive you by and you can take a look. When we're done with that, we can take some time to walk around on our own, just to establish your presence back in the city. A few people will see you, and you can keep track of the places you've been to, along with the time and date. If you do get questioned in the future about your interest in Camden, you'll be ready. Yes, that should take care of every thing."

"You don't mind walking around Camden with a murder suspect?" I wondered aloud. "I thought you had to worry about your own reputation there. Isn't that how you protect your activities? Unless I'm mistaken, people are supposed to view you as someone that's trying to reduce the amount of crime in Camden."

"That's mostly true, but you're not a murder suspect to me. You're a counselor that's trying to understand the environmental effects of a disenfranchised city. You're a doctor and a psychologist that wants to understand people in order to help them. If we play on that, it can only be good for both of us."

Truthfully, it sounded completely logical. Logic, however, often cuts both ways, and it was now Stan's turn to remind me that other factors needed to be considered.

"Unfortunately, there are other consequences as well," Stan added. "Remember how you wanted to be around those we've targeted when they die to see if we actually accomplished our goal? I said I would give it some thought. I had, and I was going to try and accommodate you. I can't do that now. You see why, don't you?"

I immediately recalled why I was in Camden in the first place--to help people. And as selfish as it sounds, I still wanted to witness the end results of that mission. In many ways, I did not want to give this up.

Stan, however, made the situation very clear. "You are a suspect in a murder. What happens if someone spots you around another suspicious death in Camden? What questions do you think that detective might have for you?"

I couldn't think of any good ones, mostly ones I didn't want to answer. I thought of the death obsession motive

and how my being at the scene of another murder might just sink me. This was proving to be a very bad day.

"I guess I really can't allow that, can I?"

"You can if you want to take that risk, but I can't ask that of you. You really would be putting yourself in a great deal of danger. There are certain things we can do that will help you, but that's not one of them."

"So where do we go from here."

"I assume you have this upcoming Wednesday off?"

"Yes."

"I'll pick you up and we'll go back to Camden. The sooner we get you back in the saddle the better. We just have to make those few adjustments I talked about. Eventually, this will all die down and maybe we can rethink some of our decisions, but for now it's best if you just trust me on this."

Chapter 20

I took the train into Camden and met Stan at the City Hall Station. He didn't ask the reason why I suddenly wanted him to pick me up there as opposed to at my office, which I thought was pretty strange. He simply agreed to meet me wherever I wished. I've always found that a sudden change in habit normally leads to at least a few inquisitive questions. If you have raisins on your cereal every morning and suddenly switch to bananas, it should raise at least an eyebrow. But maybe Stan never ate fruit with his breakfast and maybe he just didn't care where he picked me up.

For me, the motivation was to create a history of using the train from Haddonfield to Camden since that was the story I gave to the detective that apparently wanted to hang me for murder. The more familiar I became with the stations and the train, the less likely I'd swing for a crime I didn't commit, or at least so I hoped.

When I found Stan waiting by his car, he motioned for me to get in the back. More surprises waited for me inside the vehicle.

Two very attractive, very young, and very scantily dressed females sat inside the car, one in the front and one in the back. At first, I wondered if Stan had decided to get us a couple of hookers for the evening's entertainment. I know it's not a nice thing to say upon just looking at someone, but your true initial gut feelings are not always pleasant. They are often brutally honest and can usually be quite hurtful.

It also should be understood that I was now quite aware of Stan's antics. Put simply, he lived for surprises and the unexpected. From having me watch some kind of dark hand of malice erase a near vacant soul to bringing me to an interview with the dangerously impatient yet conservatively dressed Arthur Greenfree, Stan didn't always act with notice and accountability. With that kind of track record, escorting prostitutes around the city seemed as innocent as ordering ice cream cones on a hot Sunday afternoon after church.

I dropped into the backseat, nodded to the woman that was now sitting next to me, strapped on my seatbelt and looked to Stan for some kind of explanation. I didn't remember 'driving around with prostitutes' being one of the three goals in returning me to Camden, but then again, perhaps it was the unmentioned goal number four.

Stan gave up little in the way of explanation and simply introduced us by first name only. "Ladies, this is Jim. Jim, this is Doreen and Alice. Alice is next to me and Doreen is in the back with you."

"Nice to meet you both," I said with a smile as I tried not to stare too long at Doreen's legs.

They both smiled at me and offered a pleasant greeting.

"Hello, Jim," Alice called out from the front.

Doreen held out her hand which I gave a gentle yet firm shake.

"You're the psychologist doctor, right?" Doreen asked.

I now knew they had me at a disadvantage. They knew what I did for a living and I really didn't think it would be at all polite to respond with 'And you're the hooker, right?' So I simply confirmed what she stated.

"Yes, that's right," I said almost meekly.

"It's nice to meet you."

I didn't know what else to say, but I didn't relish the uneasiness of silence, so I pressed ahead with questions for Stan. I thought maybe if I prodded him a bit, he might offer more than a simple introduction.

"What are your plans for us today?" If he said we were going to stop at a motel, I would have probably jumped out of the car.

Not surprisingly, Stan spat out his plans with scant details.

"Ralph has already been out a while," he began as he pulled the Sedan out into the streets of Camden. "He's already picked up on a potential person. He's following her now. He's about five minutes away. We'll go there first. I'll put you in a position to get a good look. If it's someone we can work with, we may have an early day."

Neither woman appeared surprised or curious about Ralph or what Stan meant by me taking a look, thus I had to assume they were part of Stan's group.

Looking at them, I could not imagine if they had special talents. Well, that's not true. In fact, I believed they had plenty of special talents, but not the kind that might be useful outside a bordello. Again, I know I was judging them by their appearance, and as a psychologist, I certainly should know better, but I didn't really know what else to think.

Stan directed the car toward wherever it was that Ralph waited, and I sat staring at the back of the seat in front of me. I felt it was safer than staring at Doreen, even if I'd rather look at her legs than the rather worn back of a vinyl car seat.

Doreen, as has been my luck, decided to use the time to try and get to know me better.

"When did you realize you could see souls?" she asked without the slightest hint of skepticism.

This rather forward question caught me more than slightly off guard, though it did establish that my secret was really no longer a secret. Until Stan showed up into my life, I never spoke of it at all. Now I was being asked when I discovered my gift by an absolute stranger.

I wondered just how many people Stan decided to inform about my ability. For all I knew, word could be spreading all over Camden. I wouldn't be surprised if people started coming up to me on the street asking me to describe their inner spirit. Heck, I could open up a little shop right next to the downtown psychic. Get your palm read there and your soul viewed here, only thirty dollars.

It also confirmed my belief that these two women had to be here to assist in our endeavor. I doubted Stan would bother to give out such information to casual prostitutes. I don't think it would have helped in negotiating a price. The only thing that made sense was that they were part of the operation. Maybe they did have gifts, and I shouldn't have judged them so quickly based only on their appearance.

In the end, I decided to answer her question. I'm not sure why. I never told anyone before, and here I decided to tell someone that two minutes ago I thought might be a hooker. Maybe it was the casual way she asked, maybe it was because she wasn't looking at me like I was a lunatic, or maybe it was simply because no one ever asked me this before.

"I figured it out when I was young, maybe five or six years old. At first I thought I was seeing ghosts and it scared me."

"Wow, a little kid seeing ghosts. Not a good thing."

"Well, it wasn't as bad as it sounds. I had to actually look for them. It's not like they rattled chains in the attic or waited around corners to go 'Boo!' The souls are like bright shadows that stay inside people until they die. For the most part, I could only see something if I concentrated on it. If I walked around and didn't actually try to look very deep, the world would pretty much look the same to me as it does to you."

"But when did you stop worrying about it being ghosts and realize you could actually see a soul?"

"There wasn't any real moment of clarity when I just suddenly realized it. It happened over time. Every now and then I could see something inside a person even if I didn't concentrate, or perhaps only concentrated slightly. Slowly, I began to realize that these glowing forms were connected with living people. Every now and then, even as a kid, I allowed myself to look deep into someone to see the spirit. What I saw wasn't that scary at all. They weren't out to get me and they weren't wandering around looking for vengeance or anything like that."

"So you just kind of got used to it over time?"

"Pretty much. I guess perhaps another moment of understanding came when I was old enough that my parents started bringing me to wakes. When I actually got the opportunity to see a dead body, I looked very closely and saw that the bright shadow was no longer there. That was a big moment."

It felt strangely cleansing discussing these details. It's not like I opened up and poured out years of pent up feelings. I didn't blabber on and on as if the flood gates opened. Still, releasing these small experiences made me feel more normal than I had ever felt in a very long time. Of course, especially when Stan is involved, things never stay normal for long.

"I bet, but what about now?" Doreen asked with a noticeable tilt of her head as if she was sizing me up from a new perspective. "Stan says you're a psychologist and you see souls, doesn't that pose a bit of a problem for you?"

"Only recently," I replied without actually referring to the murder investigation in which I was apparently the lead suspect.

The incident with the shooting, however, was not what Doreen had in mind. "But what about before, like when you first started out working and counseling people? Didn't you want to cheat?"

"I'm not sure I understand what you're asking," I admitted. Doreen jumped from having me open up about my once tightly held secret to questioning me about somehow cheating. I couldn't follow the progression.

"People come to you to get help with problems, right?"

"Yes."

"As a psychologist you're supposed to ask questions and get people to look at things in a different way, that's how you help them, right?"

"That's one of the ways, yes, but I still don't understand what you mean about cheating."

"Well, you don't have to just rely on asking questions. You have the ability to look much deeper. You can have someone come in for counseling, but you can look into their soul. Doesn't that create a dilemma for you? You're looking at something deeper than anyone else can see. Without them saying a word to you, you can get an idea of what they look like on the inside. I would think that might affect your judgment."

For someone that I moments ago categorized as a prostitute, I was realizing this woman had a very brilliant method of association. She knew I was a psychologist and knew of my ability. She put them together and suddenly I felt placed in a very awkward situation.

For good or bad, I never got a chance to respond. Stan slowed the car and called for my attention.

"Jim, do you see the girl walking away from us with the pink top on the right side of the street on the sidewalk?"

I looked but saw a crowd and couldn't pinpoint the one Stan described. There were just too many people on the sidewalk at that moment.

"I'm not sure. It's too big of a crowd," I admitted.

"Do you see Ralph?"

"Where?"

He pointed over to his own right and I followed his finger into the crowd. Since I knew Ralph, I recognized him almost immediately.

"Yes, I got him."

"Ok, he's following her. She's about 15 yards ahead of him. Taller than he is, thin, dark hair, pink top."

"I got her."

"Ok, take a look for us."

I focused on the center of the woman's back. I saw a pink form take shape that actually matched the color shade of her blouse. The spirit was faint and the comparable colors of her clothes made it somewhat difficult to gauge the true size, but I knew it was fairly small.

"She's going to need help," I stated sadly.

"It's not too small is it?" Stan asked. "We don't have a lot of time with this one, only six days. I don't want to waste any effort now that we're limited in what we can do."

"No, it's not too small. I think she can make it, but I would worry about her if I saw her come in like that to the ER."

Stan directed his attention to the other passengers in the car. "Ladies, do you know who she is?"

Doreen sat up so she could get a better look over the front seat. "I can't see her face."

"Alright hold on, I'll get in front of her," Stan said as he accelerated down the street to first pass Ralph and then the woman he followed. He slowed as if to park the car and allowed us to peer back and get a good look at the woman's face.

It was Alice that answered and in a tone I immediately found very alarming, like the snarl of a predator.

"Yeah, I know her. Seen her around every now and then. Gonna die soon, huh? Interesting."

The only thing I found interesting was the fact that Alice didn't sound too concerned about this woman's well being in any way, shape or form. I wished I could have seen her eyes, because I'm guessing they would have appeared hungry, but the woman now walked past us and Alice turned her head, following the woman with her gaze like a lioness stalks a zebra.

"Watch her for a bit," Stan instructed, "even though you know her. Figure her out as best you can. No need to be overconfident. Let's play by the rules here. As I said, we only have a few days with this one... Great, she stopped walking. I'm going to pull over. Tell me if you lose sight of her."

"It's alright, I got her."

I wanted to ask what Alice would be watching for, but I played it safe and remained quiet and attentive. Sometimes you can learn more that way.

It took Alice maybe two minutes before she announced her conclusions from whatever it was she was focusing on.

"She'll be easy. Doreen and I can probably follow her right now and start talking to her right away. We just need her to go somewhere a little less crowded."

Again, I really didn't care for the inflection of her voice. It didn't sound like the voice of salvation. She sounded as if she was about to put this woman's name on the menu. I started to become very unsure of what was happening and I might have just said something, but Alice spoke up one last time.

"What is she going to die of?"

I remembered my deal with Ralph and how I told him not to give me details. I was about to make the same request of Stan, but something deep down stopped me. It's very much like that little alarm that goes off somewhere when you're just about to do something stupid, but you catch yourself at the last minute and you wonder what you were even thinking. I believe it was my growing concern over what Alice actually intended to do with this woman. I believed I needed as much information as possible, and this would eventually turn out to save my life.

"Car accident in the city, believe it or not," Stan answered. "You'll probably read about it or see it on the local news."

"Cool," Alice replied.

I felt it was definitely not 'cool'.

"You want to follow her on foot?" Stan asked of Alice.

"Easiest way to do it," Alice said and then she turned, leaned over and gave Stan a kiss on the cheek. "I'll call you."

"Good luck."

I, however, no longer believed in luck from that moment on.

Chapter 21

As the two women exited the car, Stan informed me of his next move.

"I'm going to call Ralph and tell him he can break off. The girls have a lock on her now."

I forgot about Ralph. I looked over my shoulder out the back windshield. Ralph had not quite caught up to us but was only about twenty feet away. I wondered why Stan just didn't call him over, but I was actually grateful he didn't. I was in no mood to speak to Ralph after he ran out on me when Vivian was murdered.

The thought of Vivian reminded me of what she said about Ralph, and what I did next was nothing more than a spur of the moment decision. It's not something I normally do; in fact, I've always tried to avoid it in the past. When I purposely used my gift before, I always did so on strangers. I never abused my ability, never utilized it in a way that might give me an advantage over someone else I knew.

It's funny actually. Doreen just moments ago questioned me about cheating. She asked if I ever used my ability to see souls to get deeper information on my clients then I might normally get by simply talking to them. I never did this. I always viewed it as almost a violation of privacy, like reading a diary without permission.

I don't wish to sound too sanctimonious here, because I have to admit I have looked inside of people before. I obviously did so at the hospital, I've been doing it over the past several weeks to assist Stan, and I've done so throughout my life to strangers in passing. Still, I never felt I used my gift for my own needs. It's not like I took a deep look at the car salesman before I made a purchase to ensure the individual at least had some sort of a soul as opposed to a black hole with laughing demons inside.

When I look back, I realize that I made a major break in the way I conducted myself at that moment, and I did so without even giving it much thought.

Ralph was right in plain view, speaking on his own cell phone to Stan who was in the car with me at that very moment. A conversation was going on between them, but I didn't care what they were saying. At that moment, I needed different information--information only I could obtain.

I focused on Ralph's chest. I concentrated deeply on the center of his being. At first, I saw nothing. No shadowy form of any color. I focused harder and finally I saw the miniscule outline of a tiny form at Ralph's center. His spirit was small, pathetic. It was about as bright as the last dying ember of a blown out candle.

This vision shook me, left me stunned.

I didn't think about what I did, or why I did it. Instead, I was very much overwhelmed by what I had seen. Nothing made sense anymore, everything I believed about what I was doing--about Ralph, about Stan, and about everything that was going on around me--shattered in that instant.

Stan snapped his phone shut and it brought me out of my own self-induced trance.

"Ralph is going to call it a day, so we're actually done here. We can address other concerns from this point on. I'm going to park the car and we can walk around a bit. You can just follow me and make it look like you're taking in all the sights of downtown Camden. This will give your claims to the cops even more validity."

"Sounds good," I managed.

I buried a heavy breath and realized that no matter what happened next, I knew I had to be very careful about what I said and what I did. I would not be able to simply wipe what I saw from my mind, even temporarily. I also knew I could not allow Stan to know what had just transpired, not yet. I needed to get a handle on everything that was happening around me, but I couldn't do it around him.

Unfortunately, I could not simply clear my mind and avoid appearing distant and distracted, either. Stan would know something was wrong, and I in turn knew him well enough to know he would press me for an explanation. I had to come up with a viable reason for my preoccupation, and thankfully I whipped up a convincing ploy before he even parked the car.

"I never talked about my ability like that before," I blurted out. "You heard me talking with Doreen? That's the first time I ever did that. I wonder if I shouldn't have said anything."

"Are you worried about the girls? You shouldn't be. You have to trust them," Stan answered. "They're on our side."

"But I don't even know them."

"Well, you know me and you know what we're trying to do here, that should help."

That wasn't true. The real truth was that I didn't know anything about him, and I really didn't know the first thing about what we were doing anymore. I thought I did, but a burning doubt now grew within me. What I thought I knew no longer made sense. The image of Ralph's pitiable soul cast a long, dark shadow over any previous assumptions. If we were all doing such great things here, why would his spirit be so small?

Of course I did not ask this of Stan. I had to remain focused more on the disclosure of my once guarded secret in order to protect myself from revealing the doubts growing in my mind.

"It's not so much about trust as it is about insecurity," I offered. "I've kept my abilities a secret for all my life. I never even told my parents. This is the first time I've spoken openly of it with anyone. You have to understand that it's fairly easy to wonder if I made a mistake."

It was perfect. I would be able to hide all of my current concerns under this one umbrella of an excuse. I could spend the rest of the day with Stan and he would never know what really was gnawing at my own sense of what was true and what might be a lie.

"Don't worry about it," Stan said with a soothing voice. "It wasn't a mistake. They already knew about what you can do, so it's not like you told them anything they didn't already know."

"That's from their point of view, not mine. This is a major change for me, a new path. Change is significant, especially one of this magnitude. You can't blame me for feeling more than a bit self-conscious about this."

"You worry too much," Stan stated as he pulled the car into a parking garage.

As we exited the vehicle, I began to relax slightly. Questions and doubts continued to rattle me, but at least now I had a plausible excuse, one that Stan would not question. For some reason, I felt very certain that Stan would be extremely upset if he knew I looked at Ralph in my special way.

Feeling slightly more confident that I wouldn't have to face any uncertain accusations, I decided to address my concerns about Doreen and Alice. Why not? At this point, I was only buying time, might as well put some of the less significant worries out in the open and let the bigger troubles wait for another more private moment.

"Speaking of worrying, I have to admit I'm a bit surprised with the two young ladies. They have, how shall I say it, rather striking appearances. I would never have guessed those two would be assigned to carefully approaching people that need our assistance."

"What do you mean?" Stan asked with a wry smile.

"You know exactly what I mean. They were both extraordinarily attractive and they certainly weren't dressed conservatively."

"That's true," Stan agreed still smiling.

"I'm not joking. I have to admit I was surprised to see them in the car when I first got in."

"I know. I watched your face."

Stan might have found it amusing, but it reinforced my concern over his strong perception. Hopefully, I had done enough to protect myself.

"Great. Then you know I wouldn't have guessed that they would be the ones you would send to approach someone that we wanted to help."

"Do you think we should have sent nuns?"

"I think I would have been less surprised," I admitted.

"It also would have been pointless. Think about who we're trying to connect with here. We are dealing with people that might have difficulty making the transition when their time comes. Do you think these people will be comfortable around nuns? If they were, we probably wouldn't be contacting them at all."

"Maybe you're right about that, but it seems to me you went to the opposite end of the spectrum. Maybe not nuns, but how about ordinary looking people as opposed to... well, let's just say the two you just sent are far from ordinary."

Stan shook his head. "You're not looking at the whole picture. We often have to work quickly. We don't have a lot of time in most cases, and we need to get their attention. Can you think of a better way?"

"I guess it would depend," I shot back.

Stan remained confident of his own judgment and his tone revealed his skepticism with any doubts on his decision.

"Depend on what?"

"Mostly it would depend on the person you were attempting to approach," I answered with similar resolve. "What if the person is very shy around women? Or what if we're trying to approach someone that is very self-conscious about her own appearance? Sending Doreen and Alice isn't going to make such a person relaxed in any way."

Stan took a path down a busy section of street and I took a position next to him so we could continue the discussion. As we moved past the denizens of Camden, he offered further explanation.

"Here's where you made your mistake. You don't have all the information. Alice has a gift, but not really like

yours or Ralph's. Alice is just very perceptive about body language. She can watch a person for about ten minutes and know more about them than we could gather from a two hour conversation. It's not something she learned or studied. She was born with the ability. It's kind of like a natural linguist that can pick up a new language just by listening."

"So that's why you had her watch the girl closely before" I interrupted.

"Yes, Alice can pick up on little hints. She's very good at determining personality traits from how people walk, how they talk to others, how they stand when waiting to cross a street. Once she gets a good feel for someone, she knows the best way to approach them. If the person we needed to approach would be shy or self-conscious around attractive women, she would have told me so, and I would have sent in someone else."

"You know, Doreen has a gift, too," I added.

"She does? Really?" Stan sounded surprised.

"Didn't you hear her in the car? She had some rather interesting questions for me. She can put two and two together and not only get four, but also figure out how to get five, six, and seven and make it all sound reasonable."

"She does have a rather interesting outlook on things. That's why I have her working with Alice."

At that point, I decided to toss out one more question into the mix. "By the way, how many people know about what I can see?"

"Are you worried about that as well?" Stan asked with a raised eyebrow.

It was an interesting question. Was I worried about people knowing what I could do? In reality, I had other things to worry about that seemed much more important.

"Actually, when I think about it, no, it doesn't bother me all that much. What do I care at this point? It might even come in handy. With the way things are going with that murder investigation, I might be able to use an insanity plea."

"As I said before, you worry too much," Stan said through a slight laugh.

"There's just a great deal on my mind right now."

"I can tell."

"Well? Does all of Camden know that I can see souls?"

"No, very few people know about what you can do, not even all the people that are working toward our common goal. Ralph knows, he needed to know. You understand that. Alice and Doreen know because they were going to work with you today. A few others know that you haven't met yet. They, like Alice, are responsible for approaching those we want to help. You will probably meet them someday soon. Is that too many people for you? I hope you don't feel I've betrayed your trust?"

"No, I understood when I joined you that people would have to be told. Otherwise they would wonder what I was there for. I can live with that, but as I said, it's still a bit strange for me to actually talk openly about what I can do. I have to get used to that."

I left it at that. As long as Stan believed I was more worried about my secret no longer being a secret, or perhaps contemplating my conversation with Doreen, or even the murder of Vivian, then he wouldn't guess that I took a nice long look into Ralph's inner being. We were able to walk for a bit in silence as I considered my situation further without worrying what Stan might think.

The image of Ralph's soul continued to stir the brew of my misgivings. The part that had me the most concerned was that our objective was to strengthen spirits so they could make the transition into the next life and avoid the alternative of some dark horror. From what I saw of Ralph's spirit, he wouldn't be able to make that jump with a pogo stick and a spring board. If Ralph was part of the process to assist strengthening the spirits of others, why was his soul so abominably weak?

I almost asked this of Stan right there, but in the end I stifled the question. Bits and pieces of the puzzle swirled about in my mind. If I could just organize them, I believed I'd have a better answer or perhaps maybe a more coherent question. Until I could obtain some semblance of clarity, though, danger and perhaps unintended consequences seemed to lurk menacingly behind any wrong move.

We walked a bit further and we talked about the areas we traveled. I feigned interest in the stores, apartments, businesses, even the people. We circled about and I realized we were not that far from the City Hall Train Station, and perhaps that was Stan's objective all along.

"Why don't we call it a day?" I offered. "We've certainly walked about to establish my presence in Camden for today. I can just walk right to the station from here. It's probably a further walk back to the car."

"You sure you don't want company?"

"You think I need it?"

Stan took a glimpse around.

"No, you'll be ok. Just keep to the main streets."

"That's my intention."

Stan gave me a probing look. For the first time since I've met him, I noticed an unmistakable reservation shadow the edges of his expression. It's a look very comparable to that of a parent in front of a child after hearing how a vase was shattered by some mysterious stranger that entered the house only to throw the aforementioned object on the floor. Thankfully, that expression evaporated and transformed into one more of hopeful concern.

"So will this setup work for you?" Stan asked. "Going out in the car as opposed to following with Ralph on foot? I think we can still accomplish great things with your help. We just need to make adjustments. If this works for you, I believe I can make it work for all of us."

I was quiet at first, but I found my voice fast enough to sound convincing. "Yes, it will work. It's easier and probably safer, too."

"Probably. I'll see you again next Wednesday, if that's alright. I can pick you up at the station, your home, or your office--whichever is best for you."

"Probably the station again," I replied. Before he could leave, I decided to ask at least one question in a moment of near recklessness. He was about to go on his way, but I risked it anyway. "Is that going to be enough for you? We only found one that we could help today. A week will go by before I can give you a

report on anyone else."

"Yes, but we don't have a lot of time with the one we found here, less than a week, so we have to move fast. We probably don't have time for anyone else. Besides, there are others you helped us with that we're still working on. We have enough to keep us busy."

"It might not hurt to have more," I pressed further. "We might not find anything next Wednesday, and then what?"

"Don't worry about that, Ralph will go out on his own before Wednesday. Remember, we were able to do this before you joined us. I'm not saying your help isn't valuable. It is, but you don't have to be with us all the time. We can use you now more efficiently."

I didn't like the sound of that at all, not because I was worried about using my time efficiently, but because it rung out in my head like an inconsistency I am trained to catch as a counselor. At first I wanted to address the issue, to question the substance and validity of the assertion, but once more a red light warning with accompanying alarm bells flared within me.

A great deal of uncertainty now swelled to colossal heights, but this was not the time or the place to unravel this mystery. I simply smiled, said good-bye and went off on my way to the train station. There was much about this day that bothered me and the ensuing puzzle pieces swirled about with even greater confusion.

Thankful to reach the station, I took a seat and waited for the next train. I used this time to impose order on what now felt like chaos, but even chaos didn't describe it. Chaos implied spontaneous unpredictability without reason or structure. This was more like orchestrated chaos, as if I was supposed to be placed in a position of confusion.

Sometimes you end up walking into a situation where it feels like you were fitted for a suit. You were previously measured from top to bottom and you just came back into the store to try it on. It's a feeling that represents more than mistrust, it represents the acknowledgment of planned deceit.

Maybe someone wants you to buy him dinner but doesn't say anything until the bill arrives and he announces he left his wallet at home. Or maybe someone wants you to pick her up at the airport but first asks if you have any fun plans for a Thursday night. After you say no, she asks if you know the way to the airport.

That's how I felt at that moment, as if the suit jacket was just hung over my shoulders after bought dinner and I was now wearing it on my way to the airport. The only problem was that I had no idea what kind of suit I was really wearing, what I had for dinner or where the airport really was.

If I was to achieve any type of understanding, the first step was to stop trying to make sense of things based on preconceived notions. Instead, certain assumptions needed to be discarded. Recently uncovered aspects simply would not fit if I didn't adjust my thinking. I just wasn't sure if I was ready to walk down such a path lined with countless and perhaps unimaginable consequences.

A choice existed. I could accept things as I wanted to see them and ignore my inner doubts, in essence appease myself, or I could look deeper and explore other possibilities I was afraid to consider. I've often told my patients that if we look hard enough, we can find the worst in any situation, however, I've also told them not to ignore their own feelings. That was the new door to open, to truly assess what I had just seen without prejudice, to throw open that door even though I had no idea what was hiding behind it.

Looking about the restless individuals pacing the station, I saw my own twisted thinking reflected in their meandering, circling paths. They moved without purpose other than to remain active. They did not wish to sit

still, but external forces restricted where they could go. If they ventured too far from the station platform, they risked missing their objective, the train itself. And so, they walked in a repetitious pattern that strove to return them to a starting point without ever straying too far.

This summed up my own choices and my own understanding far too well, and it was time to break from the safety zone my mind constructed involving this entire venture. Ruthless scrutiny was needed to determine the depth of my possible predicament. I needed to step beyond the platform, so to speak, and consider all the details with an unprejudiced assessment.

Stan, Ralph, Alice and Doreen--these were the participants of Stan's great endeavor, or at least the ones I was aware of at the moment. Beyond them, I could not guess as to how many others were involved or as to their true character and intentions. I needed to focus on what I knew of these people and why I suddenly felt very much out of place in their midst.

Alice's behavior was the spark to my doubts. Her inconsistent mannerisms ignited the uncertainty that led me to scrutinize Ralph's very soul. Even Doreen's probing questions left me ill at ease. While all of these ingredients merged together to form the basis of my doubts, I had to focus my attention upon the very start and the true center of my predicament. Stan.

Stan approached me because he knew of my gift. He clearly wanted to utilize it for his purposes. He stated that purpose was to strengthen weaker souls so they might make the transition to the afterlife. He showed me that another alternative exists if spirits hold too long to their mortal bodies. I did not doubt what I saw, but I would no longer accept Stan's stated purpose without suspicion.

With that assessment, I reconsidered what Stan had just told me about utilizing my skills more efficiently, and I seized upon the inconsistency I could not previously grasp. Suddenly, it was no longer imperative that we find as many endangered souls as possible to help in any way we could. That was the reason I was forced to go into Camden in the middle of the night, a night when I ended up being a witness to a murder. Stan didn't want to waste opportunities, but that was then. Now, such diligence was no longer necessary. If Stan could use me more efficiently in the car, then why did he have me go out with Ralph on foot in the first place?

The more I thought of Stan, the more I realized he was indeed a walking contradiction. He showed anger at my willingness to warn the couple that might die in a fire, but displayed no such fury when I stayed to confront the police after Vivian died. He insisted he did not want unwarranted attention that might compromise his mission, and yet today he walked around unabashedly with a possible murder suspect. He speaks of associations with organizations aimed at reducing crime in Camden, at the same time he deals with the likes of Arthur Greenfree.

The situation involving Ralph's soul also led to suspicions that did not bode well. Had I known about Ralph's meager spirit, would I have agreed to help Stan at all? Not in a million years. But I didn't look at Ralph in that way. I had no reason to.

I placed the circumstances of that meeting in the forefront of my mind. I met Ralph at his apartment the first time we went into Camden. Ralph jumped into the back seat of Stan's car and I remember being very careful of what I said and how I looked at Ralph. I didn't want him thinking I was judging him in any way.

I didn't want that because that's what Stan ordered me to do. In fact, Stan was nearly authoritarian in his warnings of how I should treat Ralph. But why?

I've dealt with Ralph now on several occasions. To put it bluntly, I didn't believe Ralph gave two shakes of a cucumber's ass what I thought of him. He would do whatever Stan told him to do whether he thought I was judging him or not. Why would Stan have been so concerned about how I treated Ralph?

Stan knew my abilities, but he didn't know exactly how I used them. If he worried that I might take a glimpse at Ralph's spirit, he risked losing my assistance or having to answer some very tough questions right then and there. By demanding my care when dealing with Ralph, Stan in essence assured I would not look beyond the exterior and then force Stan to explain the deficiencies in Ralph's soul.

As the condition of Ralph's soul came into my mind, I wondered about his character and I recalled someone else that made a comment to me along those lines. Vivian had little that was good to say about Ralph and had no qualms in saying I should get new friends right in front of him. She certainly questioned Ralph's character right before she died. I could not simply dismiss her judgment based on what I saw of her passing. I knew she had won the trust of countless animals and you don't do that easily. No, of all the people I had met in the past few weeks, I would have trusted my own life with her more than any other.

Yet, here I was trusting Stan which was feeling more and more like a mistake with each passing second. He convinced me I needed to come back to Camden after witnessing Vivian's murder... a murder I wouldn't have seen unless Stan didn't insist I come out to Camden that very night, a murder Ralph foresaw.

My heart sank with this realization. Ralph only preconceives the deaths of individuals once. He knew of Vivian and she knew of him. They encountered each other before, probably on several occasions. He goes around the city looking for those about to die, she went around looking for strays. He saw her death probably at least days before it happened, maybe even weeks. He had to, and yet he led me right to her on the night he knew she was going to die. He meant to!

I envisioned our journey that night. He followed street signs, he brought us to that apartment complex on purpose. It was no accident. He wanted me to be there and I believed Stan did, too.

Ralph didn't belch without Stan's permission. Ralph relied upon him for everything. Stan did more than just pay Ralph's rent. I recalled the way Ralph followed Stan in the streets of Camden. It was master and faithful servant, a servant that would tell Stan everything, every detail no matter how small. He would have told Stan what he saw when he knew Vivian would be murdered, and yet I now knew they both wanted me there.

I was now in some serious trouble. I was the suspect in a murder investigation. I lied to a homicide detective investigating the scene. Stan had leverage over me, and in many different ways. Although he showed no sign of it today, he had control over me, control he could use if the need ever arose.

As I considered the situation further, it became apparent that Stan had already used the situation to his advantage. He knew I wanted to have greater participation when those we were supposed to help actually passed. I wanted to ensure their souls were indeed stronger so we could know we were actually doing some good. When I first brought it up, he objected, not completely but enough for me to realize it was not something he truly wanted. Now it no longer concerned him. I couldn't risk being at the scene of another death in Camden and Stan knew it.

The pieces of the puzzle slowly came together, and in this manner they fit into place. Of course, now I faced the true dilemma of solving this particular problem. If I accepted this line of reasoning, certain insights followed.

People dedicated to the salvation of others would not act in this manner, not to this degree. The pattern of deception involved pointed more to the character of the corrupt, and the corrupt would not be interested in ensuring the rescue of weaker souls. It could all be a lie--a very sobering thought. What if Stan had no intention of doing any good? What if he had the opposite in mind?

I also realized I was now in a world of potential trouble. As I outlined the actions of those I around me, I could not dismiss my own poor judgment. I was in very deep, made many mistakes, and a great many bad

things could go wrong. I had absolutely nothing to fall back on.

As the train, pulled into the station, I watched my fellow would-be passengers cease their mindless meandering and prepare to enter the car that pulled to a stop before them. No longer did they pace without direction or destination. They now had an objective, and so did I.

Actually, I had two. First, I needed help. I had an idea on what to do to at least offer me some kind of protection if things fell apart. A few phone calls might be the difference between me getting my life back and spending my life in jail for a murder I didn't commit.

I also realized there was a way I could possibly prove my suspicions. It would be a little tricky, but it was possible. If I could buy myself enough time, I believed I had a chance.

Chapter 22

I cancelled all of my appointments for that Tuesday. I knew the girl would die that day, I just didn't know when--morning, afternoon, or night. She would die in a car accident in Camden, and it would probably be on the news, more detailed information I remembered from Stan's admission to Alice, who seemed much too eager to hear the finer points of a tragedy.

Utilizing search engines and directories, I obtained locations for about a half dozen major medical centers that serviced Camden. The girl whose soul I viewed last week would probably be brought to one of them. Not knowing where the accident would take place meant I had to consider them all as possible destinations. It would be difficult pinpointing the facility, but not impossible. The news reports might even reveal the hospital, but I couldn't count on it.

Her condition upon arrival would be another variable I wouldn't know but had to consider. I made an educated guess here. If the accident was going to make the news, it would probably be a bad one, snarl up traffic, and most likely include a fatality. Television broadcasts usually don't waste valuable air-time on fender benders when they could be showing infomercials instead.

Guessing that she would be declared dead either at the scene or immediately upon arrival to the medical center, her body would be brought to the morgue quickly. Most likely there would probably be some investigation and at least a toxicology report request to determine if drugs or alcohol might be involved. They wouldn't release the body until that was complete, but I still couldn't bet on having a whole lot of time.

If I was certain she would be considered a Jane Doe, it would be a whole lot easier. I could call around to find the facility holding the body and go late at night to try and make an ID. This, however, was more of a pipe dream. Car accident victims can usually be identified fairly quickly from driver's licenses, car registrations, or even vehicle identification numbers.

No, more than likely the medical center would know who she is and notify family members. I couldn't take the chance of waiting too long. I needed to be nearby when the accident actually occurred. That was the only way I could be certain I'd at least have a chance to determine if my doubts surrounding Stan were actually rational.

I decided to go into Camden early in the morning and wait it out with my fully charged cell phone that was also capable of obtaining traffic reports, road conditions, and local news reports. As I said, it was a good bet that a motor vehicle fatality would tie up traffic. I would use this to my advantage. Once I knew the accident actually happened and the location, I would begin my search.

Most of the larger medical facilities I had found were located in the north and the northeast of the city. I decided to start there. I actually chose one of the hospitals to serve as my initial base of operations. It would be safe, it had a cafeteria, and if I was lucky, I wouldn't have to travel far to find what I needed.

The morning passed with no news of any car accidents of significance. All traffic reports cited congestion as the main cause. Once the morning rush was over, I resigned myself to the belief that I would be there until at least the five o'clock commute. Luckily for me, but perhaps not for the unfortunate young woman I needed to see, I began seeing reports of unusual traffic activity just before lunch.

News reports were slow in coming. I couldn't find anything at first on the local news feeds I received about any roadway fatalities. I could not, however, ignore the consistent information of traffic grinding to a halt in the eastern portion of the city. Somehow deep inside, I knew the accident had occurred.

I also believed the young woman had already died. I'm not sure why. Perhaps because I looked at her soul only six days ago, I still had some strange link to her. I wish I could describe the sensation. It was almost as if someone placed a thumbtack in the lower base of my skull and it was now tumbling around in there slightly jabbing at the top of my spine. I did not take this as a good sign.

Realizing that the hospital I chose to stay at was not as close to the area of traffic congestion as I would have liked, I made a gamble to move on. I took a bus several blocks east and then took a slow stroll to the next closest medical facility.

The next stage of my plan required me to determine exactly which hospital they brought the girl to. Not the easiest of my anticipated tasks, but not the hardest, either. That would come later, after I was certain of the location.

Knowing a bit about emergency rooms, I decided not to take the direct route and simply ask the admitting nurse. That path might give me the fastest answer, but also potentially raise the most questions.

Instead, I put on my white coat and hung a stethoscope around my neck. I made sure my name tag and hospital ID cards were clearly visible. Sure, they were for a Philly hospital, but no one would look that close. I waited with a clear view near the ER doors which served as the entry point for the Emergency Medical Technicians.

I did not expect to see the girl in this way. I wouldn't be able to identify her from that distance anyway, and I needed to be certain. Instead, I wanted an opportunity to approach one of the EMTs leaving the facility. After about five minutes, I got my chance.

A man and a woman exited out the automatic doors and went to store their gear in the back of their emergency vehicle. I jogged up to them to appear in a bit of a hurry, but not so I would be out of breath.

"Hey, guys. I heard about the traffic accident. Did they bring the girl here?"

I left it as simple as possible. I didn't want to complicate it. I made it sound like I knew the details. My guess was these two had nothing to do with that actual call, but probably heard about the accident on their own radio. There was a good chance they would know where they brought her.

They gave me a quick look and just told me the victim wasn't transported here but brought to the hospital several blocks south.

"Thanks," I said, and I simply continued moving toward the ER doors. I went through very quickly and turned out into the waiting room before anyone could question me. I stepped past the chairs, looked at the vending machine but decided not to risk it, and moved out into the main lobby.

I exited the facility, took off my white coat and decided to walk to the facility in question. I needed a bit more time to pass now that I knew the location. Assuming the girl had indeed already died, the medical center staff at my next destination needed the opportunity to get the girl into the morgue. Once the body was there, I would have my best chance of getting a look.

After a brisk walk, I reached my final destination. Instead of entering through the ER doors, or the main entrance, I walked into the parking garage and began ascending the stairs. On the third floor there was an elevated walkway that connected the parking deck with one of the hospitals main buildings. I crossed over and entered the facility in an area where there was no main desk and no security immediately visible

The best way to get around the hospital is to look like you know exactly where you're going. Never ask for

where things are. That tends to raise questions, especially if you ask for the location of the morgue. Instead, read the signs, but only as you pass them, and avoid looking lost around nursing stations. Doors can be opened, but it's safer to open those with windows on them so you know where they lead. Medical center personnel are usually very busy and if you look like you know where you're going, well, they have their own problems to worry about.

It also helps if you are a licensed medical professional. In the same manner in which I approached the EMTs at the previous medical center, I prepared myself to look part of the surroundings. I put on the white coat and my name tag with 'Dr.' on it. This time I let the stethoscope hang out of my pocket, but still made sure it was visible.

During my years obtaining my doctorate as a Marriage and Family Therapist, I worked as a psychologist intern in different state mental hospitals, health centers, and community clinics. While the layouts of the facilities are often different, there are a few things that are fairly standard.

If there's a basement, that's where they put the morgue. Access to the morgue, however, is normally not straightforward, but since they're not going to throw a body down a chute or lug it down stairs, there has to be an elevator. It's also usually not going to be the main elevator in the lobby. You don't want to have visitors walk in and accidentally end up taking a ride with a corpse. It's almost always a service elevator.

I took out my cell phone and proceeded to scroll through several menus I did not care about in the least. I just wanted to look busy so that no one would disturb me, and also to appear distracted so if I made a wrong turn into a dead end or a closet, I wouldn't appear lost, just preoccupied. After traveling across several floors and up and down a few stair cases, I finally found a back elevator with a 'B' button on the panel. Hoping the 'B' stood for 'Basement' and not 'Bottomless Pit', I pressed it and hoped for the best.

The doors opened and I walked out into a stark hall with only a few doors and no one about. So far, my luck was holding. Trusting my instincts, I made a few turns and found the objective of my travels. Of course, now I also faced the most difficult part of my plan.

I knew I was taking a great risk. A homicide detective in Camden wanted to pin a murder on me because he thought I had an obsession with death. Where was I right now? Camden. What was I doing? I was hoping to get into the hospital morgue so I could take a good look at the body of a recently killed girl. Certain things just spelled disaster--throwing aerosol cans on open fires, playing catch with darts, and what I was about to do.

Unlike the morgue administrators in the Philly hospital where I volunteer, this attendant didn't know me. Morgues are secure areas and rules exist about access. Still, my request would not be completely out of the ordinary and I believed I had enough credentials for a chance to get through.

I opened the door and stepped up to the desk where the attendant looked up at me. He was a young kid, probably going to school at night. He saw I was alone and he didn't recognize me. This didn't make him happy, I could tell.

"Hello, my name is Dr. Sagacity," I said firmly, not caring at this time that I was revealing my true name. In truth, I had to. Unless I had supporting documentation, there was no way I was going to get inside to look at the body. I simply didn't have the time to spend learning the art of forgery and creating a full set of documents that would let me pass. Perhaps I could work on that if I ended up in prison.

Throwing everything at him at once, I tried to overwhelm him with information. My thought was better to give him too much than too little. I started to pull out all my identification as I continued with my introduction.

"I'm a psychologist. I have a private practice. I also do grief counseling work at a Philadelphia hospital." With this I pulled out my volunteer badge. It would let me get around the facility in Philly, but not here in Camden. Still, it strengthened my credibility. "I heard about the car accident earlier today. Young girl was killed."

I then went into a very detailed description of the girl. I remembered what she looked like as I was able to get a good look at her face when Stan drove past her. Again, the more information I threw at this kid, the better chance I had of getting inside. With all of my credentials all over the kid's desktop, I began my story.

"Here's the situation. I do some counseling work with young girls that live in Camden. I try to help them sort out various problems so they don't end up in youth detention centers or jail. I ask them their names but I don't ever demand identification. I've learned most give me fake names and I can live with that. It allows them to open up."

The kid was looking back and forth from me to the assorted papers I dropped on his desk. I'm sure he was wondering what the point of all this was and why I was bothering him. I tried to sum it up, but still offer lots of small details.

"I just got a call a few minutes ago that a girl I was supposed to meet was killed in a car accident. The person that called did not identify herself, just said she was a friend. Anyway, the girl I was in fact supposed to meet never showed up. I found out there was a car accident where a young girl did die. Apparently she was brought to this hospital. Did they bring her down yet?"

The kid picked up his clipboard and went with standard procedure. "Do you have a name?"

"I have one," I replied with a distressed expression, "but I don't think it's a match to what you've got there." I had previously formed a convincing name in my mind during my walk through the hospital. "Selena Dixon, but I don't think it's her real name."

The kid looked anyway. "No, no Selena Dixon on my list."

"Not a surprise. As I said, the girls I work with don't have to prove their identification and most usually make up names."

"Without a name, how am I supposed to confirm if she's here?"

With this question finally asked, I jumped on my single hope. "You know which body was just brought down from the car accident, yes? The accident occurred over two hours ago. She was probably brought down to you in the last hour or so. I don't need you to give me a name, I don't need you to give me details, I don't even need to look at a report, but can you confirm if they did bring the accident victim down here?"

"Yes she's here. She's already been processed and stored."

Now came the tricky part. There was no sense dancing too much around the subject, but I did need to at least set the stage. "Here's the deal from my end. I need to confirm if this victim is the girl I've been counseling, but I'm caught in a sticky situation. I don't know her real name, so even if you told me the name of the victim, it wouldn't do me any good. Getting the name is actually not that much of a problem. I could get it from the accident report, but I'd be no better off than I am now. I could possibly contact her family to get a picture to determine if this girl is really the one I'd been counseling, but I can't do that because of confidentiality. The girl said she was over eighteen, so I can't contact her family without her permission. If she's dead, I can't get that permission. Do you see the problem?"

"If she doesn't show up again, why worry about it?" the kid offered.

"Because one way or other I have to deal with it. I can't simply close the file because there are other departments of both the city and state I have to answer to." I was happy with that response because I knew the kid would know about that. Forms and filings with local and state agencies could be a major pain, but there was often no way around them. "I can't tell you how the girl ended up being a patient, but I can say that there are officials that are going to want me to be damn sure if she really died or if she just took off."

The kid started looking more tired than confused and I think he wanted to go to lunch. "So what do you want from me?"

"I need to take a look at the body, but I don't want to make an official request for viewing, you know the paperwork and all. If I have to go that route, I will, but you and I know that's going to delay things for the family when they want to claim the body. If I can avoid that, I'd like to try. Better for everybody involved."

He looked unsure. He didn't immediately dismiss the idea, but he didn't tell me it would be no problem, either. I decided to spell out exactly what I needed, so he understood the risk was minimal.

"I just need one quick look and I'm out of your hair. You don't have to take her out of the drawer and put her in the viewing room, no work for you at all other than showing me which drawer she's in and letting me take one look. Once I know it's her, there's nothing left that needs to be done. I can sign in, I can not sign in, I'll do whichever you feel is best. We can say you're just giving me a tour of the morgue and I asked you to open a drawer so I can see how the body is stored. Just make sure you open the right drawer. It can be as simple as that."

The kid perked up at that thought. He seemed to like that idea and even said so. "That works for me. You don't need to sign in if you just want to tour the holding area of the morgue. Follow me."

And that was that. He led me into the cold storage area and right to the drawer which held the accident victim. He was about to open it, when he paused and gave me a concerned look.

"She's pretty beat up, you going to be able to handle it? I don't need you going faint on me here."

"I'll be fine. I've seen quite a bit over the past few years. You don't get to be a grief counselor in Philadelphia without witnessing some horrible things." I did, however, have one quick question. "Is her face in good enough shape to make an ID? She didn't get burned up, did she?"

"No, no fire, all trauma. Some lacerations to the face, but you can still make out her features."

"Then this will be fine."

He opened the drawer and pulled the paper shroud away from the victim's face. Even before he did so, I quickly and fully concentrated on the woman's center. I focused deeply for I knew I had very little time.

I struggled at first to find any lingering shape. For a brief instant, I believed that the soul might have already left and that I had misjudged Stan and his friends. Perhaps, he did help this woman and she had already made her way to the other side. That would explain why I didn't see anything.

Unfortunately, a shadowy form slowly took shape and this dashed any such hope. Her soul remained clinging to the battered remnants of her now dead body. The ethereal form appeared so much smaller and so much dimmer than I had witnessed just days ago.

Forcing my gaze from the pathetic sight, I quickly focused on the girl's face. It was in fact the same one I had seen on the streets of Camden.

The attendant grew a bit nervous with the long wait. "Well?"

I let out a heavy sigh and then spewed the lie I prepared before I even got in the room. "No, it's not her. It looks a bit like her and the cuts on the face made it hard at first, but it's definitely not her. The one I'm working with must be on the run." I said this so the kid would not link me to the girl in the future in case anyone asked. In his mind, it was just mistaken identity. No need for him to talk about it further.

"Sorry I wasted your time, but thanks. I needed to know and now I don't have to upset her family with a pointless request to view the body. I'll get out of your hair now."

I went to leave but took one last look at the face of the girl before the attendant covered it up. I remembered how Alice said this girl would be easy. Apparently it was easy for them, easy to corrupt her. Now, her soul was waiting for that dark shadow and there wasn't anything I could do about it.

Chapter 23

When Stan called me the following day, I told him I was sick and wouldn't be able to travel into Camden. He seemed to understand and didn't press for details, which suited me just fine. The image of that young woman's miniscule soul clinging to the core of her deceased body would not be something easily forgotten. I could not imagine a productive discussion with the man I believed responsible for that reprehensible outcome. With every ounce of my being, I wanted nothing more than to label him a liar, to inform him I would not be venturing out with him on that or any other day, and to tell him to go straight to hell, which is exactly where I believed he belonged.

Unfortunately, self-preservation often prevents us from doing not only what we want to do, but also sometimes what we should do. As much as my association with these people now haunted my sense of morality, decimated my belief in right and wrong, I could not simply dismiss certain elements of my situation.

When it came to things like the murder of Vivian, my association with Arthur Greenfree, the incident involving the couple and the possible fire, and in fact all of my travels into Camden connected with people that would ultimately meet their end; I was quite assuredly holding the short end of nothing. These factors loomed heavy against any hope that I could simply walk away unscathed. Most assuredly, any of these potentially explosive situations could lead to dire consequences for my future.

I had been very careless and I had little, if anything, to fall back upon if push came to shove. My information on Stan Adanais and Ralph Finst was extremely limited, and any substantial link between them would be based solely upon my own word, hardly convincing if such a link was needed to establish my own innocence.

Thankfully, however, I had at least discovered the truth before everything crashed down upon me. I was working toward providing myself with at least some cover before the roof came down, which I believed was inevitable, but I needed time, and unfortunately, I also needed to make at least one more excursion into Camden.

I would not fool myself into believing this would be an easy charade. Once you pull away the mask of the madman, putting it back on doesn't allow you to forget what you saw. The truth can only be brushed aside by those who try to hide from it. For those that have no intention of living a masquerade, burying such discoveries is akin to burying one's self in soft earth--it's dirty, suffocating, and most likely fatal.

I now understood far more about this once believed well-meaning endeavor. My intentions did not match those of my associates, and I wished to be free of these people, but there was only so much I could do without completely surrendering to catastrophe. I had to at least try to save myself, and maybe in the process save a few others that might otherwise fall into Stan's clutches.

The following week I prepared myself as best I could, and I agreed to meet Stan at the Camden train station. He picked me up, and again, I found Alice and Doreen waiting in the car.

"How are you feeling?" Stan asked.

"Not great. I think I had some kind of stomach flu. Don't worry. If I was contagious, that part is long gone. For the most part, I'm over it." The flu story would not only explain my absence the previous week, it would also hopefully explain my discomfort with being in the same car as these scoundrels. I stared down into my lap to avoid any eye contact and I truly hoped all conversation would be limited.

"Well, that's not too bad," Stan offered.

If I looked up, I'm certain I would have seen a sympathetic expression on his face punctuated by that comforting smile. I knew now that his grin of reassurance was nothing more than a disguise to hide the face of something far more sinister, and just as if I had indeed removed the mask of a madman, I could now see through that phony smile.

"We'll try to keep it short," Stan reassured me, sounding almost compassionate. "In fact, Ralph has been out quite a bit without you. He's already targeted six people and we know where most of them are right now."

"He's been busy," I blurted out and had to bite back bile-tasting disgust as I thought of Ralph hunting these unfortunate people.

"Yes, he has. All we have to do now is take you by them and you can have a look. Some we can drive by, but for others, we'll have to be on foot. Will you be alright with that?"

"I should be ok, but if I suddenly bend over a trash can, I would recommend you look in the opposite direction."

The first phase of my plan was now complete. I was in Camden as well as in the car with Stan and his two cohorts. If everything in hell boiled over from that point on, at least I had established one very certain and provable contact with these people in which I could define the exact times and places we traveled.

Now that I had done something for myself, it was time to do something for somebody else. I had no intention of helping Stan find a weak and misguided soul to pounce upon. My plan was just the opposite. Hopefully, I would steer him in the wrong direction. It would not make up for what I did in the past, but I had committed those errors under false assumptions. I knew the score now, and I would do my level best to keep Stan from gaining any further advantage.

"We'll do the drive-bys first," Stan decided. "We can get them all out of the way, and then, we can finish up on foot."

If I had my way, it would finish with my foot up his backside, but if I really intended on helping anyone today, I had to continue the charade.

"Just don't make it too bumpy of a ride."

Stan got on his phone; my guess is to check the status and location of those he wanted me to view. Alice ignored me. Doreen offered a sympathetic smile and then asked an interesting question.

"Does being sick interfere with what you can see?"

"I never thought about it," I admitted. "In the past, I only looked at people to see their souls when I was volunteering in the hospital. If I was truly sick, I stayed home."

"How sick do you really feel right now?"

"Not too bad, better than last week." This of course was an outright lie. Driving around with these people made me very ill.

"You don't look too good." She said with an almost suspicious tone.

"I'll be alright."

"Anything else bothering you? You seem different than last time."

"I lost weight," I tried to joke. "The stomach flu will do that to you."

Doreen did not appear satisfied.

"Did you know we were able to speak to that girl you helped us identify two weeks ago?"

I bit down on my lip, but managed to answer. "No, I don't get those kind of status reports."

"I think we helped her."

I couldn't help myself. I stared right back into her eyes with growing disgust. "I'm glad to hear that because I heard about the accident on the news. I heard a young girl died. I'm glad we were able to give her a better chance." I tried to make my words sound sincere as opposed to sarcastic, but I couldn't hide what was in my eyes.

Doreen didn't say anything else to me the rest of that day. I sensed she knew what I was thinking, but I really didn't care.

Stan snapped his phone closed and called out to me. "We're coming up to the first one now. There's a group of kids playing basketball. There's going to be a girl sitting on a bench near the fence watching. She should be easy to pick out. There she is. Do you see her?"

"Yeah, I got her."

As the car rolled past, I got a good look at her and focused on her inner being. I immediately made out the outline of her essence, somewhat small and not very bright. In truth, I believed she could make it on her own, but it was close. If my concerns about Stan and his cronies were true, and I was very certain they were, I didn't want them going anywhere near her. I forced a smile but kept my eyes on the girl.

"She'll be fine. We don't have to worry about her at all."

Stan shrugged and sped up the car. He drove by two more, again both female, one fairly old and one middle aged. Too my delight, both had substantially large and bright spirits, and I revealed as much without hesitation.

Stan appeared slightly disappointed but not too surprised. After moving on a bit further, he slowed the car and pulled over to the curb. He nodded to a young male sitting alone on the steps of an apartment building.

"What about him?"

Alice chimed in before I could take a look.

"I don't remember him. What's he gonna die of?"

"Ralph found him this morning," Stan replied. "He's going to shoot himself in the head."

"Really?" Alice asked with an almost fanciful smile as if she just heard the first songbird of spring. "How long has he got?"

"According to Ralph, three weeks and two days," Stan replied as if reading appointment times out of a

schedule book. "Well, Jim, what about this one? How's he look?"

This one was in real danger. His spirit was fragile, but not without hope. The fact he was considering suicide struck at a raw nerve for me. This was the kind of person I was trained to help. There was no way I was going to turn him over to these vultures. I took my time and tried to figure out the best way to handle it. In the end, I tried a new approach.

"His soul is very small," I answered while staring deeply into the young man's face. I wanted to burn an image of that face into my mind. I wanted to be able to remember him. "It took me a while to finally really see it. It's very dim. I don't think there's anything we can do for him."

"Really?"

"Really. It's as small as the drug dealer you had me look at when we first met, maybe even smaller."

"Hmmm... that's a bit of a surprise," Stan said but then revealed his own understanding. "Oh well, he's a suicide, can never figure them out anyway, too much swirling around inside and almost impossible to approach. We'll just have to hope for the best."

It didn't take much imagination to contemplate what Stan's best really meant.

"Might as well move on," Stan stated as if he dropped a penny down a sewer grate and realized it simply wasn't worth any additional concern. "Nothing more for us to worry about. We can proceed to the others from here on foot."

As he dismissed the young man before us, it was perhaps as much proof as seeing the soul of that young girl. He didn't want to save this person, in life or death. If Stan truly was a benevolent being, he would not have been able to so easily move on. I don't care how commonplace death becomes; no one can so easily discard the thought of suicide without at least some display of sorrow.

Instead, Stan asked us all to exit the car with about as much disappointment as if he just found out the bakery was out of cupcakes. As he stepped over to the curb, he revealed the source of his only true consternation.

"We're zero for four so far today. I was hoping to get at least two out of these six. Now we only have two left." He looked at me with a smile. "You going to be able to walk alright?"

"Yeah, the fresh air will do me good," I replied behind a forced smile.

"Good, we have two left and we need to bat a thousand."

He led us into a bar, but said we should wait at the door. Alice excused herself to the ladies room. Doreen stood by silently. Stan looked at his watch as if he was in a hurry, and then he whispered into my ear.

"The guy in the dark jacket in the booth to the back on your right... what do you think?"

I took a quick look. His inner essence was insignificant in both size and brightness. I'm not sure what this person did in life, but I could not imagine it was much of a benefit to mankind. I had no hope for him.

In sheer repugnance to what I saw, I almost revealed as much to Stan. I wouldn't have to lie and I wouldn't be aiding Stan in any way. It, at first, felt like a double victory. Then, for the simple sake of giving Stan what he wanted, but in a way that I believed would add no injury at the time, I reversed my position.

"He's going to need some help," I whispered to Stan.

Stan raised an eyebrow as his gaze slipped from me to the man in the booth and then back to me. "Some help, or a great deal of help?"

A bolt of concern flared up the back of my neck, but I managed to speak evenly. "Certainly more than some, but I don't know about a great deal."

"On a scale of zero to ten with zero being hopeless, where would you put him?"

"A two," I said quickly as if I already made the calculation in my head. This man was no where near a two, he was a negative six if anything.

"Really?"

"A two," I repeated with a quick nod as if to confirm the point.

"Well, a two is worth our time. Maybe we can help him. To tell you the truth, of all the people we were going to see today, I thought he would be the lost cause. Just goes to show you can never be sure what's going on inside a person. Well, maybe you can."

I tried to chuckle but it just came out as a small hack.

"You're not going to get sick in here, are you?"

"No, I'm alright, but let's not stay too long."

"As soon as Alice gets back, we'll be on our way."

As I look back now, I regret what I did in that bar. I can attempt to justify my decision in what I saw, a pitiful soul damned on its own. I can also try to rationalize my actions by telling myself that by sending Stan at this man I probably saved someone else--maybe even the girl at the basketball court. If Stan's followers were busy corrupting this already corrupt gentleman, they could obviously not be somewhere else doing greater harm, and yet, such an excuse always rings hollow when I look back at this moment.

Through my actions, this man never had a chance. Yes, when I looked at his inner essence I saw him for what he was at that moment, but who knows what might have happened to him after our paths crossed. I could not see the future, but I certainly ensured this man had none.

It's possible he might never have found any type of redemption on his own, perhaps even downright probable. I'm just not sure that justified what I did. Because I steered Stan toward this man, I knew Stan would attempt to drive him further into a path of self-destruction. The man's soul would be trapped in his dead body until a shadow claimed it for some horrible fate.

That depressing fact I knew for sure, but I would never be able to tell if I somehow helped condemned this man, took away any last chance no matter how slim. I would never be certain until my own passing, until I faced my own judgment when I would be forced to look back on my own shortcomings. Regret is a cost that grows with time and its final toll is more than the self-doubt it generates, it includes within it the painful expense of others affected by how we have failed to do what is right.

Alice returned from the back of the bar and we walked to one last place, a homeless shelter about seven blocks away. I was asked to look at a woman that appeared high on drugs. At this point, I was tired and

depressed. I did not want to look at another soul, and I no longer wanted to deal with Stan and his huntresses. I had had enough.

I forced a quick look at this poor woman lost in a self-induced daze of some narcotic, but quickly closed my eyes. I felt my stomach churn and I ran outside. I actually did throw up my breakfast in a waiting trash can.

Stan came out and stood by me. "Did you get a look?"

"No, I didn't get a chance. I think I'm done for today."

"I would agree. You need some rest. We'll drive you back to the train station."

"Forget it. I'll just get a cab."

"You sure?"

"Yeah, in fact I'll have it drive me all the way home."

"That's going to be an expensive ride."

"It'll be worth it."

"We can drive you home," Stan offered.

"No, that's alright. I don't want to have to walk back to your car and I think I need a bit more space. If I have the cab to myself, I can lay down in the back seat."

"If that's what you want, I'll hail one for you and find one that's willing to leave the city and take you where you need to go."

As long as it gets me away from you, I'll be fine, I thought to myself.

Chapter 24

No less than two days after my most recent and decidedly final excursion into Camden with Stan, a visitor I had been expecting for many days had finally appeared at my office. Detective Webster arrived unannounced and clearly determined to see me despite my full schedule. He addressed my receptionist with complete disregard, identifying himself as a homicide detective loud enough for a waiting patient to hear. In the most abrupt fashion and making it obvious his time was much more important than that of mine or my patients, he no less than ordered Sally to notify me of his presence immediately. He was truly an ass.

Without the slightest doubt, I knew that Detective Webster arrived in this manner on purpose. He wanted to disturb me while I was counseling a patient and to make his presence known to everyone in my waiting room. He was sending me a message, one that read, 'I can harass you at any time, at any place, and in front of any one I choose.' I, however, had a different message for him, one that was either going to lead to eventual salvation or unmitigated self-destruction.

To my own credit, I was actually prepared for him, as well as eternally grateful for his arrogance. I knew he was going to get back to me, and I hoped, or perhaps I understood enough about the man that I actually expected, he would approach me in this manner. It allowed me the opportunity to strengthen my defenses against the tempest I knew was brewing.

I told Sally I would be with the detective in two minutes and I asked my current patient to wait outside. I sat alone for a few moments to collect my thoughts as well as to let the detective stew outside for a bit. I had no intention of trying to make a friend out of this man or bending over backwards in some futile attempt to appease him. The very opposite was true. I had every intention of having him work for me and having him dislike me for it every foot-dragging step of the way.

I opened the door to my office and took a single step outside into the waiting room. I saw the detective standing--perhaps hovering is a better word to use--in the path between my office and the exit as if he expected I might decide to make a run for it.

No, I didn't want to run. I wanted to thank him for totally meeting my expectations and more. It was entirely more likely for me to give him a great big hug, but in truth, I believe he would have shot me.

"Hello, detective. Please come in." I did not extend my hand, but rather turned my back to him and walked back toward my desk.

I listened for his footsteps and once I knew he was completely in my office I turned around to watch him. His face remained sour, but a glimmer of delight shone in his eyes as he passed the door and left it open. He clearly wanted to have my receptionist and my patients hear his intended accusations of my dishonesty. More jabs to prove his superiority and power over me. Of course, I was not going to allow him any such triumph.

"I assume you are here on official business and I have patients outside that do not need to hear the depressing details of a homicide," I stated in all sincerity. "Unless you are here for therapy? No? Well then, if you wish to have this discussion in my office, you will have to shut the door. Otherwise, I will accompany you to your station, and we can get several other parties involved... my lawyer, your lieutenant or perhaps captain."

He did not move one way or the other, but the gleam left his eye.

I forced the issue. "Are you going to close the door, or should I advise my patients to go home, make a few phone calls, and we can be on our way?"

With a grimace, he shut the door. He didn't slam it. Instead, he let it swing slowly closed and allowed the metal click of the latch to punctuate the moment.

Not being in the mood for his theatrics, I turned my back on him once more and moved behind my desk and sat down. I then gave him an open ended offer that he could not decline unless he simply left the room, which I knew he had no intention of doing.

"Sit anywhere you want, or stand, however you're comfortable is fine with me."

He remained standing and began to walk around my office looking at my degrees. He even straightened a picture.

I turned to my computer and began glancing at some insignificant articles I had downloaded to read during some free time.

Webster didn't appreciate my split attention, and decided to refocus my concentration on him alone.

"I have some more questions about the murder of Vivian Pearson."

At first, I wanted to shoot back with a sarcastic remark, such as I thought he was here to check the horizontal integrity of my picture frames, but I decided not to get too flippant with him. I already knew what I was going to tell him today. It wasn't going to make him anywhere near happy. That would have to be enough.

"Was that her last name? Pearson? I never knew."

"Well, now you do."

"As I said, I never met her until that night."

"I'm aware of that. I checked on it. You were strangers, but then you've seen a great many strangers die over the past several years, haven't you?"

If he expected me to get all defensive, he found only disappointment.

"Yes, I have. As a grief counselor, you end up seeing your fair share of death."

"I would say you've seen more than your fair share. And you don't actually just see the dead body, do you? You actually see the moment of death, isn't that true?"

"In many cases that's very true, but not always. It depends on the situation. I try to be available as much as possible. You also have to remember I am at a hospital. That's where many deaths actually occur. It was my idea to make the greatest use of my time as opposed to just sitting in a back office waiting for someone to come to me. I try to be involved. It actually helps me connect to the family members. You'd be surprised at how many thank me for being there at that moment."

"I would think you'd be intruding," the detective pressed.

"You're not alone in that thinking. And there are some that ask me to leave and I respect those wishes, but most seem grateful that I took the time to be part of the pain before I try to do any healing."

"You weren't able to do any healing with Vivian Pearson."

"True, but then again I didn't think she was about to be shot, so I wasn't really prepared. At the hospital, I know what I'm facing."

He gave me a stare, and I believe he was thinking that I had no idea what I was facing at that moment. His smugness stunk like a damp suit jacket left under the basement stairs.

"I've been to that hospital where you volunteer," he finally said. "I've talked to the staff. They say you make it a point to be present at the time of death whenever possible. How many deaths have you actually seen in the past few years?"

"I have no idea. I do not keep track."

"Can you make an estimate?"

"It would not be a reliable estimate, so I'd rather not."

"Well, let's try this. Do you think you've actually been present for at least fifty deaths in the last five years?"

"Easily."

"A good deal more than fifty?"

"It would depend on what your definition of a 'good deal more' is, but seeing that you're not actually trying to force me to agree to an exact number, I'd say absolutely."

"More than a hundred?"

"Yes."

"I didn't think you could make an estimate?"

"I'm not."

"But you just said it was more than a hundred?"

"More than a hundred over the past five years is not an estimate. A hundred for five years would only be twenty deaths per year. I know I've seen more than that."

"How is that not an estimate?"

"Because I have no idea how many more than a hundred. I just know that it's more. If I asked you how many days until the sun burns out, could you make a reasonable estimate? Probably not, but if I asked you if it was more than a hundred days until it burned out, it's not unreasonable to say yes. See my point?"

If he did, he didn't want to admit it. Instead, he wanted to make dead sure that I just admitted to the bizarre circumstances of my own experiences.

"Alright, you don't want to say exactly how many, but you're definitely stating it's more than a hundred. I would say you have seen more than your fair share. Personally, I think the average psychologist would be hard pressed to have seen ten actual deaths of non-family members, and you've seen more than a hundred. That kind of puts you in unusual territory."

I decided not to simply accept that premise, even if it was probably true. "I'm a grief counselor, not just a therapist. I'm more involved with that aspect than the average psychologist. As to whether or not over a hundred is a lot, that's just relative. You have to look at it in context. I'm sure a cardiac surgeon sees more than a hundred hearts over five years. Does that make it unusual that the surgeon has seen more than his fair share of hearts?"

Webster didn't like my comment and as a penalty he decided to change the topic in an attempt to catch me off guard.

"Maybe that's why you didn't run when Vivian was shot? Maybe it was because you've seen so many deaths up close and personal."

"That might have had something to do with it," I admitted.

"Really? I believe at the time you said you might have been in shock."

"And I still believe I was."

"Even after all the death you've seen? Shock usually happens when something occurs out of the ordinary. Witnessing death has become very ordinary to you."

"That's true only to a point. I've seen people die after injuries, accidents, strokes, heart attacks, illnesses--all of which occurred in the confines of a medical facility. I'd never seen a drive-by shooting in the street before. That would shock just about anybody, even an ER doctor that has seen a great many more deaths than I have."

Webster clearly did not appreciate my attitude, though I am certain he was getting everything he wanted. I already admitted to actually witnessing a great number of deaths and stating I might not have run from Vivian's shooting because, at least partially, I was very used to watching people die. In essence, I just confirmed his death obsession motive for him. Fortunately, he didn't just want to further his case against me, he wanted me to suffer. He pressed the issue in hopes of tormenting me, just as I expected he would.

"Just to make sure there's no discrepancy, you just told me that you are more comfortable with death than the average psychologist. Is that correct?"

"I would say that's an accurate statement."

"You also stated you like to be 'involved' when you work as a grief counselor. You believe it gives you a way to 'connect' to those you want to help. Isn't that what you said?"

I gave him credit. He didn't even take notes but he remembered the exact words I used. I made no attempt to deny any of it.

"That's exactly what I said."

"You say you were in shock when Vivian Pearson was shot, but you also say the sight of death is not so uncommon to you that it would have caused you alarm. You didn't run in fear for your own safety, but you didn't call for help right away, either. Is that correct?"

"Sounds like a fair assessment."

At this point, the detective actually sat down in the chair in front of my desk and took out his notepad. He began furiously scribbling down information. I assume his brain reached critical mass and he now needed to

record all the details before they poured out through his nose and onto the floor. I allowed him all the time he needed, which actually wasn't that much before he started up again.

"Have you been back to Camden since the shooting?"

"Yes I have, on two occasions." I gave him the dates, times, and places I visited. I did not at that point say a word about Stan. I was holding that in reserve.

"Do any of your current clients currently live in Camden?"

I glared at him before answering. "I don't believe I can release that type of information. I believe that might be in violation of the privacy of medical information acts."

"It's not."

"You don't mind if I don't take your word for it."

Webster decided to use that opportunity to drop his one remaining bomb on me.

"Dr. Sagacity, I've done some checking up on you as far as your previous visits to Camden. It seems you did indeed make several visits to the city before the shooting of Vivian Pearson. I've shown your picture around and people have recognized you. They also remember that you were not alone. On several occasions you were seen traveling around the city with a Ralph Finst. I'd like you to..."

"I'm going to do a very big favor for you detective," I interrupted with severity. We reached the point I was waiting for. I knew the detective would eventually be visiting me. If he didn't, I would contact him. That would have been more difficult, but this ended up turning out exactly as I hoped. "I'm going to admit to you right now I was indeed with Ralph Finst the night Vivian was murdered. In fact, he was with me at the scene."

Webster did not appear surprised, but because I was so forthright with this information, I believe he wanted to confirm it to rule out any ambiguity.

"Ralph Finst was with you at the exact moment that Vivian Pearson was shot?"

"Yes."

"Did he witness the shooting?"

"I can not speak for exactly what he saw, but I don't see how it could be possible he didn't."

"He left the scene immediately after the shooting?"

"Just about. He did spend a few moments telling me not to tell anyone that he was there. Then he left."

"You agreed not to reveal the fact that he left the scene of a murder?"

"Yes, I did."

"Did Ralph leave with a gun in his possession?"

I almost laughed, but I contained myself.

"No, he didn't have a gun and I didn't have a gun. I know you don't want to accept this, but the person that did the shooting drove away in a car. Ralph and I were not driving."

"If you lied about being alone, why wouldn't you lie about the car?"

It was time I turned the conversation in the direction I needed it to go.

"Detective, why don't you ask me what Ralph was doing in Camden?"

He frowned but said nothing. He apparently still wanted me to just come out and confess to the murder and make his job so much easier. Unfortunately for him, I was going to do the reverse and actually put him to work.

"Ralph Finst was in Camden because he believes he can see when people are going to die," I stated. "That's right. As unbelievable as it sounds, he insists he can see how and when a person is going to die. Not every person. He just walks around and he gets images flashed before him. From his descriptions to me, I can tell they are very detailed. I have a whole file on his claims."

I did indeed have a file on Ralph. I had written one up over the past week. I placed in it my observations of his physical and mental conditions. I went into great detail regarding his own description of how he can see when people die. I recorded the times and dates we journeyed through Camden and my analysis of a possible psychosis.

While there certainly was no bona-fide doctor-patient relationship, since Ralph never voluntarily sought advice or treatment from me, the file read as if there was a well established one, and that was my true objective. I wanted to make it as clear as possible to Detective Webster that I believed Ralph Finst to have a serious mental condition that needed treatment, and I was providing that treatment. That was all I needed to play the cards I prepared.

"Now it's clear to reasonable people that any such claim reveals a disturbed mind," I continued. "I, however, also worried that he might be a threat. If someone claims he can see another's death before it occurs, there's a strong possibility that person might go about causing that death simply to justify his own claim. The problem I had was that Ralph never claimed he was responsible for any of the deaths he foresaw. He never indicated in any of our discussions that he would commit murder. I have to admit I was on shaky ground. I couldn't simply reveal to authorities what Ralph told me due to patient-doctor confidentiality, but I couldn't ignore my responsibility to the public."

"I thought you were out in Camden to investigate the sociological impact the city has on some of your patients?" Webster asked with a smirk. He was so thrilled to catch me in another lie, he could not see the trap I was constructing for him.

"I've already admitted that I wasn't honest with you during your investigation at the scene, but if it makes you happy, I was not in Camden that night to investigate the city's environment. I was there to ensure one of my patients was not endangering the public."

"And still a woman was murdered," Webster responded flatly, clearly indicating I had failed in my mission.

"Yes, she was, but not by me and not by Ralph Finst."

"So you claim, but as I said, you've already admitted to lying to me, and it seems both you, and now also this Ralph Finst, have an obsession with death."

"Yes, Ralph Finst is clearly obsessed with death. I've included that in his file."

Detective Webster began to give me an odd look. "What is it you want to tell me?"

"If you think I'm going to admit to committing murder, I'm going to disappoint you. If you think I'm going to accuse Ralph Finst of murder, you're going to be disappointed in that, too. What I am going to do is now point out the obvious to you. I did you a favor by giving you intimate details involving this case, now you can do yourself one. Spend some time watching Ralph Finst when he's in Camden. He'll walk around the city seemingly aimlessly, but eventually he'll focus on someone. He'll start to follow that person or he'll be with someone else that will do the following. He believes that person is going to end up dead, and sure enough, that is exactly what will happen."

The detective still didn't quite get to where I was leading him. He remained focused on his own priorities.

"Did he think Vivian Pearson was going to end up dead?" Webster asked.

"I believe so, but he didn't tell me this until after she died."

"Then why did you go to Camden the night she died?"

"Because I knew he was looking for someone to die, he just didn't tell me who. Look, we're getting sidetracked."

"I don't care! I'm running this investigation not you. You have a whole bunch of explaining to do and if you think I'm just going to run off and start following this Finst character just because you said so, then you have a big surprise coming. I have a much better idea. I'll simply have him picked up and I can question him outright. Maybe he has a different viewpoint on all this."

Reaching the point of no return, I decided to play out all my cards at once. My entire ploy hinged on establishing a doctor-patient relationship with Ralph when no true relationship existed. At this point, I believed I could convince the detective he was in questionable territory regarding confidentiality. Unfortunately, if he spoke with Ralph and confirmed that Ralph never actively sought my advice or treatment, my bluff would fail. I had to ensure Webster didn't do that.

"That would be a terrible mistake," I insisted. "I know you don't think so, and it's going to kill you to have to listen to me, but you really don't have a choice."

"I always have a choice."

"That's true, but you better understand the consequences. Here's your problem, detective. I'm going to claim doctor-patient privilege involving Ralph Finst. I'm also going to claim that I went with Ralph Finst on the night of Vivian's murder to assess whether or not he was truly a threat to the public. If he was, I had a duty to protect non-patients. As it turns out, Ralph Finst did not murder Vivian Pearson. Someone else drove by in a car and shot her. That means Ralph was not the true threat and I did not have a right to divulge any information. When it all comes out, the courts will want to get involved in this--not to help solve your murder, but to determine the extent of doctor-patient privilege in such circumstances. I don't have to tell you how long and messy that's going to get."

"I don't see how it's my problem."

"You don't? Well, that's because you're not considering the conversation we're having right this moment. I've already revealed to you information about Ralph Finst that is clearly protected. You had an opportunity to

investigate Finst before coming to me, but you made a mistake. In your haste to hang this murder on me, you've created a situation where potentially all of the evidence in this case may have to be suppressed. I made it clear to you that I had a file on Finst. I even revealed to you symptoms and diagnosis. Any information you now obtain directly from Finst from this point on will be questioned as to whether or not it was legally obtained. How do you think your superiors are going to respond when they determine you bungled the case out of impatience? Sound like your problem yet?"

He wouldn't answer.

"Let me make things worse for you. What if you go talk to Ralph, and even though I'm telling you he didn't do it, he actually admits to the crime? That completely lets me off the hook, but when you go to prosecute Ralph, I claim you came here and obtained information on Ralph illegally. I have two patients and a receptionist outside that can confirm the time and date of your entry into my office. You end up with a confession that gets thrown out and about ten years of appeals. How's it sound now?"

"I didn't obtain anything illegally," Webster growled.

"No? You can be very intimidating, and again, I have patients and a receptionist that I'm sure will agree to that. I can state that you pressured me to release information on Ralph that was truly privileged."

"You offered all that information freely."

"Not freely, but coerced, my good detective."

He was seething, but I wasn't quite done with him just yet.

"I want you to understand exactly what's going on here. You think you have the law on your side. You're a cop. You have the badge and the gun and you think everyone is going to believe you over me. That's probably true, but that's not the point here. There's a bigger issue involved now and that's this doctor-patient privilege. Suddenly it's not just you versus me, it's the lawyers versus the doctors, and you have to know how ugly that can get."

I barely gave him a second to contemplate that legal pus-infested hurdle before I spelled out the full situation. "I have a duty to protect my patient's confidentiality, but I also have a duty to protect the public. Ralph poses an interesting case. He believes he can see the deaths of others. Any sane person would know that's nonsense, but it raises a flag of whether or not he is an actual threat. He's not claiming to cause harm, but the question arises as to whether a potential danger might exist. When I was with him that night, I was fulfilling my obligation to ensure the public's safety. When I saw that he did not actually commit the murder, the doctor-patient privilege comes back in play. I can't reveal anything without breaking confidentiality."

I was on a roll and I continued without hesitation. "There are so many questions involved here. Did my excursion in Camden that night with Ralph constitute a doctor-patient setting? Does the scope of privilege cover situations outside of a standard office setting? At what point does the committing of a crime, leaving the scene of a felony, supersede the privilege? There's probably three or four more I haven't even thought of yet. Bottom line, it's a mess and you walked right into it by coming here."

"I came here to talk about your involvement, not Ralph Finst's!" the detective declared.

I, however, did not stop. I let the swirling confusion of my claims inundate him just as I threw more onions into the soup. "There will be questions about Ralph and how you obtained information. You'll insist I offered everything freely and that I'm the one in violation of ethics and privacy codes. That, however, won't change the rather bizarre circumstances of the case. Lawyers and doctors will love to argue over this one. It probably

won't even end there. Maybe Ralph will get his own lawyer involved and attempt to suppress any evidence from his point of view. A murder investigation of a beloved volunteer will turn into a botched search of privileged information and all fingers will point to you."

Detective Webster clearly didn't like losing and he was not ready to give in. "You don't know how many times I've heard threats like this. Illegal searches, police brutality, and all that other nonsense. I've heard it all and I still end up getting convictions."

"Detective, do yourself a favor and listen to what I'm offering. Take my advice and follow Ralph Finst for three to four weeks. You really can afford the time when you compare it to how much will be lost in legal wrangling if the confidentiality aspect raises its very ugly head. Watch what happens to the people Ralph focuses on. You'll be amazed. If you do that, you can start questioning Ralph based on that information as opposed to the information I gave you here. I won't make any confidentiality claims because I won't be able to. You already know I'm connected to Ralph. You knew that before you came in here. Use that for your reason for surveillance. Watch who he meets and who he talks to. You'll see for yourself others are involved. Once you establish that you've actually seen him follow people that end up dead, you will have covered your ass."

I gave him one last crumb to feast on before he left my office.

"I'm not going anywhere. If it doesn't turn out the way I say, you can come right back here with a whole bunch more questions of why I lied to you during your investigation. But if I'm right, you may not only find out who killed Vivian Pearson, you may also uncover a large serial killing operation. How many opportunities do you get like that in a lifetime? Think about it--there's a guy that says he can see when people die and sure enough they end up dead, but he's not doing the killing. There's a whole bunch of people making sure he's right. The media would eat this up. You might even be able to still arrest me as part of the conspiracy or at least give me some very bad publicity. Wouldn't you rather take the chance at being the detective at the center of all this attention as opposed to being involved in a case that ends up determining the limits of doctor-patient confidentiality? You and I both know it's the judges and lawyers that are going to get the attention and praise if it goes in that direction. As for me, if it goes that way, I'm going to look like I'm fighting for my clients. Seems like an easy choice to me."

Chapter 25

I received another visitor to my office almost two weeks after I sent Detective Webster on his way. This unscheduled caller I also expected, but unlike the detective, I hoped against hope this one would not actually show. He did, and not during the time when patients were there, or even my receptionist.

I usually spend Monday mornings at my office alone without appointments. I use this time so I can complete reports, forms, filings, and all the other mundane stuff that is necessary to be a practicing psychologist but that no therapist wants to spend any effort actually doing. It was at this time that Stan finally decided to check up on me.

Previously, Stan and I had three quick phone conversations since we last went out together. Actually he made more than three attempts to reach me, but a few times I simply ignored his messages. On the three occasions I decided not to avoid him, I politely declined all invitations to venture out into Camden again, claiming either sickness or a busy schedule. While I had not yet developed a plan for making my separation from his group complete, I had no further intention of assisting them in any fashion.

When I saw who it was, I have to admit my stomach sank a little. As perhaps futile as it was, I really hoped Stan would get the idea and simply leave me alone. Of course, I knew deep down that wasn't going to happen. As he stepped into my office, it felt very much like getting that final visit from a date you went out with a few times but decided there really was no future. You can avoid the person for a while, but anyone that's persistent is going to force a final resolution. I knew that persistence was one of Stan's more entrenched qualities.

He walked past me when I opened the door, didn't even wait for an invitation. "How are you feeling today?"

"I'm fine," I said as I tried to steady myself for this conversation that I knew was inevitable.

"No more stomach flu, no more headaches, everything feeling back to normal?"

"As normal as it gets."

Again without waiting for my invitation or even my instruction, he passed through the door between my waiting area and my office and moved toward the guest's chair in front of my desk. As I watched him from behind, he took a seat and appeared to stare at the empty chair where he obviously wanted me to sit.

"Why don't you have a seat?" he directed.

I complied. I figured I might as well go along with that request since chances were I wasn't going to go along with any of his others. I moved around my desk, sat down, and cleared the papers off the top. I looked up at him and saw him staring at me with an expressionless face.

The comforting, easygoing smile was absent as was the calming twinkle in his eyes. Surprisingly, there was also no anger or hostility. It was the perfect poker face. I could read nothing from him. I could only see that his eyes would not leave mine.

"I came here because I know it's time we had a heart to heart talk," Stan began. Again, there was absolutely no hint of emotion in his voice. I might have found that comforting, but I was used to him speaking in tones that left you relaxed and at ease. His voice held no such reassurance today. "Three times I've asked for your help over the past couple of weeks and three times you have refused. On a few other occasions I've also left messages for you that you have ignored, but I'll only count it as three rejections in a row. That's a magic number you know, all throughout history. Even today, three strikes and all that. Care to tell me what's going on?"

Attempting to find the right words that would relay my message and cause the least amount of conflict, I took a long pause to search for a way to begin. Stan, however, would not wait for me to form any kind of tactful response.

"I think you're avoiding me," he stated plainly.

"I don't believe avoiding is the right word," I offered.

"True, I should have said you want nothing further to do with me"

With that blunt statement out there for both of us to chew on like a tattered sock between two dogs, I decided I should not even try to deny it.

"You're right, I don't want to be part of your group any longer."

Stan opened his mouth, but said nothing. He repositioned himself in his chair, all the while keeping his stare fixed on my eyes.

"I was just about to ask you why you want out, but let's not waste our time. You were honest with me this time, now I'll be honest with you. While you might have told the truth right now, you didn't the last time we went out to check on the people Ralph had found for me. You purposely gave me false information. And now you've clearly made a decision that you will no longer assist me in my plans. You're not a stupid man. You also don't have this great need to belong. You are not like the others, and so I won't treat you like I treat them."

At first, I wanted to thank him for that, but then I realized the treatment I might receive wasn't going to amount to anything worth even the slightest gratitude. Instead, I simply confirmed what he said.

"You're right. I did lie to you about what I saw, but I also wasn't happy about it. Trying to misdirect you isn't really going to help me. The best thing for me to do is just to not be involved at all."

"That may be the best thing for you, but there are other considerations."

"Such as?" I questioned.

"Such as what's best for me."

"What about what's best for the people Ralph tracks down in Camden?"

I expected some type of expression to cross his face when I came out with this, but he remained stoic.

Stan admitted the obvious truth. "It's a fairly safe bet that you now must realize I have no intention of trying to help any of the people Ralph finds for me. Otherwise, you wouldn't have lied to me, and you wouldn't want to disassociate yourself with me now. That being the case, I shall not hesitate in telling you that I don't care what's best for them."

"Maybe you should."

"Maybe you should remain more concerned with what's best for you. By the way, I must admit that I am curious. When did it finally dawn on you that your intentions did not match my own? Was there one thing that allowed you to figure it out, or a combination of things?"

I considered not telling him, but I saw nothing to gain in hiding the truth.

"It was a combination."

"What was it that gave you the first clue?"

"Alice, I didn't like her."

"Shame, I like Alice. I like Alice a lot."

I'm sure he did, but didn't say as much.

"Alice seemed way too pleased to hear about how people were going to die," I finally stated. "She seemed like she was on a blood trail, hunting not helping."

"That's what started it for you?"

"Started? No, I was always uncomfortable with the situation, you knew that. There were plenty of things I didn't like. I wanted to do more to actually help these people avoid their deaths, and I wanted to check up on them at the end to make sure we were actually doing something positive. You didn't want any of that. You gave me enough reasonable excuses to keep me satisfied. But that first time I went out with Alice, I started to feel something was really wrong. And then I looked at Ralph."

Stan tilted his head to one side in the only display of interest he revealed so far, as if he did not really expect to hear that. "Really, you took a look at Ralph? I thought I had that covered."

"You almost did, but the uneasy feeling I got from Alice forced me to do something."

"Forced? Now, now, don't go using words that aren't true. Nobody forced you to do anything."

I did not like hearing that, but it was true.

"Fine, when my suspicions were raised by Alice, I decided to see for myself if I should be suspicious of anyone else."

"So you took a look at Ralph, invaded his privacy, got a good look at his inner essence without so much as asking for permission."

I didn't like hearing that, either. Again, it was also true. I had to face a great many truths during this conversation, and I wasn't going to like most of them.

"That's right, never asked, just looked," I confirmed.

"And what did it look like?"

It was my turn to tilt my head in wonder. I would have thought Stan would have known exactly how Ralph's soul looked. I told him anyway.

"It's pathetically small. One of the smallest I've ever seen."

"And yet he seems so happy in what he's doing."

"Yes, well maybe he's been misled like me." I caught myself there and corrected myself immediately. "No, I haven't been misled. That would infer that I'm not responsible for what I've done, that I can hang it all on you. I'm not going to do that. I went into this thing willingly, and I ignored too many questions, too many concerns that I had or should have had. That's not being misled, that's being stupid. If I really thought about what I was doing, I wouldn't be in the situation I am now. That's all on me."

Stan didn't like hearing this at all and an expression of disgust shadowed his features. "Don't be too hard on yourself. Over time you will come to realize that you shouldn't take the blame."

I have no idea if that was sarcasm or simply an attempt to change my thinking more to his liking, but after hearing what he said, I never looked at it in any other way. I got myself into this mess, and I had to get myself out.

"So you didn't like Alice and you looked at Ralph's soul and that was enough for you to realize what was really going on?" Stan asked. "You're smarter than I thought."

"No, that wasn't all I needed. I needed more. I started thinking about all the little things that didn't add up. All those little details didn't make sense if we were trying to help these people, but they made perfect sense if it was the other way around. That still wasn't enough. I wanted confirmation. Remember the girl that died in the car accident, the one you sent Alice and Doreen out to help? I saw her soul after she died, still hiding in her own dead body. You didn't help her. If you were able to influence her in anyway at all, it was in the wrong direction."

Stan's face returned to the expressionless mask he had worn upon arrival. "That's not a surprise to me. Doreen told me she was pretty sure you knew about that girl somehow. You see, Doreen does have a special gift. She can tell when people are lying. She's like the perfect lie detector. When she spoke to you that day in the car, the second time when you got sick in the trash can, she knew you were lying when you told her you were glad we helped that girl. At first, it confused her. She couldn't figure out why you would lie about that. Everyone knows you're here to help, and yet she thought you lied about being happy to hear we did some good. Shame she didn't put it together faster. She didn't pay enough attention to you when you started telling us which people to focus on and which people to forget. She would have caught you in those lies as well, and we could have dealt with this sooner."

"Yes, that's a shame."

"It is indeed a shame, because we do have to deal with it, and it's better that we get it over with sooner as opposed to later. You can't tell me you've been happy putting this off."

"No, far from happy," I admitted.

"You'd be happier if I just let you go your way and forgot about you. Isn't that right?"

"I don't see how I couldn't be better off if it ended up that way, but for some reason, I don't think it's going to be that easy."

"We'll get to that momentarily. Let's just stick with the issue at hand. Even if I did give you what you want and simply let you walk away, do you think you would just be able to forget about this?"

"No, I'll never forget this."

"No, you won't, but you have to go further than that. You can see the deepest part of a person, the very essence of their existence that never dies. You know that this world isn't all that it appears. You have a special

connection to a world beyond. It allows you to see that which can never be explained by rational thinking because your very ability goes beyond rational thinking."

"That's always been the case."

"Yes, but previously you've always been a bystander, someone that watches from the sidelines. I pulled you into being more than a spectator. You became actively involved. You'll deny it, you'll say you've done what you've always done, simply looked at the spirit, but you know that's not really true. You looked with purpose, you looked with a desire to change the outcome, surely not the same outcome I intended, but that's not what's important. Your intention is the issue."

"And I won't argue with you at all. I did want to do more, but I never wanted to do any harm. I was ignorant and stupid, believed what I wanted to believe, but now the truth is out in the open."

"Is it? Do you really think so? If that's true, tell me what you think I'm really doing."

I looked him dead in the eye and revealed my own conclusions. "You are corrupting people right before they die. You are taking advantage of the fact you can learn when the end will come for them through Ralph's ability. You discovered that I can basically see the health of a soul, and you're now using that as well. If you can find a weak soul right before the person dies, you aim to make it weaker, to make sure it doesn't move on in the way I have seen. You want that dark claw thing to take these souls. That's what you want."

"And why do you think I'm doing this?" Stan asked flatly.

"Because you're sick, twisted. There may be any number of reasons why, but that's the bottom line. You enjoy the thought of doing something evil, maybe it makes you feel special."

"And doesn't this surprise you?"

"Are you kidding? I hear about twisted people all the time. People come into this office and tell me about their problems. The horror I hear is not really from those that come to me for help. Most of the time, it's the people around them, even the people closest to them. Children get abused, women get raped, the weak get ignored, the innocent get blamed, the elderly get discarded, husbands get emasculated, wives get beaten--the list goes on and on. The truth is I don't know why people do the things they do, why they hurt and sometimes even torture others both mentally and physically. I just know it happens, and that's in the real physical world. For whatever reason, I can also see beyond the physical world, and apparently so can Ralph, and so can you. Why should it surprise me that you want to abuse people in that regard? You're no different than any other abuser out there walking the streets. If I understood why, maybe I could cure you as well as the rest of the world, but no one really knows why. We come up with a bunch of excuses for this behavior, but it's just that, excuses."

Stan folded his hands in front of him and placed them on his lap. He then sat stone still as he continued staring into my face. "I want you to take a look inside of me. Take a good, long look."

At first, I refused. I continued to meet his stare, but I would not concentrate fully on seeing anything deep within him.

"You don't want to look?" he chided me. "That's too bad, because you're going to see me as I am whether you want to or not."

As I've said before, there are times I can see souls within a person without concentrating very hard. Some times I don't even have to think about it at all. Mostly this tends to happen when a strong spirit is near its time to leave this world. What I saw at that moment within Stan, I'm not sure was actually a soul.

The shadow that formed before my eyes was extraordinarily large, larger than any spirit I had ever seen before. It grew and quickly encompassed far more space than Stan's own body. Strikingly beautiful at first, I could see great detail including facial features, something I had never witnessed before. Breathtaking in magnificence, it reminded me of the greatest sculptures carved by the most gifted of hands through time.

Even as it remained ethereal, for it hovered in mid air and shifted through material space with ghost-like ease, the apparition appeared almost solid, tangible. Adding to this quality was the simple fact that this entity did not glow in any way like other spirits I've encountered. There was no level of brightness, no self-luminosity. Instead, it appeared to reflect exterior light with the same opacity as a dull and weathered tabletop.

As I peered deeper into the qualities of this specter, the initial splendor faded as even greater detail came into focus. Like a once beautiful painting that is left outside to wither and warp under the elements, the presence before me twisted into a disfigured shell of hateful agony. It was as if I could see the pain of every victim I ever counseled chiseled into the swirling contortions of this evil apparition. In essence, I saw the very worst that this world can be. I saw the very definition of horror.

Thankfully, the shadow before me did not remain in my sight for long. Stan reeled the specter back into his core, and I imagine I stared back at him with a lost look of ultimate dismay.

Even to this point, Stan remained emotionless.

"Now you have a better idea of just what you're dealing with here."

I could not find my voice.

Stan spoke up to fill the void. "Here's the deal, you don't want to piss me off and you're in a tight spot. The cops don't like you and you can end up in trouble for the murder of the crazy cat lady. Forget the cops, I don't think Arthur Greenfree likes you, and he can do a lot worse to you than throw you in prison for the rest of your life. You implied you don't like Alice. Well, Alice isn't too keen on you, either. I'm sure she'd be more than willing to take a piece out of you as well. Then of course there are all the things that I can do that are simply beyond your imagination, but I don't want that to happen."

I couldn't respond. What could I possibly say?

Stan spelled it out for me. "You may not want to have anything to do with me anymore, but that's really not ok with me. I don't really need you, but I like having you around. You make things easier for me, and I like that."

"Why?" I finally managed.

"Why do I like it?"

"Yes... No... why do I make it easier for you?"

"I can't see the souls while the body is still alive, only after death can I truly see. Now that doesn't mean I don't have a good idea what everyone looks like on the inside because I know what makes people tick. I'm a little like Santa Claus. I know who's been good and who's been bad. I just don't know exactly how good or how bad. I can never tell for sure until after it's all over for them. The problem is I don't like to wait. I like finding those few right on the edge and pushing them over. It's fun."

"You can't see what I see until they die?"

"Nope, strange isn't it. Rules of the game I guess. I think what I really like is that you can tell me which ones

are extremely small, the ones I know are going right where I want them without me having to waste any valuable time trying to direct them. I don't like wasting time."

"So you ignored the faintest ones because you knew they were already lost."

"Yep, you don't go searching for chickens that are already in the coop. Anyway, that's really not important. What is important is for you to know that I can get along without you, but I really don't want to. You really have nothing to offer me but convenience, and I can live without that if I have to. I, on the other hand, have a great deal to offer you. Keep me somewhat satisfied and you won't end up facing all the trouble I can cause you. It's not a great choice, but it's really not like me to make fair deals."

"If you can get along without me, then why do you want me?"

"I love a challenge."

"A challenge," I responded more mystified than ever. "What kind of challenge am I?"

"You dumb fool, you're the biggest challenge there is. You are allowed to see the front door. Don't you get it?"

I didn't, and he apparently realized it immediately.

He shook his head as he offered me a parting gift. "I know this is a bit much for you, so I will give you some more time to consider it. I'll even give you another week off. I won't ask you to join us this Wednesday or some evening afterward. The following Wednesday, however, I'll expect you to join us."

He got up, walked out of my office, and left me alone to contemplate the epic disaster waiting for whichever decision I made.

Chapter 26

No way. No way was I going to simply give in to Stan Adanais. It was a simple matter of understanding. I understood that if I just caved there was much more at stake than avoiding the difficulties of the Camden Police and Arthur Greenfree. The road ahead might be pretty grim by saying no to Stan, but if I agreed to his demands I was welcoming that dark hand to come for my soul when my time ran out. Maybe that was going to happen anyway, who knows, but I wasn't just going to let it take me without a fight.

I needed to see three people before I met up with Stan again. The first was none other than Mr. Arthur Greenfree himself.

I did not call in advance. I simply showed up at his office early in the morning. If his receptionist was any colder, she could have brought an ice storm to the Sahara, and I mean the desert--not the once proud, now demolished casino in Las Vegas.

"You don't have an appointment," she declared as opposed to asked.

"No, I don't," I admitted without shame.

"Mr. Greenfree is very busy today. He will not have time to see you."

"I understand, but if it's all the same I'll wait around and maybe he can fit me in. If you could just tell him I have some important information for him, then if he does get the opportunity, he'll know I'm not wasting his time."

"If everyone that thought they had something important for Mr. Greenfree just waited around for him, we would be in violation of the fire code for maximum capacity."

"Yes, that's probably true. I imagine hundreds of people would like to get the chance to talk to him, impress him, prove their worth to him. I could see why you would want to send me away. Then again, how many of those people have spent the last several weeks walking around with Ralph Finst and Stan Adanais?"

The room just got a little colder. Now she could probably bring ice to the sun, and it wouldn't melt.

"When I get the chance, I'll tell him you're here. Of course, that doesn't guarantee he'll see you."

"I understand."

Actually, I did understand. My connection to Ralph and Stan was my only chance at getting to see Arthur Greenfree, but at least it offered me a fairly sizable opportunity.

Of course, Greenfree made me wait, quite a while actually. I imagined if I started to leave, the receptionist would have stopped me and I could have earned an earlier meeting, but I didn't want to annoy anyone any more than necessary. I figured I would pay my price, wait patiently, and allow this loan shark to decide when I would receive an audience.

Eventually, he granted me the favor of his time. His receptionist simply pointed to the door and told me to go in. She had no intention of escorting me inside.

Greenfree sat at his desk, looked up at me once and then turned his attention back to his computer screen. "Well?"

No greeting, no invitation to sit down, not even an offer of coffee. I expected as much and moved right to the point. I knew I didn't have a great deal of time before he showed me the door, or the window.

"You have been told something along the lines that Ralph Finst has the ability to sense when people are upset with each other," I began. "He just seems to know when tensions reach a point that conflict is going to occur. You let him roam around the city under your protection because you obtain critical information that is important to you. The information I have for you is that it doesn't really happen in that fashion. I know, I've been around them both long enough to see what happens."

Apparently, Arthur still did not hear anything that boosted his interest enough for him to look up at me, but then again he didn't throw me out the window, either. Not bad for a start.

I continued quickly. "What Ralph actually does is look for relationships. It's not a special gift, anyone can do it. Think about it. If you're allowed to walk around freely and listen to things, you end up hearing a whole lot more than anyone else; including things you're not supposed to hear. That's what Ralph really does. People let him get away with it because he's protected."

I didn't get him to look up at me, but I could tell Greenfree stopped reading whatever it was on the screen in front of him. He was listening much more closely to me now. I think I was safe from the window, but I still needed to convince him not to show me to the door.

"Ralph is somewhat of a shadow. He can go almost anywhere he wants and people ignore him. He watches people, follows them, pays attention to what they do and who they talk to. He gets a feel for who's important to whom and what's going on. The interesting thing about Ralph is that the people he follows all end up dead. Every one of them. Do you really think that's a special gift?"

"Don't ask me questions," Arthur finally responded. "You're not here to ask me anything. You tell me everything you know."

"Fair enough," I agreed without arguing. "Ralph Finst and Stan Adanais have created an operation that allows them to manipulate people and events in Camden. Ralph gathers information and relays it to Stan. Stan utilizes this information to his own benefit. He has many other people working for him. When they believe they can influence certain situations like gang wars, drug operations, police investigations, and anything else that allows them a unique opportunity, they instigate tension. They can do this because they can follow the relationships. They know how to make accidents happen and then use the fallout for their own benefit."

I was hoping Greenfree might ask me how this was possible, but he remained silent, so I had to continue on my own without his entry into the conversation.

"They hand out information about certain events that are about to transpire, in fact sometimes well before they actually happen. At first it seems almost mystical how they know about these things, but it's not so amazing when you know how they do it. They are the unseen hand instigating these events in the first place. Stan will tell you there's going to be tensions between gangs, but what he doesn't tell you is that those tensions will exist because of the upcoming death of someone he has marked. It's kind of like telling someone he is going to collect a large insurance check in the future and then purposely crashing his car. That's not anything mystic."

I paused to let that thought knock around in Greenfree's head for a while. I was sure he was thinking about all the times Stan warned him about something that might happen and how it was possible to get this information in advance. I decided to accentuate the point.

"I know you told me not to ask you questions, but I think this one allows me to make my point. How is it possible Stan can see things so far in the future? Is Ralph really some kind of psychic with supernatural

power, or is something else going on here that might make a whole lot more sense? You've met Ralph, if not, I'm sure you've sent someone to check him out. Do you really think Ralph has any special vision that allows him to predict events that might have any bearing on your business activities?"

Arthur finally looked up at me. "You have no idea what my business activities are."

"That's very true," I answered, "but I've been following Ralph around for a while and I know what he's been up to. I've watched him enough to know he doesn't have this supernatural gift to see special relationships." This was true. Ralph's ability allowed him to see when people were going to die, but as far as I knew, Greenfree didn't know this, and I was here to create doubt. "He's using his ability to move around the city to get an idea of what's going on in a way no one else can. Together with Stan, they use this information to determine what relationships are actually important, and where an untimely death can create tension. Everyone Ralph has targeted since I've been with him has ended up dead. There's the answer to everything."

"That's the answer to nothing," Arthur Greenfree stated with an expression of malignance but a tone that revealed a hint of uncertainty. I could tell he was contemplating the so-called special ability of Ralph and the now suspect integrity of Stan's insight.

Managing to catch his interest, we were finally having a conversation and I planned to make the most of it. "I don't wish to contradict you, but it answers all my questions. I could not understand how Ralph and Stan could possibly know in advance how certain things would occur. They knew when drug busts would happen, when gang tensions would heat up, when deals would go bad--all before these things actually occurred. It only made sense if they were somehow influencing these things. As it turns out, they are."

"What exactly are they doing?"

"Ralph goes out and collects information. He looks for people that seem somewhat insignificant but actually have some hidden importance--like a girlfriend, a brother, or a close friend. Ralph will target these people and Stan will then have them followed. He will eventually contact them in some fashion and attempt to influence them in to doing something that might be dangerous or puts them in harms way. These people all end up dead, and from these deaths, Stan knows that certain events will follow. If a high ranking gang member's brother is killed, he can then tell you in advance that the situation is going to be volatile. It seems like special ability, but it's really the result of his own actions. He then profits from it."

"You have anything to back up what you're saying?"

"Not a thing. Not an ounce of proof, but I don't really need proof. All you have to do is have Ralph watched when he comes into your city. Eventually, he'll become very interested with someone. That person will die within a few weeks. Every person he follows with real interest ends up dead. I guarantee it, but you don't have to believe me, you don't have to take my word for it. Just have Ralph watched and see what happens."

"And why are you all of a sudden telling me this?" Arthur demanded.

"The last time we met, you asked me if I knew my place. I do know my place. I know it well enough to be here before you now. I have absolutely no power over you whatsoever, and you have the ability to snuff me out on a whim. I'm here because I understand that's how it stands and because I don't want you to think I had anything to do with this. However you cut it, Stan and Ralph are pulling a con. You may be benefiting from it now, maybe you're not. As you already said, it's not my place to know your business. I do know that they are feeding you information based on what they are doing. That much I was told. When I see someone like you is getting conned, I don't want to be any part of it. Stan brought me here before you to get your approval of me. That puts me in a tough spot. I need you to understand I have nothing to do with what's really going on."

"What if I invite Stan here and ask him about all this?"

"That's your privilege. It's not my place to tell you what to do or how to do it. I can't even give you a suggestion. It's not my place."

Pleased with that answer, I waited for Greenfree to make the next move. He simply asked if I had anything else I wanted to tell him. I confirmed I didn't and quickly left his office.

I wasn't totally honest with Arthur Greenfree, but that wouldn't cause me any sleepless nights. My only objective was to raise some doubts in his mind, enough so that he would follow Ralph around for a while. I already had two people on Ralph's tail, why not a third.

Chapter 27

This was going to be a short visit. I didn't have much to say to Ralph, but I wanted to be seen with him one more time. I drove to his apartment building, stepped up to the call box and rang his unit.

"Ralph? It's Jim Sagacity. Stan already spoke to me. He told me what to expect. I have a message for you, but I have to give it to you in person. I'll wait outside the door."

Releasing the button, I stepped away from the building and moved toward the street. I didn't say if the message was from me or from Stan. I figured that would make him worried enough to actually come down and talk.

It took him a while. I wondered if he called Stan first before coming down. That would be my guess. It didn't matter. I wasn't going to say too much that would come back to haunt me. In fact, I imagined Stan would have expected as much from me.

Ralph walked up to me with an expectant look, so I got the conversation rolling.

"Stan pretty much told me the score, told me I'd have to help or there'd be a whole bunch of trouble coming my way."

"That's between you and Stan. I don't get involved in none of that stuff," Ralph responded with an uncaring expression.

I nodded in apparent acceptance, but that didn't mean I was finished with him. I wouldn't go over what I saw inside of Stan, but I needed to ensure that Ralph had at least an inkling of what was going on here. If Ralph was a hapless dupe, he deserved a chance to know the truth.

"Fine, I won't put you between me and Stan. I'll leave you out of that completely. In fact, I'm not here to do anything else then make sure you're aware of how this whole operation is playing out."

"I know exactly what we're doing," Ralph admitted. "You were the only one that didn't have a clue."

"So you know? You know that he's corrupting these people? He's taking advantage of what we can see and pushing them in the wrong direction."

"He's not taking advantage of no one. We're doin' exactly what Stan says. We're makin' people stronger."

The defiant look in his eyes expressed far more to me than his words. He knew what Stan was doing to these people, but he saw it in different terms and he dared me to disagree with him.

"You really believe that, that he's making them stronger?"

"If you don't believe it, that's your problem."

"You know he's not trying to help these people at all."

"That's the way you see it. I see it different."

"And how is it you see it?"

"Stan told me you wouldn't get it. You think we need to save them just like all the others, but you don't know what it takes to save 'em."

"Apparently I don't."

"It's 'cause you don't really understand. Maybe you think you do, but you don't. You got to understand what it takes to make people stronger. They need to know they can make it on their own, they don't need to believe in God or heaven or any of that stuff. People need to be strong enough to know there's nothing out there that's going to help them. When they accept that, then they're strong enough to make it."

I looked at him with nothing but total pity. "Stan told you that, didn't he? You probably just repeated it nearly word for word from what you can remember."

"Stan told me the truth. People got to be strong enough to let it all go."

"You're very sadly mistaken. It takes strength to have faith, to hold to your beliefs. It doesn't take strength to let them go."

It looked to me as if Ralph wanted to spit on me, but thankfully he refrained.

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said instead of spitting.

"So that's why you're doing this. He's convinced you that he can give you everything you need, and you don't have to look anywhere else." I shook my head in sadness. "I can't imagine what it's like to be you, to have to see the things you see. I wonder if I could take it, to live with seeing those images every day of my life. Still, it doesn't justify what you're doing. Nothing does."

"I don't have to justify anything to you," Ralph growled.

"That's true, you don't, but you may have to justify it at some point. The thing is, I don't think it's going to help."

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I can see. Whether you like it or not, I took a look inside of you. You're in trouble, Ralph. Deep trouble. You know what I mean. If you think you're ready to make the jump when your time comes, think again."

"You're a liar."

"You can go right on believing that," I said. "I really don't care. I'm here because I couldn't sleep at night if I didn't at least give you a warning. I've said what I needed to say. You do with that information as you wish. Goodbye Ralph."

As I said, I knew it was going to be a quick conversation. There really wasn't anything left to add, so I simply walked away.

Chapter 28

The lie worked once for me, I believed it would work again. I carried a clipboard and even wore a white hard hat I bought from a local tool and safety supply store. I forged a fake city badge and placed it inside my hospital ID holder to look that much more official. I really wasn't too concerned with anyone realizing it was a fake. I mean really, how likely is it that someone was going to compare my ID to a legitimate one?

I knew his apartment building and I was also able to discover his specific unit. I entered the building without anyone questioning me and made my way right to his second floor apartment. I knocked on the door and then looked down at my clipboard.

The young man that I knew was planning to commit suicide today opened the door. I have to admit, I was more than slightly relieved.

There were two things that could have gone wrong. The lesser of my two worries was that he wouldn't be home. I really doubted that one as I didn't think he was going to be out shopping for carrots, cupcakes and cold cuts on the day he planned to kill himself.

My more pressing worry was that he already committed the act. I knew this would be the day, but I didn't know when. He could have done it at two in the morning and then I would have been too late. Luckily, he was still alive and as I looked up, I recognized the face I had burned into my memory when I was in the car with Stan, Alice and Doreen.

He opened the door fully, didn't use a chain, but stood directly in my path to keep me from entering.

"Good morning," I said. "Fire inspector." I then pointed to my fake ID. He didn't even look at it. "I just need to make a visual inspection of your sprinklers."

"Come back tomorrow," he said with a light chuckle as he knew he wouldn't be around then to be bothered by this inconvenience.

He was about to shut the door, but I spoke quick enough to hold his attention.

"Can't do that. Has to be today. Reports are due. You don't want me to call the super or the cops do you? I do that and then I have to look at everything and it takes up your whole morning. You want that? Cops hanging around for who knows how long? All I need to do is walk inside, confirm you have a sprinkler head in visibly working condition, and I'm out of your hair. Five seconds and you're done with me. Then, you have the rest of the day to yourself."

He frowned but turned and pointed to the ceiling in the living room. "It's right there. See it?"

"Just need to take a closer look and I'm done. Have to make sure the head's not blocked."

"Fine."

He stepped aside and let me pass. I walked directly underneath the sprinkler head, all the while keeping my gazed fixed on the metal spout imbedded in the ceiling.

"Looks good to me. I can go now, except sometimes I get a feeling, and right now I get the feeling you want to kill yourself."

I continued to keep my gaze focused on the sprinkler. My best chance for success was to keep him as confused as possible. I didn't want to look at him and have him become confrontational. I wanted him stunned, not angry. If I remained a fire inspector in the back of his mind, there was less chance he would throw me out immediately.

"Not only do I get the feeling you want to kill yourself, seems to me you've decided to do it today. And you've decided to shoot yourself. I suppose that's less a fire hazard than you trying to gas yourself to death. Some people do that, you know. They blow out the pilot light, turn on the gas, and then stick their head in the oven. Problem is the place fills with gas and one spark can blow up an entire building."

I believe I had him stunned, for I was met with absolute silence. I'm not sure if he was more surprised with the fact I knew he was going to kill himself or with my absurd chatter about the dangers of natural gas. Whatever the reason for his surprise, I needed to keep him off balance for a bit longer. Eventually, I was going to try and get a message through to him, but I wanted to make sure he wouldn't just dismiss me. I honestly believed if I could shake him up, he might be more willing to hear what I had to say.

"Shooting yourself is safer for everyone else in the building," I continued in a matter-of-fact fashion, "but there could be a problem if you don't think ahead. Let's say you leave the water running. The apartment floods and that's not going to make the people downstairs very happy. That's really not my worry, though. I'd be more concerned about fire hazards. A real problem would be leaving something on the burner of the stove top. You're not cooking anything are you?"

I redirected my attention away from the living room ceiling and toward the kitchen.

"Stove's not on now. That's good. If you're going to cook yourself a last meal, make sure you turn everything else off. You don't want to take other people with you when you go."

I still wouldn't look at the young man. I simply continued acting my part. I looked down at my clipboard and revealed information that I obtained in the same manner I obtained this particular apartment number.

"Your name is Hank Taylor, right? Yep, that's right, says so right on my report here. Sorry to keep you so long, Hank. I know I said I'd be out of your hair in five seconds, but when I said that, I didn't know you were going to shoot yourself in the head today. You understand I had to check the stove, right?"

The question was so preposterous I knew I could afford to give him a glance. He wouldn't think I was threatening him in any way. All I was doing was explaining the expansion of my intrusion.

Of course Hank wasn't sure what to say.

"What are you talking about?" he finally mumbled.

"I'm talking about the stove. Let's say you're cooking something like, I don't know, macaroni and cheese. You like macaroni and cheese? Of course you do, just about everybody does. Anyway, you start cooking, but you decide you don't want to eat it anymore. You just decide to go get your gun and just get it all over with. Problem is that the meal is still cooking on the stove and you're no longer in any condition to turn it off. It boils over and the cheese, which is oily, catches fire. Next thing you know, the whole building goes up in flames. It's one thing for you to kill yourself. It's another thing entirely to kill everyone else in the building."

Maybe I pushed the absurdity level too far, or maybe he had enough time to regain his senses, but Hank finally started to speak with a bit more authority.

"You crazy, man? What are you even talking about?"

"I'm talking about doing my job and protecting the people in this building from a possible fire."

"Why are you talking about me killin' myself?"

I had the opening I needed. I just had to make certain I didn't blow it. It wasn't going to work if I sound like a psychologist trying to help him. He didn't want help. He didn't come to me, I intervened. If I asked him the wrong question, it was probably all over. At best, I had maybe about two minutes before he'd realize he didn't have to put up with me.

"Here's the deal, Hank, I can't tell you how I know you want to kill yourself today, I just do. Think of it as one of those bizarre things you see on television or at the movies that really doesn't have an explanation. It's just part of the story. You end up believing it because it goes along with everything else. If I tried to come in here telling you I wanted to help you, you never would have let me in, but that's not what happened. I'm here for a different reason."

"Why are you here?" Hank managed to get in.

"I'm here to make sure other people don't get hurt. Like I said, that's my job. It may not make sense to you but that's why I'm here." In truth, it was my job, and Hank was one of those people I didn't want to see hurt. I just had to approach him in this way. As I said, he didn't come to me, I came to him. I couldn't appear to force myself on him. All I could do was try to get him to really think about what he was about to do, hopefully delay his decision, and maybe give him a new perspective.

"Look, Hank, I'm not here to judge you or to try to make you feel all warm and toasty about yourself. I'm just here checking on sprinkler heads and stove tops. In the end, though, I don't think you've really thought this through all the way."

I needed to get my point across quickly now because I finally said something that actually challenged what he made his mind up to do.

"You want to check out of this world and I can't blame you. I've been around enough to know that life isn't always as grand as people want to make it out. Sometimes people reach a point where they've had enough. They decide to do something about it, but they need to ask an important question. What if putting a bullet in your own head doesn't really end it? Look, I'm just fire inspector, but I see how things get started and how they can turn up bad. Someone thinks it's a good idea to point a bottle of hair spray at a candle, and it's all fun until the can blows up. That may be what happens to you, unintended consequences."

"What kind of consequences?" Hank asked.

Well, at least I knew he was listening and that I had kept his interest. "You must have been through some pretty crappy things to want to end it today, and I'm not going to argue with that at all. What happens, though, if it's all some kind of test that you have to go through whether you like it or not? You've only gone through a part of it, not the whole thing. What if you end up having to come back to go through the rest of it. Worse, what happens if you have to start over and go through it all again, including the stuff you've already seen and done? Worse still, what if you don't get a chance to come back at all, what if you just fail, and you end up in some place that's worse than this?"

I knew if I was going to lose him, this would be the point. I said what I needed to say; now I simply had to get him to consider it instead of disregarding it as the rants of some loony fire inspector that really wasn't a fire inspector at all.

"Just think about it, Hank. I'm not going to tell anybody about what you're going to do. I'm not going to try

and stop you. I'm not going to call the cops. I'm going to leave you just as I found you. The only thing I'd like you to do is give it a day. Just one day. You have to admit that what's happened here today is pretty weird. Maybe it's a sign. You take it for whatever you want, but the only message I'm giving you is just give it one more day. See what happens tomorrow."

It all came out better than I expected. It sounded pretty good and he listened to what I had to say. If I could get him to put it off, to think about tomorrow, he had a good chance. That was all I could ask for.

"I don't know what you're goin' on about," Hank stated, still not quite sure of what to make of me, "but I'm not going to kill myself. Now, you gone and looked at the sprinklers, time for you to go."

He didn't sound angry at all. I took that as a fantastic sign. I nodded and started for the door. Then, as seemed to be standard practice in my life at that point, Stan showed up right when I didn't want him to.

"Good morning," Stan stated with that easy going smile as he casually walked through the door of the apartment. Everything about him appeared so calm, so comforting.

Hank, however, didn't seem pleased with another intruder. "Who are you, man?"

"No one important, just here to make things easier for you." Stan then looked at me. "Why am I not surprised to find you here?"

I didn't answer him, but he didn't care.

"Well, that's alright. Just makes things fit that much nicer." Stan turned his attention back to Hank. "I also know what you're planning on doing today. I bet you thought it was a big secret. Nothing is ever as much a secret as we believe. Truth is, you've been thinking about it for some time. You've had some reservations, but you're almost over them. That's really why I'm here. I told you I was here to make things easier, and now I'll prove it."

Stan pulled what appeared to be a hand towel out from under his shirt. He unfolded the small cloth and presented the object that was wrapped inside to Hank. I think my heart skipped when I saw the gun. It looked eerily similar to the one that shot Vivian Pearson.

"I've got a present for you," Stan offered while holding out the gun inside the towel. "Use this. You want to kill yourself and this will do the job nice and quick. Point it to your temple and squeeze the trigger. No pain, no more worries, but it's actually better than that. You see after you pull the trigger, I'll take the gun out of your hand and wipe off the prints. I'll throw it on the floor and this guy here will take the blame for killing you. No one will ever know you killed yourself."

I looked at Stan in complete shock.

Stan turned to me and returned my gaze with an explanation that only deepened my distress. "It's the same gun that was used to shoot the crazy cat lady. The cops already think you did it. They just need to find the gun. They'll find it here next to another person shot dead. They'll ask around and quite a few people will admit they saw you enter and leave the building today. Two murders, one gun, and you're at the scene of both."

Stan looked back to the apartment resident. "It's the best answer for you, you know. You want to do this. We all know it, but do you want to be remembered as a suicide? That's what's been holding you back. You're afraid of what people will think of you if you kill yourself."

"How do you know..." Hank's words just fizzled out.

"Does it really matter how? I told you I was here to make things easier for you. I can. All you have to do is use this gun. You're no longer a suicide in anyone's mind. This guy here will be blamed for your murder. I guarantee it. You don't want people talking about you as a suicide, but if you're a victim, if people believe this nut came in and shot you, you'll get so much more attention. A big funeral, the newspapers, probably television. They're going to remember you for a long time, a lot longer than if you just off yourself and people think you pulled the trigger."

Stan pressed the gun a bit closer toward Hank. "It solves all your problems."

"Or maybe adds to them," I chimed in. "Remember what I said about this being a sign. How in the world is it possible for two people to come in here and know what you've been thinking about? It doesn't make any sense, does it? Take a day to think about it. What's another day?"

"In another day, you won't have this gun to use and you're back to being a suicide," Stan stated flatly.

I wanted to punch Stan as hard as I could in the back of his head, take the gun, and shoot him. For some reason, however, I didn't think that would have done anything to him at all. I decided to simply stare down at my clipboard and hope for the best.

I never got to see Hank's expression, I just heard his voice.

"Both of you get out of my place. Now!"

I avoided glancing at Hank, but I couldn't help offering a smile to Stan. "After you?"

"Why thank you," Stan stated with his comforting smile as he wrapped the gun back up, hid it under his shirt, and walked out of the apartment.

I followed Stan down the stairs and right out the building. I decided that I would give him my answer now, even though I was well aware he already knew what it was. He confirmed as much as we began walking down the street away from the apartment building.

"I'm a little disappointed in you. I know you went to see Ralph and now I find you here. I guess that means you've made your decision."

"Yes, I have. I'm not going to help you again."

"Anything else you want to add?"

His expectant tone made it clear this was an invitation for me to place my cards face up on the table. I decided to come clean with everything, tell him every move I had made to protect myself. I figured he would end up finding out eventually. If I had any chance of getting him out of my life, I had to convince him I was serious.

"I was careless when I first joined up with you," I stated. "I should have asked more questions, should have been more careful. I ended up putting myself in a bad spot. After I got a good look at Ralph and realized things weren't as they seemed, I took some steps to try and erase some of those mistakes."

"Such as?"

"Being a family therapist, I've been involved in a great many divorces. I know the value of pictures. I've learned about private investigators. It's just the kind of thing you come across when people don't trust each other. I've learned investigators know how to follow people and get information that often helps someone get

out of a bad marriage. I figured if it can work for a battered wife, it might help me."

Stan's expression revealed a fair amount of surprise. Turns out he was more doubtful over my claim than actually astonished. "So you've had me followed? I don't think so. Where you are careless, I am very careful. I would have known. If we're going to go through this, I suggest you don't try to embellish your actions with false claims."

I corrected him. "I didn't have you followed. Well, not directly. I got pictures of you on my last trip into Camden. That establishes my connection with you, Doreen, and Alice. That's the main reason I agreed to go with you after I knew what you were really up to."

"That's it?"

"Actually, no. I also have pictures of you with Ralph. He's the one I had followed. That's what made the most sense to me. I have pictures of him interested in several people. As you know, all of those people will end up dead. It's not going to make me look innocent, but it certainly is going to raise questions about what's going on. If I can convince enough people that this is all bigger than just me, then the hook I'm hanging on is not so big."

"Pictures are nice," Stan nodded, "might come in handy."

"Yes, pictures and the PI's eyewitness testimony. He's been watching Ralph for several weeks now. He's actually been very helpful, even beyond the pictures. He got me this address and he got me Hank's name. It was an expensive cost, but it's not like I live a lavish life style. I could afford it."

"Anything else you want to tell me?"

"Yes, there is," I stated with my confidence growing. "I decided I didn't like the fact I wasn't quite honest during the murder investigation. Other than dealing with you, that's had me the most concerned. As far as Detective Webster goes, I've already told him that I lied to him. He knows Ralph was at the scene of Vivian Pearson's murder. At least that's one mistake I've corrected."

"I'm not sure admitting you lied to Detective Webster will actually play out in your favor."

"I didn't just admit I lied. I told him Ralph was connected with not only that murder but several others. Of course he didn't believe me, but I convinced him that Ralph was a client of mine and that I was bound by doctor-patient privilege. I persuaded him it would be in his best interest to follow Ralph to determine if I was correct. So, along with the pictures I can provide, there's been a homicide investigator keeping tabs on Ralph for a while as well. Again, the more attention I can put on your entire group, the less the spotlight is focused on me."

"Not bad, but I still don't think you're anywhere near out of the woods yet. All you've done is admitted you and Ralph are connected and that Ralph follows people that end up dead. I'm not sure how that helps you."

"I'm not done. I also went to see Arthur Greenfree. I put a bug in his ear that you were running a con on him. I figured I already had two people following Ralph, the PI and the cop, why not the thug? I told Greenfree you were manipulating things, that's how you got him so much information. He must have had doubts of his own, because I think he bought it. He hasn't been following Ralph for as long as the others, but probably long enough to know something is not right with you two."

"You created a regular parade. It's a shame Ralph isn't a bit brighter."

"I wasn't worried," I admitted. "I noticed Ralph pretty much focuses on looking for people that are about to die, not on what's going on around him. He doesn't care about much else, other than doing exactly what you tell him to do."

"Yes, Ralph is a good soldier where you are obviously not."

"And I don't intend on being one in the future."

Stan pulled to a halt and pressed a hand on my shoulder, making it clear he wanted me to stop as well. He took three steps forward and looked down an empty alley. He then waved his hand over his head.

A very plain looking gentlemen that was almost nondescript in appearance walked out of seemingly nowhere and over to us in a matter of seconds. He had dark hair, brown eyes, average height, average build and weight. There was not one distinguishing characteristic about him, other than he knew exactly what Stan wanted him to do without having to hear it.

Stan directed me into the alley. "Time for some privacy. He'll see we're not disturbed."

No doubt about it, it was crazy to follow him, but then again, sanity was no longer a driving force in my life. When everything around you is demons, death, and darkness, it's time to check reason at the door. I followed him willingly.

Stan only took a few steps into the alley, and then, he turned to me with an expectant expression.

"Is this the big declaration you're going to make that's going to allow you to walk away? You told Webster you lied, you told Greenfree I'm running a con, and you have some pictures?"

"Don't make it sound like it's nothing," I shot back. "It may not impress you, but it shows what I'm willing to do. I'm not going to make it easy for you."

Stan simply shrugged it off. "You're not making it all that hard, either. Big deal, you admitted to Webster that you lied and you told him to follow Ralph. What's that going to do? You're the one connected with Ralph. I pull the right strings and it will look like Ralph is following all these people at your request. It will still all come back to you, especially if the gun used to kill Vivian Pearson turns up in your office. I can pull that off without breaking a sweat. As for Arthur Greenfree, all I have to do is make it look like you're the one trying to con him. Maybe I'll have one of his goons killed with the same gun before I hide it in your car. Arthur knows you're being investigated for the murder, then he realizes you're cutting into his business. That won't be healthy."

Listening to him tell me just how easy it would be for him to screw me over royally made it all that much clearer I had to break away.

"Just being around you isn't healthy," I insisted, "and that's what I really intend on fixing. I'm not saying I've done enough to clear myself. I'm betting Detective Webster still has some plans for me; maybe Arthur Greenfree does as well. Hopefully, however, I've convinced you that I'm more trouble than I'm worth, that you'll realize I'm not going to just drop in line and do what you say--like Ralph."

"Is that all you have? Because if it is, I'm still not impressed. I'm pretty sure I can still get what I want out of this. All you're doing is showing me that I need to be more creative in what it takes to persuade you. If you don't think I can work around everything you've done, then you didn't really take a very good look at me when I told you to."

"I took a very good look at you, and no, that's not all I have. That's everything I've done to give me something to fall back on, to give me a chance, but what I really have is the belief in what's right and wrong. I know I can't help you anymore. I won't help you anymore. If I end up going to jail, that's what happens. If I end up getting thrown off a pier by one of Greenfree's goons, then that's what happens. What won't happen is that I won't chain myself to this body and this world so some dark claw can come and seize my spirit when everything comes to an end."

I needed to convince him that I was beyond serious, that I was resolute in my intentions and that nothing he could say or do would change my mind. At that moment, I realized what I needed to do.

"I'm going to look at you as you really are, do you have a problem with that?"

Actually, I didn't care whether he had a problem or not. I just wanted to make sure he knew what I was doing.

His expression turned weary for a moment, but then any concern revealed in his eyes faded away. "Go ahead, take a good look."

I concentrated on his inner essence with all my focus. I brought the image of what was inside him fully into my own special sight. The specter of his true being was both stunning and yet madly twisted and mutated at the same time. The shadow of his form grew in size, and I had to tilt my neck to look upward and into the new face before me--not the countenance of the shell, but the true features of this demon.

Peeling away the facade of this creature, I could see everything within it. Once the external beauty was stripped away; emotions of hate, anger and despair, traits of dishonesty, brutality and envy, and an essence of pure evil became clearly apparent.

I wanted to tear my view away from this horror, but I could not afford to do so. I stated my purpose with as much strength as I could gather.

"I'm looking at you like this so you can be sure I mean what I say. I don't want you to think I'm shielding my eyes from you, or that I'm simply talking to the easy-going Stan Adanais. I'm talking to you as you truly are."

"You have no idea what I am," the creature responded with a shameless cackle.

"That's not quite true. I admit I don't know you completely, and God help me I hope I never do, but you know I can see you now, so I do have some idea of what you are. I see you as the striking horror you can be, but your essence doesn't glow, not even as much as the dimmest soul I've ever seen. I think I know why. Your spirit's been dead for a long time--years, decades, I wouldn't be surprised if it was centuries."

"Try millenniums."

"Great, just proves what I'm saying, and it still doesn't change my mind. I will not help you again. For all the fear you can conjure within me, for all the pain you can cause me, this is the end."

I stepped closer to him, dared to bring my face to within a hair's width of his snarling mouth. "I have no illusions. You can probably come up with horrors beyond my imagination, of that I'm sure. It will not change my mind."

"So you think you can defeat me?"

And with that one question, I believe I found my one chance at salvation. "Me? Defeat you? Not a chance, but that's not my intention. What did you expect me to do? Get a wooden stake and try driving it through your

heart? Shoot you with a silver bullet? Tie you down and perform some exorcism over you? I don't think any of that would work. It's not for me to defeat you, all I have to do is reject you. And that's what I'm doing."

Another cackle erupted from the dark essence before me, but this time it sounded less confident, and I made my final stand.

"If there's any weapon I can use against you, it's basic honesty. I certainly can't claim innocence, but I can take hold of the truth. And here it is: You can cause me no end of grief here in this world. You can throw it all at me--terror, pain, despair--everything I see within you right at this very moment. The truth is that's just a drop in the bucket, isn't it? As bad as it can be, there's something a whole lot worse. What you can do to me now is only temporary in the grand scheme of things. If you get a hold of what's inside me, though, well that just goes on forever. Then there is no hope for me. I won't let that happen without a fight."

"Then you do wish to fight me. That's almost humorous."

The alley turned dark just as the brick walls on both sides faded into nothingness. The air around me became chilled and heated at the same time. Each breath I took into my lungs burned and froze my insides. The demon in front of me grew larger and more terrifying. All of the stunning features disintegrated, leaving it as a hollow nightmarish husk of pain and torture. All around me I could hear the skittering sounds of small claws dashing about and the bitter snarls of hungry unseen terrors.

I would not block out what was before me, I could not. It was what I truly faced.

"Fight you?" I scoffed. "No, the fight is within me. It always has been. It kind of comes down to that very first debate we had when we first met. Do you remember it?"

The creature looked at me with a quizzical expression. I don't know if it was toying with me or if it really didn't remember.

"It was about character and spirit," I stated. "I wanted to believe that character and spirit were the same. You told me they weren't. You seem to have been right, because now I have to be strong on both fronts. I have to have the character to do the right thing and stop helping you--no matter what the cost. But I also need the faith to stand up to the pain you can cause me. I have to be strong enough in spirit to know that in the end I will prevail, that I will not fall to your will and pay the eternal cost that would follow."

The creature did not seem impressed and only continued to torment me.

"You see so much, yet you understand so little."

"I understand enough. Just like that young man that just refused your offer of the gun, I refuse your offers of an easy way out. He saved himself even though it means facing what he wanted to escape. Now, I have to the same. The choice is mine, but in some ways, I've already made that choice. I stood up to Webster, I stood up to Greenfree. You're all that's left."

The demon said nothing, not even a snarl.

I inhaled deeply, stood stone still and spoke with all the steel I could muster. "I am done with you. One way or the other, my involvement with you ends now."

The monster that was Stan's inner being withdrew back into his body. The darkness lifted and the alley walls reappeared. I could see only Stan's normal, physical presence. He gave me that reassuring smile one last time, I think just to annoy me.

"And so it goes."

That was all he said. He stepped by me and walked away. I moved out of the alley and in the opposite direction.

Chapter 29

With not much else to do, I returned to my life just as it was before I ever met Stan Adanais. I went to work as normal, saw my patients as scheduled, and pressed all thoughts of Camden, Ralph, Detective Webster, and everyone else out of my mind. I focused on returning to my regular, everyday activities and took no further precautions to alter or delay whatever outcome was coming my way.

I'm not sure if I could have done more, but I believed whatever I did no longer truly mattered. I made my decision and delivered it to Stan without much ambiguity. He knew where I stood; he could only doubt my resolve. If he did, he would be sadly mistaken.

A few days passed, and still nothing. No phone calls, no late night or even early morning visits from Stan or even Detective Webster. I wondered if perhaps one or maybe both of them were just forcing me to wait, to languish in my own dread of the inevitable.

I'm sure that they understood the worst part of any calamity was knowing it was coming, being unable to do anything about it, and having to wait for it. It's kind of like being scheduled for a painful injection ten hours from now and putting the needle out in plain view. You get to keep thinking about it while you stare at it, but you can't do much else. Time is funny that way. It moves like lightning when you're having fun, but it marches slowly along like an overweight beetle through warm pudding when you're dreading something in the future.

Keeping Arthur Greenfree out of my thoughts was a bit more difficult. I firmly believed if he was after me, I wasn't going to see him coming. Someone would step out from behind a dark corner and introduce my face to a baseball bat. If Greenfree decided he was going to take care of me, I could count on it being quite a surprise and quite painful.

Still, there wasn't much I could do along that front, either. The only thing I knew for sure was that I had kicked the ball and got it rolling. At this point, I couldn't see the dust and debris wrought by my actions, but that didn't mean Detective Webster, Arthur Greenfree, and even Stan were simply going to forget about me. Eventually all the dirt would settle, and all I could do is hope most of it didn't land on me.

Eventually, I returned to the hospital to continue my volunteer work as well. Yes, I now looked at death differently, but that didn't stop it from occurring. I realized that those souls that didn't rise up and leave their host bodies were possibly doomed to an unpleasant fate, but that didn't take away the joy of seeing the alternative. Most souls would still let go and still make that marvelous transition. I could still witness that, and I certainly could use that kind of comfort at this most uncertain point of my life.

As I entered the facility, I noticed the familiar faces were much friendlier than the last time I was there. Things felt much more relaxed, people more willing to approach me. I welcomed the change, and at first didn't risk losing it by asking any questions.

Once again, the explanation came from my friend, Dr. Paul Paxim. He smiled broadly when he saw me.

"Good to see you, Jim."

"It's good to see you," I replied truthfully, but somewhat surprised toward his obvious warmth.

"I guess you're pretty relieved about all of this, huh?" he asked.

"About all of what?"

"About that Greenfree guy in Camden."

My face must have lost a shade of color and my expression hollowed, for he noticed it immediately.

"I'm sorry, the murder probably still has you a bit shaken up, but the news had to be good for you to hear."

"What news?" I asked with near panicked alarm.

"You haven't heard?"

"Haven't heard what?"

Dr. Paul was still smiling, but he looked at me with noted surprise. "That guy in Camden, supposedly he's a loan shark. He admitted to killing that woman that helped the dogs and cats."

"You mean Vivian Pearson?"

"Yes, the murder you witnessed. Arthur Greenfree confessed. Well, he didn't really confess, he admitted it in his note."

The world spun around me. There were many things I expected to happen, many things I feared might happen, but none of them included what my friend was saying.

"You really don't know what happened, do you?" Dr. Paul asked.

"No, I don't. What's going on?" I nearly begged.

Paul looked about and waved for me to follow him into a supply room. Once inside, he continued with greater detail.

"Yesterday morning the story broke that the Camden police received a tip that Arthur Greenfree was involved in the murder of that woman you were with in Camden, Vivian Pearson."

I remained in a fog. I didn't think Arthur Greenfree had anything to do with the murder of Vivian Pearson. If it was my murder, it would make perfect sense, but then I wouldn't be standing there listening to this.

"They went to question him at his office," Paul continued. "When they got there, they found him dead with a gun in his hand and a note on his desk. He shot himself in the head. The gun was the same gun that was used to kill that woman. In the note, he admits to murdering her."

"You're kidding?"

"No, you really didn't know, did you?"

"I had no idea."

"Don't you watch the local news?"

"I've been avoiding it lately."

"Well, I would have thought the cops would have told you."

"Maybe they haven't gotten around to telling me yet."

I instantly thought of Detective Webster. I didn't think he was going to do me any favors. Still, why didn't he contact me? It didn't make any sense. I was a huge loose hanging thread. I was at the scene of Vivian's murder. Shouldn't he have come to me and asked me more questions?

"I guess you're relieved now, huh?" Dr. Paul asked. "I think those detectives really believed you killed her. They had quite a few people around here worried for you, me included. I never thought you had anything to do with it, but things were tense for a while."

About a billion thoughts went through my mind at that moment, and I almost didn't hear what Paul said. I kept thinking of the gun, how it was in Stan's hands, but now it was the apparent weapon used in Greenfree's suicide.

I wanted to be relieved. Greenfree wasn't going to be a threat to me anymore, and I didn't have to concern myself with a bat meeting my teeth. Nor did I apparently have to worry about Detective Webster trying to accuse me of murdering Vivian Pearson. He might still have a beef with me in other areas, but not worrying about a murder charge is certainly a big relief. This did not, however, dispel my greatest fears--those involving Stan.

I couldn't imagine that he was just going to let me be, and yet all of this appeared to be his doing, as if he was clearing the board for a new game. Hopefully, he realized I was serious, that I wouldn't have anything more to do with him. Still, I couldn't accept he would just remove every obstacle for me.

And yet, I realized something else at that moment. If there was nothing more he could do to me, then all of this actually benefited Stan as well. With my warning, Greenfree could have become a problem. Now, he wasn't anyone's problem, mine or Stan's. And with Vivian's murder solved, Detective Webster would stop watching Ralph. Everything would be tied up in a neat little ball and Stan could get back to his own business.

At that point, I began to wonder about Vivian's murder. None of this seemed right, it didn't seem like justice. I didn't think Arthur Greenfree killed Vivian. Instead, I believed that Stan was somehow behind this entire maneuver. Otherwise, how did Greenfree end up with a gun that was once in Stan's possession?

Then again, did I have the right to say anything, to try and shed doubt on what happened? I wasn't truly part of the murder investigation. They had to know more than I did. Maybe it was Greenfree that pulled the trigger and killed Vivian Pearson. I never did get a look inside that car. It could have been him.

I realize I was just rationalizing at that point, but I'm not sure I blame myself too much for that. Maybe if my character was a bit stronger I would have pushed for the truth even then. If that's the case, I accept responsibility for not being as strong as I should.

In all of my worries and all of my fears, I never once considered that the pieces would fall in my favor. Maybe, however, the pieces fell that way because I rejected Stan. If this was somehow my reward for making that choice, I wasn't going to complain.

Chapter 30

It's been nearly a year since the day Stan Adanais walked into my life. I haven't seen or heard from him or Ralph since that day I stopped Hank from shooting himself in the head. I went as far as to have the private investigator I hired take a look at Ralph's apartment and see if he was still hanging around. He vacated the place not long after the last time I spoke to him. Hopefully, they're both out of my life for good.

I've also never heard from Detective Webster again. I'm just as happy about that. With Arthur Greenfree dead and implicated in the murder of Vivian Pearson, I assume he decided to just leave me be. It was probably more trouble than it was worth to open that can of worms.

I'm guessing he earned a boat load of accommodations for closing the file on Vivian's murder, getting rid of Arthur Greenfree, and all without wasting any valuable court time. If he started bringing up me and Stan and Ralph, he was looking at one huge mess of a case. Webster always appeared to me as a man that wanted to maintain control and a mess like that could grow out of his grasp in a real hurry.

And so here I am back volunteering at the hospital, but I've made some changes. I told the powers-that-be on the hospital board that in light of questions about my intentions, it would be best if I didn't get so close to those about to pass. They agreed with a nearly deafening sigh of relief.

It's not that I no longer wish to watch souls depart this world. I still do, but I no longer have to be so close to them to see it. While it pains me to say it, I actually have Stan to thank for that.

The first time he took me into the morgue, when we first met, he told me straight out that I created the barriers that kept me from seeing souls under certain circumstances. I was the one that insisted on being in the same room as those that passed because I feared that walls and pulled curtains would block my view.

I have since realized that the gateway that opens to the next life is not of this world. It is simply not encumbered by walls or plastic curtains. When I see a soul, I'm seeing beyond the light which is reflected off this physical realm. I'm looking into space that exists between the two worlds, and my vision of it is not necessarily dependent on an unobstructed view.

When I realized that, I learned to look not through walls and curtains, but rather beyond them. I only had to focus on what was happening in the space between this existence and the next one. When I figured out how to do that, I found I could easily see the souls depart this world even if it happened down the hall, through three walls and a closed door.

I made another change as well, an important one for my own personal growth. I realized that during my life I became much too dependent on my special gift. I was forgoing commitments to others. That would no longer do.

I'm not quite ready to call my sister and have a heart to heart discussion with her. Maybe eventually, but I needed to focus on something more permanent for me, something that went beyond repairing a long distance relationship with a sibling. I needed to make a concrete commitment to show that I was ready to live in this world even while waiting for my turn to step into the next.

I didn't get married, or even begin a serious relationship with some woman. Instead, I focused on what I learned the night I witnessed a woman murdered trying to save a cat. She told me what I should do before she died, and I listened to her.

Yes, I adopted a dog. I named her Vivi because I believe in my heart Vivian Pearson would be proud of me.

I released my fears about making such a commitment. I worked through solving the problems as opposed to using them as excuses. With such resolve, I found the time needed to take care of a dog. Vivian was right about that.

I bring Vivi to the office with me, and most patients are actually happy to see her. I think they look forward to that more than talking to me. If a patient is afraid of dogs, I try to help them get over it. If that's just not an option, Vivi stays outside in the waiting area with Sally. Sally doesn't complain at all, she's been much happier with Vivi around.

I still go to the dog park, actually quite a bit more. Now when I go, I don't go alone, and when I see Vivi's soul light up when she's racing around like a nut with all the other dogs, I know I've done the right thing.

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