

# **Soul Chase**

**Jeff Inlo**

**Sample Chapters 1-4**

**Copyright © 2011 Jeff Inlo  
All rights Reserved.  
120110226**

By Jeff Inlo

Fantasy:

**Delver Magic Book I – Sanctum’s Breach**

**Delver Magic Book II – Throne of Vengeance**

**Delver Magic Book III – Balance of Fate**

Spiritual/Thriller:

**Soul View**

**When Do I See God?**

Humor

**Counterproductive Man**

Science Fiction:

**Alien Cradle**

More Information Available at: <http://www.sitelane.com>

*To Joan, for making my soul brighter*

\*\*\*Important Note\*\*\*

*Soul Chase* is the second book in the Sagacity Series. *Soul View* begins the adventures of Dr. Jim Sagacity. While *Soul Chase* is a complete novel and it is not necessary to read the first book to follow the story, it is recommended that the series be read in order.

Information about *Soul View* can be obtained from the author's web page at <http://www.sitelane.com>.

My first trade paperback of *When Do I See God?* will be available at bookstores and online merchants in the spring of 2011. If you enjoy *Soul Chase*, please consider purchasing a copy.

Thank you.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to all those that have supported my efforts and encouraged me to continue my writing. Special thanks are due Kathy Austin, Christine Bell, Michael & Teri Bureman, and Dan Johnson.

# Chapter 1

Dogs know better.

Vivi was barking before I opened the front door. I just thought she caught the scent of a chipmunk or a squirrel, but I should have realized it wasn't that happy, excited bark of 'let me out so I can chase something!' It was a concerned bark, a warning.

When I opened the door, I immediately recognized the lonely shadow of a disheveled man—a man that had a gift somewhat similar to my own.

I got that tense feeling in the back of my neck and in my temples. Most people know that feeling. It's like being held upside down and all the blood rushes to your head, only it's not quite as fun. It's the kind of sensation no one asks for, but comes naturally when fear or anger—or both—burst from some situation you can't control. It's the road rage that explodes when you get cut off by some lunatic on the highway combined with the panic that erupts from a sudden thud when you're home alone on a windy night.

The reaction was completely understandable. Disdain came easily for this man, and while I wasn't afraid of him, his associate gave me the kind of nightmares that leave you staring at the ceiling over your bed vowing never to sleep again.

Thankfully, he stood alone, and I fought back the urge to jump back inside and slam the door. I managed to blurt out a question as I held tight to Vivi's collar with my left hand and reassured her with my right.

"Why are you here?"

He said nothing, only appeared to struggle with some decision as he fidgeted and curled his lip.

"What do you want, Ralph?" I said with a bit more force.

His eyes shifted back and forth, but he avoided my stare. He looked as uncomfortable as I felt.

"I need help," he mumbled.

Did he possibly think I cared? If he did, he was grossly mistaken.

"Doesn't surprise me," I said without a hint of sympathy, but still taking every chance to glance about and wonder if someone else might be hiding behind some corner.

"I'm in trouble," he offered.

I held back a snort of contempt. Of course, he was in trouble. He hung out with some very bad people, he got involved in some very bad things.

"I tried to tell you that the last time we spoke, remember?"

"You don't understand..." His voice trailed off and his head drooped downward as he now simply stared at the ground.

"Are you alone?" I demanded. The thought of Stan stepping out into view became too strong for me to stifle.

"Yeah."

I really didn't trust him, but he also never hid his emotions well. He looked alone. By that I mean he looked like a hungry man in a soup line with nothing to his name but the clothes on his back. He had just one objective and nothing else mattered. I, apparently, was the soup.

I took a deep breath and decided to deal with the issue straight on. I patted Vivi on the head as I put her back inside and told her to wait. She seemed to understand fully as I closed the door. I didn't want anything to happen to her, then I turned my attention back to Ralph.

I didn't bother to ask his permission. I didn't have to. Ralph might have been just a tool of Stan's, but he was part of it, part of the gang that preyed on the weak, that tricked me into using my gift for all the wrong reasons. I concentrated deep on Ralph's core. I had to look very deep indeed. It was much worse than when I last looked. His soul was so small, so pathetic.

"I understand perfectly, Ralph. I warned you."

"I believe you now!"

His outburst didn't surprise me. As a therapist, I was used to those kind of things.

"Good. Then I've done all I can for you. You know what I can do. I just looked inside you again. If anything, you're in worse shape."

"That's why you have to help me!"

"But I just did. I told you what I saw. That's my gift. I can't fix it for you, you have to fix it yourself. There's nothing more I can do for you."

Someone else might have asked why he was in trouble, but I didn't care. Actually, I didn't want to know. I turned around to go back inside.

"And you know my gift," Ralph mumbled. "You know what I can see."

I stopped, my back still to him. I did remember, I remembered how he knew when people were going to die, that he could see not only when, but how as well.

"What did you see, Ralph?"

"I saw it in a mirror," he whispered.

I wasn't sure what to say. It's a little bit like talking to someone that's been mortally wounded, but still has a few moments of life left. I turned around to face him once more, perhaps with a tad bit more compassion.

"How long do you have?"

"Three months, two weeks and five days."

It has to be tough when you know your end with that clear distinction.

"I'm very sorry to hear that, but there's not much I can do."

Ralph's voice burned.

"You ain't going to help me?"

I didn't like his tone, and that small twinge of sympathy vanished.

"And just what do you want me to do? Remember when you and Stan came to me the first time? You could see when they were going to die and I could see the brightness of their souls. You used me. You made me point out the one's that were on the edge... not to help them, but to push them over. That was your little game. You made me point out souls that were close to danger, the ones that might have been big enough to escape this world and avoid whatever shadows wait for the small ones. You targeted them and then you made sure they didn't make it."

"I'm not talking about them."

I cut him off. I didn't want to hear it.

"Of course you're not. You're talking about yourself, and that's all that matters to you. Now you're about to die and you're worried. You should be more than worried because



you're not even close to the edge. Your soul is so pathetic there's nothing I could possibly do to help you."

"So you'll just walk away from me? Is that how it works for you?"

Rage filled his voice as well as his eyes. I checked his hands. They were clenched in fists, but empty. I didn't think he had a weapon, but I thought he still might attack me, especially if I turned my back on him. That's just the kind of man he was.

I took one very small step toward him to show I meant business as well.

"I'll walk away if I want. I don't owe you anything and you don't deserve anything."

He slunk backward just a bit, enough for me to know he didn't have the stomach for a head-on confrontation. He also, however, wasn't ready to give up.

"You think I'm worthless. Why? 'Cause you looked at me? You judge someone based on how their soul looks and I got no right to ask for anything?"

That stung a bit, but only because he twisted the truth. Yes, I knew his soul was terribly small, but it wasn't what shaped my opinion of him.

"I tried to help you once, Ralph," I defended myself. "The last time I spoke to you, I tried to warn you. You ignored me. Don't try to blame me for this."

"I'm not blaming you, I want your damn help."

"Why should I help you?"

"Because you said you wanted to help people."

He was, of course, referring to what brought me together with him in the first place. I would have never met Ralph if I didn't tell Stan I wanted to help others. I had put up with Ralph because I thought he was helping as well. He wasn't. And whereas I was duped, Ralph knew what was going on all along.

"And look at what happened," I said through painful memories and a wave of guilt. "I wanted to help their souls get brighter and Stan and his lackeys just doused them down to nothing. You're misguided if you think you can play that card on me."

"I just found 'em. I didn't push 'em one way or the other. That was Stan that done that."

"So now you're not even going to take responsibility for anything? I may not be sure of much, but I know that's not going to help you when your time comes."

Ralph grew angrier. He wanted to turn and leave, perhaps spit in my face first, but I guess a man with a few months left to live who wants help has to make certain modifications to his behavior.

"What do you want me to say? That I made a mistake? Fine. Whatever. I still need your help."

"I'm overwhelmed by your sincerity."

"Don't matter if I'm sincere or not. I'm still gonna die. You know what that's like? To know exactly how much time you got left?"

Of course I had no idea, but that didn't mean I had to help him.

"Why me? Why not Stan?" It might have been a harsh question, but it was a fair one, and I needed to know.

He struggled with this one. He didn't want to talk about Stan. That was clear.

"Because you want to help people. I think I can trust you."

That had to be tough for him to say, to give me a compliment in any fashion. I didn't want any compliments. I wanted to get to the truth.

"And you know you can't trust Stan?"

He gritted his teeth, but said nothing.

"Fine," I replied for him. "I already know the answer to that. You can't trust Stan, but did you even tell him?"

"Yeah, I told him," Ralph finally admitted.

"And what did he say?"

Ralph muttered and I couldn't hear him.

"What was that?" I demanded.

"He laughed. Okay? He laughed."

"Why am I not surprised?"

Ralph was clearly not happy with the direction of the discussion and he tried to turn it back to his own selfish interest.

"So he laughed, so what. You gonna help me or not?"

"I don't see what I'm supposed to do for you. Whether I laugh or not, whether you trust me or not, what is that going to get you? You think I can turn things around for you? I

don't have any secrets to tell you, or any great wisdom that's going to let you find God... or faith... or whatever it is you think is going to save your soul."

"I'm not talking about my soul, I'm talking about my life."

Because of my gift and for all I had gone through, I had linked the two together. The soul *was* life, and life fed the soul. I had the ability to see just how bright the inner spirit glowed, and I saw what happened to it at death. The bright ones left this world in a display of incalculable brilliance. The dim ones, like Ralph's, were devoured by some dark shadowed claw. I couldn't comprehend how Ralph wouldn't be concerned with his soul when he was so near his own end.

"I don't understand," I admitted.

"I'm not interested in havin' you save my soul. I want you to help save my life."

Looking into his eyes, I saw fear, the agonizing terror of someone that knew exactly when he was going to die. He wasn't there to attack me. Desperation brought him to me. Maybe if his soul had been brighter, had been stronger, he wouldn't have been so afraid, but death scared him beyond anything this world had to offer.

"You don't want to die, do you?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

He looked at me like I couldn't pass a second grade math test.

"Is that some kind of big friggin' surprise?"

"No, it's not."

As much as I now understood his fear, I still couldn't fathom why he was coming to me.

"But you're the one that sees when people are going to die," I offered, "not me. I just see the soul. You know that."

"Yeah, and I also know that you tried to save other people when you learned they were going to die. You remember that?"

I remembered it well, and things got a bit clearer. When I learned Ralph could foresee deaths, I wanted to try and stop those deaths. Stan told me we were going to save souls, but I wanted to save lives as well. I thought of the couple Ralph told me were going to burn to death in their apartment. I tried to help them. I have no idea how that ultimately turned out, but I know trying to warn them almost got me beat up or possibly even killed.

I also remembered the last time I spoke to Stan. I tried to save a kid from committing suicide—someone else that Ralph had found with his *gift*. I don't know what the kid ended up doing that day. I never went back to find out. I decided it was best not to know. It was better to believe I had made a difference and hope everything turned out all right.

"Yes, I remember," I said to Ralph, and then I told him another truth. "I also remember that both you and Stan didn't want me to try and stop people from dying. When you saw something, you thought it was going to happen no matter what. You told me I would just get into trouble if I tried to intervene."

Ralph wouldn't deny it, but he pointed out his own understanding.

"But you tried anyway."

"Yes I did. I don't know if it did any good, but I did try, and you thought I was nuts. If we're going to be truthful here, it has to cut both ways."

"Yeah, I thought you were nuts. That make you happy?"

"Happy? No, but it brings me back to my question of why are you asking me for help now?"

"Because you might think of a way for me to get out of this."

"So that's it. You didn't care about stopping some tragedy when it was going to hit someone else, but now that it's you at the other end, it's a different story. You know, Ralph, maybe this is why your soul is so pathetic. Did you ever think of that?"

"Stop talking about my soul!"

"If you're going to die soon, Ralph, it's something you better consider."

"I don't want to consider it, and I don't want to die! What the hell do you want from me? You want money? You got more than I ever dreamed of! You want me to say I'm sorry? You want me to beg?"

"I don't want anything from you, Ralph. It's your mess, you clean it up."

I turned around once again, no longer fearing an attack, even to my back. Perhaps it was my way of letting him know he didn't matter to me and I wanted him gone. My hand was on the doorknob. I was finished with him, but he wasn't finished with me.

"How's that going to help your soul?"

I almost kept moving, but I couldn't. I spoke the next few words without thinking, and my tone lacked any clear conviction.

"It's not my soul I'm worried about."

"Maybe you should be," he shot back with clear contempt.

"I thought you didn't want to talk about souls."

"I'll do what I gotta do."

"Then worry about your own."

"And you should worry about yours. You ever look at your own soul, doc?"

I never had. I never even tried. I wouldn't turn around to face him, but I kept talking as I stared at my own front door.

"No," I answered honestly.

"Maybe you should try it. Use a mirror. It worked for me," he added with a sarcastic tone.

"My soul has nothing to do with you."

"Maybe it does now," Ralph stated, as if it was his last chance at redemption. "You're walking away from someone that asked for help, someone that needs your help. Aren't you supposed to forgive people? Aren't you supposed to help everyone, not just your friends?"

He was hitting me hard, feeding a deep guilt. I suddenly became very suspicious. Ralph wasn't smart enough to come up with this on his own. I swung around and turned my guilt into an even greater distrust of this wretched little man.

"Where'd you come up with that, Ralph?"

He didn't hesitate with an answer.

"A minister."

"You talked to a minister?"

He turned red. It was almost comical—a man going to die in a few months embarrassed to admit he spoke with a person of religion.

"I got scared when I saw what I saw!" he blurted out, as if to explain a misstep.

"You told a minister that you knew when you were going to die?"

"No, ya idiot. What do you think? I'm stupid? I told him I was sick and I was afraid of dying."

"And he recommended you come to me and say these things?"

"Sort of?"

"What do you mean, 'Sort of'?"

Clearly, Ralph didn't want to talk about this encounter, but I didn't care.

"Look, Ralph, I don't know what you're up to, but I think even you're smart enough to know that I don't trust you. You came here looking for help. I didn't come to you. If you don't tell me the truth, I'm going inside, locking the door, and calling the police."

He obviously didn't want the cops involved.

"Okay, Okay. After I saw... after I looked in the mirror, I got scared. There wasn't anyone that was going to help me. I was wandering around and I saw some church. I don't even remember the name of it. I went inside and told someone that I was sick and needed to talk. Some minister came out and we sat down. I told him I was gonna die. He told me I shouldn't be afraid. When I told him he didn't know his ass from his head, he said I would be surprised how many times he heard that. He told me I needed to make peace inside, or some crap like that."

"That doesn't explain anything, Ralph."

"The hell it don't. I went to see him a couple of times. I didn't tell him what I had done or what I could see, but he thought I was feeling guilty. He talked about forgiving people and helping strangers and junk like that."

"And so now you're trying to use that on me? That's just great. It sounds so sincere."

"It doesn't have to," Ralph said in a blatant display of his true character. "You're the one that worries about souls. What do you think? I'll tell you how I see it. I think you're a lot like that minister. You worry about helpin' people, but what about people like me? You just going to kick me to the curb?"

I had to say this for him, he was being honest—disturbingly so, but honest nonetheless. He was selfish and devoid of any conscience, but he was scared and he wanted my help.

I wasn't sure exactly what I would be able to do for him, or what I was even *willing* to do, but I wasn't going to make that decision at that moment. He hit a nerve when he talked about my own soul, I'll give him credit for that. It bought him some more time with me. I pulled out my wallet and handed him my business card.

"Here's my card. My office address is on it. Meet me there after eight tonight."

He was not thrilled.

"I'm not going to your office! I don't wanna go there. Why the hell do you think I came here?"

"You want my help, you follow my rules. I'm not going to continue this discussion on my front step. I have appointments this morning and I'm already late. I'm done by eight tonight. Meet me there and we'll see where it leads. No argument on this, Ralph. We're done here. You get going or I won't meet you again, period. I'll just call the cops."

He left with a curse.

For a brief moment, I wanted to believe he would never show up at my office and I would be done with him, but I knew I wasn't that lucky.

## Chapter 2

I sent Vivi home with my receptionist. They loved each other, and it made me feel better. I didn't want to see anything happen to either of them. The late night meeting with Ralph was my decision, and if Ralph was going to cause any problems, no one else needed to suffer but me. Still, it was lonely in the office as I waited twenty minutes past 8:00.

When you're alone and waiting for someone you really don't want to see, your mind can take you down several paths. I wondered if I was being setup. Could Ralph really have seen his own death? He seemed scared and I didn't think him capable of putting on such an act, but maybe Ralph saw nothing at all. Maybe he was scared of something else and this was just some ploy to get me involved in another charade of Stan's. I worried Stan might be the one that would finally show up. I didn't want to be alone here if that was the case, and I figured twenty minutes was more than enough time to wait.

I was about to leave when Ralph finally came through the door. I tried not to show it, but I was greatly relieved when, just as that morning, he appeared alone. I was not, however, thrilled with his concept of time.

"I can accept a little late, but when you're asking for my help, twenty minutes is not okay."

"I didn't want to come here," Ralph said without apologizing, as if that made it okay for him to make me wait.

"You already told me that," I said, "and like before, I really don't care. I'm also not going to hide other facts. I don't like you. I *know* I can't trust you. And the plain truth of the matter is I really don't *want* to help you. Despite the fact it might sound like I'm judging you, and maybe I am, you really don't deserve help."

What impressed me the most at that moment was that he really didn't care.

"Yeah, but you're going to talk to me anyway."

"I'm talking to you because I'm curious to know what you think I can do for you."



He looked at me like I was the high school drop out and he was the one that spent years in higher education.

"You still don't get it? I saw when I'm going to die. I want you to help me stop that."

"How?"

"That's the part I need you to help me with."

"We're going in circles here."

"Ain't my fault."

"It is if you don't tell me what you want me to do. You're just telling me you want my help. I'm not exactly sure I'm going to be willing to help you until you tell me exactly what it is you think I can do for you."

"I want you to figure out a way I can avoid getting killed three months from now."

It's about as strange a request as I ever heard in that office, but I knew my own gift, and even if I didn't respect Ralph as a person, I respected that innate ability of his.

I nodded.

"Okay, have a seat and we'll talk this out."

He didn't want to move at first. He probably wanted to just talk while standing near the door. I think he wanted to secure my assistance and then get the hell out as soon as possible.

I certainly wanted him gone quickly as well, but I also needed to show him that I was in control. While normally I would be very considerate of those that came to me for help, Ralph wasn't here for counseling. If we were going to play along, it was going to be by my rules. I moved around my desk, sat down, and pointed to a chair.

With a shrug, he complied.

"All right," I began, "you saw when you were going to die and you don't want it to happen. Let's start with exactly what you saw. How are you going to die?"

"I'm going to be shot," he said mundanely, as if he announced he had a dentist appointment in a few weeks.

"Did you see who shot you?"

"No, lots of shadows. Not a big guy, I could tell that. Small gun, too. Maybe a .22. Hard to believe somethin' like that could kill ya. Lousy peashooter is all it is."

"What time does it happen?"

"Just before nine in the evening."

I thought for a moment and decided to try and give him a quick answer that would get him out of my office and out of my life.

"So why don't you stay out of trouble for the next three months and on the day you think you're going to die, just lock yourself up in a room where no one can get to you?"

"You gonna help me or just be an ass?" he snarled.

"What's the problem?"

"What room do I lock myself in? A hotel room? Manager's got a key. Window's can be broke. Maybe you're thinkin' a jail cell? Cons smuggle guns in all the time. Maybe you think I can ask for some kind of protection. I got no say over what the cops do. If I tell them I think I'm going to be shot, you think they're gonna listen? They can just throw me out whenever they want. What happens then? Now I'm in a dark alley probably with drunks and whatever. Or maybe you think I can hide out in some old abandon warehouse? Why don't I just shoot myself now and get it over with?"

I tried to think of a safe place he could hide for one day, but without knowing who was going to shoot him, it would be difficult.

"Alright maybe it's not that easy. Tell me exactly what you saw. Is there any indication of where it might have happened?"

"No, too many shadows. I see a couple of blank walls and the little guy with the gun. That's about it."

"So make sure you're in a brightly lit area at the time you think this is all going to happen," I offered. It seemed like a simple but realistic solution. "Pick a place that's wide open and without blank walls. Go to a mall."

"And what if I get stopped on my way and taken somewhere I don't want to go? Or what if I get there and someone shoves me into a backroom. Hell, even security could throw me out. Now I'm outside in the dark. Or maybe the friggin' lights just go out. Ever think of that?"

He was right again. Based on what he was telling me, he could be shot anywhere. If he knew he was going to be shot on the East Coast, he might be able to leave for the opposite side of the country and feel pretty safe, but shadowy places with bare walls are pretty common throughout the world.

Frustrated, I pushed him for more information.

"Well, why don't you tell me something about your death that lets us figure out where it happened? I thought your visions had a great amount of detail?"

"They do. I'm shot three times. Once in the shoulder, once in the leg, and once in the stomach. I don't die right away, but in less than ten minutes from when I'm shot. The wounds are small but there's a lot of blood. I can't see the guy's face that shoots me, but he doesn't stick around. The bastard just steps around me and out of sight after I hit the ground. I pull myself up against a wall, but I can't stand up and I can't call for help. I think I'm in shock. There's no one else around. No one walks by me while I'm dyin', so I don't get any help."

"You didn't see anything leading up to it?"

"A few things, but they don't make sense."

"Describe them."

He frowned and said nothing.

I pressed him further.

"Even if I wanted to help you, which I don't, I can't do anything if you don't tell me what you saw."

"I was holdin' a gun," he finally admitted.

I shook my head.

"Ya see!" he nearly screamed. "That's why I didn't say anything. You figure now I just deserve it."

"For God's sake, Ralph, why would you be holding a gun?"

"I don't know. Maybe 'cause I know I'm gonna get shot?"

I didn't like his sarcastic tone and decided to throw it back at him.

"Well, maybe if you don't pick up a gun, you won't have to worry about it. There's your answer right there. You don't need me. Just stay away from guns and you'll be fine."

"Yeah, just as simple as locking myself in a room somewhere, right? What if the guy makes me pick up a gun?"

"You mean if he says something completely ridiculous like 'pick up that gun or I'll shoot you'?"

"He could say that."

"And if you do, you know you're going to die. Just don't pick up the gun."

"He could shoot me anyway."

"But then your vision won't come true."

"But I'll still be dead."

"Now we're going in a circle again."

"Ain't my fault."

"Seems like nothing is."

"You said you would help me!"

"I said I would talk to you about it."

"Yeah, well this kind of talk seems pretty useless."

"Fine, you can leave whenever you want."

He almost did. He started to rise from his chair, but then cursed under his breath. He finally said what truly brought him to me in the first place.

"I can't leave 'cause that would mean I got no hope. I don't know if there is a way for me to keep from gettin' shot, but if there is, I think you know how. I gotta think like you think."

"I'm not sure that's possible."

He shrugged off my insult.

"Let me ask you somethin'. Why did you want to warn people that I saw were gonna die?"

"Excuse me?"

"You got in a big fight with Stan about that. I told you who was gonna die and you wanted to do somethin' to stop it. Why?"

"Because most of the deaths you saw seemed pointless, even stupid. You saw people being murdered, people dying of drug overdoses, people committing suicides. It seemed like more than a tragedy. It seemed like a waste."

"But why did you think you could stop it?"

"I was just trying to warn them so *they* could avoid it. I wasn't trying to be a hero, if that's what you mean."

"That's not what I'm talkin' about. You thought these people could avoid what was gonna happen to them."

"I suppose I did."

"Why?"

"Because people can make choices."

"So you don't think what I see is definitely gonna happen, right?"

"I guess not."

"Then why do I see it?"

"I have no idea. Just like I have no idea why I can see people's souls."

"But you see souls. It's not your imagination. Right?"

Others might disagree, but then they couldn't see what I saw.

"No, it's not my imagination," I said firmly.

"That's what I'm talkin' about," Ralph persisted. "You ain't makin' nothin' up. Neither am I. I knew what I see and I know it's real."

"But what you see hasn't happened yet."

Then, his eyes lit up.

"That's what I'm talkin' about. You still believe what I see isn't definite. It doesn't have to happen."

"Are we talking about destiny here?"

"I dunno. Maybe. We're talkin' about what I see. Every time I see someone die, I know it's gonna happen. I don't know why. I just do. But you don't. I want to believe you."

And it all became clear.

"You saw your death, and in your mind, it's unavoidable, but then you thought of me. You think I believe you have a chance to change that outcome and that's why you're here."

"I'm here because I don't wanna die!"

"Ralph, I don't believe you have to die. I think you can change your future, but I think it has to mean something. You have to want to do more than just avoid this pointless end. You have to want more out of your life."

"Now you're sounding like that minister guy."

"Maybe he knew what he was talking about."

"He didn't get it. He was thinkin' I was sick, like I had cancer or somethin'. He didn't know what I saw, and he just went on and on about finding peace and all that crap. Now

you're starting in on the same stuff. Look, I don't know why this is so damn hard for you. You thought you could save people from dying. You didn't think it had to happen. Make it so it doesn't have to happen to me."

He truly was a selfish individual. He wasn't trying to give his life meaning. He was only trying to avoid the inevitable, or at least temporarily save his own skin.

"Fine." I paused to release a heavy sigh as I considered his request. "You told me what you saw and I say just try to avoid that scene. Stay away from guns and stay away from trouble. Try to find the safest place you can on the day you're supposed to die. Beyond that, I don't know what else I can do for you."

"I could have come up with all that on my own," Ralph said, "but I want to believe it. I want to believe it like you believe it."

He had doubts, doubts that clearly scared the hell out of him. I decided that, if anything, I could use my experience as a counselor to at least give him some hope. Maybe that would be enough to convince him he had a chance and to allow my own conscience to accept that I at least tried to help him.

"I don't believe you have to continue living the life you're living. You have a choice to change the direction of your life, and if you do that, you can avoid so many problems, probably avoid a senseless death as well."

He didn't quite bite on the therapy routine.

"Yeah, yeah, cry me a river about my life. I don't want to hear it. You just ain't getting it."

"What am I not getting?"

"I see things that haven't happened yet, but they *do* happen. I see how people are gonna die! I don't make it up. I don't even know where this crap comes from. It just hits me. It's the future, but it's real to me, just like souls are real to you. It's not some dream. It's something that's really going to happen. Why do you think you can change that?"

"Because it hasn't happened yet," I repeated. "You're seeing a future, not a present or a past."

"So? I still see it, and if I see it, why do you think I can avoid it? I know what I see, and what I see always comes true."

And that's where his fear came from. He thought it was written in stone. I tried to throw him one last bone, one last hope, and maybe he would find his own way out of his mess.

"It always comes true? Always? Do you know that for sure?" I asked.

He tilted his head and then seemed to grab hold of some thought like it was crust of bread for a starving man.

"What do you mean?"

"Have you followed up on every single person where you had this kind of vision?"

"No, but all the ones Stan followed happened exactly the way I saw it."

"Stan wanted those people to die. He wasn't going to change things, right?"

"I guess."

"But how many did Stan follow? Did you tell him about all of them?"

"Some of them, but not all."

"And did he check on everyone you told him about?"

"I don't think so." He considered the point further. "Nah, he forgot about a lot of 'em. Some he didn't seem to care about at all, like it wasn't no big deal to him."

"So how do you know that your visions always come true?"

He started to nod.

"I don't."

"I'm guessing you only know about the ones Stan followed up on, and like I said, he wasn't about to help anyone. You know that."

For a moment, he seemed eager to agree with me, but then, he fell back on his fears.

"But it don't make sense. Why would I see it if it ain't gonna happen?"

"Maybe it's something that *might* happen," I offered, "but doesn't *have* to happen. Maybe there are several different paths and that's just one of them. Did you ever think of that?"

"But I don't know any of these people. Why would I see something that *might* happen?"

"Ralph, why are you arguing with me? I don't think either one of us truly understands what we can see. I see souls. I don't know why. You see flashes of people's death, but

there's no reason for it. Since there's no way to truly understand it one way or another, why are you so certain these deaths are guaranteed to happen?"

"Cause I believe what I see," he said with a edge. "If it ain't gonna happen, then it's just some weird nightmare, or maybe I'm just friggin' crazy. It means I'm seeing things wrong."

"Wouldn't it be better to think you might be wrong than to think you're definitely going to die?"

"I want to be wrong! I don't want to die."

"Then accept you're seeing only one path of many possible paths. Take a different path and you might just save yourself."

He frowned—looked up at me, out the window, and then grunted with frustration. He shook his head and seemed ready to leave, but he held steady in his chair as he narrowed on a stray thought apparently flickering somewhere back in the recesses of his mind. He struggled with it, but then yanked it out into daylight as his hope. His confidence suddenly grew in a burst of some inherent new course of action.

"We can try it. We don't have to wait. If you're right, we can find out soon enough."

"What are you talking about, Ralph?"

"I'm gonna find someone else, someone I see that's going to die soon, and I'm gonna bring him to you."

"Now just hold on!"

"No, that's it. You can try to save someone else, and if you're right, it'll work. And if it works, then I can avoid it, too."

"Hey, I'm not going to get involved with you again in that kind of thing!"

He appeared almost shocked.

"Why the hell not?"

"Did you forget about Stan? What he had me doing?"

"I'm not doing this for Stan," he shot back. "This is just between you and me."

"I don't care who it's between. I still regret getting involved with you and Stan. People suffered because I was careless and stupid. I'm not going to do that again."

"I ain't trying to trick anyone," Ralph pleaded. "Really, this is it. If we can save someone else, then I know I don't have to die."



"Ralph, I said no."

His face turned dark and he spit out a harsh accusation.

"You want me to die, don't you?"

"I agreed to talk to you, but I'm not going to get involved with you again. What happens to you has everything to do with you and nothing to do with what I want."

He wouldn't let it go at that.

"Bullcrap! You don't *want* to help me, so you won't. That's the same as sayin' you *want* me to die. You don't care about nothin' but what you want. You probably do that to everyone that comes in here. What? If you don't like the way they look or the way they smell, do you call the cops on them and have them thrown out?"

His selfishness was matched only by his callousness.

"This discussion is over. You can leave now."

He got up to leave, but he didn't appear defeated. If anything, he looked more determined to get his way.

"We ain't done," he stated, as he left my office and slammed the door behind him.

## Chapter 3

That's really not the way I wanted my meeting with Ralph to end. I wanted to be done with him. I wanted to send him away with a guilt-free conscience, knowing for sure he wouldn't be coming back. Then again, I'm not the first one to realize that what we *want* usually doesn't matter much in how things turn out.

Ralph clearly held to other notions. He was seemingly determined to get what *he wanted*, and he didn't care much how it might affect me.

Personally, I hate these kind of things. I realize everyone has to deal with loose ends and not everything gets tied up quickly into a nice, neat ball, but no one needs to wonder about when a person like Ralph is going to pop back into his or her life. It's just the kind of thing that keeps a big space open in the section of the brain that's reserved for endless worry—the kind of concern that leads to vivid yet mostly pointless anxiety. Given just a few moments, I could think of all kinds of terrible scenes with Ralph forcing himself back into my life. He knew where I lived, where I worked. He could show up at either place at any time. I'm not a big fan of that kind of thinking, but it's difficult to avoid. While I like to be prepared for things, and forethought is always helpful, worrying about worst case scenarios doesn't do wonders for the digestion.

Thankfully, I had no other appointments that evening. I decided I didn't want to stick around in my office for more than a couple of seconds. I didn't want to give Ralph the chance to come back and continue to argue, or hit me over the head with a baseball bat until I realized that helping him was my only true option.

I locked the door to my office and headed out to my car.

With those little worries of mine still tugging at my fears, I moved carefully down the sidewalk. I parked in the back corner of the lot to allow my patients the best spaces. As I turned the corner of my building, I saw a tall, slender figure in a hooded sweatshirt leaning against the driver's side door of my car.

This was not Ralph. Different body type. Ralph was shorter, a bit stockier. Ralph also had stormed out quite tense. The person stood more relaxed, as if waiting for a friend. Ralph knew I was not his friend.

I wasn't expecting anyone else that evening, and a stranger leaning against my car door is not something I viewed as a welcome sight.

Brought to a halt, my feet seemed more than happy to stay put while my mind reeled against this new development. Why would someone be waiting for me at that time of night? I wasn't even supposed to be there. I should have been done for the day and gone a little after 7:00. The only reason I was still in the office that late was because I waited to talk to Ralph.

Thinking of Ralph, I wondered if he might also be lurking about, so I quickly scanned the area. I didn't see him. The hooded figure was apparently alone. The parking lot was well lit, but the surrounding bushes were fairly dark. As I swung my head around to get a look at all possible threats, I noticed Ralph walking away much further down the street in the opposite direction.

That gave me just a taste of relief, but not much. Ralph wasn't hiding behind some tree waiting to beat me with a tire iron, which is a good thing, but it didn't give me any further information about the unknown individual in the sweatshirt.

I turned my attention back to my car hoping to get a glimpse of the hooded stranger's face. Nothing. The person was gone.

Nobody needs that kind of surprise, especially considering what I had already been through that day.

That little gnawing flame of worry sparked by Ralph now turned into a full blown raging alarm. Tension screamed down the back of my neck. What to do about it was the major question.

I decided to get moving, believing I would be a more difficult target, but not toward the car. I chose a path away from the parking lot toward an objective I believed was a bit more secure. My feet were actually a bit stubborn at first. Standing alone, however, was not something my brain truly appreciated and it won the battle of wills.

Once I started walking, getting my feet to move a bit faster was no longer a problem, and I headed down the sidewalk toward another office building that was larger and held

many more professional offices. The atrium was well lit and there were several people mulling about just inside the door. I stood by the front entrance and waited as I tried to get a better grip on my fears.

Feeling slightly safer, I tried to burn the image of the hooded figure into my mind—the color of the sweatshirt, the rough height of the individual, anything that would allow me to pick the stranger out in a crowd.

From my new vantage point, I could no longer see my car, but I could see the entrance to the lot where it was parked, as well as the front of my building. If I saw anyone moving about, I wanted to be certain if it was the same individual that had been leaning against my car.

I gave it several minutes. No one.

At a loss for what to do next, I gave a look in the direction I last saw Ralph and he appeared to be waiting at a nearby bus stop. He wasn't looking around or acting nervous in any way. I believed he didn't know about the hooded stranger, but that was an assumption on my part.

My options were limited. I wasn't going to simply walk back to my car at this point. If I had, I might as well just have hung a sign around my neck that said, "clueless victim."

I could have called the cops and said I saw a stranger prowling around my building. They would have come quickly. It would have also been the safest choice and I doubted they would have asked too many questions.

My problem was I wanted to know who this stranger was, and a squad car pulling into the lot would have scared most people away. I didn't like mysteries. Like I said before, my mind can run a bit wild when I start to worry, and hooded strangers waiting in the dark can really ramp up the old imagination.

Wondering if I might have blown things out of proportion, I considered my circumstances. I'm not a big believer in coincidences. I saw Ralph for the first time that morning. He came to my office that evening. Suddenly, someone is waiting for me at my car. It had to be tied together, or at least the odds were high.

What else could it be?

It wasn't a mugger. Maple Shade, New Jersey isn't a dangerous town and muggers aren't dumb enough to stand out in the open waiting for a potential victim. A mugger would have hid out of sight and hit me from behind.

Thinking about other possibilities, I started to wonder if I truly was just being paranoid. Maybe it was nothing more than a delivery man taking a smoke break, or some guy that just got off work and was cutting through the back of the lot when his cell phone rang and he stopped to talk.

It could have been anyone. I gave one more look toward where I last saw Ralph. He wasn't looking in my direction. He just sat on a bench... waiting.

I decided I would let Ralph choose my next step. I could see the bus moving toward him further down the road. If it stopped and he got on, I would dismiss the event and go back to my car. If for some reason, he stayed put, I'd call the cops.

The bus pulled closer to the stop.

Ralph stood up.

The bus came to a halt and the door opened.

Ralph got on, and in a few moments, the bus pulled away from the curb and headed on to its next stop out of my sight.

That was that. Time to go back to my car.

Despite the removal of Ralph from the scene, my feet remained convinced that walking back to my car was not the wisest of choices. For some reason, I could not shake this sense of apprehension. Stepping slowly, but at least moving forward, I eventually returned to my office door. I pulled on the door handle and it held firm. No one had forced the lock. Another good sign.

I stepped around the corner and looked toward my car.

Nothing there, but this time I heard footsteps, and I was no longer moving.

I jerked my head about, but no one had been following me.

Then I looked across the street and I saw the hooded sweatshirt. The face beneath the hood gleamed with a satisfaction.

I recognized Alice immediately. She was one of two young ladies introduced to me by Stan. Alice was scary. Not as scary as Stan, but still not on the short list of people I'd like to spend some time getting to know in any intimate detail.

Unfortunately, Alice decided it would be a great time to have a chat with me.

She walked across the street with single-minded purpose. She didn't bother to look for possible traffic as she crossed. I'm guessing a car, or even a bus, would have done anything not to hit her. She reeked of malevolence, and once you get that kind of evil on your car, you can't get it off. No one wants that.

The dark sweatshirt now looked more like the hooded shroud of the grim reaper. She smiled wickedly, but her teeth didn't show. I took that as a plus. I didn't need to see fangs. Her steps were confident, like a lioness approaching a two-legged antelope.

At this point, I felt like that antelope and my feet did in fact wish to whisk me away from there. I realized at that point that my feet were rather inconsistent in their wishes. Running, however, was pointless. She clearly had something she wanted to say to me. Better to get it over with than have it dangling over my head. I already had that problem with Ralph.

She completed her crossing and was now upon me, but she didn't stop moving. She skirted around my shoulder, but kept her focus entirely on me.

Despite my desire to turn with her and continue facing her, I allowed her to circle me. She stopped before coming completely around. Instead of standing directly in front of me, she took a position just off to my left side and I turned my head toward her.

"Now why did Ralph come to talk to the doctor boy?" she asked herself as she looked at me with a half-cocked nod of the head. "Doctor boy didn't want to help us any more. Ain't that right, doctor boy?"

I debated whether I should talk to her or not. I wanted to say nothing, but her question was one that I could answer without hesitation.

"I want nothing to do with you," I responded firmly and quickly.

"Doctor boy the spoil sport. Gave up on us and yet here he is talkin' to Ralph. What's up with that?"

"I told Ralph to leave me alone. I want you to do the same."

"And yet Ralph was here talkin' to you for some time. Only takes a couple of seconds to tell him to take a hike. He was here a lot longer than that."

I wouldn't deny it, but I wasn't going to confirm anything, either.

"Why don't you ask Ralph how long he was here. He just left on a bus."

"Maybe I'll talk to Ralph, maybe I won't need to. Did Ralph tell you what he wanted?"

"Don't you know what he wants?"

"What he wants with you? No idea. I'm surprised he's here." She paused and seemed to reflect on what she knew for certain. "Can't imagine why he would want to talk to you. He didn't like you one bit. I can see that you don't like him, either. But you agreed to meet him here. He didn't want to come here, but he did, and he knew you would see him. I know that good enough. So did he get what he wanted?"

"No."

I didn't have to convince her. She took me at my word.

"I don't know if that's good or bad. You gonna see him again?"

"No," I repeated.

She looked me up and down from head to toe, and then she gave me a half-smile, half-snarl.

"You're lyin', doctor boy. I can tell. I'm not as good as picking up on lies as some others, but I still know you're lyin' right now. You may not want to see him again, but you think you will, don't you?"

I suddenly remembered Alice's gift. She could read people. It was a deep natural perception. By the way I stood, any small movement, or even the lack of movement would give her a good indication of what was going on in my mind. She knew how to deal with people just by watching them walk down the street.

I had to remind myself that Stan collected people with gifts, anyone that could help him corrupt the people in this world. I could see souls, that's why he came to me. Stan kept Ralph around not because of the stimulating conversation, but because Ralph could see how and when people were going to die. As for Alice, she was one of Stan's favorites. She could read people's bodies—find strengths and weaknesses, virtues and flaws, hopes and fears—read all of that just by watching for a nod, a gesture, or even an exhale.

"I have no control over what Ralph does," I stated. "I told him I don't want to be involved with him again. I hope he listens to me."

For the most part, she bought my explanation, but she knew there was more to it than that.

"But you're worried he won't. Yeah, you don't want to have to deal with Ralph. You didn't contact him. He came to you. You agreed to meet him here tonight, but you don't want to meet him again. Thing is, you think you'll have to see him again. He wants something from you and you didn't give it to him."

I said nothing.

"You know Ralph is going to die?" she asked with just a hint of smile, as if it was some kind of inside joke.

"He told me what he saw."

Her smile grew a bit.

"You don't really care about what he saw. If anything, it would probably make you sleep easier if he just hurried up and got himself killed all that faster."

It's shameful to admit, but it was probably true. I didn't want to deal with Ralph again. If he were dead, it would be one less thing to worry about. Yes, it's a cold statement, but reality isn't always warm and fuzzy.

"What happens to Ralph is not my business and I don't want it to be my concern."

"But you are concerned. You're not comfortable with me talkin' to you, but Ralph has you more than just a bit nervous."

She was playing with me, tormenting me probably just for fun.

"All of you make me nervous. Speaking of such, is Stan around as well?"

"No, he sent me to see what Ralph was up to."

"Pity."

"You don't think it's a pity. You're relieved he's not here."

"That was called sarcasm."

"Call it whatever you want, but I will tell Stan you asked about him."

Seems as if Alice was going to take up another space in the "worry section" of my consciousness. I wasn't concerned about these new anxieties not fitting. The worry spots in the brain just expand as needed. I didn't bother trying to hide my fears. Alice would be able to see through the attempt. Instead, I told her exactly what I felt of all of them.

"You tell Stan whatever you want, but if you're going to give him a message from me, tell him to stay the hell away from me. That includes you and Ralph. Now if you want to



know what Ralph wanted, you go ask him. If you want to know if I intend to help him, the answer is no."

Her face crinkled up into a wrinkled frown as her stare narrowed on me.

"I guess we'll have to see about that, won't we." She turned and started walking away, but left me with words I really didn't want to hear. "I'll be seein' you 'round, doctor boy."

Wonderful. Worry was clearly going to make a long term home in the back of my brain all the way down to the pit of my stomach.

## Chapter 4

The next couple of days, I worried more about Alice than Ralph. Ralph was selfish, frightened, and under the impression he was going to die in a few months—certainly a dangerous combination—but Alice was just plain dangerous no matter what her emotional state. I also knew what Ralph wanted. He wanted my help. That at least gave me some room for bargaining. I couldn't imagine Alice wanting my help for anything. Alice would just enjoy pulling my spine out through my abdomen.

With that understanding, it's not difficult to imagine that Alice created the kind of worry that constantly gnawed at my brain. Every time I heard a strange sound, saw a shadow, felt a breeze on the back of my neck, I was certain it was Alice sneaking up from behind. I did not sleep well the next few nights.

As it turned out, I should have been more concerned with Ralph as he was the one that turned up in my office three days later. He entered with a friend, but I did not know the young man that accompanied him. I told my receptionist to send Ralph in alone.

He walked into my office wearing a big smile, apparently not for being particularly pleased to see me, but as if proud of some personal accomplishment.

I told him to shut the door.

"You can lose the smile, Ralph. I'm not happy to see you again."

He kept smiling.

"I didn't think you'd be happy, but I don't care."

That set me off and I decided to make him care.

"Well, did you expect I would be talking to Alice?"

"Alice?"

"Stan's friend... that Alice. I talked to her after you came here the other night."

The smile disappeared, as I knew it would.

"Why would you do that?" he stated with an accusatory glare.

"Suddenly you're not happy with something I did? Well, now you know how I feel, but if it's any consolation to you, it wasn't my choice. I didn't go looking for her, not that I

would know where to find her. She came to me and you're the one that brought her here. She followed you the last time you were here."

"She what?"

"She followed you. She was waiting for me out in the parking lot after you left here."

"Damn bitch."

Crude words, but a description I would accept as accurate. Still, his surprise over the event made at least one thing clear.

"So I can assume she didn't talk to you?" I stated more as a fact than a question.

The news seemed to catch Ralph a bit off guard and he hesitated before answering.

"No. Did she want to?"

"Of course she wanted to. You show up at my office and you don't think that's going to raise her curiosity?"

"I dunno. What'd you tell her?"

"What do you think I told her? I told her to get lost, like I've been trying to tell you."

"That it?"

"What else should I have told her? Maybe we should have exchanged phone numbers?"

"Well, what'd she want with me?"

I couldn't believe how dense this man truly was.

"Come on, Ralph. Stan sent her to keep track of you. Even I can figure that out. You're a loose cannon."

This information seemed to weigh on him, not that I blamed him. I wouldn't want Alice looking for me.

"I haven't seen either of them in a while," Ralph revealed. "I been busy."

"I bet. You see, Ralph. This is why I don't want anything to do with you. You bring trouble, and I'm guessing there's more outside my door."

With that, Ralph quickly washed Alice from his concerns. I envied him for that ability. I couldn't wash Alice out of my thoughts with steel wool and sulfuric acid.

"The guy I brung here ain't got nothin' to do with Alice."

"That's only slightly comforting. His coming here with you, however, is hardly a sterling endorsement to his character."

It took Ralph a moment to understand I just insulted him. Then, as opposed to actually being insulted, he seemed to care more about my opinion of the unknown gentleman in my waiting room.

"I hardly know this guy."

"And yet here he is tagging along with you. I'm not impressed with that."

Ralph grew annoyed, and suspicious of my quick judgment.

"What? You already look at his soul? You gonna judge him before you hear what I gotta say?"

"I didn't look at his soul, and the only judgment I'm making is in regard to the company he keeps. It's not a good idea to get involved in anything you're doing, and yet here he is walking around with you. That certainly makes me question his character, and I'll stand by that judgment without remorse any day of the week."

"Yeah, I know. You don't want nothin' to do with me, but what about someone else, someone you know is going to die?"

I tried to stop him.

"Stop it right there, Ralph. I don't want to hear it. I'm not going to listen. I want you and your friend..."

He didn't let me finish.

"He's gonna die in less than a week. In six days, he's going to get knifed during a drug deal. You gonna let that happen?"

I exhaled heavily. I didn't want to know any of this.

"What do I have to do to convince you that I don't want to help you and that I think you're trouble? Just take your friend out of here and don't come back."

"He ain't my friend. I found him like a find everybody else. He's a guy that's gonna die."

"Fine. He's a stranger to you. He's a stranger to me and I want to keep it that way."

"You gonna let someone else die?"

"What I do doesn't matter."

The moment I said those words, I regretted them. It did matter. I knew that, but I also knew that when I got involved with Ralph before, I didn't do any good. I didn't mean to

cause any harm, but I did. I just wanted to help souls grow brighter, but I was manipulated. Maybe I was about to be manipulated again. I didn't want to risk it.

"I can't trust you, Ralph. That's the bottom line. You could have been sent here by Stan, you could be trying to trick me."

"Stan ain't got nothin' to do with this."

"And I'm supposed to take you at your word? Doesn't work that way, Ralph. I don't even have to know what your soul looks like to know that you're a self absorbed, sociopath. I know beyond a doubt that I can't possibly trust you, and if you don't like to hear that, that's just too bad. Choices have consequences."

Ralph wouldn't be deterred.

"What about the guy outside? Doesn't he count?"

"All I know about him is that he came here with you. That means I shouldn't trust him, either."

"If all you say is true, what about your choice? You're choosin' not to do what you think you should do."

That made no sense. I was doing exactly what I thought I should do. I was trying to get Ralph and his associate out of my life.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about giving you a chance to do what you wanted to do. You wanted to save people from dyin', but now you want to stay out of it. I go out and find someone that's gonna die. Maybe you can save him, if you try. If you don't, you're letting him die."

"Everyone is going to die at some point, Ralph. I can't stop that."

"But this guy is going to get knifed... and he's young. You don't think you should try to do something about that?"

It was a good argument, a *very good* argument, and I thought it went well beyond Ralph's capabilities. I could sense a more manipulative hand at play here, and again, I thought of Stan. I tried to coax additional information in hopes of revealing the truth.

"What do you care about this guy?" I demanded.

"I don't care at all about what happens to him, but I thought you might."

"So you brought him to me as some kind of favor, a benevolent gestures? That doesn't sound like you."

"It ain't no favor. I told you what I want. If you can stop someone from dyin' the way I see it, then I know there's a chance for me."

"And you just happened to find this guy by chance?"

"Wasn't no chance. I been lookin' constantly until I found him. Wasn't easy."

"And you did this all by yourself?"

"Ain't had no choice."

His response was quick and his frustration was clear. I began to wonder if maybe Ralph was just so desperate that he was able to pull all this off on his own. Then, I considered an obvious hole in his story.

"And just how did you convince him to come see me?"

Ralph smiled more profoundly as he spoke. This was the great accomplishment he was so proud of.

"I had to think about that for a while. I couldn't just tell him what I saw, but I knew he was a stoner. I figured that out by watchin' him. I told him I knew a doctor that could hook him up for some prescription meds for real low cost. I got some stuff from a corner pusher and gave it to him as a sample. I said it was from you."

"You did what?!"

"It worked. He's here."

I couldn't believe this.

"He's only here because he thinks I'm going to sell him drugs. I'm not."

"You don't have to sell him the drugs. Just write him a script. That's enough to keep him interested."

"I wouldn't even if I could."

I got a perplexed look from Ralph.

"What do you mean? You sayin' you can't?" Ralph asked.

"I'm not licensed to write prescriptions."

This did more than confuse Ralph. It clearly aggravated him.

"You can't? What kinda doctor are you? You're one of them shrinks, aren't you? I know people get scripts from shrinks all the time."

"I'm a psychologist, not a psychiatrist."

"What the hell's the difference?"

"You have to be a licensed medical doctor to write prescriptions."

He shook his head as if I just scrambled his brain.

"You ain't kiddin' me? You really can't?"

"No, I can't."

"Crap!"

I thought that might be the end of it, but Ralph remained persistent.

"What about samples? I hear drug companies have these reps that give out samples all the time. Give him some samples."

I assumed the new drug culture of the streets brought Ralph this treasure trove of information.

"They only bring samples to doctors that can prescribe them. They don't bring me anything, but it doesn't matter. Even if I had samples, which I don't, or if I could write prescriptions, which I can't, I wouldn't just hand them out to your friend."

"Well, think of something else, man. Don't you know some doctor that can prescribe stuff? Can't you send him to a friend or somethin'?"

I had enough.

"All of this is unethical and illegal. I don't want anything to do with this. I want both of you out of my office now. If he's going to get knifed in a drug deal, I suggest you warn him, but leave me the hell out of this. If you don't start moving, I will call the police."

Ralph broke down and began to beg.

"You can't do this! You gotta show me you can stop this! That guy out there... he's the key. He won't listen to me, but you're a doctor. You wanted to save people! He's gonna die! And if he dies, that means I'm gonna die. You can't let that happen! Please, man!"

As terrible as it might sound, I cared more about my own skin at that very moment. Ralph was trying to get me involved in a drug deal. How was that going to look? I'd probably make the six o'clock news. Heck, with all the talking heads out there looking for something to debate, I'd probably make every cable news channel in existence.

"That's not going to help," I stated. "You have me connected to a drug deal. I don't want any part of it. I told you to leave." And I stepped to the phone.

His pleas turned to blame.

"If you don't do something, then you're lettin' it happen. You're supposed to be some kind of doctor. People look up to you, but you might as well go out there and stab him now and then come back here and shoot me. You're gonna have two deaths on your head!"

Once again, Ralph forced me to pause and consider the situation. Would I really be responsible for the death of either one of them? Logic told me no, but this was not a *logical* situation.

I went silent as I considered his plight. Ralph saw his own death and was scared beyond reason, and in my mind, probably not half as frightened as he should have been. I knew what Ralph's soul looked like. No happy ending there.

I don't think it was compassion that stirred me on. It was part stupidity, but mostly guilt. When I looked at Ralph, I didn't really see him for what he was. I saw my past connection to him. I thought of his gift and my gift and how they were similar

I also didn't really think of the man out in my waiting room that was going to die in six days. He was here to make a drug deal, and it was another drug deal that was going to get him killed. That was his problem, not mine, but then the guilt flooded in.

What was that man but another individual that was going to die, and I knew about it in advance. I wanted to curse Ralph for coming back into my life, but the truth is, it wasn't all Ralph's doing. I had my own demons I had not exorcised.

I considered all the other people that Ralph he had led me to. He had brought me to people he said were going to die in a few days, a few weeks, or a few months. I thought of their souls. I looked upon those spirits and I judged them based on their size. I picked out the smaller ones and Stan had destroyed them.

I really didn't care about the death of these particular two men on my head, as Ralph had put it, but I did care about what I had done in the past. I thought I forgave myself for that, blamed it on my own naivety, and tried to justify everything with my intentions, but I kept hearing that saying about the path to hell and how it's paved with the best intentions.

Maybe I had to do more. I couldn't save those already passed, but maybe I could save someone else, at least that's what I thought at that moment.



Still, I vowed I wouldn't be taken advantage of again, that I wouldn't allow myself to be tricked. But I would, at the very least, make one attempt to help someone who I believed didn't deserve help. Perhaps that would go a long way toward finding some kind of redemption.

Ralph didn't say much more at that point. He just waited for me to make the next move.

Knowing it was up to me and cursing the need to make a decision, I almost opened the door from my office to the waiting room. I thought of looking deep into the man's essence, of getting a true picture of his soul. If it was bright and strong, I might feel better about getting involved. Then I considered what I would do if I saw a spirit that was weak and dim. Would I give up on him because of that?

That was just another question I didn't want to answer, so I chose a path that would take the decision off my plate. I turned from the door and faced Ralph.

"Here's the deal, Ralph. I'm not going to give your friend any drugs or any prescriptions. I'm going to tell him that you lied."

Ralph almost exploded.

"You can't do that! He'll leave. He'll..."

"Let me finish. I am going to try and help him, but not your way."

Ralph was apparently prepared for this.

"What? You think he's gonna listen to you talk? That he's gonna just sit here while you tell him how much of a mistake it is to take drugs? He ain't gonna stick around for that!"

Ralph was right, but there had to be some way for me to offer reasonable help and let the guy who was going to die in less than a week make the final decision of how much I was going to be involved. I knew we couldn't tell him his future as Ralph saw it. He'd think we were nuts and be out of there just as fast as if we told him he wasn't going to get any drugs.

"What else would keep this guy interested, besides drugs or scripts?" I asked.

Ralph thought for just a moment.

"Money," he replied.

"So what should I do? Pay him to stay away from drug deals six days from now?"

"Won't work," Ralph admitted. "You pay him and he'll definitely make a drug buy."

Then it hit me.

"Do you know the exact time he's supposed to get knifed?"

"Just after two o'clock in the afternoon."

"What time? Exactly?"

"2:18"

"How much money do you think it would take to convince him to be here in my office at that time?"

"Why would he want to come here if you ain't gonna give him drugs?"

"Don't worry about that. How much?"

"Probably two hundred would guarantee it, but..."

"But nothing. Tell him to come in here... alone."

Ralph wanted to ask more questions, but he wanted my help more. He did as he was told.

This is not the end of the novel. This file was created as a sample of the first four chapters only. To obtain the entire book, please visit the author's web site at <http://www.sitelane.com>.

### **A Final Note from the Author**

Thank you for reading my work. I have tried to make these eBooks available in as many formats as possible. If you encounter any difficulty with the formatting, please let me know. Contact information can be found on my web site at [www.sitelane.com](http://www.sitelane.com). If you enjoyed this book, please consider my other novels, including the *Delver Magic Series* and *When Do I See God?* which is available as a trade paperback at bookstores and online merchants.

Jeff Inlo lives in New Jersey, USA with his wife, Joan, and their dog, Jilly.

