

When Do I See God?

Sample Chapters 1-4

Jeff Inlo

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By Jeff Inlo

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Delver Magic Book IV – Nightmare's Shadow
Delver Magic Book V – Chain of Bargains
Delver Magic Book VI – Pure Choice
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Delver Magic Book VIII – Spirit Past
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Delver Magic Book XII – Essence of the Chase
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Soul Chase
When Do I See God?

Science Fiction:

Alien Cradle
Detached Lives: Judgments

Science Fiction/Apocalyptic:

Slow Fall: Counting Down

Humor:

Counterproductive Man

Important Note

This is the Sample Edition which only includes the first four chapters of the book. If you wish to purchase the entire book, please visit my web site at www.sitelane.com.

Thank you.

To Joan, for bringing part of heaven to earth

Chapter 1

By chance or by design, the consequences of an action unseen can have a far reaching impact, even beyond all reasonable intentions. As unlikely as he might have ever imagined, one man's fate rested in the ground beneath a tree far removed from his sight, and his journey into the next life began with a storm.

Heavy rains swept away the dirt supporting the roots of a large tree, and in mere moments, the mature oak collapsed into the surrounding muck with the same majesty as a giant crocodile thrashing about in quicksand. Sharp cracks from the snapping of several branches added cymbal-like emphasis to the constant patter beat of the rain, but the tree's impact with the ground resounded with more of a dull thud than any dramatic sounding crash.

As fate would have it, the heavy tree fell across the banks of a small stream, covering the waterway fully from side to side. With the rain feeding not only the stream but many of the creeks and brooks that emptied into it, the current raced with a maniacal flow and the water deepened into a heavy torrent. The trunk, as well as the thick branches that dangled into the stream, quickly trapped more mud and debris flushed up within the blocked waterway. A dam formed, not without leaks, but enough of an obstruction to divert more than half of the flowing current over the stream's banks and back into the nearby stagnant lake that was the main source of the stream's waters.

This larger body of water was actually a manmade reservoir and the stream served as an outlet to handle seasonal overflows. With the stream significantly blocked, there was no clear passage for the rising waters.

The surface level of this reservoir was also being fed by the heavy rainfall, and it had already reached a point well above the recognized flood stage. The additional water from the backed up stream increased the pressure on the elevated banks that kept the lake contained. At the southeast corner, the mound began to break apart. The embankment eventually disintegrated and fell away as a thick layer of muddy sludge. Crumbling, bubbling, and oozing in front of the frenzied current, the slushy muck preceded the first breakaway flood waters that barreled down the hillside.

The water broke from a breach that, at first, appeared inconsequential at best, but the crashing flow quickly widened the gap. As the breach expanded, the amount of water surged in both weight and force. The downward slope of the hillside served to add speed and power to the growing wave, and the flash flood now tumbled down the hillside with a grinding, churning energy that far surpassed the original overflow from the small stream.

The hillside was adorned with only grass, and the thin strands simply bent to the ferocity of the surging flow. Nothing blocked the path of the flash flood until the current hit a small grove of trees several hundred yards past the base of the first hill. Dozens of saplings broke under the force and became lodged between the trunks of larger trees around them. The obstructions created breaks in the current, forged small barricades that held against the surging water. As the barriers served to temporarily restrict the growing swell, large pools began to form that were suddenly being fed not only by the flood waters from the broken embankment, but also by the deluge of rain.

The pounding downpour soaked the ground. The soil could absorb no more and additional surface water rushed down the surrounding hillsides and joined with the

deepening pools. The water that collected in the twisting valleys of the hills measured several feet deep and it continued to rise behind the obstructions within the trees.

Past the barricade, the muddy sludge that served as the herald for the initial flood wave continued to rush forward. Pressed on by water that continued to flow freely, it tumbled around several hills. The wide, gurgling mass of thick mire twisted and turned as it searched for lower and lower ground. Its speed was deceptive. From a distance, it appeared to move slowly, almost like thick volcanic lava leisurely bubbling down a mountainside. But in truth, it raced forward much more swiftly than appearances would reveal.

Eventually, the thickened head of the flood waters reached the banks of a nearby river. The river itself was already swollen from the heavy rains. The light brown water tumbled about in swift currents just as the falling raindrops adorned the flowing surface with thousands and thousands of small circular blasts of upheaval.

As the torrent of water finally tumbled over the bank, the sludge marking the beginning of the flash flood simply vanished into the churning tide of the river, broken apart and swept away by the faster and more powerful current.

The initial entrance of flood waters into the river made no discernable change in the volume of muddy liquid passing between its banks. The diminishing prospect of a potential tragedy, however, was only temporary.

Back at higher ground, the broken edges of the reservoir's embankment collapsed much further and the gap tripled in size. In one giant wave, a much larger swell of water charged down the hillside. It hit the growing pools trapped behind the fallen trees with a monumental crash. The force ripped apart everything in its way, including the trees which had survived the first onslaught. The flood surged onward with renewed power as nothing remained to restrict its flow.

With the obstruction cleared, the gurgling, foaming waters raced angrily around the hills with the fury of a stampede. When the second wave finally hit the river and raced into the channel, it appeared to ride over the top of the current which ran between the banks.

The flash flood carried broken tree trunks and heavy limbs, along with churning mud and untold gallons of water surging forward with immense force. When the natural river bank curved full to the east, the torrent broke containment once more, and the charging flood continued on a southeasterly course. The heavy debris rolled over the barren river edge and on to a small flood plain that had already been saturated and filled to capacity.

Behind the massive wall of water, the heavy currents of the river grew and continued to nourish the once again freed flood. The released wave hit a small country road and barreled down the empty path directly toward a small home with a single occupant.

Steven Drilach didn't much care one way or the other about the rain. He had nothing planned that evening, so what did he care? Weather was beyond his control, so it wasn't worth grumbling about. Yes, storms could be a nuisance at times, especially snow storms. He hated shoveling the white stuff, particularly when it was heavy and slushy, but he never had to shovel rain, so he remained undeterred in his indifference to the whole affair. He even managed to keep a positive outlook as he muttered to himself that if it didn't rain, the grass around his small home would dry up and turn brown.

Rather than lamenting about any inconvenience, he took advantage of the time he had to himself. He sat alone in his living room reading a rather curious novel with enough

plot twists to keep him intrigued and guessing at the author's ultimate message. The heavy downpour outside offered a pleasant percussion concerto in the background with a rhythmic pounding of rain against his roof. He never actually noticed, but his eyes scanned the written words before him in a tempo that matched the beat of the raindrops. In essence, his mind became unconsciously tied to the elements outside, and he remained at peace with the world around him until the storm itself decided to break that serenity.

In the distance, he heard a strange sound like the throaty growl of some long extinct dinosaur. Initially, he thought it was thunder, but the clamor did not diminish and he had not seen any flash of lightning. He listened with greater focus as a frown of discontent shaped his features. He had become attuned to the simple drumming of the rain on the exterior of his house, embraced it as a friend to share the evening. The rumble was not so welcome, and it shredded his attention, grated at his nerves. As if to add mystery to his unspoken consternation, the internal lights to his home flashed, once... twice... and then went out completely.

At first, the power failure seemed to confirm his suspicion about a lightning strike, but the rumbling in the distance never waned. Instead, it grew.

If he had a candle nearby, he might have simply lit it and continued his reading in a comfortable solitude that was enhanced by the darkness around him. Steven, however, had no such item nearby, nor did he have a match with which to light it. He also could not block out the growing roar that sounded almost like a freight train at full throttle.

Steven wanted to check his front window, but not enthralled at the prospect of stumbling about in the dark, he moved first toward another objective.

Rising out of his living room chair and placing the book he was reading down upon the abandoned seat cushion, he walked carefully through the darkened archway into the kitchen. He could see the rain pounding against a side window, but the rhythmic smattering of raindrops pelting the glass was now all but drowned out by the expanding roar.

Before he could reach the cabinet where he kept his flashlight, his home began to shake. That was the last thing he remembered of this world. The wave of water hit the front of his house and the lonely little dwelling was swept aside almost instantly by the force.

Twisting, cracking, and crunching; nearly every component of the kitchen swelled in vicious upheaval as if a bulldozer had crashed into the far wall at breakneck speed. The floor buckled under Steven's feet just as dust from the crumbling ceiling clouded the air. With cabinets turning to splinters and appliances groaning in twisted metal, debris of every type fell upon him in a surge of mayhem. His body was crushed before his clothes even became damp from the rushing waters.

Death was not painful for Steven, and his last emotion was one of confusion, not fear or dread. The realization that he was about to die never entered his mind, for he dropped into unconsciousness almost immediately. If all awareness was to end upon death, he never would have known that he had died in a flood. Of course, he would soon discover that the death of the body does not necessarily lead to the end of existence or consciousness.

The house broke into several pieces, most of which rode the currents of the flash flood into the surrounding streets. The roof stayed almost entirely intact, but it was quickly separated from the rest of the structure. It came to rest in a wooded area a short

walk from where it used to sit upon walls which no longer existed. Scraps of furniture, saturated books and files, chunks of electronic equipment, and pieces of clothing floated much further along with the current and littered storm drains and creek beds for miles.

Steven's body was stuck within the compacted remains of what used to be his kitchen, dining room, and back bedroom. This large mass of crushed wood, plaster, siding, and insulation also ended up in the woods, but much further down the road than the rooftop.

Back in the hills, the flood waters receded quickly once the level of the reservoir fell below the bottom of the breach. With the lower level of the ground more solid and with less pressure placed upon it from the dwindling water level, the lower embankment held. No further water raced down the hillside other than that of the diminishing rain.

The churning mass of water that previously flowed through the destroyed grove of trees weakened to a slow stream and then to a mere trickle. Very soon, the remnants of the flood waters failed to make it out of the valleys within the hills. The freed water turned into still pools in thick grass or heavy mud surrounding broken tree trunks.

No additional water broke upon the river and the level of the rushing current racing between its banks dropped quickly. Without the flood waters feeding the tide, the river remained within its natural channel and no further surge escaped its banks.

The flood plain at the eastern river bend became still, turning into a deathly quiet pool of trapped water, and the dark gray asphalt of the country road leading to Steven's house channeled the last remnants of the flash flood off to drainage ditches and storm drains.

Local authorities discovered Steven's house, or rather the empty concrete slab of the foundation, rather quickly. Emergency crews followed the destructive path of the flood and spotted the roof and another major portion of the demolished structure firmly entrenched in thickets of trees.

Steven's body was not located until the proper equipment could be dispatched to break up the crushed remnants that entombed him. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

Chapter 2

The precise moment of Steven Drilach's death was neither euphoric nor horrific. There was no egregious tearing in the fabric of reality as if his soul was ripped from his body like flesh from the bone and then thrust unwillingly into a dark and shadowy realm. On the other hand, there was also no chorus of waiting angels delicately lifting his spirit through a tunnel of bright light and into the loving hands of previously past friends and relatives.

For Steven, the transition was a simple step from one plane of consciousness into another, an unobtrusive event that barely created a ripple of significance in either dimension. Other than his mortal body, everything that he was—the very essence of his identity and existence—passed over from one realm to the next, and that transition began at the exact instant his body ceased to sustain life.

Steven's last moments on earth were not painful ones. He went through such trauma that he died instantly from the calamity caused by the flood. The impact from the objects around him broke his bones, crushed his organs, and forced the blood from his veins. Despite this violent mayhem—or more accurately, because of it—there was no cognitive moment of severe pain and distress. The heart ceased to beat just as the impulses within his brain stopped, as if a light switch had simply been turned to the off position. The spark of life that had served as the connection between his spirit and his body, the glue that kept his soul in the physical world, was extinguished in the bat of an eye.

With his time on earth complete, his ultimate end reached and concluded beyond doubt, his link to the material world broke away clean. His spiritual essence moved on to the next phase of consciousness. It was not as if he stepped through a door, flew through some portal, or slipped past the veil of infinity. His awareness simply moved, ended its focus in one world and began its existence in the next.

For Steven's consciousness, the transition was seamless. One moment he was in his kitchen. The next instant, he stood upon the flat, hard floor of what appeared to him as a large empty room.

At the initial moment of transference, he did not hold a true understanding of what had just happened to him. His mind buzzed with a realization that something had occurred, he just didn't know what it was. His thoughts were initially wiped clean, but slowly, reflective considerations gently filled his consciousness.

It was not overwhelming confusion he felt at that moment, though certainly some questions nagged at him. And despite the nature of his circumstances, he did not experience terror or anxiety. As if to hold things in perfect balance, there also wasn't any impression of glorious awe or triumphant delight.

In fact, his emotional response seemed almost inappropriate. He didn't feel lost in a dense fog and he didn't feel as if he had just returned home from some long journey. Truth be known, he lacked any significant reaction to that most perplexing moment; no pain or comfort, no joy or sadness, no great amusement or heavy despair. If pressed for his own definition, he would have stated he felt indifference, if such a thing could truly be felt.

The wide range of his previous earthly emotions compacted themselves into a sparse set of simple sensations which allowed him to reflect clearly upon his present condition.

He knew who he was; remembered his name and his identity. In fact, he retained all the memories of his previous existence. Those memories, however, just could not explain his present situation.

He stood in a place he could not recognize, a place with no apparent purpose... and he stood alone.

Without moving beyond craning his neck in several directions, he surveyed his surroundings. The hard floor extended beneath him in all directions. It remained flat and level until it reached the bases of plain white and unmarked walls. The walls surrounded him in a simple but large rectangular formation. In the distance and in several different locations, he noticed stairwells with steps leading both up and down. He could not see where they led. To his left within one of the walls, he saw one solid paneled door. It was simple in décor, plain and white, just like everything else. It remained closed.

The space about him looked much like the concrete platform for a subway train, except there was no deep channel for the tracks. There was also no other waiting passengers, no turnstiles and no benches, and no guards or ticket booths with occupants waiting to accept tokens. He stood quite alone in that wide expanse.

Continuing his inspection of the walls in the distance and the floor below him, Steven wondered about their composition. The ground appeared like some kind of stone, but the surface was not rough like concrete, nor was it slippery smooth like marble. Perhaps the floor consisted of white slate, for it felt hard and solid beneath his feet. He could not guess as to the walls. He remained too far away to make a close inspection and reach any sound judgment. They appeared like ordinary sheetrock, with the seams spackled flawlessly and any imperfections sanded cleanly away.

As he inspected the area, he realized he could find no light fixtures. The walls and ceiling, however, appeared bright just the same, as if they were self-luminous. The walls were solid with no windows, and thus, no rays of sunshine angled down into any distant corner. Still, light fell about the area from all directions, not from one source, but seemingly from everywhere at once. The brightness held to a uniform degree, keeping the entire room glossed in consistency, as if darkness was not allowed. Looking upon the ground, he noticed his form made no distinct shadow.

He slowly stepped about in a small circle, turning and examining the space around him. His steps made small thumps upon the stone floor, and that was the only sound he could hear. An empty silence waited for him everywhere else.

“Hello?” he called out.

He heard his own voice, but there was no echo.

Nothing... no response from any direction welcomed or even challenged his presence.

The questions that nagged at Steven’s consciousness took greater hold of his thoughts.

Where am I?

How did I get here?

He could not answer either question.

The uncertainty of his surroundings did not bring a sense of peril. His body did not tense in panic and his mind did not cloud with apprehension. He simply recognized that

he stood in a place he could not identify, and he could not fathom as to how he got there. Acknowledging these facts simply demanded further consideration.

Concentrating on the last thing he could remember, an image of his small home came to his mind. He recalled the failure of the lights and his attempt to retrieve a flashlight. He even remembered the distant rumble growing into a deafening crash and the kitchen seemingly coming apart around him. That was all his mind could retrieve.

Wondering what might have happened in those last moments, he looked down upon himself and he realized he was wearing different clothes than he remembered. He had on sneakers, jeans, a T-shirt, and a sweatshirt. This was not what he recalled wearing when he rose from the living room chair and put down his novel in the dark. He recognized all the garments he currently wore. The clothes were indeed his, and they were comfortable enough, but he could not recall putting them on.

He shook his head in near disregard of yet another puzzle. Answers eluded him, but his situation still failed to lead to any true dismay.

The silence of the room remained clearly evident. He could perceive nothing—not a hum of any motor in the distance, and no buzz from some electrical equipment. There was no rushing sound of water in some pipe, nor the whistle of a breeze in the air. He could also not detect any sound beyond the room. There were no birds singing, no insects buzzing, and no dogs barking. Even the sound of the rain he remembered pounding against his roof could not be heard.

As if to check his hearing once more, he clicked his tongue against the roof of his mouth, and he heard the snapping sound clear enough. Again, no echo, and the expanse immediately returned to absolute silence.

He knelt down and felt the ground. It was indeed smooth and hard against the palm of his hand. Patting it firmly, it did not give in any fashion. To him, it felt as solid as any granite surface. He had never seen such a floor before and he marveled at its purity. He could find no trace of dust or dirt that spoiled the clean white surface which stretched out around him.

Shaking his head again, he stood back up and inhaled deeply through his nose. He wondered if he might sense the strong odor of disinfectant or cleanser, but instead, he smelled nothing. The air was dry and as empty as everything else within that strange room.

After a few moments, however, he realized something new, something that finally elicited a response from within. He was not breathing. He never exhaled that long breath he took through his nostrils. It remained in his lungs, or at least so it seemed. He felt not the slightest need to release his breath, to exhale out the air he had taken in.

He stood for long moments, concentrating on his own state of being. He, in fact, was neither exhaling nor inhaling, yet he felt no strain. His body should have been rebelling at this inaction. Still, he felt no pressure building in his chest or pain growing in his head. His vision remained clear and his thoughts unmolested by the lack of oxygen. He realized that such a thing was just not possible, or at least it shouldn't have been. Holding his breath even just for a minute should have created obvious discomfort, but he felt nothing.

The indifference that held sway over his emotions finally loosened as this one sudden insight shook him to his core. Something was indeed very different, something about him, and it went well beyond his strange and barren surroundings.

Standing even more still, he tried to sense his own heartbeat. He could not. He placed his hand upon his chest. Nothing. He felt for a pulse at his wrist and then at his neck. Again, nothing. No breathing and no pulse, and yet he could move about with ease.

The quiet about him grew even stronger, for his own body was as silent as tranquil air trapped in a tightly capped jar. Without distraction, he puzzled over more than just his surroundings. His very state of being came into question, and he could not wipe away the perception that something was not right... though that was not quite an accurate description. He didn't feel as if something was wrong, but an instinct within him latched upon an understanding that something of great significance had occurred.

His thoughts turned over the limited possibilities. He was not breathing and his heart was not beating, or at least he could not sense either of these functions. He considered what might cause such a bizarre state of existence.

Am I dreaming? Steven wondered.

The thought held momentary promise. If somehow he had fallen asleep in his chair with book in hand, perhaps the last few moments he could remember were nothing more than a dream. The distant rumble, the darkness, the upheaval; all of it just a moderate nightmare that still held his consciousness. That would certainly be a plausible explanation.

He recalled deep, heavy sleeps where he ultimately gained awareness of his dream state. In these instances, however, he always woke quickly once he reached such a moment of realization. If such were the case, he expected to awake at any instant and find himself back in his home. He tried to will himself awake, to remove the white floor and walls from his view and return to the chair in his living room.

Still here, he thought to himself after long moments of forced concentration.

Dreaming became less of a credible explanation.

He thought back to his last known memory, and again he recalled the lights failing and his trip to the kitchen. He remembered a momentary calamity and then even greater darkness, as if a blanket had been thrown over him. Considering these elements, he wondered if he perhaps fell in the dark and struck his head. If such were the case, he could be unconscious on his kitchen floor, or perhaps somewhere in a hospital bed.

As he carried the possibility further, he wondered if he might actually be in a coma and his consciousness trapped in a dormant body.

That would explain much, he thought.

This consideration, however, failed to elicit an emotional response—mostly because it felt more like a hollow excuse than a rational consideration of the truth. Indifference returned to him as he held to these thoughts. His state of being now felt cold and empty, as if he stepped into a bubble of nothingness and floated within it without purpose or direction.

Only one insight had invoked any true sensation within his being, and that was when he realized he was not breathing and his heart was still. Once more, Steven took hold of those simple facts and searched deeper for greater meaning.

Dreaming was one thing, but his current circumstances were something else entirely, something more. He could feel his body, but it was different. He believed he felt his own substance, but he also sensed a change. The body he knew was gone. There was no fatigue in standing, no restlessness in remaining still. He felt no hunger or thirst. He was

neither cold nor hot. There was also a greater freedom in his movements as if every joint, every muscle, every fiber were all honed to a perfect state of being.

There was a hard truth in those thoughts, a truth that needed to be accepted. That was what resonated deep down in his soul. The indifference again bled out of his being, replaced by a deeper sense of understanding.

Steven realized he had a choice at that moment. He could brush any thoughts of extreme alteration away and attempt to rationalize his circumstances based on his previous earthly existence, or he could expand the limits of his consciousness and allow for new possibilities. The former held safety and the familiarity of his previous life, but it also seemed poisoned with hollow consequences. If he would allow himself the chance to consider other possibilities, he knew the empty fog would lift, but he could not know what he might finally discover.

With little internal debate, Steven pressed aside the desire to return to the secure sense of his familiar past. He allowed his awareness to break through the boundaries of rational thinking and he took hold of things he knew to be true. He was not dreaming, and he was not in some coma. He was somewhere else. He was beyond his old body, his essence deposited into something similar, but something new and better nonetheless.

Enlightenment grew just as his indifference faded further away. Allowing his understanding of the situation to grow and bloom, he muttered two simple words.

“I died.”

With that said, he heard something in the distance—footsteps coming toward him. He turned about and saw what appeared to be a middle-aged man in casual pants and a collared, short sleeve shirt walking toward him with a warm smile.

“Hello, Steven. My name is Cham and I’m here to welcome you.”

Chapter 3

Steven glanced quickly upon the newcomer, and at first said nothing. He did not recognize this person, this Cham, but he was already in a strange room, so why not have a stranger come visit? Steven's mind dwelled instead on much weightier considerations.

As he had just professed aloud, he knew, in fact, that he had died. At least his body had died back on earth. The appearance of a stranger was hardly a great concern under such a revelation.

He did not yet know how he had died, but it was no longer a question open for debate. He accepted it as cold, hard fact, and while he remained lucid in his thinking, he could not deny the oddities of his current situation.

Despite the clarity with which he accepted his death, his body seemed to be more or less intact. This created a paradox he could not solve. He could see, speak, hear, and even move about with ease. As he looked down upon his body, it appeared whole. He could find no sign of injury, no stain of blood, and no loss of flesh. This should have created some doubt in his mind about his demise, but none existed. There was nothing but simple acceptance of his mortal end.

Adding to the absurdity of his circumstance, he felt nothing like he might have imagined. There was no sorrow, no despair that shrouded his being. The acknowledgment of his death did little to raise even the slightest alarm. He faced his condition as more of a puzzle as opposed to some great tragedy. He was dead, and yet he did not seem to care.

Odd, he thought.

Looking at the stranger before him, Steven's almost surreal apathy—the indifference that held sway over any emotional outburst—remained strong, but not without total opposition. In observing Cham, Steven held to a small but growing desire, a wish to understand his situation, and this craving eclipsed simple curiosity.

Steven had accepted the death of his human body based on his own rational considerations. No one had guided him to this realization, no one informed him of his earthly demise. Comprehension came of his own perception, and he accepted this awareness with nothing more than his own strength of will. Still, even with this monumental recognition, he now remained determined to comprehend more of what he faced, and this determination broke through the indifference that otherwise kept his emotions in check.

"Cham is it?" Steven asked to confirm the name of the person he did not recognize but now stood before him.

"Yes, it's Cham."

"That's an unusual name."

"Depends on how you look at it. My full name is actually Chamuel, but that's a bit too formal for me, so let's just keep it at Cham. And you are Steven."

"Yes, at least I was... I guess I still am." Steven nodded, accepting this as fact as well. He had not lost his identity, the consciousness of who he was. He might have died, but he was still Steven Drilach.

"You are still you, I assure you," the stranger confirmed.

Steven, however, knew that not all was the same as it was. He might have retained his identity, but he clearly understood that his surroundings and the scope of how he existed had changed drastically.

“Well, I may be me, but I’m not the same as I was. Not completely. I know I died. I don’t know exactly how it occurred, but something happened to me and now I’m here... wherever *here* is. This appears to be my body, but if I’m dead, I don’t understand how I can even have a body.”

Steven shrugged at that particular thought, as if it was not all that important, and continued with what he observed.

“I still seem to have arms and legs. I can feel things, and hear things, and I can talk to you as well. I’m not sure how I can accomplish that without breathing, but I can hear my voice, and *it is my voice*. I recognize it, and yet I don’t understand how that’s really possible. It all seems rather difficult to put together.”

“I’m here to help you with that,” Cham responded. “You sound like you have quite a few questions. Where would you like to start?”

Steven looked into Cham’s face. He still could not recognize him.

“Do I know you?”

“No, we’ve never met.”

“So you’re not like a distant relative or a past friend or anything like that?”

“As I said, we’ve never met before.”

“But you’re here to help me?” Steven found this odd as well, and while he felt no true distrust or aversion to the stranger, he did not hide his skepticism. “Why?”

“Why not?” Cham responded confidently. “I knew you were here, and when you finally accepted what happened, I came to help. Things work differently here. You don’t have to call for help. It just shows up when you need it.”

No further suspicion crossed Steven’s mind, nor did any gratitude. While he accepted Cham’s answer at face value, he still wanted additional information and to confirm certain suspicions.

“You were sent here... to meet me?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes, but it wasn’t entirely my choice. You had to be open to it. I never could have entered this place if you didn’t want me here.”

“I’m not sure how I could have stopped you,” Steven stated. “You seemed to appear on your own. It’s not like I unlocked a door.”

With that said, Steven remembered the door embedded in the far wall to his left. He cast a quick glance in that direction. It remained closed, but as he inspected the door, he felt a wave of warmth flow over his being, almost as if he just pulled open an oven door where a pie had been baking on a cold winter’s day. The door was important, not just to the room itself, but to him personally.

Cham called for Steven’s attention once more as he continued his explanation. “You may not have physically unlocked a door, but you were certainly responsible for letting me in. I know you don’t understand that, but we can get to that later. Let’s just make sure you understand why I’m here, and then we can start answering some of your questions.”

Steven took his focus from the door and turned it back upon Cham.

“How do you know I have questions about anything?” he wondered aloud.

“Everyone has questions when they first arrive here. Are you telling me you don’t?”

Steven certainly had questions. In fact, curiosity proved to be the only stimulus within him. Not much else roused any reaction. He certainly faced no stirring emotions about his death. There was no denial, and no longing to return to an earthly life he knew to be extinguished, but he could not dismiss his curiosity.

“I have questions. I’m just wondering how you know.”

“Hey, everybody dies at least once, so it’s not like you’re the first person to come here like this. Questions are just part of the normal flow of things. That’s one of the reasons I’m here. Think of me as your personal guide. I’m here specifically to assist you—to clear up some of the little details and allow you to feel more comfortable in your new surroundings.”

Steven carefully considered Cham's explanation. The stranger before him seemed sincere, and questions did exist. A guide would be helpful under such circumstances, so why not?

“So I guess you’re like my guardian angel.”

In immediate response, Cham shook his head.

“No, nothing like that at all. That would imply that I somehow looked after you and guided you during your physical life, and that’s just not true. You made your own decisions in life without any help from me. I didn’t really exist for you until you passed over to this new realm. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea on that.”

“So you don’t know anything about me then? You don’t know about my life, what I was like, what I did?”

“It’s immaterial,” Cham stated. “It’s not like I kept watch over you while you were on earth and took notes on your activities.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely.”

The concept intrigued Steven. Offering help certainly seemed reasonable enough, but Cham’s offer of personal guidance without knowing anything about Steven’s life, especially under such circumstances, seemed almost inappropriate. It’s one thing to help a complete stranger in the street, but this was *death*, the great beyond. Shouldn’t his previous life have counted toward something? Apparently, it did not, at least not as far as Cham was concerned. Steven questioned this openly.

“I would have thought it would have mattered what kind of person I was. It almost sounds like my life has nothing to do with what happens here.”

“Your life on earth was your own. You did with it as you saw fit. I’m not here to judge you on that life. If anything, I’m here to assist you in making a smooth transition from that existence to this one.”

“Then why would you automatically want to help me? What if I was the loner type and didn’t want your help... or anyone’s help for that matter? What if I liked to do things on my own?”

“How are you going to get any information if I leave you here alone?”

“I don’t know, but it just surprises me that you’d want to help me even though you don’t know anything about me. I would also think you would want to be sure I deserved your assistance. What if I was a real bastard? What if I was a selfish con-artist that swindled elderly couples out of their life savings and left them to live in poverty?”

“Then you wouldn’t be here,” Cham answered as if Steven should have already known this. “If you weren’t worth my assistance, you would never have made it to where

you are now. But you are here, and because of that, I know I'm not wasting my time with you. You deserve to be here."

Steven looked about the place. It remained as it was when he first entered—a large empty room with plain white walls and very little of anything else. The only thing that appeared to have changed in the past few moments was the arrival of Cham.

"So rotten people don't end up here?" Steven asked as he gazed about the area. "I'll tell you the truth; this place doesn't look all that special. In fact, it looks pretty plain to me. You just made it sound as if this is some grand place that only good people get to see. I don't really see anything so spectacular about it."

"It may not be spectacular at the moment," Cham responded with a growing grin, "but it's better than where you would be if you were a selfish swindler of senior citizens, I can assure you of that."

The meaning of Cham's statement was not lost on Steven.

"You mean those people go somewhere different?" He considered what that might mean and blurted out his surprise. "They go to hell... there really is a hell?"

Cham's smile faded quickly. "I don't like to talk about that. It's not part of what I do. I'm here to help you with questions about what happened to you and where you go from here. You're not in hell, this is not hell, so there's no need talking about it."

The answer, though punctuated with a definite sense of finality on Cham's part, did not satisfy Steven, but he didn't quite know enough of his situation to press the issue. He was often cautious in his previous life and it seemed appropriate for him to remain so, even in death. Discussing hell when you're dead is very much like harping on malpractice lawsuits right before a medical procedure. It just doesn't help the cause.

"Alright, this isn't hell. Is it heaven?" Steven asked.

"You could call it that."

The response didn't inspire confidence in Steven, and the answer certainly didn't satisfy him anymore than Cham's reply to the question regarding hell. This time, Steven decided to push for greater detail.

"I'm not sure what to call it," Steven acknowledged. He didn't know where he was. It wasn't hell, or so he was told, but did that necessarily make it heaven? He didn't want to jump to that conclusion. "That's why I asked you. Is it heaven or not?"

"Heaven is a rather subjective term."

"And hell isn't?"

"No, it's not," Cham responded firmly.

"We're not really getting anywhere," Steven suggested. Two questions asked about where he was, and still no firm answer.

"Actually, we are," Cham corrected Steven in an upbeat tone. "You realize and accept you're dead. That's a good thing. You now know you're not in hell. Believe me, that's a *very good* thing. That's pretty important progress if you ask me."

"Fine, that's progress, but that's not what I'm talking about. I asked you a question and you still haven't answered me. You said I could 'call' this place heaven. Well, I don't want to call it something it's not."

"And neither do I," Cham interrupted. "That's why I can't answer your question as clearly as you would like. You want to know if this is heaven, but I can't say that for sure because I'm not sure what that would really mean to you. I'd rather you come to that conclusion on your own."

“So you won’t tell me where I am?”

“I didn’t say that. I’ll tell you exactly where you are, but that’s not what you asked. You asked if this was heaven, and for you, it might be. Who am I to say?”

“Okay, fine, why don’t you tell me exactly where I am?”

“You’re right here in front of me.” Cham let out a short laugh. “Sorry, I know that was annoying, but you set yourself up for that.”

“I suppose I did,” Steven admitted.

He would have sighed heavily, but since he wasn’t breathing, sighing was no longer a natural response. Surprisingly, he also didn’t feel anywhere near as frustrated as he believed he should. His feelings remained somehow in check, as if they were placed in neutral. Still, his curiosity had not faded and it pressed him onward.

“I won’t ask exactly where I am, okay? But I would like to know what’s going on here. If I really am dead, I assume I’m no longer on earth, is that correct?”

“That is completely true. You’re not on earth. In fact, you’re not at any particular location in that physical plane that we could use as a reference point. You are now in a different realm, a spiritual plane of existence that your previous body could never penetrate. Many people call this the afterlife, but that can be a confusing term. Look at how much confusion we created when we were talking about heaven and hell.”

“And I’m still not certain where I am,” Steven said with a bit more force.

Cham remained good-natured, if no less ambiguous. “The problem is this place really doesn’t have a specific point of reference. I can’t show it to you on a map. I mean, it’s not like you were hurled through the galaxy and are now standing on some distant point in the universe. You’re no longer in that universe... hey, that gives me an idea.”

“What?” Steven asked with an expectant tone. Hearing that he was in the afterlife did not surprise him in any way, but it sounded as if Cham had found a way to make it clear exactly where he was, and Steven waited for this explanation intensely.

“This may work,” Cham offered. “Think of outer space. Now take away all the planets, stars, asteroids, gases; take away all the debris, and that’s kind of what you have here. No molecules, no elements, no physical substance as you used to understand it, just plain space. Now take that space and stretch it between the layers of the physical existence you once knew. No one can see it, it can’t be touched, but it’s still there. It’s not quite an overlap because there are clear boundaries between the spiritual world and the physical world, but the two exist in coordination with each other.”

“That means this place is just emptiness,” Steven suggested as he tried to comprehend the meaning of Cham’s words.

“It was, but not anymore. Now you’re here to fill the emptiness. That’s the difference between the blankness of empty space and what we have here. This area doesn’t stay empty. You’re here now. You fill this space with your energy, but again, it’s not just energy—it’s consciousness, identity, and imagination. You project that throughout this space. The area is filled with the creativity of your thoughts. What you see here is of your own creation.”

“So I created this big empty room?”

“Absolutely.”

“Any idea why I would do that?” Steven asked as he glanced once more about the walls surrounding him. “Seems kind of strange that I would make a big empty room.”

“It’s not strange at all,” Cham replied. “In fact, it makes perfect sense to me. Your mind doesn’t have a full grasp of what’s happened to you yet, but the recesses of your consciousness guided by your spiritual awareness realize you have the power to shape the area around you. Your mind chose something safe, but also something simple. You created a floor, walls, and a ceiling to give this space form. That way, you have a point of reference. The room, however, did not exist until you made it so. You altered the space to meet your own perspective and expectations. The more you become aware of what you can do here, the more elaborate you can make this space.”

“So I created this room because it was simple and safe, but I have the ability to turn this place into something more? Something complex?”

“You’re starting to understand.”

“So if I wanted to, I could create a big mega-rollercoaster and I could ride on it over and over?”

Cham’s smile grew broader. “I like the way you think. And yes, you’re getting the idea. This place is somewhat like your own personal playground, your own amusement park. You can create whatever you want here, and once you’re tired of it, you can make something new. You can pretty much make any setting or scene you can imagine. You can make anything.”

Steven believed he understood, and the realization brought him to one quick assumption. He looked down at his hands as he posed a question that might confirm his conclusion.

“What about my body? I know I’m dead, but I still have my body. Is this my doing?”

“You catch on quick,” Cham confirmed. “Yes, you created your body just as you created this room around you. Your body is long gone, dead and buried, or dead and burned if you preferred cremation. It’s your consciousness, identity, and energy—your spirit if you like—that lives on. That is what’s filling this space. You have, however, grown accustomed to having a body. In order for you to remain at ease with your surroundings, you simply recreated your body to establish your presence here.”

“What about my clothes? These are different clothes than I wore last.”

“Well, it’s not like you went to some dresser drawer and changed when you died. The truth is that you created them just as you created your body. Perhaps in the back of your mind, you always found these clothes to be very comfortable.”

“I suppose I did.”

Steven paused and considered what he had just learned. The body his essence occupied was no longer his true form. He was a spirit, or so Cham claimed. And if so, he imagined he would have a more ghostly form. He spoke openly as he gauged his own thoughts.

“If I created this body, then this isn’t really how I look anymore. This is just an illusion. How can I see what I really look like?”

“Well, first of all, it’s not really an illusion. You recreated your body in this space, so in this space it’s very real.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but even if it’s real, it’s still a creation of my own mind. It’s like a covering for my true form. What if I want to know what my spirit looks like without this body I made?”

“That’s kind of complicated to explain.”

“Why?”

“Because at this moment you’re still to some extent thinking the way you thought when you used to be alive with a mortal body. Didn’t you hear what you just asked? You want to know what your spirit *looks* like. That implies seeing things with your eyes. You don’t have eyes any more.”

“But I can see you.”

“Yes you can, but you perceive me as your mind wants to perceive me. I can tell you that what you *see* and what I *perceive* are two very different things.”

“So you see me as something different? Do you see this room as something different?”

“No, I see what you created, but I can also see beyond that. Actually, ‘see’ isn’t the best word. As I said, we don’t have eyes anymore. It’s more like being aware of something. In a spiritual world, you have the ability to perceive things that don’t require physical attributes. You don’t need sound waves to hear things or light to see things. Your perception is based on spiritual awareness, and this awareness will grow for you over time.”

“I’m not sure if I’m following you on this,” Steven admitted.

Again, he felt no frustration, but Cham’s explanations lacked a sense of clarity, as if the words were all there but the meaning was somehow hidden behind a fog. Steven realized he didn’t have eyes, but he could still look around. It might not have been *seeing* things as he experienced when he had actual eyes, but the way in which he perceived the imagery around him seemed identical in practice.

Cham offered some solace. “Like I said, give it time. You need to adjust to everything that’s here, and there’s a great deal around you that you haven’t even experienced yet. Part of you has to let go of the old ways. That’s not going to happen the first instant you’re here. There’s really no other way I can say it.”

For the most part, Steven accepted the notion that he needed patience, but he also remained steadfast in his desire to understand as much as he could. He decided that he was not getting as clear a picture as he hoped, and he pressed for a new direction.

“Look, I’m not sure I understand things any better than when I first got here. All I can figure out is that I created a body for my spirit and then an empty room for that body, but in truth, I don’t really know where I am or how I got here.”

“You seem to be a bit of a pessimist,” Cham said. “You keep looking at the things you don’t know, and you’re ignoring what you’ve learned in only a few short moments. Seems to me, you’re making more progress than you’re willing to give yourself credit for.”

“I’m not sure I’ve made any progress at all,” Steven admitted.

The only thing he really knew was that he was dead, a consideration that seemed surprisingly unimportant. On earth, death is severe. It’s the end of everything. He faced it now with less concern than if he had been given a simple parking ticket. The level of apathy regarding this acknowledgment simply did not meet the measure he would have expected.

Cham offered comforting advice. “Hey, I know what you’re going through. It’s not a mystery to me. I know what you’re feeling, and what you’re not feeling. But you have to understand, you’re just at the very beginning.”

“The beginning to what?” Steven asked.

Cham opened his arms and scanned the entire room. “The beginning of appreciating what’s really possible here. Yes, you made this room, but that’s just a sliver of what you can do. As you move forward, you’re going to experience some amazing things, things that are going to astound you, and I’m here to help you discover all of that and more.”

Steven decided to turn the conversation toward something more concrete.

“You want to help? Okay let’s first deal with how I got here. How did I die?”

“It was a flood,” Cham answered without hesitation. “It destroyed your house while you were in it.”

Steven recalled the mayhem in his kitchen, the last memory of his previous life. A flood made sense.

“My house is gone?”

“Yes, but you really don’t need it anymore.”

Steven realized that was certainly true, but try as he might, he could not recall the actual moment of his death.

“Did I drown?”

“No, you were basically crushed to death.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“It was very sudden, very quick. You never even saw the water.”

“Wait a minute,” Steven declared as he recalled something earlier that Cham had stated. “I thought you said you knew nothing about me or my life. That’s what you said when I asked if you were my guardian angel. If that’s true, how do you know this?”

Cham showed no reservation in explaining the apparent contradiction.

“Remember when I said I perceive things differently than you do, that I do more than just *see* things, that I’m actually more aware of things? Even if I know nothing of your life, I still can see your death. Your death is the event that brings you here, and this is something I *can* perceive. As you continue to grow, you’ll start to understand what I’m talking about. Your awareness will deepen and you will perceive things on different levels as well.”

“This is getting confusing again. We seem to keep returning to this point, no matter what I do.”

“That’s only because you’re still reacting as if you were back in your previous existence. Right now, for you, it’s all about your comfort level. You’ve had a lifetime with your consciousness in a physical world. You had senses that allowed you to see, hear, smell, and feel things. That’s what you’re comfortable with, so you’re still relying on those sensations to bring you information. The truth is, you don’t have eyes, you don’t have ears, and you don’t have a nose. You are, however, aware of your surroundings. Your consciousness remains, but you perceive things on a different level. You don’t have a true grasp of that yet, so you are falling back to what you used to know.”

“And that’s why I made this body,” Steven stated as a greater understanding began to arise within him.

“Exactly. By doing so, you are more comfortable with this environment, but it also limits what you can perceive. Eventually, you will grow accustomed to your new surroundings and you will be able to perceive so much more. Think of yourself like a newborn back in the life you once knew. An infant has much to learn before it can truly appreciate all the things that the world has to offer. You are, in essence, facing the same circumstances as a newborn. You need to experience things here, which will allow you to

grow, which will allow you to understand even more of what there is here in this new existence.”

“Interesting,” Steven allowed as he considered the analogy.

“Yes, it is.”

Steven nodded and then considered another point that was nagging at him. “Let me go back to something else you said earlier. You said something about me accepting what happened. You showed up only after that. What did you mean by that?”

“You don’t miss much. I’m impressed. As for what I meant, I meant exactly what I said. I could only show up when you accepted that you had died.”

“You say that as if there was a chance you might not have showed up at all. Eventually, I had to accept what happened. That was really only a matter of time, right?”

“No. There are people that have died a long time ago that have still not accepted they are dead.”

“Really?”

“Definitely.”

“What happens to them?”

“They become lost. Their consciousness clamps on to the old existence, never releasing it, but they have only the slimmest connection to it. They refuse to recognize this plane. They shun it and hold to what they used to know. Unfortunately, they become a shadow of themselves, a life with no true past and no future, only a present, and that life is meager at best.”

“I understand that they wouldn’t have a future, but why wouldn’t they have a past? I remember my life, or at least most of it.”

“But you remember all that you were, and you keep it in context with your current state of being. Their past becomes clouded by what they can’t accept. They return to a point in their lives and hold to it forever. They don’t look back on their past as a way to experience some pleasant memory or to learn from some mistake. They lose what they were because they are no longer mortal, yet they attempt to walk upon a mortal world. Many of their memories fade as they can’t reconcile their situation to what they are currently experiencing. Those that are caught in this state might hold to a few memories, maybe those that pertain to an event that kept them from accepting death. Those memories would represent all that they are, not what they were. They return to this past event and it becomes their current existence as they hold to it above all other things.”

“Spirits can go back to earth, is that what you’re saying?” Steven asked.

“Yes and no. They can’t go back to the way things were, they have no physical properties left, and so they can’t go back to their previous life. Still, there are links to that existence, links anyone can follow. These souls grab onto those links, take hold of them like lifelines and don’t let go. Their entire existence becomes focused on that connection and they lose everything else. They retain a basic identity, but not the full composition of what they were because they are a spiritual energy holding onto a non-spiritual world.”

“That could have happened to me?”

“It could happen to anyone who comes here. You faced a moment when you first arrived when you had to make a decision; you could have either accepted this new life or refused it. You know I’m telling you the truth on this, don’t you?”

Steven recalled his own moment of acceptance. He knew the threat of refusing his new reality existed, and he remembered how hollow it felt.

“Yes,” Steven admitted.

Cham pointed to the stairs that remained visible in the distance. “See those... those stairs? You made those when you made this room. You made them because when you first arrived in this realm, you still hadn’t made that decision. You still did not accept your own death. Those stairs were your escape hatch, a way out.”

“A way out to where?”

“Back to what you used to know. Like I said, there are links between this existence and the life you once led. If you could not accept your death, those stairs would have led back to the physical plane you once knew. They’re not really stairs, but they represent links between the two planes. Connections between this realm and the physical world continue to exist, and you still have the ability to look into that old existence. The thing is, if you did not accept your death, you would have been trapped between the two realms. Not a good thing.”

Steven looked over to the stairs in the distance. “Where do they lead now?”

Cham shrugged at first. “They probably still lead back to earth, my guess would be somewhere that was important to you.” Then he noticed Steven’s growing interest. “I’ll tell you what, why don’t we take a look?”

Chapter 4

“Where are we going to end up?” Steven wondered aloud as both he and Cham began to step toward the stairs several paces in front of them.

“I have no idea,” Cham answered. “I didn’t make the stairs, you did.”

“Can they lead anywhere?”

“Sure. Time and space react differently here. There are connections that span the entire plane of physical existence.”

“So we could end up on the moon, or even the other side of the universe?”

“It’s possible, but not probable. Remember, you made these steps unconsciously. I would guess they lead back to something you knew. Have you ever been to the moon?”

Steven shook his head.

“No, I didn’t think so,” Cham continued, “so I’m betting against the moon. It could be anything out of your past—maybe something recent or maybe something from your childhood. There’s no way to tell from here. It’s not like we can check the mall directory, but there’s one way to find out.”

Cham paused as they reached the opening to the set of stairs that led downward. Several steps formed a casual, easy slope, and as they continued on beyond their line of sight, neither Steven nor Cham could see their ultimate destination.

“You can go first, I can go first, or the steps are wide enough for us to walk down together, which do you prefer?”

“Let’s take them side by side,” Steven announced and then began a steady descent without waiting for further word from Cham.

Very quickly, Steven’s head was below the floor of the room above him and still the steps went on down beyond his perception. Without knowing the end, he simply moved downward with growing curiosity. The walls remained plain white and clean on both sides. There were no hand rails, and his footfalls clapped out on the stone-like surface that was much like the floor of the room they had departed.

Steven began to feel more than just a twinge of excitement. With the acceptance of his new surroundings came the realization that mysteries and revelations abounded at every turn. His spiritual countenance revealed his pleasure as he could not hide the grin that adorned his appearance. The slight pang of exhilaration grew quickly into a thrilling sense of new adventure as the indifference lifted from his soul. He knew he was returning to the world where he used to live, but he could not guess where he might end up. Like opening a surprise gift that was delivered by mail with no return address, he moved down the steps with an electric anticipation.

Suddenly, with one step, the stairwell simply vanished around him. He was no longer in that strange empty room, or on a staircase with no obvious destination. He was indeed back on earth, and standing near a very familiar place.

It was near midday, for the sun shone brightly almost directly overhead in a serene blue, cloudless sky. The season had to be late spring for the trees were full with mature leaves that still held to that bright green hue of fresh growth. Only a very few blossoms remained on high branches—most were upon the ground, already faded or brown.

Despite the gorgeous clarity of the day, Steven’s hope for adventure quickly returned to the dormancy that ruled his emotions with consistency since his passing. His previous

excitement ebbed away to nothing as the disheartening appearance of his surroundings extinguished his previous enthusiasm.

To compound the dampening of his emotions, his lack of a physical connection to the world around him added to his indifference. He could not feel the warmth of the sun on his face to judge the temperature, even as it cast sharp shadows all around. He could not sense the force of the wind to say if it was warm from the south or cool from the north, but he knew it blew steady as it ruffled the leaves of the surrounding trees.

He looked upon a worn concrete slab that sat in the middle of a clearing. It remained covered in dirt and debris. Even as he recognized the general vicinity, very little was quite like he remembered. Trees and shrubs were missing, mud covered much of the grass, rubble was scattered across the area, and yet still he knew this was where his home once stood.

“I used to live here,” he stated with a now expressionless face, his grin dissolved.

Steven turned about and looked up the shadow-covered country road. He scanned the surrounding woods. He didn’t have many neighbors, none that lived close by anyway. He used to like it that way, enjoyed the quiet. With his home gone, it was beyond quiet. It was desperately lonely, forgotten, and abandoned.

With the suddenness of an unexpected detonation, Steven’s emotions burst from their state of idleness. It was no longer excitement that flowed throughout his spirit. The emptiness within him shattered like icicles hitting cold, hard pavement as a pain struck him at his center. The emotion that took hold of him was nothing less than the most desperate grief he had ever experienced.

Sorrow engulfed him giving no quarter, no mercy. He suddenly felt as if all hope had deserted him. The dreadful sensation grew to a point of bitter anguish. The dismay weighed on his center like a concrete block. He could not cry, and yet he felt if he did not release his sadness, he would drown in grief.

“What’s happening to me?” Steven begged of Cham. “I feel so sad, so awful. This is horrible! Why am I feeling this way?”

“Your home is gone,” Cham answered with a hollow tone. There was no comfort in his voice, no compassion that Steven could take hold of for reassurance.

“I know it’s gone! You told me it was destroyed in the flood, but why do I care so much?”

“Part of you is back on earth now. You’re a spiritual presence in a physical world. You have not yet learned what that truly means, and so you have no control. Your emotions are torn between the two realms and they will react violently, sometimes angrily, sometimes painfully.”

Cham’s words meant nothing to Steven. He retained the form of his previous body, even though that body no longer actually existed, and he could feel his emotions just as if he was experiencing severe physiological trauma. The pain swelled inside of him, and he felt as if he would burst at any moment. Despite the fact he had no true legs, the shadow of his outline began to sway uncontrollably.

Such was the severity of his sorrow, he collapsed to his knees, yet still he could not cry. There was no outlet for his anguish and it boiled like liquid in a covered pot. He could barely speak, but he found just enough strength to make a frantic plea.

“Make it stop, please make it stop!” It was a mere whisper as the pain flooded his ability to think, let alone speak.

“I can’t,” Cham answered.

With one colossal effort, Steven managed to blurt out one last appeal.

“Then help me out of here, we need to get out of here!”

“No,” Cham stated with a firm grip on Steven’s shoulder. “I can’t help you, but it will pass. Give it time.”

“I can’t take it much longer!”

“Then it shouldn’t last much longer.”

Steven groaned and the shadowy image of his figure crumpled full on the ground. Cham’s hand fell away from Steven’s shoulder as Steven rolled over on his back to face the sky. It felt to him as if a giant was now stepping down upon him, crushing him with slow methodical pressure as opposed to one mighty stomp. At a point when Steven believed he could take no more, the pain exploded like a star going supernova, and then thankfully, stopped completely.

It seemed as if nothing remained inside of him, as if all the pain and despair disintegrated in that ultimate explosion of grief. He felt like an empty casing, a hollow egg shell. Not even the slightest twinge of despair remained. There was only emptiness.

Steven looked up to the sky, almost afraid to move, but greatly relieved to feel nothing at all once more.

“It’s gone,” he revealed. “The pain is gone.”

“I told you it would pass.” Cham responded casually.

The silhouette of Steven’s body slowly rose from the ground. His painful emotions had boiled over and out of his essence, at least for the moment. Everything he felt was removed from his being. He staggered to his feet as he finally regained control over the full scope of his senses.

“What happened to me?” Steven demanded. “It felt so bad. I felt like I was back in my body again, but it was like being crushed.”

“It’s like I said,” Cham explained, “you experienced the full effects of forcing your immortal soul into a physical world. Your emotions are no longer tuned to your old body, so you created a form that is similar. Bringing yourself to this physical world can set those emotions on fire as well as the form you created for yourself. You may not have a body anymore, but your emotions can make it seem like you do. They can create pain within you.”

“I never felt that bad before... ever!” Steven persisted.

“I don’t doubt that for a minute because you’ve never been in this situation before. Connections may exist between the spiritual and physical planes, but never fool yourself; you no longer belong here. Certain events, certain places can play havoc with your essence here. Never forget that.”

“But why did it happen here and now?”

It was Cham’s turn to inspect the area. As he reviewed the grounds, he offered a simple explanation.

“Is it that surprising? This used to be your house... the slab is all that’s left after the flood. Isn’t that right?”

Steven nodded in affirmation.

“Then this place was your home, your sanctuary. This was a place of safety for you,” Cham said firmly. “It’s gone now, and you’re not here to rebuild. The link that your spiritual self is clinging to could not release the emotional tie you had to this place. I

know I told you that your home was destroyed, but that was back on the spiritual plane of existence. You're here now to see it for yourself. Nothing I could have said could have prepared you for this. When you saw it like this, you could not control the outburst of pain. You no longer have a physical body, despite the fact it looks like you do. That's just an image you project. Without anything that acts as a true receptacle and a constraint for your spiritual essence, raw emotion will rage with little control."

"Am I going to experience pain like that again?"

"It's possible—almost a certainty if we stay too long—but I believe that it's safe enough for us to look around for a while. When emotions explode like that, it will take some time for them to build up again, but it will happen."

"Does that mean that every time I come back to earth, I'm going to get hammered like that?"

"Not exactly. There will come a time when you better understand the separation between the spiritual world and the physical world and you will gain greater control of your emotions. Still, that has not happened for you yet and that's why you don't wish to be trapped in this world. I said it before, you do not belong here."

"So this is what happens to people who don't accept death?"

"Believe me, it gets worse than this," Cham added. "Remember when I said that you unconsciously made those stairs as an escape back to this physical world?"

Steven nodded once more, "Yes."

"Obviously, your home was the strongest connection you had to this earth, but now it's gone. Imagine if you did not accept your death. You would want to return to this place, but your connection to this world is already dissolving before you. Eventually this place will change even more. It will become overgrown, swallowed by nature. Or perhaps someone will build a new house here. It won't be yours. You will have lost your anchor, and so you would also lose your past. Confusion and anger would most likely consume you, and there would be no future as well. There would be only hollow emptiness for you. Spirits trapped between both worlds can not find happiness in this state. Only when they accept their death do they have a chance to move on."

"Does that happen often? I mean, how many people choose not to accept their death?"

"It's very unusual, but think of the number of people who have lived on earth over the ages. Even if just a tiny fraction fail to accept their demise, imagine what number that would rise to over time. There are more here than anyone would like to believe."

"So there could be millions and millions of lost souls trapped here?"

"I wouldn't venture to guess at an actual number." Cham turned his head as if sniffing the wind. "A flood caused this disaster, which means there should be a river nearby, yes?"

Steven pointed over the trees up beyond the country road. "Yes, up that way."

"Let's go take a look. Rivers have been around for ages, much longer than roads. There's a good chance we might find one nearby."

The suggestion surprised Steven. "You want me to see one of these lost souls?"

"It'll do you good to see one. That's part of the learning process. The more you experience, the greater your perception will grow."

"Are you sure we can find one?"

“Am I sure? No, not by any means, but as I said, rivers are good places to look. They served as roads before any car or cart was ever devised. There’s a very good chance we will find someone who had a connection to the river and wouldn’t accept his death. It won’t take much time to check.”

“That’s good, because I don’t want to stay here for long if I’m going to be hit by that sadness again. I’d rather not go through that ever again.”

With that sentiment made clear, Steven began walking up the country road toward the river.

“Where are you going?” Cham asked.

“To the river. It’s up this way.” Steven nodded in the direction he moved but noticed Cham stood still. “Isn’t that where you said we should go?”

“It is, but why are you walking?”

“How else are we going to get there?”

Cham said nothing, he simply looked upward.

A new wave of emotion, one with the power of great vibrancy, quickly rolled across Steven’s essence as a question of delight burst in his mind. It went beyond a question, though he voiced it as one. It was a deep understanding, and one that generated exuberant expectations. There was no sorrow or pain as his emotions bubbled to life once more. This time, there was only joy.

“We can fly, can’t we?”

“You already know the answer to that,” Cham responded without revealing any great excitement of his own.

“I do know... we can fly here. There’s nothing to stop us.”

Without another word, Steven sailed upward above the trees. His form came to a stop just above the tallest branches, and he floated in midair. He looked all about him, gazing over the land in every direction.

The view was beyond staggering, for he could see further and clearer than his old eyes would have ever allowed. The crispness of the images before him went beyond natural sight. It was almost like viewing the world through a floating telescope that could turn and focus instantly. If he so desired, he could count the veins in a leaf that hung upon a branch miles in the distance. He could see the soft folds of clouds far overhead and he knew he could reach them in an instant if he so desired.

Being freed of the constraints of a mortal body, his perception of the world was certainly enhanced, and it went beyond sight. He could hear everything he focused upon, all the while eliminating those sounds he found distracting. He could hear birds chirp and ignore the sounds of heavy traffic. When he turned his attention to a park far to the east, he could hear the laughs of children on a playground. The clarity was astounding.

As he turned about, the sense of sheer freedom that encompassed his being enthralled him. It was more than being a feather on the wind, more than a soaring bird flying over mountain tops. Gravity could not affect him. The wind meant nothing. He retained complete control over his position and he could move at will. He could remain aloft in the open air indefinitely. It required no energy on his part to stay above the ground. Beyond that, he could turn or glide about with the merest whisper of conscious thought.

Just as the first view of his destroyed home brought him despair, this ultimate sensation of freedom and delighted him beyond anything he had ever experienced. Once

more he felt like crying, but this time they would be tears of joy. He could not cry, but he cared little. He did not want this feeling to end. He embraced it, encouraged it to grow.

Steven began to soar about in large circles, then he darted up and down through the branches of the trees. When he first returned to the remnants of his home, he could not feel the wind, but he willed himself to sense it now. While he would not feel the slap of limbs against his face, he did feel the rush of air throughout his being.

Cham drifted up to meet him. He allowed Steven to soar about for long moments before he called out.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, but don’t get too caught up in this.”

“Are you kidding?” Steven replied through a laugh as he encircled Cham in several flying twists and turns. “I don’t think I could ever get tired of this.”

“That may be true, but the more time you spend here, the more you leave yourself open to emotional outbursts that might not be so pleasant. Remember what you felt when you first arrived here. Your emotions can swing back in that direction without warning. You’ve had some fun, but let’s move on quickly now.”

With that warning, the joy Steven felt from flying left him like air from a burst balloon. He quickly disregarded his exaltation as he recalled the grief that brought him to his knees.

“You mean I can get hit by that feeling again... right out of the blue... even while flying around?”

“Absolutely. What if you spot something else around here that suddenly reminds you of some unhappy event? You’ll focus on it and you could be overwhelmed in an instant. I know you were happy flying about, but you need to be careful. Sorry to bring that to an end, but you do have to remember where you are.”

Steven shook his head, dissatisfied with the explanation. “This doesn’t seem right. It’s like swinging back and forth from happy to sad. Why am I feeling so much here?”

“Part of your question holds the answer to that. It’s because you’re *here*, here on earth and not back in the spiritual plane. There, patience is easy, it comes naturally. Here, it’s not easy, and your emotions rule with haphazard dictation.”

“What about you? Do you face the same problems?”

“My perception is different. I accept what I am, and know what I’m not. I could stay here for the passage of much time as defined by this world, and remain steady. The problem for you is that you have not yet defined your true essence. Complete perception as a spiritual being is not yet yours, and thus, you are much more susceptible. As your perception of your spiritual existence grows, you’ll be able to return here for extended visits and maintain much greater control, but that’s in your future, and we must turn our attention to our present goals.”

Steven remembered what they were looking for and pointed to the river. Even from high in the air and a fair distance away from its banks, he could hear the gurgling waters.

“The river’s over there,” he noted with a more somber tone. “I don’t see anything special from here. What’s the best way to go forward?”

Cham soared up closer to Steven’s side and reviewed the surrounding landscape. “Let’s follow it downstream for a while. We can get over the top of it and just continue following the current and see what we find.”

As Steven worried about the return of crushing sorrow, his elation over flying remained in check. He followed Cham over the treetops to the opening that allowed them

to see the full width of the river. He glided silently for a while, simply staring down at the endless flow of water.

“What exactly are we looking for?” Steven finally broke the silence. “I mean, what should I look for? I see some people down there fishing, but they look like regular people. Are any of them dead?”

“No, they’re all still alive so far.”

“Would I be able to tell the difference?”

“The recently dead? Probably not. To you, they would look just like a regular person fishing, unless another fisherman sailed a boat through one. You’d probably notice that.”

“Yeah, I guess I would. It’s strange though, to think there might be live people fishing with dead people. Kind of like those ghost stories you hear when you’re a kid.”

That raised a new thought in Steven’s mind.

“Hey, is that how ghost stories get started? Is someone really seeing the dead?”

“Maybe,” Cham replied as he appeared to be more concerned with scanning the banks of the river below. “Most stories are just that, stories. Still, it’s not totally out of the question. Sometimes ghosts can be seen by just about anyone, but that’s rare. Sometimes a specially gifted person can see the dead, but that’s rarer still.”

“So normally the dead that don’t accept they’re dead just walk around being ignored by everyone.”

“That’s pretty much how it works.”

“And yet we’re looking for them now. That seems odd.”

Cham chuckled slightly. “Well remember, you’re no longer just one of the mortals down there. Now, you can see both the living and the dead.”

“But you said I wouldn’t be able to tell the difference?”

“You probably won’t. Take a look at me, take a look at yourself. If we weren’t flying up in the air, could you see anything that makes us look different than the people down below us?”

“No, we pretty much look just like them.”

“The recently dead are going to look like that too. It’s harder to pick them out.”

“But you can?”

“Yes, I can. It’s the same thing as being able to know how you died. I look and see beyond the physical attributes.”

“What about the ones that aren’t recently dead... the ones that have been dead for a while? What do they look like?”

Cham stopped and pointed down to the middle of the river.

“They look like that.”

Steven stopped gliding forward and came to a halt in midair directly over the river. He looked down upon the water and immediately spotted a faint disturbance.

In one distinct location, the current appeared to bubble faster and the water broke in small waves as if some unseen hand redirected the surface. A dark gray mass, somewhat similar to a tiny storm cloud, sat in the middle of the flow. Although the near shapeless shadow appeared to rest half in and half out of the current, Steven could still distinguish the edges of the form that sat submerged in the dark water.

“Do you see her?” Cham asked.

“I see something, not sure what it is.”

“It’s a spirit.”

“You said ‘her’, how do you know it’s a *she*?”

“That’s what she was in her previous life on earth. She was a female, so it’s easier just to refer to her as such.”

“How can you even tell she’s a spirit, let alone that she was a woman when she used to be alive? It looks like a collection of mist to me.”

“Stop trying to see things with just your perception of vision. In fact, don’t try to *see* her at all. Simply try to comprehend her.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Steven said.

“Okay, it’s probably still a bit early for that. I see her as she was, as she wants to be, but can no longer be.”

Steven tried to focus more closely on the gray cloud, but to no avail. Unlike Steven and Cham, each of whom retained a form similar to that of a human walking on earth, the shadowy figure was more of a gray haze, and lacked any real definition. Steven could see nothing of a woman in this shape, but accepted Cham’s explanation.

“So that’s a lost spirit, someone who can’t accept being dead?”

“Yes. Take a good look. No true form, no future, no significant past. Just a collection of bitter emotions floating in a river.”

“How long has she been here?”

“A very, very long time.”

“How did she die?”

“She drowned in that river.”

Almost as if the gray spirit suddenly heard the conversation and became enraged by it, the shadowy form flung itself airborne and departed the river bed like a missile locked upon its target. That target was Cham.

A high pitched shriek raged from the depths of the streaking silhouette as it sailed toward its intended victim with obvious malice. The misty spirit engulfed Cham with the full scope of its essence as if to choke him like smoke from a raging fire that would asphyxiate any helpless victim. It swirled around him, pulsating with anger just as the shrieks continued in intermittent shouts of fury.

Steven watched with a sense of wonder, never imagining he would see two spirits locked in some kind of pitched battle. He felt no desire to flee from the scene, for he felt no sense of danger, no threat to himself from the raging dead woman.

Still, he felt a need to offer his aid. He could not simply stand by and do nothing, and yet he had no idea what he might be able to do.

“Can I help?” he shouted. “What should I do?”

“There’s no need for you to do anything,” Cham replied as he calmly remained airborne and made no attempt to shake his attacker.

That would not do for Steven. A powerful sensation began to grow within him, and the need to lend assistance became so strong he believed that he could almost touch it.

“I can’t just float here and watch. Tell me how I can help.”

“You’re thinking like she thinks,” Cham stated with near disregard to the being that engulfed him. “She thinks she’s still alive, she thinks she can physically attack me. She can’t hurt me. That’s no longer possible for her.”

The gray shadow shrieked even louder and swirled about Cham like a great tempest.

As her rage grew, Steven felt his own desires shift. He no longer felt the need to assist Cham, but he felt an overwhelming yearning to save the enraged spirit from her torment.

The need grew even more palpable than before, and he could almost taste the necessity to offer aid.

He moved closer to the mass of gray, held out his arm, placed it within the swirling storm.

In a brief instant, he saw a woman at the front of a boat riding down the river. He felt unsteady, queasy in his stomach, as if he would be sick. Suddenly the world flipped about him, everything was upside down and then dark. He felt confusion and then denial.

Steven pulled his arm back from the gray mist, and the world came back into focus.

“You have to let go,” Steven finally said. He did not know why he said those words. He knew so little of what was going on around him, and yet those were the words that came into his head. “There’s nothing for you here.”

The swirling ceased and the gray mist hung motionless in the air still surrounding Cham’s form. If what was left of this woman held to any consciousness of her true circumstances, she would have beheld the sincerity within Steven. Unfortunately, no such consciousness existed, and the form darted back to the river bed, back to the exact spot in which Steven first noticed her.

“And so she returns to the spot that holds her,” Cham stated without any apparent compassion. “That is truly a lost soul, one who has never accepted her death and probably never will. Learn from that. If you ever allow your desire to return to this world overtake your senses, remember what happens to those who can’t let go.”

Steven did not so easily release a different desire, a wish to help that poor soul. He looked down upon the small cloud within the water and wanted desperately to do something that might make a difference.

“Can we help her... make her understand?”

“There’s nothing we can do. Just look at her and realize that could have been you.”

“Why did she attack you?”

“She sensed that I was here to help you, and I could only do that when you accepted your death. She never accepted her situation, so I was an affront to her existence. I also don’t think she liked me telling you how she died.”

“Could she have been able to hurt you?”

“No, she’s a spirit that thinks she’s still alive. She thinks she has a mortal body. The truth is neither of us has a physical body. What could she have done?”

“I don’t know. So much of this is still a mystery.”

“Yes, but consider how much you’ve learned so far.” Cham gave Steven a long look. “There’s really nothing you can do to help her and it’s time for us to get back.”

Steven felt no reason to stay, save one. He knew he did not belong there anymore, but he found it difficult to simply turn his back on the woman in the river. He gave one last look to the dark mass and then turned his attention back to his guide.

“Nothing at all we can do for her?”

“Nothing,” was Cham’s flat response.

“Alright, let’s get out of here. Time to move on.” Steven then looked back towards where his house used to sit. Even at that distance, he could still see the slab. What he could not find was any trace of the steps that had brought them there. “Don’t we need to go back to those stairs?”

“Go back to them? You make it sound as if they physically exist back at your home. There are no real stairs. They are just a symbolic representation of the links between two planes of existence. You can make them appear anywhere you want.”

“So what do I do, just click my heels and say something like *there’s no place like home?*”

“You could if you want, but how about just focusing on leaving here and returning to where you belong. If you’ve really accepted your death, and I’m sure you have, you know how to make those stairs appear instinctively.”

Steven considered the point, and deep in the recesses of his consciousness, he did know how to get back to where he belonged. He simply focused on the acceptance of his spiritual existence, and with that, a new staircase appeared just as the world around him became cloaked in a shroud of white mist.

Without a word, he placed his foot on the first apparent step. The mist dissolved and the clean white walls appeared on both sides. The stairs now stretched both upward before him and downward behind him, and he could not see where they ended or where they began.

“Interesting,” Steven remarked as a lull came over his spirit.

He knew he was no longer in jeopardy of the severe emotional swings that plagued him when he ventured back upon the earth. His emotions fell under the calming grace of spiritual existence and he understood they would remain in control.

Climbing the stairs, he soon saw them level off above him and lead to the plain white room that greeted him on his arrival. Upon reaching the flat floor, he stopped and looked back down from where he came.

“Will these stairs always lead back to what’s left of my home?”

“They will lead to wherever you want them to lead. Remember, they really aren’t actual stairs. They just represent the connection back to the world you once knew. That connection will always exist for you here, so the symbol of the stairs will always remain. Where they go from here on in is up to you. You’ll learn that very soon.”

Steven thought of returning to earth at another time. At first, he considered the pain he felt upon reaching the tattered remnants of his previous home. He saw no reason to return, until he thought of the gray mist that marked what was left of some poor soul. He still wanted to help her, but in that empty room, the desire was not so urgent. Cham was right about that. Patience came easy there.

Then Steven thought of flying, and for that, he might want to risk a return. “If I returned, what could happen? I mean is it possible something dangerous could still happen to me... that I could get trapped between the two realms?”

“I would like to say it’s not, but I don’t like to say anything is impossible here. Once you figure this place out, you’ll see why.”

If nothing is impossible, then anything is possible, Steven thought.

With that consideration, Steven’s attention fell upon the closed door off against a far wall. Again, he felt great warmth fill his spirit, and in that moment, he needed to know what was behind it.

“What about the door?” he asked.

“I was wondering when you were going to ask about that.”

“The door is important?”

“Yes, it is.” Cham declared with a slight smile.

“Where does it lead?”

“That’s the door that brings you to see God.”

From the Author

When Do I See God? does not end here. The entire book is available for sale at many on-line ebook stores. For more information on obtaining the rest of the story, please visit www.sitelane.com.

If you have a comment or question about this book, please feel free to send me a note. Also, please let me know if you encounter any difficulty with the formatting. Contact information can be found on my web site at www.sitelane.com. Please consider my other novels, including *Soul View*, *Soul Chase*, *Detached Lives*, *Slow Fall*, *Counterproductive Man*, *Alien Cradle*, and the *Delver Magic Series*.

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