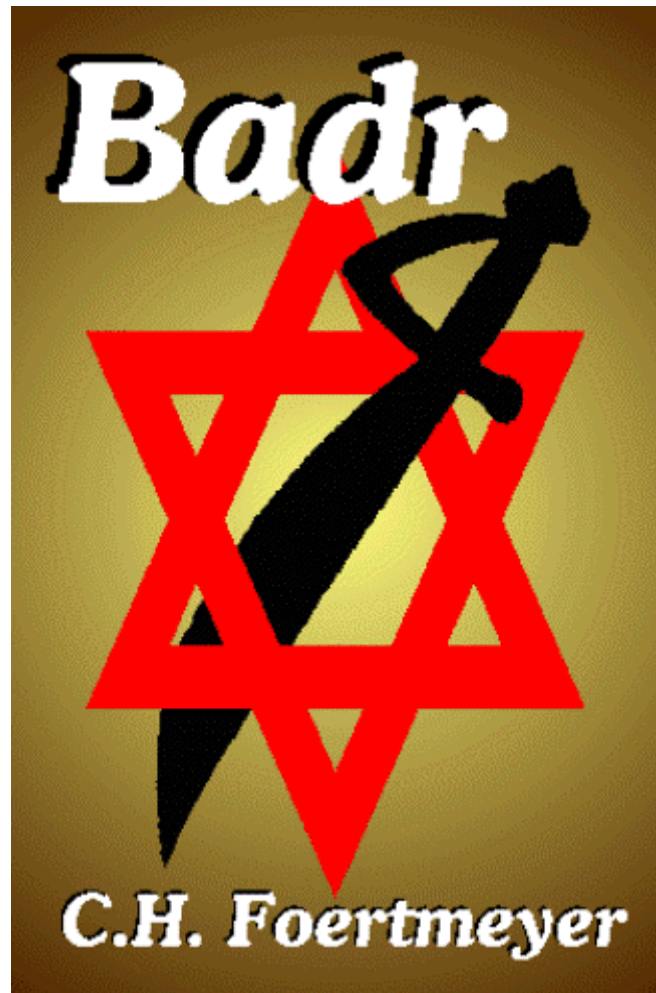


Badr



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Badr

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Foreword

Someone once said, "Heaven can wait." Perhaps, in the case of Marlin Goldberg, it did. Whether you believe in Heaven, or not, whether you believe in anything beyond the grave, or not, you must concede the possibilities. Why? Because no one actually *knows* the answer to the *big* question-Is there life after death? *That* is what faith is all about. Whether or not you have faith, only you can say.

So, what then of reincarnation? Is it real? Is it permanent, or temporary; is it just one small step, a temporary stopover on the way to Heaven? Does it exist at all? This novel, *Badr*, nor *Badr* himself can answer those questions for you, for as I said, no one knows. However, in the midst of death and mayhem, terrorist plots and the efforts to stop them, between these covers, you *will* receive food for thought. Beyond that, you will have to decide for yourself.

C.H. Foertmeyer

Chapter 1

Glensharon, Ohio

April 12, 1986

Saturday mornings were Marlin Goldberg's favorite mornings, especially in the spring and summer. Saturday mornings afforded him the opportunity to get outside and into his garden at the break of day, when it was cool and the air was as fresh as it would be for the remainder of the day ahead.

Gardening was Marlin's love in life; digging into the moist, black topsoil of his flower garden, his greatest joy. His wife's greatest joy was watching Marlin's flowers grow into prize-winning, horticultural wonders. Emily Anne participated in the gardening only to the extent of going shopping for Marlin's needs. There was nothing she liked more than going to Gardner's Garden Supply, smelling the aroma inside the store, and picking out seeds and bulbs. Where Marlin was an expert at growing flowers into something special, Emily Anne was an expert at picking out which seeds and bulbs would produce the results they both hoped for each season.

The growing season in Cincinnati was adequate, although Marlin constantly wished for a longer one, often threatening to pull up stakes and move south to Georgia or South Carolina, especially during those winters that all too often lingered in southwestern Ohio. If it weren't for his good job in the northern suburb of Glensharon, only a-minute-and-a-half from his home, he'd have probably made the migration south, years ago. As a real estate agent of some acclaim, and having a good grip on his market in Glensharon, he didn't want to take the hit to his income by moving to an unknown market where he was just a small fish in the pond.

This particular April morning, a Saturday, Marlin knelt down in his garden, looked up to the blue sky above, and breathed in deeply the fresh morning air. The automobile fumes from nearby Interstate 75 hadn't accumulated yet, and all he could smell was deep, rich earth, and the fragrance of begonias, mixed appropriately with the bouquet of roses. He smiled broadly, dug his hands into the black soil, and froze at the sight that filtered into view.

For the briefest of moments, his normally pale hands were dark with a rich, olive tan. His partially rolled up white sleeves were suddenly khaki, and buttoned tightly around his wrists. The soil he was digging in was no longer black and rich, but dry and sandy, and light in color by comparison. Then, what his eyes had seen, vanished as quickly as it had come on, and he

saw again what he should be seeing, his own hands digging in his own garden.

What the hell was that all about? he questioned, questioning his mind's veracity, and in particular his eyes. It hadn't been a flashback to some time in his past; he knew that. He had never had a tan like the tan he had just seen on his hands. Furthermore, he could not remember a time, ever, when he had dug into such dry and sandy soil. *You couldn't grow a peanut in soil like that,* he told himself. But now it seemed the vision had passed, and with his vision restored to normal, he leaned forward again and went back to work.

"Whatcha doin', mister?"

Marlin turned to the sound of Emily Anne's voice behind him.

"Oh, hi, Annie; I'm just planting a new row of jonquils. Is that coffee for me?"

"Yep, hot and fresh," she replied, handing the steaming cup to him. "So, more jonquils, huh. I thought you were going to try carnations this year."

"I may, next, but I wanted to get these jonquils in first."

"Where'd they come from; I didn't buy them, did I? I couldn't have made a mistake like that, could I?"

"No, Henry brought them in for me."

"Henry Wheeler?"

"Yeah, Henry Wheeler. Go figure."

"Yeah, go figure indeed. So, what's he want I wonder?"

"Nothing, or so he says. He said he just knew I loved planting flowers, and he ran into a really good deal on these bulbs, so he got them for me."

That doesn't sound like the Henry I know.

"No, it doesn't, does it. But, that's what he said."

"Well, just watch your back, Marlin. He's after something I'll bet. Henry Wheeler doesn't *give anybody anything* without a reason. He's probably going to try to talk you out of one of your better listings."

Marlin just smiled, took a sip of his coffee, and replied, "Back to work. Thanks for the coffee, hon."

Annie headed back toward the house, but before entering the back door, she turned back to say that breakfast would be ready in twenty minutes. Marlin smiled his approval and then went back to his digging. As he watched his hands dig into the black soil again, he became slightly light-headed, a little dizzy, and his eyes went out of focus. When his focus returned, he was staring again at two very tan hands, scooping out dry and sandy soil from a now larger hole in the ground. As the hands pulled a stone away from the hole, Marlin muttered, "What the hell?" and he tried to shake off the vision. As the vision faded, and all

returned to normal, he remembered noticing again, the tightly buttoned, khaki sleeves, belonging to a shirt he *knew* he didn't own.

"This is nuts," he said to the empty garden, and then he noticed the jonquil bulb placed neatly in the bottom of the hole he had been digging. He glanced quickly to the small, burlap bag he had put the bulbs in, and noticed that the top was no longer tied with twine.

"I didn't open that, did I?" he mumbled. "No, I know I didn't."

But, the fact remained that the bag was open, and he had absolutely no recollection of opening it himself. If he had done it, while his mind was *elsewhere*, then his mind had been elsewhere for nearly a full minute—and apparently, his eyes too. In his forty years experience, he had never experienced anything like this before, and his mind began groping for a reason for what was happening to him, the first thought coming to mind—a brain tumor.

"No way," he said, and then Annie poked her head out the window and called him to breakfast, a lot sooner than he had expected.

Sitting down across from her at the kitchen table, he asked, "Has it been twenty minutes already?"

"More like half an hour," she replied.

"Huh—I'd have never guessed. It seems like you were just out there with me."

"I was, a half hour ago," she said, smiling and shaking her head. "You always lose track of time when you're in the garden. You know that."

"Yeah, but this time it wasn't just that. Something happened to me out there—twice. Like my mind wandered off to someplace else."

"And you know *that* happens to you too, when you're in that garden of yours."

"Yeah, but his time I saw what wasn't there, I mean..."

Marlin paused, thinking how best to explain what had happened.

"And," Annie said, when he didn't continue, "what *did* you see?"

"It's not just what I saw, but also what I didn't see."

"Is this some sort of riddle?"

"No, while I was digging, I saw my hands change to those of someone very tan, wearing long, buttoned down khaki sleeves. The hands were digging, just like mine were, but in very dry, sandy soil."

"Have you checked your sugar this morning?"

"Yes, it's fine. The second time this happened, when my hands returned to normal, I guess you'd say, there was a jonquil bulb placed in the bottom of the hole. Annie, I hadn't even opened the bag yet."

"Then how'd the bulb get there?"

"Well, the bag was open when I looked around to it, but I didn't open it, or at least I don't remember opening it."

"Well you must have. You were the only one out there, dear. Maybe..."

"Maybe," Marlin said, cutting Annie off, "maybe I have a brain tumor."

Annie stared blankly at Marlin's bombshell self-diagnosis, and then replied, "Now that's a leap. Maybe you'd better check your sugar again."

"My sugar's fine, dammit," he barked out. "So, how else do you explain me seeing what I saw, and then not remembering my having planted that bulb?"

"Check your sugar, Marlin, and then eat your breakfast before it gets cold."

Annie could play this off, as if it were just his sugar, but Marlin had been there before, and this was not just a case of his sugar being too high, or too low. He knew what that felt like, and this wasn't that. But, to prove his point, while Annie went on eating, he got out his tester and did as she had suggested.

"Ha, see," he blurted out, as the reading was displayed, "one hundred two. That's as normal as normal gets."

"And that proves what?" Annie asked. "That you have a brain tumor? I don't think so."

"No, it just proves that it's not my sugar, but it could still be a brain tumor."

Anne just gave him a cold stare, rose from the table with her dirty dishes, and walked to the sink. Then, she looked over her shoulder and said, "Finish your breakfast. I don't intend to stand here doing dishes all morning. I've got better things to do."

Marlin picked up his fork and resumed his meal, but he had no more than stabbed his first piece of waffle, when the tan hands appeared again, breaking bread over a tin plate. Gone was the chinaware he had been eating from, and gone was the flatware he had been using. The tabletop was no longer light yellow Formica with red binkies, but rough, unfinished wood. As he watched the hands tear away a piece of the obviously homemade bread, he noticed again the khaki sleeves, this time rolled up to mid-forearm. The vision lingered, and as one of the tan hands brought a piece of bread to his lips, he could actually taste its somewhat salty flavor.

He shook his head violently, trying to break the images before him, and succeeded, only to look up at the face of his very worried wife, staring straight at him from across the table.

"Are you all right?" she asked, as she came into focus. "Marlin?"

"Yeah, yeah I'm back-okay, I think."

"You were just sitting there, staring at your plate, and you wouldn't answer me."

"For how long?"

"Jeez, for about five minutes, I guess. You scared me."

"Not as much as it's scaring me. What's wrong with me? I saw those hands again, and I wasn't here..."

Marlin stopped.

"You weren't here?" Anne asked.

"No, not *here*. I was at someone else's table, eating bread from a tin plate."

"You saw *that*?"

"Yes, it was like I was actually there, wherever *there* is."

"Well, I sure couldn't get through to you. Maybe you should go see Doctor Frazier, just for a checkup maybe. Maybe it's some sort of virus, or something-something going around maybe."

"Yeah, *maybe*."

Well that's a load off my mind, Marlin thought, as he drove up Sharonton Pike on his way home again from Memorial West Hospital. It had been five days since his episode at his breakfast table, and he had spent the last three days undergoing a battery of tests at the hospital, all to no avail. Not only had he not experienced any further visions of the tan hands, but all his tests had come back negative. He was the picture of health. He still had no explanation for what he had seen, but Doctor Frazier was chalking it all up to stress, in conjunction with what he suspected had been a virus of some sort.

As he approached Tollgate Park, he flicked on his turn signal to make a right turn onto Oak, and then he looked into his rearview mirror. "What the hell?" he said, as all he could see behind him was a cloud of dust. He glanced forward again to make his turn, and then, "Good God, where the hell did the road go?" Sharonton Pike and everything familiar to him was gone. He appeared to be in the middle of some desert, navigating between brush and rocks, and then he noticed his hands on the steering wheel. They were the tan hands, and the steering wheel was that of an old pickup truck, not his Audi. He peered through the grimy, dust-covered windshield, over the sandblasted, sun-baked

hood of the truck, and then suddenly he was no longer aware of anything.

"Hey, you okay in there?"

Marlin opened his eyes to the sound of a voice outside his car, and tapping on the window to his left. For the longest moment, he had no idea where he was, and then he realized that he was sitting in the middle of Tollgate Park, facing southwest, and staring out across the pike, to the nearby Glensharon Inn.

"Mister, can you hear me in there?" the voice outside asked.

He turned his head to the left and saw several people staring in at him. *Roll down the window*, he told himself, and he did.

"Yeah, I can hear you. What happened?"

"You tell me," the man said. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. I must have blacked out, or something. I don't know how I got here."

Part of what Marlin had said was the truth; he didn't know how he had ended up in the park, but he did know why. *Those hands*, he thought. *That pickup truck...the desert.*

"Well, the police are on the way. I called them when I couldn't get a response out of you," the man said. "I told them that you might be a heart attack victim, so there's probably an ambulance on the way too."

Marlin thought about that, and asked, "And how long was that, that you couldn't get me to answer you I mean?"

"Hell, we tried for nearly five minutes, I'd say. I was just about to break in your window when you finally woke up."

In the distance, Marlin could hear sirens coming his way.

"Did you see how the accident happened? I mean, did I hit anybody or anything?"

"Yeah, I was right behind you, as you started onto Congress. You signaled to turn onto Oak, and then you were all over the place. You drove off the road before coming to Oak, and you went down through the greenbelt, around several trees, back out onto Oak, and then straight across Congress and into the park. If you were out of it all that time, I sure as hell don't know how you did it without clobbering something."

Two days of rest in bed followed Marlin's traffic mishap. He had not been cited for any infractions, although the officers on the scene had come close to charging him with failure to control his vehicle. In the end though, he had been given only a warning and was told to seek medical help for whatever condition had caused him to lose control. It hadn't been merely a

recommendation, but an order. He was to appear in court the following Wednesday with documentation that he had seen a doctor about his blackout, or face possible revocation of his license. A trip to the doctor wasn't necessary though, as he had all the documentation he needed from three days of testing at Memorial West.

On the afternoon of his second day of bed rest, the scare behind him now, and no further *visions* having occurred, he was feeling a lot better. He got up from his bed and headed downstairs, where he found Annie working on something in the kitchen.

"Whatcha doin'?" he asked her, as he entered.

"Oh, hi, honey; feeling better?"

"Some. I thought I might go out and work in the garden awhile, if I have time before supper."

"Sure, plenty of time. We're eating out tonight."

"We are?"

"Yes, we are. We are going to the Iron Horse. I need a nice night out and a break from this kitchen."

"Okay, but if it's not supper you're working on, then what?"

"This is for the Street Fair bake-off. It's my apple strudel. I thought I might enter it in this year's contest."

"You're going to waste one of your strudels on a contest. Now, *that's* a crime."

"Come to the Street Fair with me and you'll get a piece."

"Well, I can't pass up that offer," he replied, opening the back door and stepping out. "Call me in time to get ready to go to supper."

Marlin walked across the back yard to the garden and knelt down next to the gardening tools he had left lying here a week ago. He hadn't been back to the garden since his experiences here with the tan hands. He found everything just as he had left it; a freshly dug hole with a jonquil bulb sitting in its bottom, awaited his attention, and off to his left was the bag of bulbs Henry had given him.

Might as well finish what I started, he thought, reaching into the hole and picking up the bulb. He turned it over between his fingers, checking that it hadn't been harmed by its exposure this past week. *Looks fine*, he thought, and he placed it back in the hole. As he began to position it just right, what he saw next totally blew him away. He watched, as his hands turned again to the olive tan hands, and the hole to dry and sandy. Once again, the khaki sleeves appeared, and were buttoned down tight. But, what sent him reeling back across the yard was what he had suddenly seen himself holding in "his" hands.

"No!" he screamed, which brought Annie running from the house.

Anne saw her husband sitting in the yard, leaning back on back-stretched arms, and shaking his head violently from side to side.

"Marlin! What's wrong?" she yelled, as she arrived at his side.

He looked over to Anne, his face ashen, his eyes wide with terror.

"The hands," he said. "It was the tan hands again."

"Oh no, not again."

"Yes, again, and this time they were holding an artillery shell, with what looked like a timer of some sort wired to it."

Anne said nothing for the longest moment, just staring at Marlin, as if he were crazy.

"You...you don't believe me?" he asked.

"No, no, honey; I believe you, but..."

"But what? I know what I saw!" he yelled at her.

"I know, honey; I know, but still..."

Anne didn't know what to say. It seemed to her that her husband was losing his grip on reality, or had already lost it. This was the third episode in the garden, and then there had been the episode at the breakfast table, and the auto accident. In one short week, Marlin had gone from the most levelheaded, grounded man she knew, to a man who couldn't tell a jonquil bulb from a bomb. As Marlin sat there on the grass, shaking like a leaf in the wind, Anne finally came up with the right words, or so she hoped.

"Marlin-I think the virus hasn't run its course yet. I think maybe you should go back to bed for a day or two, and give this bug a chance to pass."

"Virus? It's no virus. It was too vivid for a virus to cause. There was something new, Annie, besides the bomb. There was a tattoo."

"A tattoo? Where?"

"On 'my' hand."

"What was it; I mean what did the tattoo look like?"

"It was a black and red tattoo, of a sword; a big, black, curved sword, stuck through a red Star of David. It was right in the middle of the back of 'my' right hand. I don't think a virus would produce such detail as that, do you?"

"Not the virus itself, no, but your own mind could produce such a thing, at work under the duress and stress of a virus," Anne replied. "That's all it is, dear, I'm sure. So go back to bed, and give this thing time to pass."

Several hours of searching the Internet, while Marlin slept upstairs had produced no results for Anne. Marlin had described a tattoo that so far, didn't seem to exist. At least if it did, it wasn't known well enough to have made its way to the Internet archives of known tattoos representing known organizations.

Maybe it was self-stylized by an individual, and has nothing to do with any organization, she thought, as she closed yet another website. *Maybe it's all in his head.*

Switching from her Google web searches to Google image searches, she continued her quest for the black sword sticking through a red Star of David. After going through at least fifty pages of tattoo photos, the results of several searches, she was finally ready to give up and concede to the fact that the tattoo was all in Marlin's head. It was either that, or it was a personally designed tattoo, created by some Jew hater, probably living somewhere in the Middle East. That last thought not being likely though, she resigned herself to her former thought, that the tattoo was merely a figment of her husband's imagination.

Chapter 2

Glensharon, Ohio

April 28, 1986

Marlin had been so shaken by his last experience in his garden that he had taken a leave of absence from work. All that he had wanted to do, from that day on, was to rest and give the virus time to pass. Although he didn't believe the visions were merely a product of a simple virus, Anne had convinced him that rest was probably the cure.

Apparently it was working, as over a week had passed now without any strange occurrences having taken place. But then again, he had not gone near the garden in all that time, nor had he climbed behind the wheel of his car. As a precaution, he avoided the kitchen table as well, opting to take his meals in front of the television, eating off his lap. Anything he could do to keep the visions away was what he would do, and for as long as it took to put them permanently behind him.

Knowing that being behind the wheel of his car could be fatal, when and if another vision occurred, Marlin decided to test his wellness in the garden. Certainly, after over two weeks since its onset, the virus must have run its course by now. One way or the other though, in order to go on with his life, he had to find out. He wasn't in a position to be able to retire, which meant he had to get back to work soon, and going back to work meant driving his car. The garden was the much safer place to find out if the illness had passed.

Not wanting to upset Anne again, he waited for her to leave for the grocery before putting his saneness to the test. He realized that saneness was the right word, because it had never been proven that a virus was causing the visions. If there was no virus, the only other explanation was that he was going insane. Why he would be losing it though, remained a mystery, as all the results of his physical and neurological tests had been favorable.

Back outside, at the edge of the garden, Marlin shuddered visibly. *Do I really want to do this?* he asked himself. *What choice do I have?* "None," he answered his inner doubts. He slowly knelt over the same hole, picked up the jonquil bulb, and held his breath, as nothing out of the ordinary took place. He stared down at his own hands, holding the bulb. He placed the bulb back on the bottom of the hole, and slowly began covering it with soil. Still, nothing untoward happened.

"Ha!" he blurted out, his relief overwhelming him.
"Nothing!"

He started a second hole, and then a third and fourth, placing a jonquil bulb in each and then smoothing the soil over them. The tan hands did not return, and he continued planting jonquils until he had placed and covered the final bulb.

"Now," he said, looking skyward, "it's time to take my life back."

As much as he was happy to have been able to do some gardening without interference, he was equally happy to be done with "hiding out" in his bedroom. It was time to get out and about, and right now, there was nothing he wanted more than a cold beer, in a frosty mug, as served by Danny at the Glensharon Inn.

The Glensharon Inn had long ago ceased operation as an Inn for weary travelers, and was now simply a local bar, but a bar of high character and fascinating antique décor. You'd find no derelicts hanging out in the Glensharon Inn, because for one, Danny would not allow it, and secondly, it was not a cheap place to drink. The clientele found inside the Glensharon Inn were mostly professional people, such as doctors, lawyers, executives, and the like. It was a safe and relaxing place to sit for a while, and let the stress of daily life melt away.

The theme of the Glensharon Inn was that of an ancient roadhouse, just as it had once been, shortly after the turn of the eighteenth century. It was actually established in 1818 along the Cincinnati and Sharonton Turnpike, near where the old tollgate once stood. The original oak plank floors were still in place, the original mahogany bar, and many of the original furnishings still adorned the interior. Walking into the Glensharon Inn was in and of itself, a history lesson in the making. Ask just one question about the history of the inn—and Danny would be sure to fill you in—at length.

Marlin's biggest concern about heading for the Glensharon Inn today was the three-quarter mile drive he'd have to make to get there. He thought about calling a cab, but then again, he couldn't keep doing that forever. *Better to find out right now if the visions have left me*, he reasoned, and he went outside and got behind the wheel of his car. As he turned the key, he realized that he was taking a big chance; after all, the last time he had driven he had ended up in the middle of Tollgate Park. If the visions returned while he was driving, he might not be so lucky a second time. But despite his behavior of the past few days, he had never before been one to run and hide from trouble, or danger. Yes, the visions had been unsettling, but if they returned and persisted, he'd not let them get in his way any longer. Somehow, he'd learn to live with them. Somehow, he would have to.

A wave of great relief and calm settled over him, as he entered the bar and spotted Danny, standing behind the bar and talking with Ralph Adams. Ralph was sitting on his usual barstool, enjoying his usual Beck's Dark. Both men looked up and smiled, as Marlin crossed the floor toward them.

"Hey, stranger," Danny greeted him, "where the heck have you been lately?"

"Yeah," Ralph chimed in, "we thought maybe you had finally thrown in the towel."

Ralph was referring, of course, to their weekly games of cribbage; little tournaments actually, that Danny conducted every Tuesday evening. Marlin smiled at that, and replied, "Fat chance, Ralph. I enjoy whipping your sorry butt too much to give that up."

"So, where have you been?" Danny asked. "It's not like you to miss a Tuesday around here; or, for that matter, a Wednesday, or a Thursday."

Marlin took his customary seat next to Ralph, smiled, and replied, "I haven't been feeling well lately, Dan. I guess I had a virus, or something. I went through a lot of tests at the hospital, the doctors looking for some explanation for my *symptoms*, but they found nothing wrong with me."

"What were your symptoms?" Ralph asked.

Marlin hesitated at the question, wondering if he should even go there. The last thing he wanted to do was leave himself open to ridicule. He could imagine what might come next. *Seeing things, huh? You know what that means. First, you see things that aren't there, and then you hear voices, and the next thing you know you're locked up tight in Longview—in a padded cell.* But, ridicule or not, he felt he had to talk it out with someone other than Annie. Maybe one of these guys might have a perspective on it that neither he nor Annie, nor the doctors had thought of.

Before he knew it, he was blurting it out, "Visions—I had visions; vivid, full-color visions."

Silence reigned in the bar for what seemed like forever, before Danny finally asked, "What kind of visions, Marlin?"

Marlin looked first at Danny, and then at Ralph, noting that neither man was laughing, or even smiling. Both men had very serious looks on their faces, as if they were truly concerned.

"I—I keep seeing someone else's hands in front of me when I'm doing anything that requires me to look at my hands. The hands are deeply tanned, and I can also see his sleeves, which are khaki colored sleeves, nothing like I own."

Marlin paused in thought.

"So, what are these hands doing?" Ralph asked. "The same thing you're doing at the time, or something else?"

Marlin was surprised at Ralph's question, how quickly he had honed in on that little detail of the visions.

"What makes you ask *that*? Have you heard of anything like this before?"

"Like what?" Ralph replied. "You haven't even told us about the visions yet. It just seemed to me like the logical question to ask."

"Yeah, maybe it was, and no, the hands were *not* doing what I was doing, but the circumstances were the same."

"Circumstances?" Danny asked.

"Well, yes. The first time it happened, I was digging a hole in my garden to plant a jonquil bulb. Then suddenly, I saw the tan hands doing the same, but the soil was no longer rich and black, but dry and sandy. That was it, the first time it happened."

"And the second time?" Ralph asked.

Marlin went into each episode, telling them about the breakfast table event, the driving event, and the other gardening events. When he finished, and Dan and Ralph had digested what he had said, Ralph was the first to speak.

"So, tell me again about this tattoo. You say it wasn't present on the tan hand in the first few events, but that it appeared in the last event?"

"Yes, that's right."

"*That*, my friend, is significant."

Marlin was confused. To him, the significant thing was the artillery shell bomb he had seen in the vision, *not* the tattoo.

"You think the tattoo is more important than the bomb?" he asked Ralph.

"Well, the bomb is important, but the tattoo tells us something about the progression of the occurrences."

"How's that?" Danny asked, confused himself over Ralph's focus on the tattoo.

"Simply put, people are not born with tattoos. They get them done at a certain point in time. The tattoo appearing later in the sequence of visions means that that vision is later in time, than the ones that preceded it. Ergo, your visions are sequential, each one displaying a later date in someone else's life."

Marlin had heard all that Ralph had said, but what he focused in on was *not* the time aspect of his explanation.

"What do you mean by 'someone else's life'?" he asked. "You're not suggesting that I am actually seeing someone in those visions who *really exists*, are you?"

"Well, yes, but he doesn't exist yet. He will not be born until after you have departed this life. But tell me, what did the tattoo look like? Describe it to me. Maybe I can tell you more about this man through his tattoo."

"It was a crudely done Star of David, red in color, with a black sword sticking through it."

Marlin's description of the tattoo brought on total silence from Ralph and a look of great concern was now displayed on his face. He shut down immediately, and clinching his hands around his beer glass, he stared into the dark brew, frozen in the moment.

"Well?" Marlin asked. "Does that mean something to you, Ralph? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"It's...It's nothing," he replied.

"No, Ralph, it's *something*. I can see it in your face. You've heard of this before, haven't you?" Marlin demanded.

"I've read the theories, but they were just that, theories."

"What theories?" Dan asked. "Come on, give it up, Ralph."

"And, what about the tattoo?" Marlin asked. "Come on, give."

"Forget the tattoo," Ralph snapped, "it means nothing. As to the theory, it's just a theory dealing with reincarnation, that's all, and probably not sound, or even possible."

"Reincarnation?" Marlin asked. "Like being born again, as someone else, after you have died? That kind of reincarnation?"

"Yes, Marlin, *that* kind of reincarnation. You see...no, I don't want to talk about it anymore. It's just a theory, believed in by a very few individuals."

It was obvious that Ralph didn't want to go into the theory with Marlin. If the theory were to be considered as true, Marlin would have enough to worry about without him serving it up to him on a silver platter. If the theory were true-he'd know all he needed to know, soon enough.

"To my way of thinking, Ralph, you've gotta come clean on this," Dan said, breaking the growing silence. "You can't just bring it up, and then drop it like a hot potato."

"It'll serve no good purpose for me to continue," Ralph replied, "and it will only serve to make Marlin paranoid and uncomfortable. I've said too much already. I really *should* learn to keep my mouth shut."

"Yes you should," Dan replied, "but you didn't, so why don't you let Marlin decide for himself if the theory is valid or not? After all, they *are* his visions."

Ralph gave Dan's words some serious thought, and then answered, "Perhaps, but remember that it is merely a theory, and remember also that it was against my will that I told you of it."

Don't come back later, blaming me for your growing paranoia, or your impending psychosis."

"No, never," Marlin replied, "so, what's this theory all about?"

"It's about you looking into your future life."

"Future life?" Marlin asked, bewildered.

"You know what reincarnation is; you die and then come back as someone else. Well, your visions are showing you that someone else."

"That's impossible," Marlin said.

"And as I said before, it is only a theory. You may be right. It may be impossible. I think we can, and should, just leave it at that."

"But, the last vision alluded to the fact that the tan hands were those of some terrorist. They were placing a bomb in a hole for Christ's sake."

"I doubt that it was for Christ's sake that he was doing that, but it still remains that it is all just a speculative theory," Ralph replied. "I wouldn't pay it any further attention. Besides, when did you say the last vision occurred? Over a week ago?"

"Yes, over a week ago."

All of a sudden, Dan wasn't so sure he should have pushed Ralph to explain his theory. "And a week is plenty of time for a virus to run its course," he suggested. "And, that's probably all it ever was, Marlin; a fever from a virus, making you see things that weren't even there."

Marlin looked over to Dan with a weak smile, and said, "Yeah, Dan, *right*. I don't know if it was a virus or not, but what I *do* know is that you don't have to worry about me buying into Ralph's theory. It's total poppycock, and you can take that to the bank."

"It's not *my* theory, Marlin," Ralph interjected, defensively. "I didn't say I believe it, or that I am a proponent of it. I just threw it out there for consideration. It just seemed, at the time, to fit. Maybe not."

Marlin smiled at each of his two friends in turn, and then said, "Well, gentlemen, I came in here for a beer, not a meal. But now that you've given me plenty of *food for thought*, I really should be getting along home."

"You haven't had that beer yet," Dan said, reaching for a glass from above the bar.

"Maybe later, Dan; when it's just the two of us, okay?"

"See!" Ralph said, excitedly. "There you go blaming me already. I knew you would. Just shoot the messenger and everything will be fine. Is that how it is? Well fine, if you

don't want to drink with me, then fine it is, I'll leave and be glad for it."

With that, Ralph jumped up from his stool and stormed to the door. He stopped only long enough to look back, and say to Dan, "Just put it on my tab," and then he was gone.

Marlin looked at Dan, an incredulous look on his face, and said, "Jeezle, he's a bit touchy."

"He always has been; want that beer now?"

Marlin staggered into his house, well past suppertime, and was greeted by a very angry stare from Annie. He had seen the look before, not unlike the storm clouds that form before the hurricane. Sheepishly, he edged his way to the kitchen table and sat down across from his wife.

"I can exshhhplain," he said, trying to hold his head upright and straight, and falling short on both measures. "Itshhhall Danny's fault."

"My God, Marlin, how'd you get home? You're three sheets to the wind."

"That'sshh Danny's fault too. He drove me home."

He could feel himself tipping forward, but he was somehow powerless to stop himself, and just before his head hit the tabletop, he was out. The next thing he knew, it was morning, and he was waking up on the living room sofa. He started to get up, but his head demanded he remain lying down. The next time he opened his eyes, it was noon, and Annie was sitting nearby, staring knives through him.

"Well, what do you have to say for yourself?" she asked, and in no friendly tone.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. Don't you think you're a little too old for such foolishness, Marlin? What if someone from the agency had seen you? What then?"

"Hang the agency," he mumbled. "You'd have done the same if you were me, and Ralph Adams had told you what he told me."

He was going the sympathy route now, although he wasn't so sure that Anne would go there with him.

"Ralph Adams? What has Ralph got to do with your acting like a stupid teenager?"

"Never mind; you'd never understand anyway."

"Try me, or you'll be sleeping right where you are for the next I don't know how long."

Marlin gave that threat some serious thought, and answered, "It's the visions, Annie. Ralph had a handle on what the visions are all about. A theory really, but it was enough to get me

thinking, and then I couldn't get enough beer in me to kill the fear."

"Fear? Fear of what, Marlin? What did Ralph tell you?"

"Well, in a nutshell, he told me that I was looking into my future life—my life after I die in this one. My reincarnation."

"And you believed him why? What is he, some sort of expert on the hereafter? Come on, Marlin, get a grip on yourself."

"You haven't seen the visions; how real they are. What if he's right? I told you about the last vision with the tan hands placing a bomb in the hole. The hands I see in the visions are the hands of a terrorist. What if Ralph is right about this? What if I do come back to this world as a terrorist, living in holes in the ground, hiding out in the hills for fear of being captured or killed, killing innocent people like you and me? What if he's right?"

"So, you don't believe in Heaven then?" Anne asked.

"Well, yes, sure I do."

"So what then is the problem? You can't have it both ways, Marlin. Either you believe in reincarnation, or you believe in Heaven. You can't believe in both. So, which is it going to be?"

"Maybe, if you haven't been good enough to get into Heaven, and you haven't been bad enough to go to Hell, you get reincarnated. Maybe what you become in a second life depends upon just how good, or just how bad you have been in this life."

"Oh come on, Marlin. You can't believe that, and besides, the visions have gone now, haven't they? When was the last one? It was over a week ago, wasn't it? I saw that you worked in the garden yesterday, and you drove yourself to the bar yesterday, and no visions came to you, did they?"

"No, but that doesn't mean that they won't come again."

"Well, in the mean time, I suggest that you get a grip on yourself and act like a man, instead of a terrified child. I know what happened to you was scary and disarming, but it's probably over now, and if not, then you still need to learn to live with it. It's either that, or lose everything you've ever worked for."

"And you too?"

"No, Marlin, you're stuck with me, but if you don't shape up, and quickly, I *will* make your life more miserable than any vision could manage to do. Do I make myself clear?"

When he didn't answer, Anne continued.

"Look, Marlin. You told me about the tattoo the tan hands had..."

"Only in the last vision," he broke in, "and Ralph had an explanation for that too."

"Forget Ralph and listen to me. I spent hours on the Internet looking for the tattoo you described to me, and guess

what, it doesn't exist. It doesn't belong to any terrorist group, or hate group, or supremacist group, or whatever. If that tattoo belonged to any group of any size at all, I'd have found it."

"And your point is?"

"That the tattoo, and therefore the visions, were all in your head. They came from nowhere and they signified nothing. Furthermore, they are over with now, and why, because the virus you had has passed. End of story."

Chapter 3

Glensharon, Ohio

May 5, 1986

It did seem as though Annie had been right. It did seem as though it was the end of the story, at least for the past week or so. Marlin had gone about his daily business, even returning to work, and nothing had appeared before his eyes that had been unexpected, or abnormal.

He had worked in his garden, driven his Audi all over town, and had taken each meal without incident. He had been to the Glensharon Inn several times, but having not wanted to run into Ralph, even to say, "I told you so," he had looked for Ralph's Subaru in the lot each time before entering. Marlin wasn't a superstitious man, but he had not wanted to risk having Ralph bring up the subject of the tan hands, and perhaps, through the power of suggestion, start the visions all over again. Stupid, he realized, but just the same, why chance it?

On this beautiful Monday afternoon, having just closed on a \$350,000 house he had sold to an incoming doctor, Marlin was definitely in the mood to celebrate. He swung around the corner, and the Glensharon Inn came into view. Carefully, he perused the parking lot for any sign of Ralph's Subaru, and not seeing it there, he pulled in, parked, and headed for the front door.

He couldn't wait to tell Danny the good news about the sale he had just finalized, and a round for the house would certainly be in order. But, just as he pulled open the door, he heard a car pull into the lot behind him, and turning, he saw Ralph's Subaru.

"Son-of-a-bitch," he mumbled, under his breath. "Just my frickin' luck." *I'll just ignore the jerk if he tries to start anything up about the visions,* he thought, as he went on inside.

"Hey, Marlin," Danny greeted him, as he approached his usual stool. "What brings you in here on a Monday afternoon?"

Getting situated just right on his stool, Marlin replied, "I'm here to celebrate a big sale, my friend. A round for everyone-oh, and include Ralph too, he's right behind me."

Dan looked around the bar and laughed.

"Gee, Marlin, how generous of you," he replied, laughing again. "Counting me, you, and Ralph, that makes *five* drinks coming up."

"Okay, so I'll do it again when the place fills up for happy hour, okay?"

"Whatever, it's your party."

Dan poured Marlin his beer and then a Beck's Dark for Ralph, placing it on the bar next to Marlin's glass.

"Can't you put that someplace else, like at the other end of the bar?" Marlin asked, pointing to Ralph's beer.

"Oh, come on now, Marlin. Ralph's not so bad, and he didn't mean any harm with that theory of his. He was truly trying to help; he told me so, and he knows you've been trying to avoid him."

Marlin thought about that for a moment, and then replied, "Yeah, maybe you're right, Dan," and then thought to himself, *and maybe I'll get lucky and he'll see my car outside and leave.*

With that thought though, the front door opened, and in walked Ralph. He sauntered over to the bar and took his usual seat next to Marlin, glanced down to the bar top in front of him, and asked, "Where did the drink come from?"

"Complements of the gentleman to your right, Ralph," Dan answered him.

Ralph looked over to Marlin and nodded, a small smile forming on his lips.

"Gee, thanks, Marlin. What's the occasion?"

"I closed a big deal today. That's all. I felt like celebrating."

Marlin's tone was cold, and Ralph noticed.

"So what...?"

"Do not ask me about the visions, Ralph. Just don't," Marlin said, cutting him short.

"I wasn't going to. I was just curious about the sale. What house did you sell, and to whom?"

"I sold the old Constable place; some young doctor bought it."

"Constable, the dentist?"

"Yeah, he's retiring to Florida at the end of the month."

"Nice, that must have brought three-hundred grand, or more."

"Three-fifty, actually."

"What's the young doctor's name?"

"Ralph, drink your beer before it gets warm, okay? His name is Ken Haddington, and he's from the UK. You wouldn't know him, if that's what you're thinking."

"No, no, it's just nice to know who your neighbors are; who's coming and who's going. Did he seem like a nice fella?"

"I wouldn't know, Ralph. I only met his wife, Doreen, and she was very nice. The doctor was busy at the hospital and wasn't present at the closing. Why do you care anyway? You don't live anywhere near that neighborhood."

"I know. It's like I said, it's just nice to know who's coming and going."

"Well, now you know," Marlin said, a broad smile appearing on his face, "so drink that beer if you expect me to order you another one."

Ralph smiled back, extended his hand, and said, "Sorry about the misunderstanding between us. I really was merely trying to help you know."

Marlin took his hand, gripped it firmly, and replied, "Let's not go there, okay? What's done is done, and besides, it's over with now."

"Good, glad to hear it."

"Me too," Dan chimed in. "I'm a bartender, not a referee."

The three of them, all back on an even keel now, spent the next hour talking about everything from the weather, to the how the Redlegs were doing, to how the Bengals might do next season, with, or without Ken Anderson. About the only subject they didn't touch on was the problem Marlin had experienced of late-his visions. No one, and especially Marlin, wanted to go there.

After an hour-and-a-half had passed, Marlin stood from his stool and announced, in no uncertain terms, "I've got to take a piss."

"So, who's stoppin' ya," was Dan's reply to his announcement.

Ralph, on the other hand, looked at Marlin standing there, and said, "Damn, Marlin, you've lost some serious weight."

Knowing that was true, Marlin threw back his shoulders and reached down to his belly, framing it between his hands.

"You're damn right I have," he replied, looking down at his hands. "Nearly fifteen..." He froze in place, as he saw the tan hands and khaki sleeves before him, the right hand bearing the sword and Star of David tattoo. He sucked up his breath and nearly pissed his pants when he saw what was wrapped tightly around his torso. *It can't be*, he thought, but it was exactly what he thought it was, a neatly constructed vest bomb. Held firmly in 'his' left hand was a red trigger button, 'his' nervous thumb twitching above it.

"Oh, God, no!" he screamed, and then he saw 'his' thumb press down on the red button.

When Marlin awakened, he did so screaming and writhing about the gurney. Ralph was by his side and quickly grabbed him, as did the paramedic, in an effort to keep him from further hurting himself. It took nearly a full minute to get him to settle down enough to talk to, but finally he calmed and lay staring at the ambulance ceiling.

"Marlin," Ralph said in a soft voice, "you're gonna be fine. You took a nasty fall, but we're on our way to the hospital now."

"Ralph, is that you?"

"Yes, Marlin, it's me. I'm here."

"What happened?"

"I don't know exactly what caused it, but you were showing us how much weight you'd lost, and then you screamed out, reeled backwards, and fell over a table behind you. I think you gave that hard head of yours quite the crack."

Marlin lay still, thinking, and then he ventured, "It was the hands again, Ralph; the tan hands."

"I thought it might be, but I didn't want to bring that up again. What scared you so though? You screamed out, 'Oh, God, no!' and then you lunged backward and fell. What did you see?"

I...I was wearing a bomb around my middle, and I saw the tattooed hand. I was holding the bomb trigger in my left hand, and then, he pushed the button. Do you know what it's like to get blown up, Ralph? Do you?"

"No, Marlin, no I don't."

"I do-now. How do I get rid of the visions, Ralph? How do I get rid of them? I can't live like this; I just can't-not anymore. Do you know what it's like, waiting for the next one to come, not knowing when, or where it will come; what it will be?"

"I can only imagine that it must be terrible, but maybe they're done now. Maybe there won't be any more visions. If in the vision, the man with the tan hands blew himself up, maybe it's all done with now."

"But, that's me, if your theory is right. It's me."

"No, Marlin, it's not. *If* the theory is right, it is someone you will never know. Someone who hasn't even been born yet. Whoever it is, it is *not* you."

Marlin closed his eyes and drifted off. Whether he had fallen unconscious again, or had just wandered off into his own private thoughts, Ralph had no idea. The paramedic placed his hand on Ralph's shoulder, and said, "Let him rest now; we're almost to the hospital," and Ralph leaned back and did as the man suggested.

A new round of testing, over a three-day stint in the hospital, greeted Marlin as he awoke in his hospital bed. He didn't care, and no amount of encouragement on the part of Annie could change the way he felt. As far as he was concerned, he had seen his final fate, and it wasn't pretty. It didn't matter, as Ralph had told him, that *even if* the theory were true, he would

never know the man he had seen blow himself into oblivion. It didn't matter to Marlin that *if* the theory were true, the man with the bomb wouldn't even be born until after he was dead and gone. It simply did not matter.

As far as Marlin was concerned, if he couldn't even go to his favorite bar and enjoy a beer with his friends, without ending up in the hospital, then life really wasn't worth living. But, therein lay his dilemma. *If* Ralph's theory about his visions was the correct explanation for his condition, then wouldn't that mean that he *had* to remain alive? Wouldn't his death simply open the door for the man in the visions to be born? Was Marlin contemplating suicide? Yes. Was he thinking about it seriously? *I don't know*, he thought. *I don't know*.

By the end of day two of his three-day stay, he had pretty well discarded any notion of killing himself, reasoning that it wouldn't do at all for his autopsy to reveal some small tumor in his brain that had been previously overlooked. No, he'd try to put the theory out of his mind and let the doctors do their thing. Maybe soon they'd come up with some physiological reason for his malady—and, the sooner the better.

Nearing the end of his third planned day, Marlin was confronted with the encouraging, yet terrifying news, that the radiologist had found something that had not shown up during his first round of tests.

"A lesion?" Marlin asked. "What exactly *is* that?"

"It's an area of the brain," the radiologist began, "where the tissue has changed in such a way as to suggest disease."

"A tumor?"

"No, not exactly, but it could become one."

"Is it cancer?"

"We won't know that until we receive the results of the biopsy, but in my opinion, probably not. In my opinion it is probably residual from a previous illness, or injury."

"Could this lesion cause visions, or hallucinations?"

"Yes, it is in an area of the brain where it could possibly produce such events. Have you been experiencing hallucinations?"

"Yeah, and how. That's why I was here for the first tests I had done. Say, by the way, do you mind if I ask where your accent comes from? Are you English, or Australian?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I *am* from the UK. Leeds, to be exact."

"So, what's your name?"

"Oh, I am terribly sorry. I didn't introduce myself, did I? My name is Ken Haddington. I'm the new head of radiology here."

"Well I'll be. I'm Marlin Goldberg, the realtor who just sold you your new home. Small world isn't it? So, Doctor, what's next?"

"Yes, it is a small world at that. I'm glad we finally got to meet, although I wish it were under better circumstances. My wife, Doreen, told me all about you and the care you took in finding us just the right place. Sorry I was too busy here to participate. As to what is next, first we do the biopsy and we see where that leads us. If the lesion is benign, there will probably be no surgery required, and I believe we will be able to medicate you with anti-hallucinogenic drugs, thus solving your problem."

"And, if it is cancer?" Marlin asked, his countenance souring.

"If it is cancer, we will cross that bridge as we come to it. There is no reason yet, for us to believe that we will need to go down that road."

A week to the day after suffering his fall at the bar, Marlin walked into the Glensharon Inn, a new man. He strolled up to the bar, took his customary seat, and smiled broadly at Danny.

"Well, where's Ralph?" he asked Dan.

"So, how the hell are you?" Dan asked, ignoring his question. "From the look of that grin on your face, I'd say everything worked out okay at the hospital."

"Sure did. That little trip to the hospital killed two birds with one stone. It solved my little problem with seeing what isn't there, and it gave me something to throw back in Ralph's face."

"Really-I hope you realize that Ralph was very worried about you."

"Really-Then why didn't he come visit me at the hospital?"

"For Christ's sake, Marlin; he rode to the hospital with you. What more do you want? Besides, he's been sick himself."

"Ralph's been sick; with what?"

"He's *been* sick, Marlin; with cancer. He just took a turn for the worse though, right after your episode."

"Jeez, I didn't know. How long has he known?"

"About a year now."

"So, where is he; at home?"

"No, he's at the hospice. I don't think we'll be seeing him in here again."

"Jeez, I'm sorry to hear that. Can he have visitors do you know?"

"Yeah, I've been, but there's not much point in going. He won't know you're there anyway."

"Jeez, that bad?"

"Yeah, that bad--So, what did you find out about yourself? You said your problem is solved; how?"

"Oh yeah, they found a lesion on my brain in an area where it could very easily cause hallucinations. It isn't malignant, so it isn't life threatening, and they gave me a prescription for something called Zyprexa, which is supposed to suppress the visions. So far, it has, or at least I think it has. I haven't had one in a week now, since the last time I was here."

"Great, I hope it lasts. That *can't* be any fun. You wanna beer?"

"No, I gotta run. I just stopped in to give you the good news, and to tell Ralph where he could put his theory. Damn, that's bad news about him. Now I'm glad I never got the chance to rub it in his face. What hospice is he in? I may stop by to see him, even if he won't know it."

"Green Meadows; do you know where it is?"

"Yeah, I do. Thanks, Danny. I'll try to stop in for a cold one tomorrow night."

"Okay, and if Ralph is aware, tell him I said hi."

Marlin stepped outside into the cool evening air. He stopped just outside, looked up to the full moon, and said a short prayer for Ralph. *Damn, that's bad luck*, he thought, as he finished his prayer, and then he walked to his car. Climbing behind the wheel, he promised himself that first thing tomorrow morning he'd make a trip out to Green Meadows, just in case Ralph had taken a turn for the better. He hoped he had, because not only did he actually like the old fart, but also because he still had one question he wanted to ask him.

Nine o'clock in the morning found Marlin waiting outside Green Meadows for the doors to open. A minute later, they did, and he walked inside the pleasantly decorated hospice and asked directions to Ralph Adams's room.

Ralph, being a man of means, had his own private room, lavishly, but tastefully furnished with replica antiques. Right away, looking in from the hallway, Marlin could see that this room would please Ralph to no end, if it weren't what it actually was, a nice place to say goodbye to the world.

The door being open, Marlin simply walked in without bothering to knock, and a pair of steely blue eyes greeted him, staring straight at him from the bed. He stopped just short of the footboard, and asked, "Are you awake, Ralph?"

"Yes," came the short reply.

"Do you know who I am?" Marlin asked, studying the somewhat perplexed look on his friend's face.

"Wish I didn't," Ralph replied, cracking a smile and trying to laugh, which only brought on a round of coughing. When he gained control again, Ralph said, "Sorry, sometimes it's bad like that."

"Yeah, I see. Why the hell didn't you tell me about this before? I had to find out from Danny, when it may have been too late to see you again. What's with that?"

"I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me. I just wanted to live out what time I had, as normally as possible; that's all. Don't take it personally."

Another round of coughing interrupted their conversation for nearly a minute. Once Ralph had suppressed it though, he began again, "So, how'd you fare at the hospital? I took a bad turn the very next day, and wasn't able to get back again to see you."

"Yeah, I know, Danny told me. Thanks for riding along with me though. That was good of you."

"Hell, I was worried about you. You just went blank on us, and then over you went. Just like a big sycamore going down in the wind."

"It was a benign lesion on my brain, Ralph. The doctor told me that it was in the right place to create hallucinations too. They gave me some stuff that's supposed to stop the visions, and so far..."

"So far, it's working," Ralph said. "That's good. I was hoping it wasn't really the theory at work. That's one thing I can go to my grave relieved about."

"How's that Ralph? Do you mean to say that somehow you truly believe in the theory?"

This was the question he had wanted to ask; whether or not Ralph really believed in it. Now, as Ralph thought silently, Marlin waited anxiously. Yes, his problem had been diagnosed, and was now being treated, but still-the doubts lingered.

"I believe in it completely," Ralph finally stated. "I'm just happy that in *your* case it turned out to be something else. In my case, it wasn't."

"Your case?" Marlin asked.

"I've been there, my friend. Oh, it was years ago, and I've been free of the visions since, but I was there, once upon a time."

"Jeezle, I had no idea. So, how'd you get the visions to stop?"

"It was nothing I did. I guess they just ran their course. I received about a two year preview of my life to come, and then it ended."

"I sure hope your visions weren't as scary as mine were."

"No, not at all; mine were very mundane. In my visions, I was a young man, perhaps twenty years old, and I was in training to become some sort of police officer, or soldier. I was usually on the pistol range in my visions, practicing my shooting. What exactly my job was to be was not clear, or much else for that matter, but I was made aware of my name. My instructors all addressed me as Chavez, and at some point someone called me Rico. Rico Chavez. Go figure, an Englishman in one lifetime, and a Mexican, or whatever, in the next. Anyway, that was some ten years ago, Marlin, and the visions have never since returned."

Ralph paused, thinking, and then, "Do you remember my reluctance to continue when you described the tattoo you had seen on the tan hand?"

"Yes, I do."

"Well, that reluctance came from the fact that the tattoo you described had hit home with me, it had brought it all back in an instant. In my visions, when I was not on the shooting range, I would be sitting at a desk, sketching the exact image you described."

"Really?"

"Yes, rather frightening, I'd say, the parallels that can be drawn from that."

Ralph paused again, then continuing, "You told me in the ambulance that you pushed the button on the bomb you were wearing. Did you actually push the button, or were you just about to push it?"

"I pushed the button; the tan hand did anyway, and that's all I remember."

"But you don't know if it worked or not; the bomb I mean?"

"No, I can't say that I do for sure, but like I told you before, it sure seemed like I blew up; why?"

"Oh, no reason I guess; just curious. Your problem has been diagnosed anyway, so it doesn't really matter."

Ralph never got the chance to explain his concern over whether or not the vest bomb had actually gone off. Right after he had brought up the matter, he had slipped away into a coma. He had experienced that moment of clarity that some often get, just before the end, and Marlin was glad for the opportunity it had afforded him.

When he was unable to awaken Ralph, he had gone for a doctor. Doctor Sedroc told Marlin that he doubted that Ralph would last out the day, so Marlin waited by Ralph's bedside for the end to come. Ralph had no family, and no one should have to go alone-not on the final journey.

It was four in the afternoon, when Marlin climbed back into his car, with one less friend in the world. He started the engine, said a short prayer for Ralph, and then he headed home.

He had told Anne that he would be gone only an hour or two. Now, it had been nearly eight hours he had been away, and she was going to be furious. After all, it was May 13, her birthday, and he had promised the day to her. *One of these days I'm gonna learn*, he thought to himself, and then he pulled onto the Interstate.

Anne was just taking the trash out to the garage when she heard a car pull into the driveway behind her. Turning, and expecting to see Marlin's Audi, she gasped as she saw a Glensharon Police cruiser in her drive. *Oh no, this can't be good*, she thought, as she set down the trashcan and raised her hand to wave at the police officer exiting the car.

"Hi, can I help you officer?" she asked, as he approached.

"Hello Mrs. Goldberg," he greeted her, removing his hat. "I'm Captain Metcalf. Is there somewhere we can go sit down and talk in private?"

"What is it, Captain? Is it Marlin?" she asked, fear welling inside her.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm afraid so. Ma'am, Mr. Goldberg was killed at four fifteen this afternoon in an automobile accident on Interstate 75. He died instantly, ma'am. He didn't suffer."

Anne's knees buckled, and she started to go down, but Metcalf caught her and then helped her into the house. Once seated in the living room, and after Anne had cried out her initial grief, she asked, "How did it happen?"

"We figure it must have been a stroke, or a heart attack. We won't know, of course, until after the autopsy, but from what the witnesses say, it looks like one or the other. They all said he was driving south on the Interstate, when suddenly he was all over the road, crossing lanes back and forth, and then he crossed the median and into the northbound lanes. As he hit the northbound high-speed lane, an eighteen-wheeler hit his car. Like I said before, ma'am, he didn't suffer."

The fact that Marlin hadn't suffered was of great comfort to Anne, but she wasn't buying the heart attack, or stroke scenario. Until the autopsy confirmed such an event, she was inclined to believe that what had taken place, out there on the Interstate, was another episode like the one Marlin had described to her before, when he lost control of his car and wound up in Tollgate Park.

With that in mind, and until proved otherwise, she would blame Marlin's death on the tan hands of his visions, and that of course, sent her back to her computer to search for the distinctive tattoo Marlin had described to her. If she was ever

to understand what had taken Marlin's life, she felt the answer would come through identifying that tattoo. If nothing else, it was something to do to occupy her mind, while she awaited the autopsy results.

When the results came in, three days later, she found that she had been correct in her assumptions. There had not been a heart attack, and there had not been a stroke. The only determination that the coroner had made was "probable loss of consciousness due to circumstances unknown". When she read that passage from the report, she thought, *Unknown to who? Not me.* Anne was fully aware of what had caused Marlin to lose consciousness, and his life.

Throughout the grieving and the arrangements for Marlin's funeral and burial, Anne continued, to no avail, to identify the tattoo. After hours of searching images and reading descriptions, she had come to her final conclusion that it simply did not exist anywhere other than in her late husband's mind. That settled, her search ended and she began the long and tedious process of searching out a new home in Atlanta. She did not want to be a thirty-five year old widow, and she certainly did not want to be one living alone in the world. She needed family, and with Marlin gone, the only family she had remaining, was her older brother, and his wife and children, living in Atlanta.