

# Night Shadows

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## Acknowledgments

In the early years of this century, I worked the overnight shift in the hospitality industry. During those hours, I enjoyed listening to the late-night radio show, Coast to Coast AM. One show featured a guest who spoke of the phenomenon of shadow creatures. That discussion inspired the idea for this book. Right off, I must thank Coast to Coast AM for sparking the creativity to develop *Night Shadows*. In addition, I wish to thank the following:

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*The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the light into the peace and safety of a new dark age. – H. P. Lovecraft, “The Call of Cthulhu”*

*In this world, everything changes except good deeds and bad deeds; these follow you as the shadow follows the body. – Unknown*

*Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!*

*Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. – William Shakespeare, “Hamlet”*

## Prologue

### **Des Moines, Iowa Midnight, Saturday**

It is a special time. The Night. A special place.

Where things are seen but not witnessed. Where promises are made and broken and dreams and wishes fulfilled.

During the day, there is a rushing, frantic pace.

When night falls, movement is quieter and more mysterious. Breezes blow through tree branches, and the soft slap of leaves is heard, but those leaves are not noticed as much as their silhouettes caused by streetlights.

The streetlight's sodium vapor fizzes to life, pale illumination in its own small section of the world, at the same time creating shadows.

Moving shadows.

Elongated shadows, such as the dog and its owner out for a walk along a quiet, residential street. A familiar route for both, but a chance for the canine to track fresh scents and continue the age-old instinctual—if nowadays needless—practice of marking and re-marking its territory. Its owner revels in a chance to breathe the cool air after being cooped up in a stuffy cubicle by day and a stale apartment all evening.

He is cautious, for while he may favor the night, others less innocent also occupy the patches of darkness. So, when his best friend, not a breed to cause hesitation to a potential attacker, stops to sniff a scraggly bush, the man swivels to look in all directions. Ears strain for the lightest footfall or rustle of clothing from someone hidden. Darting eyes pick up any movement. The back-and-forth flow of tree leaves, the silent streak of a darting rabbit not seen by the dog.

There!

Did he notice a curtain edge drop back into place in the darkened house he and his dog now face? Maybe. The dwelling is single story, a small box, with the requisite low-pitched roof, mullioned dollhouse windows. No porch, just irregularly shaped flagstones leading to a gravel driveway. Nothing special, nothing unique. Nothing to fear.

Man and dog continue down the sidewalk, their shadows sometimes guiding, sometimes dissipating as they pass through the patches of street lights.

Inside the house, a figure steps back, letting the curtain fall from his hand when the dog walker turns toward the window.

Did he see me?

Eyes peek around the edge of the curtain and watch as the pair walk out of sight.

No, everything's fine. No one suspects.

A gasp and another step away as car headlights spear the darkness and disappear. Startled, the figure waits until his breathing evens, heartbeat returns to normal. Well, maybe a little faster than normal considering what is about to happen.

Obsessive-compulsive behavior urges another quick check outside. Nothing. No one. A blue flicker of a television from a house across the street, but no worries.

They won't know.

Without as much as the softest whisper of carpet fiber, the figure steps to a door and a flight of descending stairs. Before advancing below, the wraith-like figure double-locks the basement door.

Absolute darkness, but he isn't concerned. He knows the number of stairs and the number of steps to reach the far wall of the basement. A scratch, a brief scent of sulfur, and flame burns one end of a wooden matchstick. The light reveals his scarred and calloused hand, the fingers ends nail-bitten but clean. Those fingers spread the fire to the wicks of more candles resting on makeshift shelves around the room.

The basement is small, as befits the structure above. Not many items are in evidence. The candles, of course—some new and fat, others thin, with castle-like moldings of dripped wax. Others are stubby and ready for replacement. All are colored black or red.

A dais stands at the far end of the basement. Next to it sits an old wooden chest with an ornate metal lock and hasp.

No windows, no vents. Only the candles, the dais, the chest...and him.

What was the merest glimpse of a figure behind a curtained window is now a solid man in candlelight, even with a stooped posture. His face and body show the years of a hard life's struggle, ever striving to find that one elusive...something. The creases in his forehead, the scars on his limbs, the gray hairs on his chest and head, the involuntary twitches of leg, arm, and back muscles belie the fact the man is in his late fifties. The robe he wears is inlaid with intricate, complex, and alien designs on a background of rich deep purple.

He lays the spent match in a brass ashtray on a shelf. His heart thuds in anticipation. Quiet pervades the air and the shadows created by the candle flames do a jittery dance against the walls.

The shadows, yes...

A loner by choice for many years, he sometimes wonders why he lives in the city. Rural life would suit him better, away from the people and the noise. Midnight in the metropolis is tolerable, and the traffic on his block is sparse, even during the day.

Unlike Mexico City with its twenty-four-hour-a-day traffic jams, thirty million plus population, and smog turning his snot and lungs black. He had survived the ordeal and obtained his prize. The old chest...and the treasure within.

Years of research and travel led him to the filthy, corrupt capital where he tracked the old Guardian to a forgotten alley in the Zona Roja—the Red Zone—one of the ugliest, dirtiest, crime-ridden, rat and human debris-infested parts of the city. In a sub-cellar of a neglected building, the encounter went as

expected. A stubborn, worthless, withered old man lay dead, the chest and its contents he had guarded for decades stolen away in the night.

Now, in another capital city, in an American heartland state, the dreams of the new owner of the treasure can be fulfilled. Power will be the reward for all his tribulations. Power...

From the Book of Sarmangous.

After unlocking the chest, he withdraws the large tome, its cracked bindings, strange textured cover, and brittle pages handled with infinite delicacy. The cover bears strange, timeworn designs, vague human shapes, others more monstrous. Some of them spell out in an ancient language the book's title.

Sarmangous.

He places the book on the wooden dais's felt-lined stand. Inhaling one sharp breath and holding the air in his lungs, he opens the cover, turns to the correct page deep within the thickness of the ancient writings, and selects the specific text. He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, still holding his breath. His entire body is a-quiver with heightened nerves, then...then opening his eyes, he utters the correct words, the specific phrases, the weird combination of sounds.

The candles burn brighter.

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### **Another room, elsewhere in the city**

One second, darkness, then a flash of swirling purple.

A portal opens.

Whispers like water flowing over rocks fill the air.

In the center of the churning purple maelstrom is a blackness, a malevolence, almost...prescient.

A shape, burnt-gray, slithers from the black into the room...into existence.

It is followed by another and another and...

Pinpricks of red pierce the darkness. The gray shapes expand, grow.

As does their hunger.

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The man in the purple robe stands on the dais, gazing at the Book of Sarmangous. He smiles and revels with the energy surging within him. He has unleashed an unstoppable power, one he will control.

The candles flare once and settle back, their flickering erratic, and the created shadows dance.

Some of those shadows move against the dancing silhouettes...move on their own.

And so it begins...



## CHAPTER 1

### **Ewing Park**

### **Four nights later**

“Come on, Betty. It’ll be fun. Don’t you think this is romantic?” The youth coaxed the reluctant girl deeper

into the grove of trees and large bushes, the sweet odor of lilacs heavy in the air.

“Joey, we’re gonna get caught. Someone’s gonna see us.”

“No, they won’t. It’s the middle of the night.”

“The car, Joey.” Betty pulled back, causing her date to stumble. “A cop is going to find the car and catch us. I don’t want to go to jail.”

“We’re not going to jail unless you don’t lower your voice,” Joey whispered. “If we get caught, they’ll just throw us out of the park. We won’t be arrested.”

He sensed her hesitation wane.

“Come on, honey. You always complain how I’m not spontaneous enough. Well, here we are.”

Betty put her hands on her hips. “Joey, you’re carrying a blanket, a flashlight, and a condom. How spontaneous is that? You drove here after we left the club. Don’t tell me you didn’t plan this.”

“Well...” Joey shrugged. “Do I at least get points for originality? Maybe...a kiss?”

Betty pursed her lips in mock consideration. “I have to admit, this is different.”

“Uh-huh. What about that kiss?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe...more?”

“At least turn off the flashlight,” Betty said. “It won’t make any difference how loud our voices are if someone sees a light.”

“Mmm...”

“What?”

“I just...well, I wanted...”

“Yes?”

“I want to watch you...undress.” Joey leered.

“Joey!”

“It’s sexy. The way you look at me and take off your clothes one piece at a time, slow and teasing.”

He closed in and nuzzled her neck, whispering more seductive words in her ear. She giggled, then sighed as Joey’s insistent body warmed her, overwhelmed her senses, and eased her fears. He touched her skin, brushed her arms with soft fingers, and she reached for him.

“Wait.” Joey backed away.

Betty moaned at the broken moment. “Why?”

“Not here. I know a good place. Follow me.”

They ran, hand in hand, to a circular clearing within a copse of trees almost in full bloom. The heady lilac scent pushed their pulsing hormones up another notch. He spread the blanket on the grass and removed his shoes. Kneeling, he pointed the flashlight at her.

“All right. Show me,” he whispered.

“Don’t shine the light in my eyes!”

“Sorry.” He aimed the light lower.

She licked her lips with the tip of her tongue while her hands slid across her stomach and up to her breasts. Her fingers played with the first button of her blouse.

“Oh, my!” Joey’s eyes widened, excitement building.

Betty moved her hips to a silent rhythm as she popped the first button out of the hole. Then the second button, the third.

A faint sound upon the breeze wafted through the branches. Betty stopped moving.

“What?” Joey narrowed his eyes, upset by the interruption.

Betty cocked her head to one side. “I thought I heard something.”

“Ain’t nothing out here. Come on, keep going. I’m about to drill a hole in my pants.”

Betty giggled again and resumed her routine. When she slipped off the blouse, she crossed her arms in front of her breasts, which all but spilled from her half bra.

“You like?” she asked, voice husky and breathy.

She reached for the zipper on her skirt and soon the garment joined the other.

“Black panties,” Joey said with a grin. “My favorite.”

“Yes, but it’s your turn.” Betty pointed. “Time for you to get out of those clothes.”

Joey stood, handed her the flashlight, and scrambled out of his shirt.

“Not so fast, lover boy,” Betty chided. “I like it slow, too.”

He moved his hips in a poor imitation of a Chippendale dancer taking off his pants.

“Yes, very nice,” she said.

Joey stepped towards her, hand reaching for her breasts. He hesitated when a slithering sound, like a snake on loose gravel, wormed its way through the trees.

“What was that?” Betty aimed the light around her.

“I don’t know. Probably a small animal.”

Betty reached for her clothes. “Joey, m—maybe we oughta get out of here.”

The sound altered from a slither to the harsh shush of two pieces of satin rubbing together. The volume increased, and the noise became an incensed hiss.

“Joey!” Betty whirled around, flashing the light in every direction. “What is it? What’s happening?”

“I don’t—”

Another evolution of sound cut off his words. The hiss became a mushy scrunch, like shuffling footsteps in sand or finely broken glass.

Something shifted in the darkness. Too late, Joey realized it wasn't something in the shadows, it *was* a shadow. No, a lot of shadows. Shifting, growing, looming.

Coming closer.

"Betty!" Joey's scream ripped through the night air, but Betty couldn't respond. The shadows enveloped her, and her own screams pierced the darkness.

Although not for long.

Joey tried to run, but other dark shapes cut off his escape...cut short his life.

The flashlight clunked to the ground. Its switch still set to the "on" position. The bulb shone, providing fuel for the attack.

Because with no light, there are no shadows.

## CHAPTER 2

### **Thursday morning**

*Ring, ring.*

Marvin Dirksen, startled by the sudden intrusive noise, dropped the joint onto his bed and fumbled for his cell phone. The lit end darkened a patch on the white sheet.

*Ring, ring!*

He pinched the joint between thumb and forefinger and transferred it to the small plywood night table, where it smoldered and left a black spot similar to other burn marks on the surface.

*Ring! Ring!*

The ringtone, a high-pitched, rough-voiced human shouting, “*Ring, ring,*” unless immediately answered, worsened, ever more insistent and nerve-grating. The fourth audible cry for attention cut through Marvin’s lethargy.

Marvin answered the phone. “Yeah?”

The voice on the other end was one he expected. His lips formed a lazy smile. His dealer always made him happy.

Marvin had a plan. He wanted to stay high for a week straight with short time-outs for food and sleep. On this, his second day, his mind and soul surged free, flying to the stars. He’d touched his stock of food, purchased for the “trip” when extreme hunger demanded attention.

One snag in the plan, and the phone call soon rectified it. He’d just started smoking his last joint and needed another package. When his supply diminished, a quick message to his dealer’s voicemail should have resulted in fresh weed in hours. However, the guy must have run into problems because he hadn’t returned Marvin’s call. Marvin didn’t want to lose what he had worked so hard to attain, although to be honest, only part of his brain bothered to care.

Now, with the phone call dealer confirmed he had come through with the goods.

They'd worked out a great system. The exchange of product and payment occurred via the locked, slotted mailbox in front of Marvin's apartment. Each party owned a key, and Marvin's cash would be replaced with stash.

"Thanks, man," Marvin replied when told he had "mail."

He hauled himself out of bed, slipped his phone and lighter into his pants pockets, made sure to extinguish the joint on the nightstand—no sense taking a chance of burning down the place—and went to inspect the latest offering.

Marvin floated in slow-motion languor out the door to the row of mailboxes. With uncanny precision considering his condition, he eased the key into the lock and turned. The aluminum door squeaked open to reveal a sandwich bag filled with three-inch long joints, enough to carry him through the day and into the night if he rationed them.

He stuffed half a dozen of them into his pants pocket, placed the seventh between his lips, and re-locked the box, leaving the rest for later.

A pleasant walk would do him good. Fresh air to let his mind soar.

He fired up the joint with the lighter as he ambled along the sidewalk. Everything he saw filled him with delight. A budding bush. The street sign with white letters spelling out Indianola Avenue. A gray squirrel scurrying into the trees twenty yards to his left.

He tried to keep a running count of the telephone poles he passed, but lost his train of thought while pondering a fire hydrant. Measured, slow steps, sneakers scuffing the concrete. Take a puff, hold the smoke in for five seconds, then exhale. Inhale, hold, exhale. An easy, unhurried, rhythm.

Before crossing the avenue into Ewing Park, he looked both ways for oncoming traffic like a good boy.

Wow! The marijuana smoke combined with the spicy scent of lilacs sent him to new heights. This early in the morning, Marvin anticipated a day of total bliss.

He wandered among the trees and bushes, weaving from one to another, pushing his nose into each plant, sniffing, followed by a hit off the joint.

He spied a seven-foot tall bush near the entrance to a small patch of open ground. Rounding the corner, he leaned forward for extra momentum...

*Thud!* A dull ache spread through his body, and his arms and hands were slick with moisture. Why was he looking at blue sky and fuzzy clouds?

“Oh, shit, man!” He tried to maneuver up onto his forearms—his first thought was not the pain in his back from having slipped and landed face up on the hard ground, but the fact he’d lost the joint.

Gore covered his arm. He looked around, eyes widening in shock. What remained of the two human bodies sucked away the marijuana high in an instant. His mind slammed to earth as hard as his body had hit the ground, but stark reality socked him harder.

He uttered a piglet squeal and scrambled away from the carnage. With shaky, red-stained fingers, he plucked the cell phone from his pocket and dialed 9-1-1. Nausea caught up with his addled, weed-affected brain, making his report almost incoherent.

Dry heaves continued to wrack his body even as the sound of sirens filled the lilac park, its beauty now forever ruined by death.

## CHAPTER 3

Misty Reznik locked herself in the bathroom and opened the first of two small rectangular packages.

The previous day, she'd debated buying the extra one but decided she needed to be certain. She withdrew the plastic tube with the paper instructions, confirmed the steps she had to take, positioned herself over the toilet, and tried to relax. The test didn't require too much urine to work, but she didn't like the awkwardness of holding the little tube between her legs. A few drops dribbled out while she tried to concentrate on something else...anything else. Footsteps outside the door announced the approach of her husband.

Don't do it, please don't—

She yelped when he slapped the door.

“Hurry up, honey,” Harry said. “I haven't brushed my teeth.”

Damn it!

His annoying door-slapping habit began long before they married, but it still scared her, taking her by surprise every time. This time, it literally scared the piss out of her. A steady stream shot into the bowl. Flustered, she still managed to open the second box and place the other stick under her before her bladder emptied.

Redressed, she stood before the sink, biting her lower lip, fighting the rising anxiety. The two thermometer-like tubes rested on the porcelain sink processing the information contained in her urine. She closed her eyes, unable to look at the display window. If a minus sign appeared, she wouldn't tell Harry she'd even taken the test.

If the window displays a plus sign, well...

After what seemed an eternity, counting the seconds, she opened one eye in a squint, like a child at Christmas anticipating the one big present still under the tree.



A blurry plus. Blurry because she still hadn't opened her eyes all the way. When she did, the crossed lines cleared. She whimpered in shocked delight and glanced behind her as if Harry might come barging in and discover her secret.

They'd been trying to get pregnant for several months. Frequent discussions had resulted in mutual agreement to try for a baby, and so far, they had enjoyed the effort.

She didn't close her eyes while waiting for the second test but fixed them on the display window, avoiding glancing into the mirror above the sink. She hadn't yet combed her sun-kissed blonde hair, and her sea-blue eyes were itchy and bloodshot. No surprise, after the fitful night she'd experienced.

The positive symbol faded into solidity, and she squealed in delight. She had to tell Harry right now. She burst out of the bathroom and dashed to the kitchen, where her husband stood talking on his cell phone.

"Huh? Not another one! Where? Who? Two kids? Shit. Okay, okay. I'll be out there as soon as I can. Damn, I haven't even had breakfast. Yeah, all right. All right! Get off the phone, so I can go. Bye."

He pressed the *End Call* button.

Misty leaped in front of him. "Harry, you won't believe it. I'm—I mean—"

"No time, baby." Harry reached for his jacket. "Gotta go. Looks like another attack. Two victims this time." He gulped orange juice on the way to the front door.

"But, Harry, I'm—"

Misty followed on his heels but stopped short when he turned, handed her the glass, pecked her on the cheek, said a quick, "See you tonight," and bolted out the door. He disappeared before she could get her lips to move.

"—pregnant," she finished as the door slammed.

The kohl-colored cat stared up at her, mild interest in its pale yellow eyes.

"Aren't you happy for me?" she asked.

The feline cocked its head at her disappointment before padding off to find something more stimulating.

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Detective Harry Reznik tried to do two things at the same time: drive and adjust his tie. Rush hour traffic clogged the freeway, interstate, and main arteries of the city. Travel progressed in spurts due to what had to be sentient and evil sets of lights at various intersections. He tried to keep pace with the river of vehicles, steering with his knees while snatching looks at the rear-view mirror aimed so he could see his neck, never satisfied by the placement of the choking knot. He moved it up, down, left, right, returning to the first position like a frustrated husband under the indecisive guidance of his wife deciding on the placement of a heavy planter.

With a sharp screech of brakes, he avoided playing bumper cars. He snarled in disgust, ripped the tie from around his neck, and threw the infernal object in the back seat. A quick finger and thumb motion released the top collar button. He rubbed his chafed neck in relief.

Screw departmental dress code. He hated ties. He wished he could meet the person who decreed the wearing of the torturous pieces of fabric so he could punch him in the mouth. Better yet, choke him to death with his own tie. Besides, he was headed to a murder scene. Corpses couldn't care less whether the detective in charge wore a tie.

Even using shortcuts to avoid the major thoroughfares, twenty-five minutes ticked by before he reached Ewing Park, on Indianola Avenue on the southeast side of Des Moines. Ewing ranked as one of Misty's favorite parks, especially in spring, when the lilacs bloomed. At least once a year during the flowers' brief season, he and his wife drove from their Johnston home and, holding hands like young lovers, strolled the spacious aisles of bushes and trees, enjoying the smells and the serenity.

Today, murder marred the idyllic field. If the facts bore out the initial reports, this would not be a pretty sight. Then again, how many murders were?

Yellow crime scene tape, flapping in the breeze, surrounded the parking area. Harry pulled to a stop half on the road and half in the ditch. Already, more vehicles lined the avenue than necessary. Those not desired were decorated with the myriad letters and numbers of the local media representatives.

The reporters recognized authority and bombarded Harry with questions. If the idiots had any sense, they would realize he wouldn't have any answers yet since he'd just arrived.

Though they kept their somewhat respectful distance, Harry still felt as if he had to wade through the pack like the sole normal human escaping a sea of hungry mutants.

The officer at the barricade directed him to the location of the bodies. Harry advanced as far as he dared and caught the eye of the lead forensics man who bade him come closer.

"Another GD mess, Harry," the man said.

The detective admired Frank Belsom. A ten-year veteran as the county Medical Examiner, the man knew his craft. He retained enough heart to have remorse and regret for the victims, yet could close the shutters on his emotions to do his job. At five-six, he possessed Tom Brokaw handsomeness and carried a pocket watch. He looked at it every three minutes as if he might be late for an important meeting. The quirk Harry liked best was Frank's using initials for swear words.

Harry considered his own features. Thirty-five, athletic, but not a muscular build. Instead of a suave journalist look like Frank, he combined the best attributes of Jack Nicholson crossed with Nick Nolte—at his age, of course.

"How bad this time, Frank?" Harry asked.

"This is a bunch of S." Belsom gestured with spread arms at the surrounding gruesomeness.

"When are you going to catch this freak?"

Harry detected a note of desperate haranguing in the man's tone. He decided to return the favor.

"I have a lunch appointment with him at Applebee's to negotiate his surrender. Give me a break, Frank, will you?"

“Yeah, yeah.” The other man waved an apology. “I know. I’m just getting tired of being called out morning after morning. Four in a row now. My wife is giving me H about it.”

“Stay at your girlfriend’s,” Harry joked.

“Ha, ha, Harry. You’re an F-ing riot.”

“Hey, I barely saw my wife this morning.”

“Hmph!”

Harry gestured to the scene. “What do you have for me today?”

Frank led him around a corner to a small clearing. “A couple of youngsters out for a bit of late-night nookie. They’d gotten down to their underwear before...” He let his words trail off and pointed.

Although this was the fourth such scene he’d seen this week—and the second one in person and not through photos—Harry still had to control his revulsion. What used to be two kids barely out of their teens now could have been a still shot of a grade-B horror flick with amateurish special effects.

The bodies resembled boiled hams with chunks of flesh removed. Sections of skin bubbled with raw, inflamed blisters or lined with bloody scrapes. Their chests had caved in as if from fallen cement blocks. Each abdomen gaped open after being clawed or ripped apart.

Lots of blood soaked into the ground and more stained the pale purple lilacs. Harry averted his attention away from the slaughter, more to avoid staring than to survey the progress of the crime scene investigation. He suspected, as at the other murder sites, no clues such as fingerprints, footprints, fiber traces, tire tracks, or other forms of identification leading to a suspect would be found.

“Who are they?” Harry asked.

“Car in the parking lot is registered to a Joey McDaniel, Watrous Avenue address. ID in a purse left in the car during the aborted tryst shows the girl one Betty Hogg.”

Harry hiked his eyebrows.

“Don’t be an A, Harry. H-o-g-g.”

“Still. Hell of a name to grow up with.”

“No kidding,” Frank agreed.

“Place of residence?”

“Ten blocks from McDaniel.”

The homicide detective blew air. “Anything else you can tell me?”

“What do you think?”

“Zero, zilch, nada, nothing. Same as at the previous crime scenes.”

“Right first try. A big fat F-ing zero.” Frank moved to return to the vain search for evidence.

“You’ll have my report later today with the usual blank space listing all those clues we dug up.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, with a touch of sarcasm.

Frank gave a slight bow, then straightened up, and pulled out his watch. “We’re here only to serve up the very best, even if it turns out to be a bunch of HS.”

Harry paused a moment to decipher. He smiled and left Frank to continue looking for his horse shit.

The spring grass crunched under Harry’s shoes. He retraced his route back to the parking lot to not disturb any area not cleared by forensics. He stopped to gaze at the broad expanse of the park. From the crest, the long quarter mile of open space ran downhill to a tree-covered valley. Plenty of escape routes for whoever had committed this atrocity. A housing development and the complex design of Easter Park east of Indianola Avenue offered further options.

Before returning to business, Harry walked south along the avenue. Clusters of lilac bushes lined the perimeter of the park in no discernible pattern. He reached a certain point before facing northwest. There before him, the capital city rose from the horizon. Downtown buildings speared the sky—the Principal Building, with its forty-four stories, reigning supreme.

Harry contemplated the vista as he circled the lilacs. Crime scene techs had already cleared the area. This wasn’t Chicago, with endless urban sprawl. Rather, it reminded him of Atlanta seen from the air, with patches of city pushing up through the lush trees. A couple of rivers and several creeks lazily

wound through the city. They caused problems only when they overflowed their banks, closing off streets and threatening residences.

Des Moines and its suburbs covered the spectrum from wealthy to needy, conservative to liberal, respectable to kooky. Like New York, Harry could always find something of interest. Museums, theater, or a new production at the Civic Center. Even though those were more to Misty's taste, he went along because it made her happy. Every weekend it seemed there was an event along the riverfront or downtown. She dragged him to Art on the Square, the food festival, the farmers' market, or a new-age musician playing at Java Joe's coffee shop.

They both enjoyed Iowa Cubs baseball games and the Buccaneers at the hockey rink. Sticking a finger in the phone book to pick a restaurant. Spending a quiet afternoon picnicking at Union Park, or walking the Greenbelt Trail.

The grassy decline stretched to a single-lane strip of asphalt and a grove of trees. A maintenance truck jerked through gears on its way up the road. At the tree line, the supple, yet powerful, haunches of a young buck froze, wary because it detected a sound or movement. Then, quick as lightning, the animal disappeared with the faintest crunching underfoot.

People should die at home or in the hospital, not amid the peaceful atmosphere of a park. Harry loved being a cop. The job grew on him, and he grew on the job. He'd seen the city in the brightest lights and the darkest blacks, but he still craved the work. All homicides were tragic. Some worse than others. To track down the scumbag who took the life of another brought him satisfaction. Sure, he acted cynical and hard-nosed at times. Sure, he resisted change, but he got the job done.

He didn't want to enlarge his ego but damn it, Des Moines was his city, and someone—some Class A sicko—was running amok.

"I'm coming for you," he whispered. "I'll find you, you bastard, and when I do..."

He left the unspoken vow hanging, certain the city understood.

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Harry narrowed his eyes and studied the punk who'd discovered the bodies. He guessed a high school dropout, but Harry wondered what this goofball was doing out so early in the day, sniffing the lilacs with untied sneakers, no socks, ragged shorts, and a T-shirt with a faded imprint of a logo Harry deduced advertised a rock band. While he listened to the kid stutter and stammer through the routine questioning, Harry made a silent inquiry to a nearby officer. Unseen by the youth, the officer smiled and held up a plastic evidence bag containing a handful of joints.

Harry rolled his eyes. He hated punks and in his opinion, any kid between eight and twenty-two with even a hint of a shady countenance rated the title. He didn't mind shorts and T-shirts—Harry owned several of each—but there was a difference between looking casual but respectable even in knock-around clothes and looking like...well, a punk.

Starting five years ago, he deemed that *punk* was the best way to describe the ever-increasing number of dumb-ass bicyclists who ignored every traffic rule, pedestrians who disregarded oncoming traffic while crossing the street, those who giggled and/or spoke into cell phones in a movie theater, or any group of three or more who acted as if they owned a particular corner or doorway and wouldn't respect other pedestrians. How many times had he longed to stick out a foot and send sprawling the disrespectful runts who raced through the Skywalk system?

This particular punk in front of him wasn't his concern. Harry couldn't even remember the doofus's name. He'd let the officer handle the misdemeanor drug charge. Regarding Harry's case, the kid offered nothing substantive other than solid alibis for the dates of the other murders. Intuition told Harry the kid didn't possess the acumen nor the strength to have committed the horrendous crimes.

Before Harry returned to his car, he muttered an aside to the officer out of the punk's earshot. "I'd take him behind those Porta-Pottys over there and put my foot up his ass."

"I could 'accidentally' lock him in one of them for about three hours," the officer offered.

Harry grinned and nodded all the way back to the car.