

Prologue

After the guards had dragged the madman away, Jon hurried southwest from the piazza. He slipped into the first alley he could find to escape the orange glare of the torches that lit the Via de' Pecori. The small space stank of human and animal excrement, but he took deep breaths to calm himself.

Jon leaned back against the buildings that both hemmed him in and provided a moment of respite. The brick in the half-timbered walls was solid, but the wood already looked weathered and gray. He could hardly believe he had come back to this place. His fist struck against the cold clay as he reminded himself, *There is no other way!* He had to go through with it now.

Someone, or something, was rummaging through the debris piled at the end of the alley. Jon let his breath out slowly, then stepped back into the street.

To his left, the air over the piazza looked empty without the dome of the cathedral. He scanned to his right searching for movement, then headed west. Every doorway was a living creature in the dancing torchlight.

Jon ran through the streets until he found what he thought was the Via Nuova. *That's where the house should be.* Even though he had memorized the map, it had all looked so different six hundred years earlier.

The January night air was cold, but Jon still sweated underneath the wool robe. He searched frantically down the narrow lane, hoping to find a goldsmith's shop. At this late hour, many merchants were beginning to close, or had already shuttered. That made it almost impossible to figure out what they sold.

Jon approached the most likely building based on the well-kept exterior. When he inspected the name above the door, he knew he had found it: *Bartolo di Michele*. The only question now was whether he had the right date.

Chapter 1

Jon would realize later that the missing keys were only the beginning, but right at that moment he just wanted to get moving. He was going to be late for his bike ride with Kim, and this was one relationship he did not want to mess up.

Jon was sure he had left the keys on the hallway table after coming home from the Blue Door Bar the night before, and now they were nowhere to be found. Maybe he could have dropped them somewhere else on his way to bed? Even with the long walk home after four or five drafts, anything was possible. He probably should have left after just one. *But it tastes so much better on draft...*

Out of desperation he started looking through the kitchen drawers. *Plastic wrap, cooking utensils, junk...* Jon slammed each drawer closed in quick succession, starting to believe the search was useless. Finally, the red fob of the key ring flashed out from the drawer of silverware, mocking him for all the time he had wasted. “How in the world...” He downed two aspirin for his hangover and a glass of orange juice for the rest of his body. Glancing out the window, he donned a pair of sunglasses as a precaution.

Now that Jon was in his early forties, he generally tried to take better care of himself than he had in the past. He cooked better and ate less sugar, but draft beer was his last remaining vice. *Maybe I should give it up?* He glanced in the hallway mirror and brushed back his black hair with one hand. The strands of gray were starting to become more prominent. *Certainly not getting any younger.*

With his long legs and tall frame, it only took Jon a few steps before he was on the porch and locking the door with the elusive keys. The day was sunny and warm, and his mood improved greatly. The daffodils by

the stoop were blooming where they profited from the few extra degrees of heat retained by the hunk of cement. A nice spring day in Michigan was such a rarity, especially on a weekend in March. He needed to take advantage of it while he had the chance.

Jon mounted a silver Peugeot bicycle and strapped on his helmet with the same half smile that got him through most stressful situations. *Covers the gray hair. Maybe she won't notice.* A couple of powerful pedals and he was on his way up Fourth Street.

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He was only a few minutes late, but Kim was already sitting on her porch steps. She rested her head on her knees so that her brunette ponytail almost touched the sidewalk. Her slender arms were still white from the long winter indoors, but the blue tank top she was wearing would get her started on her tan.

Jon squealed the back tire on his bike as he stopped in front of her townhouse. It was both cool and, he hoped, showed his eagerness to see her.

Kim lifted her head quickly at the sound, startled, then smiled. "Thought maybe you'd overslept, old man." She stood and slipped her sunglasses under her helmet straps. "After all that beer last night, didn't know if you were going to make it."

Jon snorted and shook his head. "Couldn't pass up an opportunity to see you." He leaned over on his bike and kissed her, but he left the sunglasses on in case his eyes were still red. The coconut smell of Coppertone rising from her shoulders reminded him that he was probably going to burn before the day was out. "Now, let's see if you can keep up." Jon stood on the pedals and pulled out into Franklin Street. He heard Kim shout "Cheater!" at his back as he sped away, but he knew she would catch up. Compared to her, he was an old man.

Chapter 2

It was Jon's turn to train the new guy, and he was not looking forward to it. Being a government employee was not all that exciting to start with. Spending his time mentoring someone was not going to add to his enjoyment. And, as if that were not bad enough, they had the same name. Well, not quite the same, but John Smith was pretty close to Jon Smith. There were bound to be jokes.

Jon had discovered early in life that having a common name can be a real hassle, especially when it is the one used as an example on all the forms. It is like being named Jane Doe. He could have been named John Doe, actually. Jon had been dropped off at the hospital as a baby; no one ever saw who left him there. The State had named him John Smith, and he was brought up in foster homes. Another generic child in the system trying to figure out who he was.

Jon had gotten his fill of it in school and decided to at least change it a little, from John to Jon, hoping for a few less jokes. It did not help much.

Even the Russian man who owned the deli on the corner of Mason and Biddle was named John Smith. Through the wonders of the United States' immigration system, his family's former unpronounceable Slavic name had been changed fifty years ago to Smith by some other civil servant. His grandfather had kept it to show respect for his new country. How many more J. Smiths was he bound to run across in his lifetime? There were more than ten in the phonebook at any time, and that was only in East Rapids.

To top it all off, Jon could not have been any more different than the new guy. Jon fancied himself as being laid back and adaptable, while John was about as high-strung as they came. It was going to be a long couple of weeks while he trained this one.

“Any new prospects on the job search?” Randy’s tie draped over his ample belly as he dropped himself into the guest chair in Jon’s cubicle, coffee cup in his massive hand. This morning’s attempts at covering his balding forehead with his few remaining brown locks were not any more successful than the previous efforts.

“Nothing so far. Looks like you’re stuck with me for a while yet.” Jon lifted one eyebrow. “Any new prospects on the girlfriend search?”

“Yeah, you’re so funny...” Randy sneered playfully, then his hazel eyes flashed. “So you get to train the new guy.” He emitted a whistle through the gap in his teeth as he shifted in the chair, trying for a more comfortable position. As usual, he was apparently planning to stay a while. “Heard he’s a real piece of work. But with the same name, you two will be just like brothers!” Randy snickered as he slurped his coffee; seemed he could not resist the opportunity to rub it in.

“Thanks for the sympathy.” Jon spun his chair away from Randy and back to the old Pentium II computer that clogged his desk. Maybe Randy would take the hint and let Jon get something done before John showed up.

“Ready to go, Jon?”

The voice grated on Jon’s nerves as John Smith stuck his head in, catching them by surprise. They could not see him coming since John did not stand any taller than the cubicle wall. Randy almost spilled his coffee in an attempt to flee.

“I hear we’re going to be spending some time together. I’ve got a lot of new ideas! And I already talked to Mr. Schrantz about some! I’ll tell you all about it on the way.” He was way too excited to be a bureaucrat.

“Great...” Jon slowly got up and put the strap of his briefcase over his shoulder. By the time he turned around, John was already down the hallway. *Unbelievable how fast that little guy can move.*

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On his way home that night, Jon stopped in at the deli. The sign in the window just said “Good Food,” and it was right. A pleasant odor of spiced meats teased his nose as he opened the door and his mouth began to water.

“Ey, Jon!” The booming voice came from the mustachioed man behind the counter, dragging Jon’s attention away from the columns of hanging sausages.

“Hi, John.” It was their standard joke, and Jon sometimes got a little tired of it. John came from a long line of Russian butchers and grew up speaking his mother tongue in the Slavic enclave of Hamtramck. Watching him slice meat with a huge Gerber knife instead of a machine was like watching an artist paint a picture. “You’ll never guess who I met today. Yet another John Smith.”

“We have enough of them around here already, no?” John continued slicing the meat without even looking at it. It was amazing that he still had all his fingers.

Jon became distracted with staring at the menu of poorly arranged white plastic letters on black ribbing hanging behind the counter, trying to decide whether to try something new. “That’s the truth. Maybe we should start a club or something.”

A hearty laugh filled the whole deli. “Sure. We get jackets and everything. Maybe we even ride motorcycles.” John deftly stacked the sliced meat in a metal tray.

Jon gave the Russian a half smile and laughed along with him. He never knew if this man was serious or not. “How about we start with my usual Italian sub and go from there. Extra olives, no onion.” At least this John was better at sharing a moment than the one he would be seeing every day of the workweek.

Chapter 3

The first time Jon would later recall its happening was on a Thursday night, the first full week of April, after an especially long day of work. It probably was not the first time it had happened, but this time was different. Anyone might think he sees something in the shadows once in a while. But this was real.

Jon had been lying awake for three, maybe four hours at that point. There had to be something more to life than a dead-end government job...*that sucks the life outta ya*...and Jon was determined to find it. But his search into the private sector was not going well, and his mind raced against his will trying to dream up different ways to get the ball rolling. Images of resumes and web sites forced their way past his closed lids and into his mind's eye. So far, there was no interest in a middle-aged bureaucrat, even if he was only early middle-aged. *What else can I do?*

All the thinking had given him a headache.

He rolled over and stared at the clock, its red numbers glowing 3:30. *At least it's Friday; people hardly do any work on Friday.* Most folks would be trying to leave as early as possible anyway.

Jon kicked the burgundy comforter off his legs and swung them over the edge of the bed. He pulled himself up and ran a hand through his black hair. "I've gotta get some sleep," he muttered.

Grabbing the bottle of aspirin off the top of the dresser, Jon headed naked into the kitchen. The beige tile was cold on his bare feet. It was a clear night and the waxing moon shone in through the windows over the sink. No need even to turn on the light. He let the water run until it was cool and drew a tall glass.

What was that? Jon thought he heard a noise in the hallway. He stood listening with the glass in one hand and the aspirin in the other.

The clock in the living room chimed 3:45. He must have been hearing things. Looking back at the aspirin in his hand, he tossed the pills down, gulped some water and dumped the rest into the sink. Shaking his head, he watched the liquid spin down the drain in the moonlight. He was still not going to be able to sleep. Jon turned to go back to the bedroom, reaching out to set the glass on the counter.

That was when he saw it. The glass slipped out of his hand and shattered on the hard tile. A human shape moved past the door. Not solid, but not shadow either. Barely the outline of a man, with only hints of skin showing in the faint light. But it looked almost...familiar. Jon shivered as his skin prickled. With a start, he sidestepped the broken glass and moved cautiously out of the kitchen toward the hall. *Was he seeing things? Was he crazy?* Something had to be there, but he was not sure he wanted to find out what.

He peeked nervously around the corner. It was there again, moving into the bathroom. A bit of shoulder and a leg disappeared through the doorway. *There was something! Was someone in the house?* He was sure he had locked the doors; it was part of his nightly routine. Gently, he stole nearer the bathroom, careful not to make any noise on the hallway's wooden floor.

Standing with his bare back to the cool wall beside the door, Jon could not imagine what he might see. His mind raced with the possibilities. He took a deep breath, spun around the doorframe and...nothing. The bathroom was empty.

He turned on the light and checked behind the shower curtain. No one was there. He stepped back to the door and crossed his arms. In all its white starkness, not even a shadow could hide in the tiny room. *But...there had been something, hadn't there?*

Jon grabbed his robe off the back of the bathroom door and went through the apartment room-by-room, turning on lights and checking closets. Only the familiar still unopened boxes of books from his last move hid in their depths. But no intruders were there.

Heading back down the hall, he glanced into the bathroom. What had he expected? An image, probably from some old horror flick, flashed through his mind. That did it. There was no going to sleep at that point.

He dropped on the couch and turned on the television, the click and hum as it sprang to life holding out the hope of a classic action movie he had already watched a hundred times before.

Chapter 4

“Do you believe in ghosts?” Jon spun around and shot the question at Randy who had dropped himself into the guest chair for another morning vigil.

Waking up on the couch after a few hours of intermittent sleep with the lights on, Jon had pondered whether to call in sick. What was he going to accomplish today anyway? After the mandatory hour of Randy’s morning visit, he would have to endure the newest of John’s good ideas. In the end, his work ethic had won out over his fatigue.

“Ghosts? Are you serious?” Randy had not gotten to his coffee yet, and he blinked his eyes as if checking to make sure he was awake. The cup dangled so loosely in his hand the brown liquid threatened to spill out onto his khakis.

“Is that a ‘Yes’ or a ‘No?’”

“Not since I was a kid, Jon, and even then only during the right times of the year. Mom only had one kid to dress up for Halloween.” Randy slurped too much of the hot coffee and cursed as he burned his tongue. “Why?”

“It’s just...I saw something in my apartment last night. Not once, but twice. When I was standing in the kitchen and again in the hallway.” Jon tried to be as convincing as he could, considering how absurd the story must have sounded. “I know you’re going to say I was seeing things in the shadows. But it seemed different.”

“What time was it?” Randy swirled his coffee trying to get the sugar off the bottom of the cup.

“About three-thirty. I was up late worrying about my job search. Having John around has given me a whole new reason to find another place to work.” Jon rolled his eyes and chuckled while easing back in his chair.

“Were you eating pizza right before bed again?” Randy had finally gotten enough of the coffee in him that he was starting to wake up. The stains on his blue and red striped tie showed it had not been easy.

Jon had to admit that he had given in to the temptation of the cold pizza setting in the fridge. It was, after all, the world’s greatest snack.

“You eat pizza late, then lie awake until three-thirty, and you wonder why you’re seeing things? I’m surprised you’re even here this morning.” Randy yawned and stretched his legs out across the cubicle, settling in for the morning, his khakis riding high up above his shoes.

“So am I,” Jon said to himself. He closed his eyes and leaned back as Randy started outlining his plans for watching television that weekend.

Chapter 5

Friday night at last. The semi-successful completion of another week of mindless mediocrity. But Jon always told himself that you work with what you have and try your best to change it when you can. So right now he was looking forward to spending some time with Kim.

Kim was the only thing that kept Jon going these days. They were to meet up at the Blue Door and listen to some live music. The place was always loud and filled with smoke, but the beer was good. Pictures of other blue doors from around the world decorated the walls, contributions from traveling patrons. Jon had contributed one himself from his trip to Egypt. Randy always said he was going bring a photo back too, if he ever went somewhere.

Tonight's band was an '80s cover group. Most of the guys on stage were older than Jon and probably worked desk jobs all day. But they seemed to be enjoying themselves. In a small way they had found something that gave them a place in their world.

Maybe Jon had too. He had been watching the door since he arrived and at last Kim came through it. She smiled and waved when she spotted him. Her black slacks and blazer meant she had come right from the office. She was working late again, even on a Friday. As an engineer, she had a much brighter future than Jon ever would as a geologist. He tried not to think about the implications.

Even after a long day of work she smelled good, a hint of Coco Chanel mixing with the scent of her hair. Jon stood to kiss her when she reached the table and then helped her into a chair. His feeble attempts at chivalry might not be much, but it was what he had to offer. Kim was ten years younger than he, and Jon always worried about keeping her interested. They had met on one of Jon's projects; her firm won the

contract. It had taken him six months to work up the nerve to ask her out. Things had been going well, and now they were seeing each other exclusively.

Kim's athletic figure gave evidence that she was not much of a beer drinker, but she seemed willing to indulge Jon's taste for a good draft, only not too often. "Are you feeling okay?" Tossing her brunette hair over her shoulder, she leaned her chin on one hand and analyzed him, squinting her green eyes. Her light Irish skin was almost flawless, save for a small mole high on her right cheek. "You seem distracted, and that's not allowed when I'm in the room."

Her grin melted away some of the day's tension. Jon ran a hand through his black hair and smiled back. "Sorry, I had a rough night. Didn't sleep well." After the razzing he had taken from Randy earlier that day, Jon was reluctant to discuss the events of the night before, or rather, earlier that morning, with the woman he was still trying to impress. Jon never felt that he really deserved her, and the last thing he needed was for Kim to start wondering about his stability. This relationship was what he needed to pull him out of the slump he had been in since his divorce a few years back. Jon wanted to keep it that way.

"Things not going well with the job search?"

Her look changed from analysis to genuine concern so quickly that Jon's heart warmed. She knew what bothered him, what would keep him up at night, how much he needed the change. Pretty soon, she would probably know him better than he knew himself. *Maybe this is the one...*

"Not really." Jon shook his head and reached across the table, rubbing her hand gently. It looked delicate, but he could feel her strength. Kim hardly ever painted her fingernails; he liked that. "My mind wouldn't let me forget it last night. I kept trying to figure out what I might be overlooking."

"Don't worry about it so much." Kim reached across the table and laid her hand gently on his cheek. "You'll find something when the time is right." Then she playfully gave him a gentle slap. "Now drink your beer and forget it for the weekend. We have better things to do."

The coy grin on her face made his heart jump, and he forgot all about his job problems. She was very good for him.

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Jon's head started to ache as they walked back to Kim's townhouse later that night. Maybe it was a combination of the lack of sleep and too many drafts. But he also had an odd sensation that something was not right. The buzzing of the sodium bulbs in the streetlights was almost overwhelming along the deserted streets. He placed his hand gently in the middle of Kim's back and extended his stride.

Under a lamppost on Franklin, a man wearing a long coat approached them walking rapidly in the opposite direction. The slap of his shoes on the cement caught Jon's ears before he could even see the man's shape. He was short, and as he came within the glow of the light, the man flipped up his collar. Jon barely caught a glimpse of dark eyes beneath his hat as they passed one another.

Jon's skin prickled and he stole a glance over his shoulder at the man's back. Although the coat looked a bit odd, it was still early enough in the year to be cool at night. No, it was not the man's clothes that bothered him. Jon felt rather as if someone...no *something* else was walking down the same street, something that should not be there. He tried to discreetly survey the area.

Kim caught him looking. "What's wrong?" She scanned along the opposite sidewalk.

"Uh, nothing. Why?" He grabbed her hand and stared straight ahead, trying not to focus on anything in particular.

"You're looking around like we're being stalked." He glanced down and her green eyes caught his with an amused sparkle. "You think someone's following us?" She squeezed his hand and smiled humorously, her gaze roaming along the houses on the tree-lined street. "Some people here don't even lock their doors."

The gentle curve of Kim's lips was perfect. "No...it was nothing. I've had a long day." He gave her a quick hug to distract her.

"Well, thank God the week's over. Let's go upstairs and *not* get some sleep." Kim unlocked her door with one hand, then playfully pulled him through with the other.

After his experience last night, he would definitely have a better time at her place than his own. Jon did a quick check of the street before stepping through the doorway. *Nothing*. The man in the coat was gone. He did not see anyone else.

Standing inside the entry, he rubbed his temples. It felt better. Kim threw her keys on a small, round cherry table at the base of the stairs and headed up.

Jon turned to close the door and through the glass caught sight of what looked like...*what was it? A large dog staring out from behind the bushes across the street?* He leaned forward and squinted through the window. The animal was hard to see. *No, not a dog...the legs were too long, and the eyes...there was something.* He could swear it was a wolf! It turned and disappeared through a hedge of lilac.

“You coming?” Kim called from the bedroom.

He glanced one last time out through the door. *Whatever...* he cleared his head and climbed the carpeted stairs two at a time.

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“You ever think about the future?” Kim mumbled sleepily as she lay face down, naked, the white cotton sheet and purple blanket thrown down off the foot of the bed. Although the night air was chilly, it was hot enough inside the room that they had left the window open for the first time that spring. A single vanilla-scented candle fought against the light breeze to remain lit. Ella and Louis started singing “The Nearness of You” from the CD player/alarm clock on the dresser.

Jon rolled up on one elbow and brushed the hair off her back. “Not so much as the past.” He sighed. He rubbed her neck gently and started working his way down her back. Her skin was still slightly moist from their recent exertions. The curve of her hips glowed temptingly in the soft candlelight.

“Mmm...that’s nice.” Without opening her eyes she reached out a hand and laid it in the crook of his elbow. “You read too much history, hon. Think about...where you’re going...instead. That’s what’s important.” Her voice started drifting off. “...great hands...”

Jon ran two fingers down either side of her spine, then back up along the groove in the center. “But you know what they say, ‘Those who forget their past are bound to repeat it,’” he let out a breath, “or something like that.” As Ella and Louis neared the end of the song, the first of the spring peepers joined them for the last verse. “Besides, the future seems inevitable. What can you do about it? I mean, my whole job thing...”

Kim’s breathing was soft and shallow. She was exhausted after the long week, and here he was, babbling on about himself. Jon rolled back onto the pillow and laid an arm across his forehead. *Idiot!* He drifted off as the duo started singing “April in Paris.”

The sound of the CD head shifting to its resting position brought Jon back awake. It was chilly in the room, but he did not feel like getting up to shut the window. He reached down and pulled up the sheet; the blanket was too far on the floor. Spreading it across Kim’s back, he slid over next to her to share his body heat.

“Thanks...” she whispered, and cuddled up against his chest. He wrapped an arm around her and breathed in the scent of her hair. *The present seems pretty good*, he thought.

Something might have howled in the distance as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 6

“There haven’t been any wolves in this part of the state in years. What makes you think it was a wolf?”

Jon had called an old friend of his who worked at the wildlife office, just to verify whether he really could have seen what he thought he had the other night.

It was Monday again, start of another week. Jon had been thinking about the wolf in the back of his mind all weekend. He hoped to avoid the morning routine with Randy by being on the phone first thing. Besides, the wildlife guys never stayed in the office any longer than necessary.

“It seemed too tall and lanky for a dog. The way it stared, I could swear it was stalking me...and not for a pat on the head or a dog treat either, Ken.” Jon’s voice cracked a bit as he retold the story. Seemed it had upset him more than he thought. “But, to be honest, I didn’t really get a good look at it. Guess it was kind of dark, the way it just blended into the bushes and disappeared.”

“Well, you must have just seen a big dog.” His friend must have noticed that the experience had bothered him more than he would say. He could hear the voice coming over the phone level out as Ken tried to reassure him. Jon knew wildlife officers ended up doing that a lot. “As much as I’d like to find a wolf around here, I don’t think the first sighting is going to be of one walking down your girlfriend’s street.”

Jon sighed and scratched the back of his head. “You’re right, Ken, it must have been a dog. Thanks. Sorry to bother you.” He tried to sound more convinced than he actually was. *Ken’s just being honest.*

Still, Ken had to get in one last jibe. “But feel free to call me next time you see a threatened species walking down the street. Maybe it

will be a panther.” Jon knew the supposed panther sighting was, unfortunately, all too common in Michigan. Ken’s voice lost its serious tone as he started snorting before he even got to the end of the sentence.

Jon deserved that, and he probably would have done the same to Ken, given the opportunity. It did make him smile a little. “I’ll do that.” He tried to sound as sarcastic as he could, but he could still hear Ken laughing as he hung up the phone.

Turning around in his chair, Jon jumped when he found a pair eyes looking at him. Randy had already slipped into Jon’s cubicle and taken his place in the guest chair, coffee mug in hand. He had been surprisingly quiet for a guy who appeared otherwise rather clumsy. “What’d you see?”

Great. How much had he heard? “Uh, nothing. Just a big dog.” Jon needed no more chiding after the ghost story last week. “How was your weekend?”

Randy liked talking about himself. The diversion worked. “Well...” But just then John’s blond head appeared around the cubicle wall.

“I’ve got some great ideas for cleaning up that plating site in Adrian, Jon. I even reserved us a conference room so I can go over them with you.”

“Sounds good.” Jon scrambled to get out of his chair. Randy’s jaw dropped in disbelief and Jon chuckled silently. He would try to keep John’s input to a minimum and hope Randy would be gone by the time he got back.

As he walked to the conference room with John’s voice trailing off into the distance, Jon’s mind drifted back to the sight of the wolf. *Why couldn’t I get a clear look at it? Almost a full moon. The street was bright. I could see Kim’s smile...* but the wolf had seemed weird, fuzzy, almost transparent. He tried to shrug it off.

Then again, maybe it was that last draft of beer.

Chapter 7

Wednesday night; hump day was over. The week was more than halfway gone and Jon was that much closer to another weekend with Kim. A perfect night for just kicking back and relaxing.

The mission style furniture was more aesthetically pleasing than it was comfortable, but Jon did his best to settle himself on the couch with a book. Most of the books on his shelves considered some period of history—generally ancient, medieval or renaissance. This time he had found a good one on how Filippo Brunelleschi had managed in the 15th century to build a dome over Santa Maria del Fiore, otherwise known as El Duomo, a cathedral in Florence, Italy. It was an amazing architectural feat, especially for that time in history. For hundreds of years it had held its place as the largest masonry dome in the world. Whenever he read a book like this Jon longed to have been an architect instead of a geologist. But with his luck, he would have ended up building fast food joints instead of monuments that would last for centuries.

The setting sun slipped its last red rays in through the wood blinds and across the couch before it disappeared for the day. Two hours had passed as Jon devoured the first chapters. Glancing at the bronze face of the clock, he was surprised at how the time had flown. He also realized that an incredible headache had snuck up on him while he read. He rubbed his temples to ease the throbbing.

It was difficult to focus on the clock with the pain. *Do I need glasses?* Jon had never needed glasses and always hoped that he never would. But as much as he hated to admit it, he was getting older. Maybe he should have his eyes checked. “With my luck, I’ll probably need bifocals.” He sat up and paused on the edge of the cushion. *What would*

Kim think of that? Jon grimaced and hauled himself off the couch, intent on finding some aspirin.

He passed the hall on his way from the living room to the kitchen. Casually, almost accidentally, he glanced toward the bedroom and instantly stopped in his tracks. Coming out of the doorway was another man.

Time froze, but his thoughts kicked into high gear. *Are the doors locked? Does he want to steal something? Does he have a gun? What's he doing here?* All the lights were off except the one in the living room where he had been reading. The hallway was dark. But he was not just seeing things this time. Someone was standing at the other end of the hall!

Jon's mind raced with the possibilities, then he noticed something even more bizarre. Even in the dim light he could see that the man stared back at him, looking as startled and scared as Jon felt. He tried to focus, but the image was blurry. This man seemed strangely familiar, about his own height and build, dark eyes, dark hair. *He looks like me!*

Time started moving again. Jon realized he had to do something. He found the courage to start down the hallway and opened his mouth to shout, "Get out of here!" But as he began yelling the man simply vanished.

Flashes of light seared Jon's vision as his headache flared. He put one hand to his forehead and tried to turn toward the kitchen. Then he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Chapter 8

Jon awoke slowly to the sounds of public radio coming from the bedroom. Morning light streamed through the kitchen window, past the mottled brown countertops, and across the beige tile. He was still on the floor and had no idea what he was doing there. He tried to sit up, but his muscles were stiff from sleeping on the hard wood.

Suddenly, his head cleared and the events of the night before flooded back to him. With a start, he rolled onto his knees and looked up and down the hallway. Nothing. No one and no evidence that anyone had been there. Just as last week, he cautiously searched every room in the apartment and every closet.

Jon briefly considered calling the police to report the incident, but dismissed the notion as quickly. All the doors were still locked and none of the windows were broken. Nothing appeared to be missing. No one had rummaged through any of the drawers. What would he tell them to look at? *I don't need rumors spreading around town that I'm seeing things*. It was not a small town, but it was not a big one either, and he did not want any odd stories somehow finding their way back to Kim.

Jon leaned against the dresser and worked his toes into the thick beige carpet in the bedroom. His head still pounded from the headache and he rubbed his temples. *Maybe I'll call in sick today*...no, the distraction of having somewhere to go and something to do was probably a good idea. Better for him than staying in the apartment, wondering what had happened the night before.

He turned on the shower and climbed in, making sure the water was especially hot.

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Randy was already in the guest chair when Jon wandered into the office a little later than usual.

“Man, are you all right?” Randy frowned as he considered Jon’s disheveled appearance. Usually, Jon was careful about how he dressed. This morning he looked a little like Randy after a long weekend in front of the television. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

The remark caught Jon by surprise, and he turned on Randy ready to kick him out of the chair. But the glint of Randy’s eyes over the coffee cup told him it was just more chiding from the week before. “Ha, ha.” Jon tried to sound friendly despite feeling irritable. “Just another rough night.” *Like you wouldn’t believe.*

“I guess so. Not used to seeing you going to the Blue Door in the middle of the week. Bad form for an upstanding civil servant. One too many beers?” Randy laughed and sank deeper into the chair.

“What are you talking about?” Jon was completely puzzled by Randy’s suggestion. He dropped into his chair and started sorting through the new stack of papers that had appeared on his desk that morning.

“I was coming down Main about eight-thirty last night and I saw you walking into the bar. Don’t recall ever seeing you go on a Wednesday night before.” Randy slurped more of the coffee. “I thought about stopping to join you. But I was late getting over to my mom’s; she was cooking me dinner. Gotta love that spaghetti.” A satisfied grin crept over Randy’s ample jowl.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Jon continued shuffling the papers, hoping for once Randy would leave before nine a.m. Realizing that was not likely to happen, he spun around in his chair and tried to focus as clearly as he could. “I stayed home and read my new book last night. Okay? You must’ve seen someone that looked like me.”

Randy’s coffee cup remained suspended halfway between his belly and his mouth. Jon’s face contorted in what was meant to be a smile to ease the tension that had appeared; it made his head throb. “Hey, I enjoy

a good draft as much as the next guy. But I try to keep it to the weekends. Don't want to form any bad habits, you know."

"Right...and that's why you look like you've been dragged behind a truck." Randy got up to leave the cubicle, his light blue shirt filling the entrance. He turned back for a moment, frowning and with his eyebrows scrunched up. "Maybe you need to start drinking coffee in the morning." Randy left and walked down the hall.

Jon could hear him slurping the hot coffee as he went and felt a little bad for hurting his feelings.

"Hey, Jon. I've gotta talk to you about some ideas I have for the Matco Landfill project!" John's shrill voice snapped him back to reality. It was like he just materialized in the doorway.

*Not this morning...*Jon ran a hand across his forehead and up through his hair. Maybe he did need to drink something.

Chapter 9

Jon breathed deeply and arched his back as he glided along on his bike in the warm spring weather. The air was moist and smelled of damp earth. He caught a whiff of cut grass from an anxious lawn warrior who could not wait any longer. *Perfect*, he thought. It had been an especially long, dreary winter, and Jon was ready for summer. Now the days were getting longer, and he was determined to enjoy every minute.

Throughout the day he had been thinking about different trips Kim and he could take that year: kayaking in Canada, theater in New York, maybe even Italy. *Wouldn't that be something!* So even though he had taken the long route, it was more than coincidental that his random ride ended up in her part of town. Jon decided to drop by and surprise her. They could bounce some of his ideas around and see where she would like to go.

The sun was already starting to go down as he rode his bike up Franklin Street. Windows in the houses flashed to life as families turned on their lights. It was amazing how many people did not think to close the curtains. He could see them sitting down to dinner, mothers and fathers with their children. *What would it have been like to have a real family?* Yellow stripes disappeared under his tires as he rode faster.

The road ahead was growing dimmer as the trees filtered out the last of the sun. If he stopped by Kim's place, he would end up riding home in the dark. *No problem*. She would give him a ride; a good excuse to spend a little extra time with her.

Jon rolled his head left and then right, trying to stretch his neck. Leaning forward on the handlebars was started to give him a headache.

After two more blocks, he spotted her building. The lights were already on in her townhouse, and, sure enough, the curtains were open.

Two people were in the living room, Kim and a blond-haired man. Jon had to squint to see them clearly. *Who's that? Someone from work? Doesn't have a brother that I know of...* not only did he not recognize the man, Kim looked odd too. Her long hair was cut short, only down to her shoulders. "Why'd she do that?"

They embraced, with a long passionate kiss, way too long for a friendly relationship. "Shit!" *She's seeing someone else.* Jon thought they had agreed to be exclusive. Had Kim changed her mind? Maybe he was too old for her? Next they were at the door, saying their goodbyes, and then the man turned to leave.

At the same moment he caught a movement from the second floor, a flash of white against the deep red brick. The curtains to Kim's bedroom opened. She was framed by the window, her long hair in a ponytail hanging over her shoulder. "That was quick!" *How had she gotten upstairs so fast? And her hair...* by the time he glanced back down to the street, the strange man was gone and the first floor looked empty. "Dammit!"

* * * * *

Jon sat sideways on the seat of his bike, feet on the curb, watching the sky turn red. He needed to cool off. He locked his hands behind his head, pulling forward and down to ease the pain from riding. *What the hell was that all about?*

The sun disappeared and the streetlights started coming on. Along the sidewalk, a man jogged, his dog pulling on the leash trying to sniff every tree. Two women walked arm in arm and laughed. In the small park on the corner, a man in a black coat caught Jon's attention. He was simply sitting on a bench feeding the pigeons. Jon briefly lifted one eyebrow. He could not place the man, but he looked familiar. Jon shook his head, then looked back at Kim's townhouse.

All thoughts of summer trips were gone. He was not sure what to do about what he had just seen. Should he ask her? Would she think he was

too jealous? Or worse, that he was crazy? After all, she still had the right to see other men if she wanted to; they were not engaged. But it hurt to think that she might be losing interest in him. He had to find out what it was all about. *Maybe it's nothing.* Jon walked his bike across the street knowing that was unlikely.

He leaned the bike against the iron fence in front of Kim's building and dragged himself up the steps. The bright green leaves of an ivy wound their way up and over the white doorway, their new growth heralding spring. Two knocks and he heard Kim coming down the stairs.

She opened the door, not with a look of embarrassment, but, instead, with a genuine smile. She seemed glad to see him. "What are you doing here?" Kim reached up and tapped on his plastic helmet. "Hey, are you riding your bike in the dark? You know I worry when you do that." Even though the words were motherly, she smiled as she said them.

"I just kind of ended up here." Jon avoided her gaze and rocked back and forth on his heels, hands in the pockets of his biking shorts. He wanted to ask her, but, at the same time, he was ashamed of himself for needing to know.

Kim shrugged. "That's fine by me. I was just upstairs reading. Another exciting evening for a hot single woman." She laughed and opened the door wider for him to come in. Jon took off his helmet and stepped through the door.

It must have been obvious by the look on his face that something was wrong, because her smile started fading. "Everything okay? You're not hurt, are you?" Her eyes scanned him for injuries.

Jon stared down at his helmet, slipping the strap back and forth through the buckle. "Were you just in here with someone?"

There was a sharp intake of breath from Kim. "What?" she asked.

"It's just...I was outside on my bike, and I thought...but it was just getting dark, so it was hard to see...but I thought I saw you kissing some man...but your hair was short." It was coming out all garbled, making him sound like an idiot. His emotions kept rearranging the words and he could not fix them. "I just thought I saw you kissing some man, and then he left...but it must have just been me...I don't

know...seeing things...” He wanted to make excuses for her. Still, it sounded harsh, even to him, and he felt slightly nauseous. He studied the cracks in the wood, hoping there was another explanation. When he could finally look up at her, the hurt expression on Kim’s face was worse than he had imagined it might be. His stomach sank even further.

She had one hand up to her mouth, hugging herself with the other arm. Her head shook as she looked straight at him. Kim was not one to lash out in anger. She was not even mad. Instead there were tears in the corners of her eyes. “What kind of person do you think I am, Jon? I promised to see only you. Do you think I’d break that promise?”

“No, I...”

Kim threw up her hands. “I can’t believe you’d accuse me of such a thing. I’ve been here, alone, all evening. And I’ve been up in my bedroom for at least an hour, reading.” She leaned her head down and wiped her eyes. “I don’t know what you’re trying to accomplish with an accusation like this, but I think you’d better go.”

She stepped around him and held the door open even wider than before. Her feelings were hurt, and Jon did not blame her one bit. His stomach tightened into a ball.

“I’m...sorry.” It was the lamest apology Jon had ever heard. He tried to take the blame on himself. “It must have been my imagination. I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m just so afraid of losing you.”

Kim must have heard the desperation in his voice. But all she could manage at that moment was, “Then trust me.”

He hoped to kiss her before he left, but she leaned back and turned her head. The muscles in her jaw and neck stiffened. Cold steel in his gut would have been easier to take.

He was almost out the door when she caught him by the shoulder. She straightened herself and cleared her throat. “I saw Randy downtown after work today. He said he saw you going into the Blue Door last night. In the middle of the week, Jon?”

“Really. It wasn’t me!” It did not sound convincing, even to him.

She took a step back and placed a hand on the door. “You’re taking your job search a little too seriously. The way you’re acting tonight...I think it’s starting to affect you, or something is. If you need help, get it,

or talk to me. Just don't start hanging out at the bar in the middle of the week. All right?"

"I promise," he said with a weak protest in his voice. The only sound as the door closed was the latch clicking into place. There was no goodbye.

He stepped down to the street and grabbed his bike. The night smelled of rotten leaves. Had he really seen something? Or was he losing it?

Over his shoulder, Kim watched him through the window, shaking her head.

I really screwed that one up. He walked on alone in the dark.

Chapter 10

“I think I’m losing my mind.” Jon sat in his chair staring at the floor as Randy sauntered into his cubicle the next morning.

“What’d you do now?” Randy sank into the guest chair, coffee cup in hand as always. His tone of voice indicated that he expected Jon had done something really stupid this time.

Jon related the story of what had happened the evening before without ever taking his eyes off the blue carpet squares. “I biked over to Kim’s place last night, and I thought I saw her through the window kissing some guy. But I couldn’t quite see them, and her hair was short...” The chair squeaked as Randy shifted his bulk. “And then I went and asked her about it, but she got really upset. I don’t blame her, though...but I just wanted to know.” He paused a moment to chew his lip. “Wouldn’t you have asked?” When he was done, Jon looked up at Randy, hoping for some sympathy.

He had sat up and was leaning over on the edge of the desk. “You are one world class idiot!” Randy shook his head back and forth and rolled his eyes. “There is no way Kim is seeing other men. You must have been seeing reflections in the window or something.”

“But it seemed so real! I saw him open the door and then...” Jon looked back down at the carpet and cocked his head. *What had happened next?* “Guess I never did see him go down the street.” Now he was starting to doubt himself.

For the first time Jon could remember, Randy had a genuinely serious look on his face. “I’m concerned about you, Jon.” His voice was soft. He never knew Randy’s voice could be so soft. “First that ghost thing in your apartment last week, and now this.” Jon was really glad he had not mentioned the incident from the night before last, or about seeing the wolf...

“And the worst part is that you think it’s all real. You do, don’t you?” Randy leaned further forward over the work surface. His brow was knit, as if he could somehow see into Jon’s head and was trying to figure out what was going on there.

Jon had to admit that what Randy said made sense. “It sure seemed real.” He stared at the blue cloth walls surrounding him, searching for answers. “But it couldn’t have been. I must’ve been seeing things.” Jon started chewing on the cap of his pen. “Maybe I need to get some more sleep...or see a doctor.”

“Make sure it’s the right kind of doctor.” Randy relaxed and sank into his usual reclining position in the chair. “For real, Jon, maybe you need to see a psychiatrist. Or, if you think you really are seeing ghosts, maybe you need to see a priest.” Randy chuckled like he was trying to make a joke, but Jon could tell that he was really concerned. “Just promise me you’ll do something. Okay? Can’t let anything happen to you. You’re the closest thing I’ve got to a brother.”

“I promise!” Jon gave his friend a reassuring glance, but kept his head turned away. “Just give me the weekend to figure out what I need to do.”

“No problem.” Hoisting himself out of the chair, Randy grinned and pointed his thumb over his left shoulder, down the hallway. “Tell you what, I’ll head off John and keep him busy today.” John’s shrill voice was just starting to come within range.

Jon returned the smile as Randy went to intercept John. He really was a great friend.