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SHADOWS IN THE HEART

A Jewels of the Quill Halloween Anthology

by

Jewels of the Quill

(including authors Margaret L. Carter, Christine DeSmet, Carrie S. Masek,
Jane Toombs, Karen Wiesner, C.J. Winters, and Karen Woods)

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SHADOWS IN THE HEART

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When the Dead People Brought a Dish-to-Pass (A Mischief in Moonstone Story, Book 4) {romantic paranormal mystery} by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone): Three days before Halloween, reclusive, young Alyssa Swain finds a man dead in his car in a ditch just outside of Moonstone. She runs for help, but when she returns, the body is gone. When the scruffy, tall dead man shows up alive the next morning on her doorstep, he insists she called him to help her with the house she's refurbishing—to get it ready for a traditional Halloween party to celebrate the lives of her loved ones who have died. A party for dead people?! To her chagrin, the crazy man won't leave. In fact, closing the door against John Christopher doesn't help. As big as his name, he walks boldly through doors and proceeds to knock out walls, paint, fix the pain of her past—and claim her heart. But will her newly-awakened feelings be strong enough to keep John from crossing over to the afterlife at midnight on Halloween? Does she have the right to stop him from his destiny? A moonstone brooch found in a wall hands her an unexpected solution—but only if she's brave enough to finally embrace her past.

Trick or Treat {young adult Halloween story} by Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz): Derrick Olsen wants to go with his friends to the Middle School Halloween dance, but instead he's stuck taking his baby sister trick-or-treating. It's the worst Halloween ever until they stop at an abandoned house and stumble on a trick that could change this into the most exciting night of Derrick's life...or the most terrifying.

Ghost of a Chance {paranormal contemporary} by Karen Woods (Dame Coral): Love endures even after death. Cathy Reynolds, although a ghost, has been trying to help her husband Jake through his mourning for her following her murder, almost a year ago. Now, on her birthday, Halloween, she has an opportunity to push Jake and Mary Edwards-Robins together. Mary's been in love with Jake for a long time. Although reluctant, Jake's far from immune to Mary. But does Cathy have a ghost of a chance of getting him to give in to his feelings?

White Elephants {young adult Halloween story} by C.J. Winters (Dame Tanzanite): It's Halloween night, there's a full moon, and twins Noel and Merry, along with Merry's boyfriend, Jonas, are deconstructing a house on a deadline. They need to salvage what they can and have the interior gutted in time for the bulldozers at 8 a.m. The orphaned twenty-something girls recently inherited their father's small deconstruction business, but they're far from experts. Noel discovers a skeleton behind a bedroom wall. Fearing the police will declare the house a crime scene and make it impossible for the twins to fulfill their deconstruction contract, Jonas volunteers to dispose of the skeleton in the woods. Before he can do that, however, eight-year-old Tobias sees the skeleton in Jonas' car and decides to help the adults in their disposal efforts.

Papa (Woodcutter's Grim Series—Classic Tales of Horror Retold, Book 1) {romantic horror} by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)
For the ten generations since the evil first came to Woodcutter's Grim, the Guardians have sworn an oath to protect the town from the childhood horrors that lurk in the black woods. Without them, the town would be defenseless...and the terrors would escape to the world at large. A wickedly horrifying rendering of the classic children's story "Hansel and Gretel," in which modern revenge is served up sweet... Less than a year after Randall Park left his family for elementary school teacher, Amy, the unthinkable happens—his ex-wife and two children are killed in a car accident. Ever since the accident, Amy has had terrible nightmares in which Rand's son and daughter return to exact revenge on their father and Amy herself (the wicked step-mother) for abandoning them. When Rand convinces her to come away with him for a healing respite to an iso-

lated cabin in the woods, Amy's guilt-filled nightmares turn into pure horror.

The Beast {horror} by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise): What really did happen at the Saints and Sinners Halloween costume party?

THE UNVANISHED HITCHHIKER

by Margaret L. Carter (Dame Onyx)

The six-foot-tall werewolf and his chalky-faced vampire girlfriend in a flowing white gown trudged down the driveway with their pillowcases full of candy.

"It's after nine," Leah Trent said, watching them leave. "They should be the last, shouldn't they? Teenagers, you'd think they'd feel embarrassed to go trick-or-treating." She shook her head in wry amusement and glanced at Alice Wade, who sat on the couch with her fingers entwined in her lap.

"Yes, that's probably all we'll get." Her voice quavered. She cast sidelong looks at the front door, the shadows under her eyes making her appear older than her fifty-some years.

Leah took off the black cardboard witch's hat and plastic cape she'd worn over her jeans and blouse all evening. "Then I guess I should turn off the porch light."

"No, don't!" The tone of shrill urgency startled Leah.

Puzzled, she peered through the open door at the deserted street. She hadn't expected as many visitors as they'd actually received, on this dead-end lane away from the center of town, with houses isolated in their spacious yards. Wood smoke from a neighbor's chimney scented the air despite the weather, warm for the end of October in Maryland. Maybe the kids had ranged farther than usual because of the clear,

mild evening, not at all a spooky Halloween. Only a tangle of overgrown trees on a vacant lot across the street lent an atmospheric touch to the view. Again, she wondered why Alice had asked her to spend the night. For protection against rowdy pranksters? Leah hadn't seen any.

After closing the door and fastening the chain, she took a seat on the couch next to her friend and picked up her cooling cup of mint tea from the coffee table. "Want to watch something on TV?"

"Go ahead, if you want to." Alice's eyes, behind the glasses that looked oversized on her thin face, flickered toward the door again, as if she were waiting for someone despite what she'd said. "I usually sit up and just read or something for a couple more hours." She opened a magazine and flipped through it seemingly at random, her head with its frizzy halo of straw-colored hair bent over the pages.

Maybe she was afraid out here by herself. Leah didn't mind staying over, since her husband's reserve unit was deployed, leaving her no reason to hang around her own house. Still, she couldn't help wondering. A colleague at the library where she worked and Alice volunteered had mentioned that Alice's daughter had died on a Halloween several years past. She'd also said, though, that she'd never known Alice to ask anybody to stay with her on this night before.

I wonder what's changed? At thirty-one, Leah, having no children yet, couldn't pretend to understand the stages of grief involved in losing a teenage daughter. She switched on the TV with the remote and clicked through the channels to a black-and-white vampire film on the classic movie network. *Not that it's any of my business. She asked me to keep her company, not be nosy.* "Is this okay with you?"

After a moment's blank stare at the screen, Alice said, "Sure. Just don't turn it up too high, please."

Watching the other woman out of the corner of her eye, Leah got the impression she was listening for something. Now and then she tilted her head as if straining to pick up sounds over the movie's dialogue. When a car roared past outside, Alice jumped. Several times Leah considered asking what preyed on her mind but decided against it.

The doorbell rang at about quarter to eleven. Alice drew in a hissing breath. Her left hand crumpled a page of the magazine. She darted another glance at the door but didn't move.

When the bell rang again, Leah said, "Would you like me to get that?" Alice responded with a rapid, jerky nod.

With the chain still attached, Leah opened the door just far enough to peek out.

The wind had picked up, lending a slight chill to the night, although the half-moon still shone in a clear sky. Dry leaves skittered along the sidewalk. A man stood on the porch holding a length of crimson fabric. "Sorry to bother you," he said, "but when I dropped off your daughter just now, she left this in the car."

"Daughter?" Leah shook her head. "You must have the wrong address."

"Then maybe that girl was visiting here?" He thrust the garment he carried through the crack between door and frame. His hand trembled. "Anyway, this was the house where she told me to stop, no doubt about that. I have to get going."

Automatically closing her fingers on the piece of cloth, which she noticed was wet, Leah murmured a confused thanks. The man scurried down the driveway to the car he'd left running at the curb.

For a second the air felt icy cold. With a fleeting shiver, Leah closed the door. When she turned toward Alice, the

other woman was clutching the edge of the couch cushion like a slippery ledge from which she was afraid of falling.

"It's nothing," Leah said, "just somebody who had the wrong address. He left this before I could make him take it back." She held up the cloth. A silky cashmere shawl.

"He?" Alice whispered. "A man?"

"Yes, just some guy who was lost, I guess." She sat down, watching Alice with concern.

"No, he wasn't lost." She took the shawl and pressed it to her cheek. "I thought with another person here it might turn out different. I thought she might come herself this time."

"She? What's going on? Do you know this man? Were you expecting him?"

"Not him, specifically. But I knew somebody would show up. And I knew he'd bring this." She rubbed the loosely knitted material between her fingers. "If only I could at least keep it. But it always vanishes overnight, even if I fall asleep holding it."

"Alice, what are you talking about?" Leah was starting to wonder if her friend was mentally unhinged.

With a weary sigh, Alice said, "I'll tell you about it. You'll think I'm crazy, though."

Wincing at this inadvertent echo of her own thoughts, Leah shook her head. "Of course I won't."

"I haven't talked to anybody about it since my husband left." She wrung the shawl between her hands. A few drops of water trickled from it. "You probably heard I had a teenage daughter who died."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Joanne was seventeen. We had a fight, actually a marathon series of fights, about the boy she was going with. I knew all along he was bad news." Her lips tightened. "Her dad and I ordered her to stop seeing him. I even took away the bracelet

he gave her. She disobeyed us and sneaked out to meet him at a Halloween party. He drove her home drunk. It was raining hard. The car crashed on a curve about a mile from here. You know the one?"

Leah nodded. Every town had at least one "dead man's curve," and the main drag into this neighborhood had earned that nickname.

"The boy was killed instantly. Joanne fell into a coma she never woke up from. She died on the third night after."

"I'm sorry," Leah whispered again. She couldn't think of anything else to say.

"She took my shawl for her gypsy costume, without permission. This one." She held up the twisted length of fabric. "Out of spite, I think, because I confiscated that bracelet."

Before Leah managed to stifle her reaction, she knew her friend must have noticed the look of horror and pity on her face.

"Don't worry, you won't offend me if you decide I've lost my mind. My husband had the same idea. That's why he left. After the second year, he couldn't handle what he called my obsession." Alice's eyes glazed over for a few seconds. "It started on the anniversary of Joanne's death. A strange woman came to the door with this shawl and claimed a girl she'd picked up had left it in her car."

"Didn't it occur to you that she was hoaxing you?"

"Of course," Alice said in a sharper tone. "I may or may not be crazy, but I'm not stupid."

Leah murmured an apology, which the older woman waved away. "Naturally that was the first thing I thought of, though I didn't know anybody who hated me enough to play such a cruel trick. Later it crossed my mind that it might be somebody's weird idea of comfort, maybe one of Joanne's friends, but when I asked around, I came up blank. Besides, I

didn't really believe any of them would do anything that brainless, let alone get an adult to go along with it."

"What about the shawl? Where was the real one all that time?"

"This is the real one." Alice's bleak stare challenged Leah to doubt her. "Originally, it must have been ruined in the crash, because I never got it back. Impounded as evidence or thrown away by the—the coroner or the mortician, maybe. This one isn't just a look-alike, though. It has a flaw in one corner, see?" She thrust the shawl at Leah, who noticed the patch of irregular weave immediately. "Who'd go to all the trouble to make three new duplicates for six years in a row?"

"Three?"

Alice let the garment fall into her lap. "She tries to get home on Halloween night and the two nights after. The three nights she lingered between life and death."

"And you say the shawl just vanishes overnight every time?"

Alice nodded. "I'm not worried that you'll call the men in white coats on me. Even my husband didn't do that, though he tried to get me to see a therapist. When the same thing happened the second year, I knew it wasn't a trick. He wouldn't consider for an instant that it could be real."

"So he left?" Leah knew the loss of a child sometimes drove bereaved parents apart instead of drawing them together, but she still had trouble imagining a man who would desert his wife in a crisis like that.

"There was more to it, of course, but for him this was the last straw." She sighed and rubbed her eyes beneath her glasses. "For each of the three nights every year, I've prayed this would be the time she'd come all the way home. It never happened. This year the calendar's cycled around to the same day of the week when the accident happened. I thought if I

had another person in the house as a witness, my daughter might make it home. I should have known it wouldn't be that simple."

"Have you tried looking for her—out there?" Leah could hardly believe she heard herself talking as if this tale were true.

"Yes, of course I thought of that. On Halloween of the third year I cruised up and down the road for most of the night. She never appeared. Ten minutes after I gave up and went home, that year's messenger came to the door." She took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes. "She hasn't forgiven me."

Guilt-induced insanity, Leah thought. How could someone who functioned so well in everyday life be so disconnected from reality that she'd persuade or pay an accomplice to show up at her door with a prop to provide concrete support for her delusion? What else could explain that detail?

"Would you let me do something?" Leah asked hesitantly. She had to help if she could. She owed Alice that much for the friendship she'd offered when Leah's husband had been shipped overseas so soon after their move to this area. "Could I keep the shawl for you tonight?"

Alice said with a thin smile, "Think you can disprove my crazy story that way? And then I'll get psychiatric help so I can move on? I know you mean well, but it won't work. Go ahead, though." She held out the crimson shawl.

Leah accepted it, letting the smooth fabric slide through her fingers. "Thanks for trusting me."

"We might as well go to bed. Nothing else is going to happen tonight."

Once she'd put on her nightgown in the guest room, Leah locked the door and folded the shawl under her pillow, regardless of the wet spot it left on the sheet. When she woke

in the predawn darkness to visit the bathroom, the garment was still there. She carried it with her across the hall and back. *Just as I thought. Alice made it “appear” and “vanish” all along.* She silently laughed at herself for wasting one second on the notion of a genuine haunting. Not that she thought her friend was fooling her deliberately. Alice’s grief made it clear that she believed her own story. Leah drifted back to sleep with her hand tucked under the pillow, touching the shawl.

When she woke a couple of hours later, it was gone.

She blinked in the sparkling autumn sunlight filtered through the branches outside the window. How could Alice have possibly sneaked the thing out of the bedroom without waking her?

Leah followed the aroma of coffee to the kitchen and sat down, snagging half of a cinnamon bagel from a plate in the middle of the table and spreading cream cheese on it. She mumbled a greeting to Alice, unable to think of anything coherent to say.

“It’s gone, isn’t it?”

Leah nodded, staring into her coffee cup.

“And you think I took it somehow, don’t you? How? Drugged your tea?” Alice gave a brittle laugh. “Well, I can’t blame you. I’d believe the same thing in your place.”

After choking down a quick breakfast, Leah made an excuse to leave. She feared she wouldn’t be able to have a relaxed conversation with Alice for a long time.

* * * *

On the way home and off and on through the day, Leah mulled over the events of the night before. She searched the library’s newspaper files for a report of the accident. The article confirmed what Alice had told her. It included a high school picture of Joanne Wade, a girl with a heart-shaped face and long, blonde hair.

By evening, Leah decided she had to try the one experiment that might settle whether Joanne's spirit actually lurked along that road. Or, rather, prove it didn't. Leah clung to the conviction that any other solution to the mystery was more likely than a supernatural one. She had to uncover the truth, to cram her own world view back into its orderly box as well as to help Alice. Putting on her jacket at eight that night, she debated whether to tell Alice what she planned. No, she decided. The test wouldn't be valid if the dead girl's mother knew about it.

The chilly, damp evening felt more like Halloween than the previous night had. Leah suppressed a shiver as she stepped outside and ordered herself not to expect anything but hours of boredom.

She drove the few miles to Alice's neighborhood, prepared to cruise back and forth along the curved stretch of road where the accident had happened. With a light rain sprinkling the windshield, she turned the wipers on at the lowest speed. Tuning the radio to the local oldies station, she crept along the street to the site of the crash. There was nothing to see, of course, certainly not a dead girl waiting for a ride. The lighting was poor, with lampposts widely spaced. She repeatedly drove around the curve, stopped before she came within sight of Alice's house, then made a U-turn and retraced the route. She encountered few other cars. Her eyes began to ache from squinting through the raindrops at the splintered beams of the headlights.

Over an hour passed before she glimpsed the girl standing on the shoulder. Dressed in a long skirt and peasant blouse, with a necklace that sparkled in the headlights, she waved at the car. Slender, with long, honey-blond hair, she matched the photo in the newspaper.

Leah slammed on the brakes. Her heart leaped. Light-

headed, she gulped a deep breath. A second later, her pulse slowed as rational thought took over. *It's a scam, of course, even if it doesn't seem to have any sensible motive.* This teenager had copied Joanne's hairstyle and costume. All those drivers who'd shown up at the door weren't in on the hoax; they were being fooled, too. Poor Alice.

Somebody's gone to all this trouble three nights a year ever since the accident? Leah shoved the thought aside, since dropping that theory would mean accepting the unbelievable. She pushed the button to release the automatic locks and leaned over to open the passenger door.

The girl scurried to the car and bent to look in. "Could you take me home? It's just a little ways up the road." She wore a red shawl, of course, with a necklace of silver coins gleaming on her bodice. Water dripped from her hair and clothes.

Leah swallowed. "Sure. Get in."

Instead of taking the front seat, the girl settled in the back. She recited an address. Alice's address.

Okay, how about calling the bluff? Leah pushed the lock button and engaged the child-proof function that disabled the back door locks. "Joanne? Is that your name?"

"Yes," came a whisper from behind her.

She pulled onto the pavement and drove slowly toward Alice's house. "Your mother wants to see you. Why do you keep doing this to her? Why don't you go all the way home?"

A long silence. Finally, the voice whispered, "I can't."

Just as Leah pulled into the driveway, the temperature inside the car dropped. A sphere of icy cold enveloped her. She glanced down at the climate controls. Had she accidentally bumped the air conditioning knob? Even as she formed the thought, she recognized it as nonsense. The car felt like a walk-in freezer. Its equipment had no power to generate that

kind of chill, certainly not instantaneously.

She whirled around to look over her shoulder. The girl was gone. No trace remained except for the shawl.

Naturally. The script has to play out. She bowed her head on the steering wheel, her teeth chattering and her stomach churning. The wave of cold receded, and her nausea faded with it. She drew a long, shuddering breath and turned to stare at the back seat again. *What if I'd touched her?* Would the girl feel solid or would a hand pass through her like a hologram? She'd had enough solidity to open the car door. And the shawl was a material object. Leah stretched to pick it up. The wet yarn felt real enough. Yet how could a spirit leave behind an ordinary piece of cloth? *Well, who says the supernatural has to make sense?*

Clutching the thing, she walked on quivering legs to the porch and rang the doorbell. Alice opened the door and greeted her with a blank stare.

"She was here," Leah said in a hoarse whisper. "I saw her. She rode in my car." She thrust the shawl into Alice's hands. "I swear I'm not making this up."

"Of course not. Why would you?" Alice grabbed her by the wrist, pulled her inside, and guided her to the couch. "Tell me." Her voice trembled. "What did she say?"

"Nothing, really. I asked her why she wouldn't go home. She said she couldn't." Rubbing her eyes, Leah said, "I'm still not sure I believe all this. Maybe I'm going nuts myself."

"Not unless it's contagious." Alice hugged the shawl for a second before putting it down, leaving a damp blotch on her shirt. "I would've thought if you saw her, that would make a difference. That the pattern would change. Won't she ever forgive me?"

"Maybe she doesn't think you've forgiven her. Aren't ghosts supposed to have unfinished business? Maybe she wants

to come home but thinks she can't because of disobeying you." Leah leaned over to rest a hand on Alice's shoulder.

"As if that mattered now. It's true, at first I was furious at her for dying. For running off and getting into a car with that boy. If she'd listened to me, she would be alive today. But I got past that a long time ago." She laced her fingers together, white-knuckled. "It was at least half my fault. If we hadn't fought over him, she might not have been mad enough to ride with him when he was drunk. How can I show her how I feel if she won't appear to me?"

"I asked her to come home, and it didn't have any effect." Leah replayed in her head what Alice had told her the night before. "Wait, there was one more thing you mentioned. You took a bracelet away from her?"

Alice nodded. "His going steady gift, or whatever the kids call it these days."

"Do you still have it?"

The other woman stood up and hurried to the stairs. "I'll be right back."

A minute later she came downstairs with the bracelet clutched in her hand. She dropped it into Leah's open palm—a delicate circle of silver links with tiny, scarlet-eyed bats hanging from it. "You're going to give it to her?"

"If I see her again tomorrow night," Leah said, "I'll try. She took the shawl in revenge for your taking the bracelet, right? What if she wants to trade back, to make up with you?" She considered cruising the dark street for another hour or two but decided not to bother. All the lore she'd ever heard suggested that an apparition like this wouldn't violate its established rituals. Joanne wouldn't appear twice in the same night.

She hugged Alice and left with the bracelet tucked into her pocket.

* * * *

The next evening turned out clear and chilly. Before starting the car, Leah checked her coat pocket for the silver circlet. She'd been half certain it would vanish overnight like the shawl, just to thwart any attempt to break the pattern. It hadn't, of course.

She'd been driving up and down the road for only half an hour when the weather changed in an instant. Sheets of rain poured onto the car. She couldn't see anything except her own headlights and veiled glimmers from the infrequent street lamps. She slowed, afraid of missing the curve.

The noise of an engine roared over the drumming of the rain. With a glance in the rear-view mirror, she saw the lights of another car closing on her, weaving from lane to lane. "What's wrong with that idiot?" Her heartbeat raced. She accelerated, edging to the far right. The other car sped up, too, careening toward her instead of passing.

Her fingers aching from her grip on the wheel, she steered sharply right. Her brakes squealed. The other vehicle, a red sports car, shot past her. In a lull in the rain, she saw it slam into a tree. The crash assaulted her ears. A second later, its motor went dead, the car crumpled hood-first against the trunk, one headlamp smashed and the other still shining. The rain ceased.

Her palms slick and her pulse hammering, Leah stared at the crash site. *This isn't real. I'm seeing the past. The bracelet drew me in.*

With a sense of inevitability, she glimpsed the slim figure standing on the shoulder. She pulled to a complete stop and snared the girl in the headlights. Again her gypsy skirt, shawl, and long, straight hair were drenched, this time from a spectral rain. Opening the passenger door, Leah called, "Come on, Joanne. Sit in the front."

The wreck in the background vanished. The girl glided to the car but hesitated at the open door. Her blank stare suggested she didn't know how to react when the other person failed to recite the expected lines. Leah dug the bracelet out of her pocket and held it up. "I brought this for you."

Joanne dived into the car and snatched at the jewelry. Leah evaded her grasp and stuffed the bracelet back in her coat. "Not now. You'll get it in your mom's living room."

The air instantly congealed into subfreezing cold. Leah's face went numb, and she saw the vapor of her breath in the feeble glow from the dome light.

The girl's skin turned pale, verging on gray. Blood matted her wet hair. Bruises mottled her arms where they showed under the loose drape of the shawl. Her blue-tinted lips curled back from her teeth in a snarl. "Give it to me!"

Leah's pulse thundered in her own ears. Shivers convulsed her. All she could do in reply was shake her head.

The girl's fingers, bent like claws, scrabbled at the sleeve of Leah's coat. Leah shrank from her, but she didn't have room enough to retreat out of reach. Not unless she opened the driver's door and fled from the car, a defeat she wasn't prepared to accept.

Joanne grabbed her wrist. The grip felt like a band of cold metal, so icy it seared Leah's skin. Her stomach lurched.

"I'm lost out here," the girl whispered. "Stuck this way forever, while everybody else keeps living and changing." Her mouth contorted in a rictus of fury. "We had a fight. Alex and me. Because I wasn't wearing his gift. That's why he got distracted and wrecked the car. I thought if I could send Mom's shawl back to her, the bracelet would come to me. An even trade. Then I'd be complete. Free to go with Alex. But it never works."

With a swallow of bile, Leah forced herself to speak. "It

won't work until you go all the way home."

"I can't." Bloodstained tears trickled down her cheeks. "It's here. Give it to me."

Leah shook her head again, her throat clogged with fear.

"That bracelet belongs to me. It's part of me. I need it."

"Why don't you just take it, then?"

No answer.

Because she can't.

"No matter what you do to me, it won't change anything. You have to meet your mother face to face. She has to make you a gift of it." She held her breath until her chest ached.

Joanne's features melted and flowed, shedding the death-mask grayness and the raw wounds. She released Leah's arm and closed the passenger door. "All right," she whispered. The chill faded away. "I'm afraid to face her after what I did."

"She forgives you. She'll prove that by returning the bracelet. But you have to go to her." *There's a gulf between them, like it says in the Bible. The living can't reach the dead. Not when grief and anger block the path.*

When the car pulled into Alice's driveway, Joanne still sat in the passenger seat, gazing silently out the window. Opening the door on the driver's side, Leah noticed the flicker of her own reflection in the opposite window. Joanne didn't cast an image in the glass. By now Leah accepted this bit of evidence without surprise.

She kept her eyes fixed on the girl until both of them had stepped out of the car. "We're going inside now."

With an almost inaudible sigh, Joanne said, "I'm scared."

Leah held up the bracelet. "Just stay with me." She walked beside the girl, afraid at every step that she would vanish.

On the porch, Joanne stopped in front of the door. Leah seized her cold, damp hand and rang the bell. Footsteps and

the rattle of the chain sounded inside.

An icy wind blew across the porch at the moment Alice opened the door. When she saw who stood there, she gasped and staggered. Leah hastily wrapped an arm around her waist. "It's going to be all right. Here, take the bracelet."

With her eyes fixed on Joanne's face, Alice fumbled the circlet out of Leah's hand.

"Put it on her." Leah raised the girl's arm.

Trembling, Alice slipped the bracelet over Joanne's fingers without quite touching her. Joanne lifted her arm to let the circlet slide into place on her wrist, stared at it for a few seconds, then shifted her gaze toward Alice. Leah let go of both of them and stepped back. Joanne slipped into her mother's arms. They hugged for a long moment.

"I'm sorry," Joanne cried.

"So am I," Alice murmured into her windblown hair.

"I hurt you. Please forgive me."

"I already have." A sob choked her voice. "I don't want to lose you again."

"I'm not lost anymore. We'll be together when the time's right."

As the seconds slipped away, the girl's outline blurred. The colors of her hair and clothes faded to gray and white. In the next minute, she thinned and grew translucent, then transparent. At last, her ethereal body seemed to melt into her mother's, and she vanished. Alice stood alone, a rapt expression on her face, clasping the shawl to her breast.

About Margaret L. Carter (Dame Onyx):

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter has specialized throughout her career in fantasy and the supernatural, especially vampires. Earning degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii, and the University of California (Irvine), she wrote her dissertation on the Gothic novel. Her first novel was *Shadow of the Beast*. Margaret's vampire novels include *Dark Changeling* (2000 EPPIE award winner in horror), *Child of Twilight* (its sequel, 2004 EPPIE award finalist in horror), *Sealed in Blood* and *Crimson Dreams*. Combining her focus on relationships and getting inside the mind of the "monster" with her lifelong devotion to horror and fantasy, she has branched into paranormal romance with *From the Dark Places* and her short story collection *Heart's Desires and Dark Embraces*. She has several erotic romance stories published. Margaret's scholarly work on vampirism in literature includes *The Vampire in Literature: A Critical Bibliography* and *Different Blood: The Vampire as Alien*, as well as a number of articles. Her short stories have appeared in various anthologies and small press publications. With her husband, retired Navy Captain Leslie Roy Carter, she has published two fantasy novels, *Wild Sorceress* and *Besieged Adept*. Margaret's newest releases include: *Embracing Darkness* and "Demon's Fall." Visit Margaret's website at: <http://www.margaretlcarter.com/>.

**WHEN THE DEAD PEOPLE BROUGHT A
DISH-TO-PASS
{A Mischief in Moonstone Story, Book 4}**

by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone)

Chapter 1

The car crash echoed all the way up Porcupine Hill. Its bone-crunching wallop rattled the kitchen windows, uprooting Alyssa Swain from gluing down new floor tiles.

She held her breath, listening, paying respects. She knew. Ever since moving into the farmhouse atop the hill a few miles south of Moonstone, Wisconsin two months ago, she'd endured screaming car brakes as drivers descended the fifty-yard drop into the hairpin turn. She knew somebody had finally died.

With hands shaking and heart pumping, Alyssa pulled a stocking cap over her short-cropped, brown hair. She grabbed the yellow barn coat and leather gloves from a wood peg by the kitchen door. After reaching for the doorknob, she hesitated. Blood bathed her memory. There would be too much blood this time, too. She knew.

When a feathery whip hit her legs, her breath caught again. For a moment she thought it some ethereal force telling her to stop her heinous nightmare visits to the past.

Alyssa looked down. Her lungs whooshed out pent-up air. "Millicent, please, I'm in a hurry."

The white Angora cat blinked up with one gold eye and one blue before untangling herself from Alyssa's legs.

After calling 911, Alyssa flung herself into whirlwinds of brown, red, and gold leaves on the crisp October Thursday. She raced down the short gravel driveway then onto the black-topped county road, following it the few yards to the crest of the hill. Far below, fingers of fog reached out of Red Rock Creek, wending through the woodland to huff hoary mist at an upside down, midnight blue car. The car had smashed head-on into a birch tree, its triad of white trunks bent over the car like a mother flailing arms over a dead baby.

Alyssa's mind spun. If only she had slowed down that day...

If only. That's our punishment after such things happen. We live our lives in "if only" limbo. Even after four years.

She ran hells bells down the blacktop grade. Tears flowed, wicked away by air that spiked colder as she descended into the lowland.

If I can get there faster this time maybe I can save—

Red rivulets drizzled down the upside down window frame then onto an aqua explosion of glass pebbles decorating damp, gold leaves. Alyssa fought the urge to retch. She crouched within arm's length of a man hanging upside down in his seat belt.

"Hello?" The simple question was all she could muster while holding onto her stomach.

Blood oozed off strands of his black hair and chin. A massive shoulder encased in a camouflage jacket was wedged

against the door frame. He lay twisted with his face toward her. The deflating air bag cradled a cheek. Dark eyes were open but still as a brackish marsh pool, unnerving her. "Are you all right, sir?"

Nothing.

Alyssa shot up. She listened for the EMTs. No sirens yet. Nothing.

She threw herself at the steep hill, angry for impulsively running down the hill instead of driving her truck with its first aid kit and blanket. She stopped twice because her lungs seized.

Finally she leaped into her Jeep Cherokee, chiding herself again. Last time she'd left the rescue to the EMTs. She couldn't do that again. "*Mrs. Swain, the EMTs did the best they could but I'm sorry to have to tell you...*"

Alyssa had barely turned around in her driveway when a shiny, new squad car pulled alongside her. A woman in a brown uniform and jacket, with a blonde ponytail pulled through a baseball-style regulation cap, got out.

Alyssa rolled down her window. "He's all right? The ambulance came already?"

"Did you hear anything odd?"

Why weren't they racing to help the man? "A crash."

"But no brakes, right?"

She hadn't heard the usual squeal of brakes on the hill. She swallowed. Had the man meant to run into the trees to commit suicide? "No, Officer, I didn't hear brakes."

"Please call me Lily."

Alyssa wanted to scream. *Why are we wasting time?* Her hands trembled on the wheel. "Lily, is he—"

"I'm afraid..."

"They tried their best, Mrs. Swain." Alyssa choked. She hadn't been able to save the man in the car either. She turned off the truck engine.

"Ma'am?" Officer Lily tapped her arm. "Ma'am?"

"I'm sorry. I knew he died. I knew. I saw it in his eyes, but I was hoping—"

"There is no dead man."

"He's alive?"

"We didn't find anybody."

"But you found the car? It was smashed. He'd rolled it."

"Maybe he was smashed and walked away to avoid a ticket. There's nobody at the bottom of the hill. I'll have the car towed into town. It's a BMW. Not from around here."

Alyssa got out of the truck to run to her barbed wire fence. She followed it until the crest of the hill. The car was still held in the arms of the birch tree. She called back to the officer, "He was there, unconscious, bloody. He couldn't've walked away."

"Maybe he wore a red scarf and you just thought you saw blood."

Alyssa raced back to the officer. "No, he was wearing camouflage, nothing red. He was bleeding. It covered his face and was all over the broken window glass. Did you look in the creek? Maybe he crawled out and fell into the water."

Officer Lily placed a reassuring hand on Alyssa's arm. "It's Halloween week. It was a joke by high school kids playing hooky. I'm the new deputy here so I've been expecting something like this. They probably stole the wreck from a junkyard, stuffed a dummy in it with fake blood, and now they'll be watching the papers for news of the wreck. That is, if I put this silliness into a report." Lily giggled. "Not!"

Unease wouldn't loosen its strangle-hold on Alyssa's sixth sense. The man had been real. She was sure of it. But the pony-tailed deputy shrugged at her.

Alyssa managed a smile. "Yeah, it was probably a trick." She hated Halloween. The horrible accident she'd lived through four years before had happened on the holiday that celebrated dead souls.

"I'm Alyssa Swain. I'm a new dealer at the Port Cliff casino."

Lily shook her hand. "You must work with a friend of mine, Claire Lone Eagle. Her husband's building a gazebo behind the North Pole."

"North Pole?"

Lily laughed, an unexpected sound that relaxed Alyssa despite herself. "That's what they call the Victorian mansion in Moonstone that overlooks Lake Superior. It has a restaurant called The Jingle Bell Inn run by another friend of mine, Kirsten. She's expanding it with an enclosed aviary, an outdoor deck, fire pit and heated gazebo. She wants it all done before the wedding."

"Sounds like a big shindig."

"A Christmas wedding for Peter LeBarron. His father, Henri, owns the mansion. Peter's marrying Crystal Hagan, known for her pet reindeer, alpaca, and goats. She teaches first grade."

First grade. Alyssa shivered again so violently that she had to excuse herself to throw up.

After assuring the deputy she'd be fine, she went to the house and crawled into bed.

A menacing rapping downstairs made her sit up with her heartbeat skittering like fall leaves. But she had to have dreamed the knocking. Millicent slept curled in a white ball

next to her. The white cat always leapt down to hide under the bed when anybody came to the door.

The knocks came harder. Banging. Urgent.

“Damn kids.” Alyssa suspected she’d get down to the door to find nothing. But why wasn’t Millicent awakened by the noise? Alyssa scrutinized her watch-cat. Her fur moved; she was breathing.

Alyssa slipped into her shearling-lined moccasins and fuzzy lavender robe, cinching it tight. She grabbed her cell phone...her thumb ready for the 911 speed button.

Downstairs she found nothing at the living room’s front door but cold air nipping at her bare ankles. She sighed, certain now that it was a trick. Sure enough, sharp raps came next from the kitchen.

She rushed through the hall, minced carefully around the tiles and tools on the kitchen floor, then opened the door. “Yeah, yeah, trick or treat—”

It was him. The dead man.

* * * *

Alyssa went light-headed at the sight of the tall, black-haired man filling her doorway, giving her a lopsided grin. His eyes were the rich brown color called burnt sienna, part of the palette of stains she was using to refurbish the woodwork. He wore the camouflage jacket but it sported no blood. His hair was combed in neat waves from a side part.

“Can I help you?” she asked. How had he cleaned up so fast? Maybe her cat hadn’t moved because this was a dream. The man wore spotless, indigo blue denims and high leather boots with leather laces. He carried an overloaded toolbox.

“Where do you want me to start?”

She clutched the bathrobe together at her neck. “Pardon me?”

“We’ve got a lot to do before Sunday.”

“What’s Sunday? Who are you?” Had she forgotten about hiring a carpenter? Certainly thirty-five was too young to be that forgetful.

“Your Halloween party for all your dead relatives.”

She wasted no time in slamming the door on the lunatic’s face.

She locked the door. If the man knocked, she would punch 911.

Millicent padded into the kitchen as if nobody had been at the door. She didn’t sniff the air as she usually did with disturbances. Instead, she picked her way to her glass bowl of kibble near the refrigerator.

Alyssa tiptoed to the window next to the door. She peeked around the green-and-white striped cotton curtains she’d hung only yesterday. She saw nobody in the driveway or near the barn northwest of the house. The barn was locked, so she felt safe that he wasn’t hiding there.

Alyssa shook her head, smiling. She was groggy, overtired from trying to refurbish a house over a hundred years old. She’d dreamed everything.

She had barely turned from the window when the tall man walked through the door.

As in, he walked through the closed...locked...solid walnut door.

Alyssa stumbled backward.

“How did you do that?” She slapped her face to wake up. “I get it. A Halloween trick. You’re a hologram?” She looked around him expecting to see somebody projecting a light through the window over the sink. But she didn’t see anybody.

The tall man with broad shoulders stood in the middle of her kitchen, toolbox in hand, shaking his head, nonplussed at the room. “Don’t tell me you were thinking you could strip

that wallpaper, refinish that tin ceiling and these floors by Sunday? Are the other rooms as bad?"

Alyssa lunged the two long steps to the kitchen table to snatch a chair to use as a weapon. "How did you get in here?"

He shrugged. "I walked through the door. Isn't that how most people do it?"

"But, but—" She shook the chair at him as she scuttled to the door. She put the chair down to feel the door. "This door is locked. You have a key?"

He put the toolbox on the counter, giving her an eyeful of a denim-clad backside. He wore a hammer to the side like suggestive jewelry. She blinked in confusion while he brushed the countertop with a broad hand. "Cheap gray linoleum replete with cigarette burns. You smoke?"

She grabbed for the chair again. "Of course not. And do I look like the kind who'd set her cigarette directly on the countertop?"

His dark gaze flicked up and down her. "No. You look a little uptight actually. Either that or you're a lion tamer. Damn sexy one, I might add."

Her insides fluttered, first in embarrassment, then in frustration. She must have hired him, yet she had no recollection of it. To her dismay, he stood between her and the cell phone she'd left on the counter. She excused herself to go upstairs to toss on armor: a grubby, gray fleece sweatshirt and pants covered with tiling cement, wood stain, and white ceiling paint. She took a fortifying breath before trotting back down to the kitchen.

He'd hung his jacket over a chair back and was rolling up the sleeves of a blue work shirt to reveal tanned arms with sprinkles of dark hair. She hadn't noticed how tan he was earlier at the accident scene. If this were even the same man. The

tawny color softened the weathered face but made the glint in his dark eyes all the brighter by contrast.

Alyssa's belly did a flip-flop. The light in his eyes reminded her of a tunnel connecting two worlds. She wanted to climb in and see where the tunnel would take her.

He said, "Where should we start? Here or upstairs in the bedroom?"

She picked up a chair again.

With a weary sigh, he snatched it and set it aside. "Could you move over that way a little?" He pointed toward the striped curtains.

"Why?"

"You're blocking the door and my cat, Dillinger, wants to come in."

For some odd reason she obeyed. A huge, shaggy, matted, brown-and-copper ring-tailed cat with one milky, blind eye materialized through the walnut door. It paused, hissed like a panther, then pawed at a cocklebur stuck to one ear.

"Get that fleabag out of here!" Alyssa leaped between the scruffy cat and her white Angora still eating next to the refrigerator.

"They'll be fine," the man said, leaning near Alyssa to retrieve for his toolbox.

He smelled pleasant, like the fog before it evaporated in the late morning sun. Alyssa's mouth went dry. She backed up against the vibrating refrigerator. She was ready to scoop up Millicent, but the man was right about the cats. Millicent crunched away on kibble, oblivious to the rogue cat. *Milli-cent, run! Hide as usual! That's a vicious wild cat!*

The man shook her hand, shaking Alyssa out of her reverie. His touch was like nothing she'd ever experienced. It made her body melt like chocolate left on a steam radiator. She seemed to merge with him, settling into a soft pool of

comfort. Somehow she heard him saying, "Name's John Christopherson. Nice to meet you, Alyssa Swain."

How did he know her name? She couldn't blame this memory loss on a night of drinking. She didn't drink alcohol. She was about to start though.

"When did I hire you?"

He walked through the plaster wall between the kitchen and hallway, then came back to stand in the real doorway. Alyssa winced. "How did you do that? And how do you know who I am?"

His face darkened. "Let's just say that I was commissioned to come here."

"What does that mean?" His cat hissed, baring fangs at Alyssa. "Put that wild thing outside."

"He's had a bad night. We both have. We'll work it off."

"No, you won't." Her boldness made her heartbeat quicken. "I don't care who commissioned you. Oh crap, my ex-husband didn't hire you, did he? Get out."

His cat snarled, pawing at the air with threatening talons.

Alyssa shivered. "What is wrong with that mangy thing?"

John brightened, as if glad for the change in subject. "Can't you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"Your toilet's running. Dillinger picks up on irritating sounds. I'll have it fixed in a jiffy for you. The ball cock is probably corroded. Nothing worse than a rusty cock."

She was sure she'd turned flame red. John winked before clomping down the hallway. He and his cat took the staircase two steps at a time.

She rushed to the bottom of the stairs, waiting like a ninny. The toilet tank lid clanked. Everything sounded real up there. The man was humming a song that was vaguely familiar. "*Moon River, wider than a mile...*"

Alyssa hurried to the kitchen to use the cell phone. She whispered, "Deputy Lily? It's Alyssa Swain. Hurry. I have an intruder."

"Where is he now?"

"Fixing my toilet."

Silence. Then a giggle. "I'm betting this is all Tootsie's doings. Her 'Welcome Wagon' approach. We have a crazy woman called Tootsie Winters who loves to stick her nose in other people's business. She raises silkie chickens. Were there any lavender chickens running around with the man? She's trying to unload new chicks hatched in September."

"No. Just a really bad-looking cat with one eye and lots of attitude."

"A man who likes cats can't be dangerous. But I'll come check him out."

About a half hour later, Alyssa was pacing in her kitchen listening to John using an electric sander on the wood floor in the living room. When Deputy Lily arrived, she dashed past John to open the front door.

A blast of wind howled, whipping brown oak leaves in with the officer.

John kept on working on the floors, paying them no attention.

Lily took off her cap. She re-did her ponytail. "That's some wind. We're going to get snow for Halloween, I hear."

By the way Lily smiled at Alyssa expectantly, Alyssa knew the deputy couldn't see John or hear the sander's whining. But Alyssa had to try. "You don't hear anything?"

"Who can hear anything over that howl outside?"

"You don't see anything?"

Lily peered at the smooth, maple wood floor. "You've been busy. That floor is gorgeous. You sand it yourself?"

Alyssa sagged. "I guess I must've." Under John's firm fists the sander whirled in a corner.

"Now where's this guy with the cat?"

She gave up. "He left. Sorry to bother you." Before Lily could leave, though, Alyssa grabbed the deputy's coat sleeve. It felt real.

Lily smiled. "Something else?"

"You're sure you don't see anything? A man with broad shoulders? Wavy head of black hair? Denims that fit, well, nice, with a hammer in a loop?"

"Tootsie Winters got to you, didn't she? This house isn't haunted, no matter what she says."

"Haunted?" Alyssa had her share of bad dreams. She didn't need to add to them.

"I guess she didn't tell you. Keep in mind Tootsie is the former mayor's wife, but she still thinks she's running the town. She tries to create lore to bring in the tourists. According to her, this house is an in-between house."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know. I'm a facts person. Tootsie's the kind to read the Duluth-Superior obits then insist those ghosts pass through here for your great view of Lake Superior."

Alyssa paled. If the woman read obituaries for entertainment, did she know about Alyssa's little girl? Alyssa choked on anger. Had this Tootsie hired somebody to taunt her, to punish her for what had happened four years ago this weekend?

"I need to be alone. I'm not feeling well." Alyssa hoped Lily would forgive her for practically shoving her out the front door. This was twice she'd taken ill in the presence of the officer.

John stopped the sander. He flashed a smile. "So how's it look?"

Alyssa was so mad she could barely make her teeth unclench. “You’re a cruel person. Who put you up to this sick joke?”

He came to her in swift strides, cupping her elbows in the palms of his broad hands. Heat rippled from him like a warm wave on a beach at sunset, lapping into her body, buoying her.

“It’s not a joke.” The tunnel of light widened, inviting her again. “I know about your daughter and how she died. That’s why I’m here. The police report was wrong. You didn’t mean to kill little Sadie Rose.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 2

Whether she was finally going mad from guilt, or this was some nightmare punishment for her hand in her daughter’s death, Alyssa couldn’t discern. Did it matter? Her daughter had died because of Alyssa.

She sank shivering into the living room couch. “So you’re a detective? My ex’s attorney? An insurance agent wanting your money back? Did you pay too much for my daughter?”

John sat beside her. “I’m really a carpenter. And I’m here to help you figure out the best way to memorialize Sadie Rose.”

A hunger overwhelming her defied common sense. She wanted him to be real. When he entwined his fingers with hers, all she could feel was a cushion of heat and not the details of muscle, knuckles, and skin. “You know something about the accident that I don’t?”

“I’m here because your daughter can’t reach you.”

The distrust in him returned. “Of course she can’t. She’s dead.”

“But that’s all she is. She’s waiting for your help.”

“What’re you talking about?” He had to be an actor. This *was* a Halloween trick. Alyssa got up from the couch to eye him with suspicion.

John leaned forward, kneading his hands. “She can’t move on to her proper place in the afterlife until you move on without her.”

“I can’t forget her. I’m her mother.” Tears clouded her vision.

“You need to find a way to send her away. You’re holding onto her so tightly that she can’t even play along the river.”

“What river?”

“The river she’s waiting in line to cross.”

She recalled the song he’d hummed earlier. “Oh puh-lease. Who hired you to put on this show?”

“Doesn’t matter.” Wrinkles settled in his rugged face again. “Perhaps I can get Sadie Rose to talk to you at the party about this issue.”

“For the last time, there’s no party. No dead people are coming to my house this Sunday.”

“I’m afraid they are. I know for sure your great-great Grandmother Sadie is coming. She was hoping you’d make the pumpkin tarts you do so well.”

Alyssa flinched. How did John Christopherson know about the pumpkin tarts? And her daughter’s namesake?

“The tarts sound good,” John said in a smooth tone.

“I haven’t made them for four years.” *Not since the accident. The accident happened because of my damn cooking!* Her hands grew clammy. John wouldn’t understand. “I don’t cook anymore. Please, we can’t have a party.”

“Ah, because you were a caterer. You’re sick of cooking. I have the solution. We’ll make it a dish-to-pass party. Everybody brings their specialty to share.”

“How can dead people bring a dish-to-pass? They’re dead.”

John leaned back on the sofa, a smug smile spreading wide. “The in-between allows dead people to do whatever they did in the few days before their death. They just can’t do anything new until they go on to the after-life.”

Trying to process that, Alyssa sank onto one end of the couch again. “So you’re saying my great-great grandmother is still cooking on her wood stove?”

“Yes. It’s rather smoky in the in-between at times.”

“And my great-great grandfather is still chopping wood in the timberlands and hauling it in for her, along with water from a well and a fresh kill for the meal?”

John winced. “I’m afraid not.”

“That was supposed to be a joke.” After he shrugged, she asked, “Well, where is he?”

“It seems he was having an affair—”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“Want to know how he died? He was apologizing to your great-great grandmother for the affair, and when they were having makeup sex he had his heart attack. The apology took their relationship back to its original form, which allowed him to pass directly to Heaven.”

“Because he had an affair?” Alyssa rubbed her temples. This was a doozy of a dream. “So great sex gets you into Heaven?”

“No, he got there because he returned things to their original way. He apologized and your grandma forgave him. When we make things right again, that’s when we truly hear the voices of our loved ones and can move forward and be happy.”

“You’re not going to make me relive my daughter’s accident.”

With a sick feeling climbing up her throat, Alyssa raced through the kitchen and out the door, stumbling to nowhere, hugging her sweatshirt against the bitter wind.

John's warm aura soon enveloped her as they stood looking at the strip of Lake Superior. "I'm here to help you get this old place returned to its original condition by Sunday. If you make things right in this house again, if you restore it to its original beauty, then you'll have a chance to hear your daughter's voice. This house is nothing less than the re-start of your life."

Alyssa could swear his heat was real. But dreams often felt real. "I'll get to talk with my daughter?"

"She needs to tell you the words you didn't hear after the accident happened and just before she died."

Her heart stopped. "She said something? In the ambulance?" *She needed me? And I wasn't there at the final moment?*

"That's what I've been told."

Feeling herself sinking into this game, she asked, "When I hear her, will she be two years old still? Or six?"

"She's two. She'll always be two while waiting to move on."

An ache scraped at Alyssa. She couldn't bear thinking about her daughter stuck in time. Could the party for the dead on Sunday really rectify this? Impossible. But what if it could? Would she have the strength to endure whatever this party brought? John promised she wouldn't have to relive the accident, but Alyssa saw disaster looming. Her guilt could grow even more powerful, pulling her toward an abyss.

She shivered. "Am I going to see my daughter in addition to hearing her?"

"I don't know. It's her choice."

"Is she angry with me?"

John's face clouded. "That's between you and her."

"You said she plays. Then she must be happy."

"She seems sad when she plays. She plays alone. That's what I've seen."

Alyssa's heartbeat banged in her ears as she looked up into his penetrating eyes. "You really came here to help me and my daughter. But I don't see how a tater-tot casserole will change everything."

"You will." He leaned down, his mouth pressing heat on her lips.

She reached up to touch his black, wavy hair, but her fingers collected only the breeze. She backed off. "Let's go inside. You must be cold without a coat."

He chuckled. "That's a good one."

After they went inside and she locked the kitchen door, the wind roared like a tornado, shaking the old house. Alyssa had to grab the counter. Plaster dust puffed off the walls. "What was that?"

"Your relatives. They're trying to get in."

"They walk through walls, too?"

He shrugged.

* * * *

Ordinarily dreamland adventures evaporated during the day, but the promise of hearing her daughter's final words created a new urgency for Alyssa to believe in the power of dreams. She'd always used physical work to help her sleep well, to get past the nasty dreams, the ones with the neon headline: *Car rolls; child dies*. But now she found herself wanting to believe in John, in the dead relatives, the party, and above all the dream that might contain her daughter. Alyssa wanted to crawl back inside her dreams for the first time in four years. She wanted to crawl inside John's eyes. She wanted him to be real.

But John didn't know that Alyssa's biggest flaw was her headlong rush through life. She'd purchased this rundown house to rectify her big flaw—impulsiveness. She wanted to force herself to slow down in life, to think more carefully before speaking or acting.

Alyssa knew she could not bring contentment to John or any man. She was as hollow as this house. John had been right. She had a lot of work to do on the house and herself before either could move forward.

That Thursday afternoon she took sledge hammer in hand behind the staircase and pounded away. Removing crumbling plaster made her feel less hollow. The racket would make her forget about John.

Minutes into her chore, she heard the sander again. She smiled to herself, then groaned at her inability to will John away.

He passed her, saluting as he rolled the sander down the hall and behind the staircase. The hallway led to a suite with a bedroom on either side of a sitting room. Beyond the sitting room was a porch with rusted screens that overlooked Lake Superior in the distance. When done there, John planned to move east of the living room to the large parlor. At the front of the house, the aging boards of the open porch needed attention as well. Upstairs were four more bedrooms. If Alyssa allowed it, John could be kept busy for days just with the floors.

She didn't know much about the history of the farmhouse, only that it'd been empty for years. As she chinked at the plaster that fell from the laths, she imagined all the children that must have tromped up and down the stairs over the years, screaming as they played tag. Alyssa strained to hear her daughter's delightful squeal—

“Nice job!”

Alyssa jumped at John's voice.

“Sorry,” he said. “Penny for your thoughts?”

His looks arrested her. She’d pegged him at about her own age of thirty-five, but the deep ridges in his forehead told her life had been harsh to him, too. When he avoided her gaze to bend down and scoop up fallen plaster, she realized John Christopherson also hid behind his passion for work.

“John, what happened to you?”

“I fell off a building. Three stories up.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It was instant. Painless.”

The notion of feeling pain at death had tortured her. John’s answer lifted a burden from her.

To avoid the urge to hug him, Alyssa offered, “I can finish cleaning up this plaster. You still have the parlor floor.”

John reached out with a thumb to plant a feather touch of electricity on her chin. It brought her body awake in unexpected places. “Whatever you want, Alyssa. That’s why I’m here. To do your bidding.”

Oh my. Maybe we should’ve started upstairs in the bedroom.

After he left for the other room, she whacked away at the wall under the stairs. To her shock, plaster gave way in a huge sheet that revealed an open space. There’d been a doorway under the stairwell at one time.

She poked her head into the dark maw. Dust cluttered the floor. She saw an odd lump at the other end of the petite room. Crouching to avoid the low risers overhead, she picked up the object—a palm-sized, red leather pouch, stiff with age.

Back in the hallway, she tipped the pouch upside down. A brooch landed in Alyssa’s hand. She gasped. Within a gold rim, six white stones with what looked like diamonds in between formed a ring. Inside that ring, smaller blue gems—the color of Lake Superior on its sunny days—created a circle,

too. A green gem the size of Alyssa's thumbnail nestled in the center.

Her hand shook. "John! Help!"

The sander quit.

Once at her side, John whistled. "A secret room with a lovely cache. This bodes well."

"Bodes well for what?" He always made her think in new ways.

"That the party is meant to be and that you're meant to be in this house. Whoever stashed this here knew that an ordinary vagrant or hunter wouldn't be knocking down walls. But they knew somebody who really cared about the place would find it."

Her hand quaked even more. "Who would stash something like this except some jewel thief?" Horror struck her. "They're not coming to the party, are they?"

"I don't know."

"Now what do I do?" Her knees went rubbery. "Obviously there was some disagreement about this brooch or it wouldn't have been hidden behind a secret wall. Somebody must've wanted it and somebody else was making sure they didn't get it. Oh my gosh, maybe there was a murder!"

John plucked the brooch from her hand. "Easy way to find out. You could wear it and see if an aura might appear with answers. It'd look good on you with a little black dress."

She blushed at his teasing. "We have to find the owner."

John flipped the brooch over. "'To Rose, Love Hank'. Know anybody named Rose or Hank?"

Her insides roiled. She knew a Rose, but it made no sense that this would belong to her. "How long do you think this has been behind the stairs?"

"Hard to say. Could be old plaster or newer stuff made to look old. What really matters is that the brooch presented it-

self and you have to accept that it's your fate to find out about it."

"Not me." She backed off. "You keep it. I don't want some ghost or murdering jewel thief mad at me."

He fingered the brooch. "Would one of your relatives have left this?"

"No. My relatives aren't from around here."

John handed her the brooch then picked up a screw from the plaster. "Looks relatively new. Where are your folks from? When did you last see them?"

Regret settled on her like an itchy sweater. She'd lost holidays with her mother in the past four years. Margaret VanderLune DeClerq loved retelling family stories. She had glass ornaments generations old and each had a story. She'd given two heirloom ornaments to Sadie Rose, one for each Christmas. It was a tradition now lost. Her mother would eagerly take on the mystery of the brooch. "Both sides of my family were farmers in Door County. But that's on the other side of the state, near Green Bay. My mother still lives there."

"Nobody living around here? What about your father?"

Regret twisted again. "He took off when I was little. I don't know where he ended up. What are you getting at?"

"You know a Rose. Did your father know this Rose, too?"

Her heartbeat sped up with dread. "You think that my father lived in this house? He left this brooch behind? Why? For me to find?"

"County title records should have his name if he were an owner of the property."

"But his name wasn't on the title."

"Did he ever work around here? Maybe he rented the place or camped for free."

Fear bloomed inside Alyssa. "My mother said he was an itinerant worker, always on the move with whatever job he

could get. I suppose it's possible he passed through here. But he wasn't rich. He must have stolen this."

"Or not. Take it to the new deputy. If stolen, there'd be reports for insurance purposes."

"Great idea."

She started for the kitchen to get her coat, but John stopped her. "It's dark already. Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

"I can't wait, John. I haven't seen my father in twenty years. What if he really did live here and he knows about this brooch? And he knows about me being here?"

John's face wrinkled. "You don't want to go past the curve at the bottom of the hill."

Flop sweat bathed her entire body. "Why not?"

"You might find me in the car again bleeding to death."

She shivered. "Why would you do that?"

"Research that may prevent the actual accident."

He'd tipped her thinking off-balance again. "So you're play-acting, looking for somebody who may have actually died in a car accident like that?"

"Or who's about to die."

"Can you save them?" Her body hummed with incredulity.

"I don't know, but why else would I be left to wander through the in-between? We all have a purpose. We also have a responsibility to live up to that purpose. Don't we all have to be useful to others?"

John left by walking through the locked kitchen door.

A huge hiss made Alyssa jump aside. Dillinger raced through the closed door. Millicent sat next to her kibble bowl licking a paw, unaffected.

Alyssa stared at the brooch. What did the mysterious array of stones and gems mean? She looked again at the names. Hank. Rose. Did her father really know the same Rose she

did? Had her father been lurking nearby at the edges of Alyssa's life, keeping a spying eye on her? Alyssa's throat went dry. She decided she didn't want to know right this minute. She'd heed John's advice and stay put tonight.

She headed for the stairway and bed, but a din of scrapes and loud thunks in the living room stopped her midway on the staircase. "Who's there?"

Alyssa crept back down the stairs. She peeked around the arched doorway, looking to the north where the fireplace puffed a plume of soot.

A diminutive, white-haired woman in a long, black dress, and shoes buttoned over her ankles, dusted herself off. She spat a couple of times. "Heavens to mergatroid, but that's the devil's work, that chimney is, too much for a woman of my age and beauty."

The woman smiled, revealing several missing teeth.

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Chapter 3

Alyssa stepped wide-eyed into the room. "Who are you?"

"I am so very sorry to use the chimney, but none of us can walk through your walls. I suspect that's because you're not ready for the party. John mentioned you were a serious case. Look at this place, deary, for shame. We must get to work. I'll thump the rugs."

The woman was rolling up her sleeves.

Alyssa rubbed her temples. *Another dream?* "I suppose I know you somehow?"

"Pshaw, no. I'm your great-great grandmother on your mother's side, Sadie DeForest." *My daughter's namesake.* "I'll be bringing my homemade crackling bread and oxtail soup on

Sunday.” While swabbing at her sooty face with a dainty handkerchief embroidered in yellow petals around its edges, she squinted at the room. “Oh, deary, where shall we tack up the squirrel tails?”

“Squirrels?” Alyssa was getting queasy again.

“Yes, your Uncle Jay is coming. He’s a few uncles back.” The woman began gathering up scatter rugs Alyssa hadn’t seen before. “His squirrel hunting saved him. Your Uncle Jay Kelly was a horse thief in Ireland. He was hunting the day the constable came for him, but with his weapon he fended off the law and found his way to the boat. I believe that was in 1771. He’ll be bringing a dozen fresh, squirming squirrels. After he skins them he always likes to tack the tails up on a wall for good luck. Would the space by that big window do?”

“I guess,” Alyssa squeaked, definitely squeamish about squirming squirrels and their tails.

“I advise you hide that brooch in your hand. Your Uncle Jay can’t be trusted. It’s why he’s stuck yet in the in-between.”

Alyssa hurried to bed, getting down on her knees to pray for the first time in four years. But at a loss for words, she muttered, “John, get back here and make this go away. I don’t want weird dead people in my house. I don’t want dead squirrels becoming tapas and wall tapestries!”

* * * *

When she woke Friday morning, all seemed normal. Millicent snoozed on the bed.

While Alyssa dressed in jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt and a clean Green Bay Packer sweatshirt, she smiled at the odd dream. A party for dead people? And they’d bring food and squirrel tails?

Glancing about, she failed to see a brooch. She sighed with relief.

Ready to go downstairs to an ordinary day, she glimpsed Lake Superior in the distance through the French doors to the upper deck. She recalled the warm cocoon of John's aura while they'd peered at the lake yesterday—no, in her dream.

She alighted at the foot of the staircase...and spotted the woman with the cloud of white hair dusting in the living room.

Millicent trotted for the kitchen. She didn't even sniff the air. Alyssa groaned. *I'm still inside a damn dream. Wake up! I want my real life back!*

"You need a rabble-rousing, red rooster, young lady. It's almost seven a.m. The coffee should've been put on to boil two hours ago. There will certainly be other relatives coming today to help with preparations."

Alyssa attempted to walk to the kitchen, pretending not to see the woman. But Sadie cackled. Fed up, Alyssa marched over and yanked at her wig. "Trick or treat! Who are you? Tootsie Winters?"

Sadie let out an ear-piercing shriek. "Ouch! My hair!"

Alyssa let go, horrified to find the fluffy, white hair was real. "I'm sorry."

A sparkle on the woman's black dress drew Alyssa closer. "You took the brooch out of my bedroom. You and John are grifters!" The betrayal stung. "You think you can put on a costume because it's Halloween and nobody will notice you robbing them?"

Sadie huffed. "I picked up the brooch when I was dusting. I noticed you have no jewel box. How can a woman exist without a jewel box for her heirlooms that must go to her daughter on her wedding day?"

"I don't have...a daughter. Or heirlooms."

"Well you better get working on both because you're no spring chicken, though with hips like yours you could birth a

whole brood until you're forty-five or until consumption takes you."

"You're calling me fat?" Alyssa sniffed the air. "What's that awful smell?"

"Belgian jutte. Cabbage boiled then fried with salt pork. You have a cousin Janet six times removed who needs assistance preparing for the repast and I volunteered to make her jutte ahead of time. It'll work well reheated with the roast boar. That reminds me. Somebody in the in-between asked me where you'd like the fire pit? The pig will need to bake all day tomorrow and into Sunday, especially in cold weather like this."

"We're not cooking a pig over an open fire." *Egads but it sounds like a Christmas song. Where are you, John? I need you!*

Sadie started pushing stuffed chairs around. Alyssa frowned. She'd removed the moth-eaten chairs when she'd moved in. Now they were back, probably dripping bugs. She'd have to fumigate.

Next, with the smell of cabbage stinking up the house, the woman plopped white lacy circles on the chair arms and backs. White circles dressed tables, even the top of an antique pedal pump organ that had somehow materialized.

Sadie said, "These doilies belonged to my mother. They're now yours, handed down through several generations of women. Wasn't she talented? What talent might you have?"

"I—" She'd used to create clay creatures with her daughter. Alyssa focused on the doilies. "I've never seen anything like these in my life."

"I suspect you'll find them in your mother's effects when she dies."

"She's dying soon?" Alyssa panicked.

"I don't think so. When was the last time you talked with her about anything of importance, such as her health?" Sadie shook her head. "Young people. They only think of themselves."

Alyssa bit her lip. What Sadie said held a spark of truth. She and her mother didn't talk of anything of consequence anymore. "Mom and I aren't really doily people."

"Any good funeral needs a doily or two."

"Whose funeral?"

Sadie plunked hands on her hips. "The dead people. Who else has a funeral?"

Alyssa rubbed at her temples. "I thought they were coming for a party?"

"My dear, some will want to bring their caskets. Lying inside a casket helps push the dead spirit to the other side, or at least they hope so."

"We can't have caskets at a party. Whoever heard of such a nutty thing?"

"Alyssa, be respectful of your family. In the 1800s, when they died, their bodies were always on display in the parlor. The minister will be here to say a few words, too. I've warned him he'll have to have a bite of your Great-Grandmother Livingston's blackcap pie or she'll wake the dead."

"We certainly wouldn't want to do that, though waking up sounds mighty good to me." Alyssa did jumping jacks on the spot. "Come on, wake up!"

"Stop that. How do you expect to get a husband when you act so unladylike? Now help me move this small table to the corner. It'll be perfect for those who want to stop for a cup of tea while they view the deceased."

Alyssa lifted a lamp off the table Sadie was shoving. "Who's the dead person trying to die for good?"

"I thought you knew. It's John Christopherson, of course."

* * * *

Alyssa almost dropped the lamp. "John's leaving for good?"

"He hopes so, though completing the row across the river at these Halloween parties is never a guarantee. He tried two weeks ago by using the casket method, but I think he used poor quality wood. You can't be chintzy. Persimmon is good. Hand-carved oak is always nice." Sadie put a doily on the table. "Isn't he just the nicest man? If anybody deserves a hand-carved—"

"If he passes on, does that mean I'll never see him again?" Alyssa plunked the lamp on the doily.

"That's usually true. It's like crossing the ocean. Most of us only do it once in our lifetime, if at all. In John's case, he wants to pass over desperately. I doubt he'd come back."

"Why can't he stay in the in-between?" *What am I saying? Wake up!*

"I'm sure you've grown close, but you understand. You lost a child. He lost two children in a fire."

The news made Alyssa stagger into a stuffed chair. Dust billowed up.

Sadie patted her shoulder. "Such tragedies fortunately are kind to innocent children. They don't have to earn a spot into Heaven, but they're likely waiting for their father to help them cross the in-between. You can't hold him back from joining his children. He's been working hard to earn passage to help them cross into Heaven."

So John's kindnesses toward Alyssa were earning him his ticket to the afterlife.

She felt foolish, but not betrayed by him after all. She understood the gripping need to see one's children, to hold

them, to smell the tops of their heads. She had to tell him she understood, to tell him she was sorry for wanting to hold onto him. "Where's John?"

"I believe he said he was going to a car graveyard somewhere on the other side of Moonstone."

"Probably looking for a wrecked BMW."

Sadie took off the brooch and handed it to Alyssa. "Take this to that fine deputy woman and see who this belongs to."

"But you were wearing it. It must not be real, like..."

Sadie grunted. "Like me? There's only one way to find out. Take it into town and get it looked into, as well as invite real people to the party."

The last thing Alyssa wanted was a real party. Her last party had been the reason she'd rushed through that intersection with her daughter. "No, I can't invite living people."

"John will be disappointed in you."

That put a hitch in her heartbeat. "Why?" Certainly he didn't care. He was leaving her.

"The better the party—the more fun and neighborliness created—the better his chances of passing over. His purpose was to help you, was it not?"

"He said so." Alyssa sighed.

"When friends gather, there's a special power in the room that uplifts us. You want that, don't you?"

She had to want it for John. He needed that boost to rejoin his daughters. But if she helped him do this, he'd be gone. Alyssa was so confused again that she wanted to cry.

"Deary, what does your sweatshirt mean?"

"Green Bay Packers. Football."

"What's a foot ball? Is that like a coming out ball, a cotillion? My sister and I certainly had a gay time at Edith's ball. She married that nice Union soldier who lost his hand..."

Alyssa had to find reality. She skipped breakfast and drove into Moonstone with the brooch.

* * * *

Deputy Lily Schuster's eyes went agog at the jewels.

Alyssa stammered, "They're real?"

"Give me a moment. They're awfully dusty."

Alyssa sat across from Lily in an office that once was a sundries store for lumberjacks in the 1800s. She couldn't help but notice the lovely sheen on the wood floor. John's handiwork? "Who refinished the floor?"

"A teenager from over at Port Cliff. He unfortunately got into trouble with rat poison in a pie that caused a lady's death, so I'm without anybody to finish the work here."

"How horrible."

"It was a tragic accident. He's in therapy."

"What about the brooch? Can you trace it?"

"Something worth this much was likely reported missing sometime."

Alyssa leaned forward with excitement. "How much do you think it's worth?"

"Easily a quarter of a million or so."

Alyssa blinked. "That much?"

"My friend Kirsten VanBrocklin is something of an expert on jewels. Why not have her take a look?"

"Where would I find her?"

"She's the chef at The Jingle Bell Inn. I'm sure she's there today, what with the party in the school gym for the kids tomorrow night before Halloween day. She's catering."

Alyssa didn't want to be inside a restaurant kitchen. It would bring back unwanted memories. But she thought about how hard John was working to rejoin his daughters. He needed her help.

"Deputy..."

“Lily is fine among us girls.”

The casualness of “girls” reminded Alyssa of Sadie’s words. *“Friendship uplifts people. Invite living people to the party.”* “Lily, I’m having a party on Sunday. Would you come?”

“I’d love to.”

“It’s dish-to-pass.” She expected the deputy to back out.

Instead, Lily clapped her hands. “Wait until you try my skubanky.” She smiled at Alyssa’s odd look. “Comes from my fiancé’s mother. She’s Czechoslovakian. Before I met her about the only thing domestic I knew how to do was iron. I love to iron. You?”

“Not really.” Wrinkled clothes were on their own.

“You mix mashed potatoes with flour, roll them into hot-dog shapes, fry them in lots of fat until brown, serve with maple syrup. You’ll love my spanking skubankies!”

Enjoying the deputy’s enthusiasm, Alyssa said, “I’ll fast all day tomorrow so I can pig out on them on Sunday.” But she sobered, embarrassed to ask the next question. “Who else might I invite? I don’t know anybody.”

“Marge at the IGA would love an invitation. She’s a new woman since getting engaged to Tony. You know how voluptuous in size she is. The story goes that she wore a bikini in public last summer and Tony fell in love. He was the chef on Kirsten’s husband’s yacht. Still is, though they sold the yacht.”

Alyssa’s head spun. “Does this getting to know my neighbors get any easier?”

“Not in Moonstone. Here. Use paper.” Lily handed her a pen and paper before continuing. “And ask Tom and Lily Bauer. She’s a teller at the bank.”

“Two Lilys in town. That’s lovely.”

“We can try for other flower names.” Lily looked at the back of the brooch. “How about we start by finding a Rose?”

Alyssa paled. She focused her gaze downward on the list. "Who else should I invite?"

"Of course Tootsie Winters. She'd love bringing women to town with flower names as a publicity stunt. Talk to her about the idea at your party."

"I'd rather not. She sounds a bit intense."

"She is. Tootsie and her husband, Bob, run the honeymoon cruises. They bought Kirsten's and Jonathon's yacht. Also invite Peter and Crystal. Don't forget old Henri and his twenty-something girlfriend, Felicity Starr. They've lasted two months already so it's best to invite them because everybody would talk about them anyway." Lily laughed.

Alyssa decided that being neighborly meant putting up with a lot of quirks. She stuck with it, though. She wanted real people at her house, not dead people.

Lily added, "And don't forget Claire Lone Eagle and her husband. They've had a real bad time of things lately, what with John in a coma."

Alyssa snapped her head up. "John who?"

"John Christopherson. He and Claire's husband were working construction down in New Orleans a month ago when he fell off a mansion roof they were repairing."

There's a real John Christopherson. He's not just part of my dreams. "He's going to be okay?"

Lily's fair complexion faded paler. "He broke a lot of bones, has a bunch of internal injuries, I hear. Don't tell Claire this, because she's always worried about her husband, too, but I don't think John's going to make it."

Alyssa clutched the pen in her hand so hard she broke a fingernail. "Do you know what hospital he's in?"

"No, but I could find out. It's likely not New Orleans. Since Katrina they've taken patients all over the United States. But give me a little time. I don't want to call Claire or her

husband. They're so distraught they can't even talk at the mention of John's name."

Alyssa recalled how Claire always seemed to be on the go at the casino with no time for chatting. "Sure. Thank you. But call me as soon as you know anything."

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Chapter 4

With each step across Moonstone's square, Alyssa experienced different emotions: elation over there being a real John; anger over his wish to pass over; selfishness for wanting him despite his children needing him; sadness over being unable to help him.

But how could she know this John without having met him for real? Alyssa felt as if she'd fallen into a deep crack in the earth, been digested by monsters, then spit up with a sixth sense.

But that couldn't be. She must have read about John in a newspaper and forgotten.

When Alyssa searched her pocket for a tissue, she came up with a white handkerchief crocheted with yellow rosebuds. *Sadie's?* Real or not, the hankie was perfect for sopping up tears.

Presentable again, she crossed the street to enter The Jingle Bell Inn. Patrons filled the mansion's dining room overlooking a sweeping lawn and Lake Superior. Alyssa's mouth watered at the smell of fried eggs and omelets, buttery pancakes with maple syrup, hash browns and bacon.

She checked her cell phone. *Lily, please call. I must know about John.*

A blonde woman in a chef's hat peeked out from the kitchen then hurried over. Kirsten Peplinski VanBrocklin said, "Sorry to keep you waiting. Coffee and a stack of cranberry pancakes are on me."

The graciousness relaxed Alyssa. She held out the brooch. "Lily Schuster said you might know what this is worth."

"Moonstones!" Kirsten laughed so hard her white hat tipped back. "My husband gave me a dozen moonstones when he kidnapped me on his boat. They were gifts for my bridesmaids."

"He knew he wanted to marry you the first time you met?"

"Oh yeah. And it was his way to force me to find new friends around here. Men like him are rare."

They're like John.

Kirsten examined the moonstones. "Blue veins, hint of man-in-the-moon faces—the more valuable kind."

"My carpenter and I found the brooch in the farmhouse that I'm refurbishing."

Kirsten's smile brightened. "I desperately need a carpenter. I don't think the enclosed aviary's going to be done by Christmas for the wedding. Send your guy my way."

If only. "I heard him say he had another gig right after my house."

"Too bad." Kirsten sized up the brooch. "I have a magnifying glass in the kitchen."

In the stainless steel haven, steam rose from pans and pots. The soft heat on her skin gave Alyssa pause. She expected John to be standing beside her. But he wasn't.

While Kirsten searched a desk covered with cookbooks, Alyssa asked, "Would you like to come to my dish-to-pass Halloween party?"

"I'd love to. I have a recipe for mushrooms stuffed with wild rice, cranberry raisins and cheddar cheese that I'm dying to try on people."

"Sounds perfect."

"I'm still trying to figure out how to turn my garlic mashed potatoes into finger food."

"Lily's bringing a potato thing already."

"Her skubanky from Marcus's mom. I want to steal that recipe and she won't let me."

"Make your own version."

"Nah. Feels odd to steal from a law officer."

Alyssa grinned at Kirsten's visible shudder.

Kirsten finally found her magnifying glass. "What do you do?"

"I'm a card dealer at the casino."

"With this there's no need to go to any casino. Easily a half-million."

"What?!"

"My husband deals in fine jewels for his rich clients. This is the real deal. Moonstones, diamonds, and sapphires of the highest grade. And the emerald—wow." Lily flipped the brooch over. "Who are Hank and Rose? These stones are known for love and devotion—deep faith in another person. If you remember, Prince Charles re-started the sapphire craze for engagements when he gave one to Princess Diana."

Alyssa decided to trust Lily. Chefs knew how to be discreet with recipes and gossip overheard in their restaurants. "I once knew a Rose. A waitress that I met in Duluth a few years ago. She was kind to me when I needed it. I named my daughter for her. Sadie Rose."

"How lovely. But no Hanks?"

"Fresh out of Hanks."

“The closest we have to that around here is Henri LeBaron. But he’s in his eighties and goes strictly by Henri.”

A dead end. Alyssa recalled John’s questions about possible past owners. “Where might I find somebody who knows area history?”

“Tootsie Winters knows everything or at least thinks she does. She lives a few miles out. Just follow the signs for the lavender chickens and the giant prehistoric beaver.”

Alyssa grimaced. The Moonstone area was one surprising adventure after another.

* * * *

Tootsie lived in a yellow house next to a marsh and thick timber. A wolf-proof, enclosed yard by a shed contained oddly colored, fluffy chickens pecking about. And then there was Tootsie.

A fleshy woman with short, silver hair, she wore a flamingo pink fleece leisure outfit with strawberries appliquéd across the bosom and down the sleeves. She greeted Alyssa with Lulu, a lavender-hued chicken, in her arms. Lulu went with them up into Tootsie’s packed attic where she kept old township records. “I’m sure we’ll find something.” She handed Lulu to Alyssa, who sneezed at the ticklish, ostrich-like feathers. Lulu warbled before nose-diving into sleep in the crook of Alyssa’s arm.

Tootsie popped up from a wooden chest waving an old newspaper. “Here’s a start.”

Dated 1995, the local shopper paper had an article about area haunted houses. Alyssa exchanged Lulu for the paper.

“So it’s true my farmhouse has always been haunted?”

“At least abandoned off and on for twenty years. Of course, being haunted may be why the owners abandoned it. They didn’t want to be part of an underground railroad for lost souls.”

“What’s that?”

“An underground railroad is what they called the secret homes and people who helped the slaves escape to freedom in the 1800s. Some houses, especially big ones high on a hill, act as the same thing for spirits in the in-between.”

“You make it sound like I’m running a B&B for dead people.”

“You might be. They like to party before they pass over and go on up.” The pink woman set her lavender chicken aside on a dusty rocking chair before bending over to root about in another box. “Have you seen any ghosts? I’d give anything to see one.”

Alyssa stared gape-mouthed at the woman—or more accurately, her big pink butt. “If I say I’ve seen something it makes me nuts, right?”

“You have seen ghosts! I’m jealous.”

Alyssa clung to the newspaper. “I hear noises is all. A brick fell from my fireplace, but if you saw the condition of my—”

“Who came down the chimney?”

“Nobody.”

“Hah! Somebody did. I can see it in the twinkle of your eyes.”

“How can you know that somebody came down my chimney?”

“I know.”

She knew. As Alyssa knew things for certain.

Tootsie plunked her heft down on the wood chest. “Don’t tell anybody, but I hear voices. I see things, too, except for ghosts or spirits, darn it all. People think I’m crazy, but I can see events before they happen and know they’ll be a success. Right now I’ve been seeing all of Moonstone planted with moon flowers that open at midnight, with throngs of

tourists coming for rides in white carriages pulled by white horses. What do you think?"

Alyssa swallowed hard. "Dreamer or seer, you're a person with magical ideas. I love the idea of Moonstone at midnight. I'll even help."

Tootsie hooted. Her strawberries bounced up and down. "There're two of us who can see things, who can 'just know'. Not even my husband knows about this. He thinks my craziness is menopause. You'll keep it a secret?"

This commonality with Moonstone's resident kook would take a while to digest. "You have my word, Tootsie."

Tootsie went head-first into more boxes. "I heard some fella lived in your house for a year or two not so long ago, maybe four years ago, then again recently, but I never saw the guy."

Could Alyssa's father truly be spying on her? "How old was he?"

"Not sure. I could find out."

"Thanks." Alyssa scanned the newspaper for any mention of a DeClerq. "All it says is that hunters used the place in bad weather."

"And homeless people, teenagers, and probably those scumbags trying to create meth."

"Drugs?"

"It's likely. Lily's been having a heck of a time tracking down the labs. They started to creep in here twenty years ago. Lily needs help, but there's no budget. The best thing to happen for her and that old farmhouse is you living there to keep the creeps out."

Alyssa got a chill. If John was right about her father passing through here, could her father have been involved with drugs? Was that why he left her and her mother two decades ago? For a fast, illegal buck?

"Tootsie, can I keep this?"

"Sure. I'll keep looking through these trunks. I'll let you know right away what I find."

"If you also find anything about jewel heists, would you save those stories, too?"

Tootsie went bug-eyed with excitement. "Do we have a Butch and Sundance in our midst? Capone visited the North Woods, but that's southeast of here. By golly, Moonstone could use a good legend to bring in tourists. The giant beaver found in my yard by Professor Landen hasn't been enough."

"I'm having a party on Sunday for my neighbors. Would you and your husband like to come?"

"I'll bring deviled eggs!"

"Perfect for Halloween."

"Can I bring Lulu?"

"I have a cat." *Maybe two.*

"Not wise then. Lulu's quite the watch-hen. Very protective. I'd hate to see her chasing your poor cat around the house. You really should think of getting better protection, like a chicken that can make a fuss. Living all alone out in the woods is dangerous. People could walk into your house at any moment of the day and night."

Indeed.

* * * *

When she got home Friday afternoon, Alyssa didn't find John. Had he died? She was so distraught she called the casino to beg off working that night. Finishing her kitchen floor was all she could manage with her mind scrambled with so many worries: her daughter, the brooch, "Rose," her missing father, and now Tootsie Winters spooking her. And she had to contend with more dead relatives about in the living room.

Sadie had been joined by Joette—Alyssa's mother's aunt who had died in the 1970s from breast cancer, and her daugh-

ter, Moonbeam—a nurse who died in the 1990’s Gulf War. Joette and Moonbeam sang Beatles songs over the high-pitched whine of Joette’s canister vacuum. Moonbeam had hauled in beanbag chairs and lava lamps while Sadie shook out antique rag rugs.

When the women began the soulful song, “Yesterday,” Alyssa slumped on the cold kitchen floor in tears. The song got her every time.

A tap on her shoulder made her look up. “John!”

She launched to her feet ready to fling herself into his arms, her heart bursting toward him, but Dillinger hissed at her as he trotted by, which made her step farther back from her foolishness. The cat was wet and matted. John was, too, with leaves stuck in his mussed black hair.

“What happened?” She reached for a towel to give John. It taunted her that he used it—as if he were real.

“I decided to follow the creek to see if the guy from the car had followed it, too, after the accident. We slipped while trying to cross the creek. But I suppose that was good practice for us.”

She couldn’t take his flippancy. “John, where are you?”

“Right here.”

“I mean your body. Where is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“The past doesn’t always stay with you when we’re like this. The past doesn’t matter sometimes. My body doesn’t matter anyway. I’m here to help you with the dish-to-pass party.”

She grabbed her phone off the counter and shook it to make sure it was working. “I’m going to find your body, don’t worry. I’ll help put you back together.”

“But I might be like Humpty Dumpty. You have to face that.”

His serious look weighed her with sadness.

Dillinger plunked his butt near the refrigerator and started licking his privates. Alyssa was grateful for the distraction. “Can’t you teach that beast any manners?”

“I’ve tried. He doesn’t listen to me for some reason. Why are you so nervous? You’ve invited live people, haven’t you?” John’s smile marched all the way up to the twinkle in his chocolate-colored eyes.

“Yeah. A bunch of people I don’t know.” She ached to kiss him. “I also found out this place is haunted.”

“Duh.”

He always made her smile when she most needed it. “According to what I read, there were several past owners of parcels of land here that were once tied together in one big tract of logging timber.”

He picked up his one-eyed cat to dry him off. “What if your father owned a parcel? What if the brooch was part of some payment for land?” His eyes grew dark as the morning coffee still in its pot on the counter. “Or did he die near here?”

She hadn’t expected that information. “Have you met him recently in your wanderings?”

He tossed the towel over to the sink. “Not yet in the in-between. But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t died.”

The possible loss gnawed at her. Why did she even care if he were alive yet? She forced herself back to the green tiles on the floor.

John joined her, brushing down paste in front of her. “Are you afraid of him showing up on Sunday?”

“Dead or alive, yes.”

“Why?”

Her hands shook as she laid a green tile in place. "Because of the pain he's caused me and my mom by disappearing. It makes me want to spit on his shoes."

"But you can't really do that because you love him and he loves you."

"I doubt it."

"Alyssa, you're loveable. Trust me. There's got to be a good reason he left. I bet he smiles when he thinks of you. Your little girl smiles when she talks about you."

"I thought you said she was sad?" Alyssa sat back on the floor.

He kept on laying tiles for her. "She's repeated a couple of times that it wasn't your fault."

Alyssa could barely muster a whisper. "I speeded up to get through a yellow light. My car rolled on impact and Sadie Rose's car seat came apart." She choked. "Apparently, in my hurry I hadn't buckled it properly."

When he reached over to touch her cheek, she wanted to sink into him, to tell him the rest of it. But it wouldn't be fair to him. To reveal who else had been harmed by her careless actions would only burden him. John didn't need her grief piled on his own. He needed strength to move on.

He said, "You may have gone through a yellow light, but it wasn't red. That means the other driver ran through a red one. What happened to him or her?"

"A bunch of teenagers broadsided me but their airbags went off and they walked away from it all."

"Were they charged in court?"

"No. The driver's insurer put a price on my daughter, though. She was worth two-hundred-fifty thousand dollars." She swallowed a sob.

"Alyssa, listen to me. The car seat was defective and the teenagers made a horrible mistake. Of course you got paid a

pile of money. It's not what your daughter was worth. And none of it was your fault."

"But I can't seem to get past it. I didn't need to be in such a hurry."

She barely had her handkerchief out of her pocket when John gathered Alyssa in his arms. Being with him was like settling on a hearth next to an oak log fire. She'd miss him. Already she ached for him. "You won't leave me before the party, will you?"

"Cross over before this dish-to-pass party?" He laughed while taking the hankie to dry off her cheeks. "I haven't had a decent meal in ages."

Because you're lying in some hospital on an IV drip, a liquid diet.

She forced a smile. "We've got a ton of work tomorrow before Sunday comes. Could you paint the parlor for me now?"

"I'd rather sand the floors. I was getting the hang of that." He winked. "But then I'm good at hanging upside down in cars, too."

"I'd rather you not do any more of that."

"I'll try."

"Thanks, John. Thanks for being a friend when I needed one most. I wish you could stay."

"I'll try to stay until you find out about the brooch's owner. I'm curious, too."

He left her to go find the paint. Dillinger trotted after him. Millicent as usual paid them no heed.

How can that brooch with its inscription matter to John? Why can't he stay for me? Why can't I be his raison d'être?

She picked up her cell phone, pressing Lily's number. "Have you found out anything?"

“It seems he was moved recently for some reason. I’ll get you the right phone numbers to call.”

Alyssa had hope. “Where is he?”

“A Texas hospital.”

So far away. And she had her party in only a day and a half. She sagged. But he was alive. Hope put a smile on her face and a lightness in her walk. She even waved goodnight to Sadie on her way up the stairs to bed.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 5

On Saturday morning Alyssa felt upbeat for the first time in years.

It helped to work alongside John repairing the alcove. She reveled in doing ordinary things with him. Few words were necessary. Instead, comfort hummed from the mere companionship and teamwork, the inadvertent touch of their shoulders or marrying of hands while putting a board in place. She had never worked like this with her ex. He’d always had his own way of doing things, but then, so had she. They painted the alcove in a cheery apple red hue, and found a table in the barn that would turn the space into a punch station.

Disaster struck after lunch when Sadie began hanging pictures of dead relatives. “Deary, no home should be without a peek at who gave you your cheekbones, ears, toes, and twinkle.”

Alyssa was making cowboy cookies with orange M&M’s in the kitchen when Sadie insisted she “come see.”

A mishmash of photos and tintypes in gilded frames covered the flocked wall between the living room and parlor. Sadie said, “We’re missing an important one. Your daughter.”

The good feelings drained from Alyssa. “I don’t want my daughter paraded about like that on Halloween.”

Sadie sank into a chair, her face crumpling into her fancy hankie. John scowled at Alyssa from a ladder in the parlor. He was hanging an antique chandelier. “That’s exactly what you need. To share Sadie Rose.”

An ache ripped through her. “I can’t. You understand. You lost two children. I don’t want to have to talk about Sadie Rose with every person who walks through my doors—or walls—tomorrow.”

He came to her with his billfold flipped open. “I show them off to everybody.”

His daughters looked about ten and twelve, with John’s black hair and his twinkling, brown eyes. The girls sat on a board fence with a dapple gray horse behind them.

If only Sadie Rose had lived. “They liked to ride?”

“They loved Buster.”

“What became of Buster?”

“My ex-wife took him, which is good. He’s well cared for.”

Alyssa swallowed. She hadn’t even considered whether John was still married or not. She had rushed ahead into needing him without thinking of John’s feelings. She looked around. Sadie, Joette and Moonbeam had disappeared. “Do you want to tell me about it?”

A shadow doused the light in his eyes. “The fire was an accident. A candle in their bedroom fell over. We didn’t know they’d lit one after we’d gone to bed. They’d also dismantled their smoke alarm. We carried them out, both of us sustaining burns, but our children died of smoke inhalation. My wife never recovered from the emptiness.”

“That’s what it is, John. Emptiness.”

“But people aren’t meant to remain empty. We’re vessels who need filling. I wanted more children. My wife didn’t. But looking at this photo makes me know exactly what I need. If I can’t have real children, then it’s time to go see these cute little buggers.”

He was smiling at her. Alyssa’s heart swelled toward him.

He said, “Try it. Put the photo on the wall. It’ll start filling you with a new feeling you didn’t expect. We’ll all get to see where Sadie Rose got her ears, nose, and twinkle.”

Sadness overwhelmed Alyssa. There was so much she could never tell John. “All little kids have a twinkle in their eyes.”

“A lesson for all of us. We adults should make it our job to give each other a twinkle.” He winked at her. “There. I just blew you a twinkle. It looks nice on you. You should wear one in those big brown eyes more often.”

Alyssa’s sadness lifted with that.

John took the photo of his children and taped it on her wall. “Put Sadie Rose’s picture up beside them and she won’t be alone. We’ll both have our children at the party.”

Alyssa imagined crawling into one of those dreams where her daughter was so real she could smell her sweet, baby-powdered skin.

She fetched the photo of her daughter dressed in a pink fairy Halloween costume. She hesitated, but John’s reassuring nod helped her find the strength to put her precious pink fairy up on the wall with the rest of her family and John’s children.

The photo wall took her breath away. The twinkle in her daughter’s eyes was repeated in several others’ eyes. A lump formed in her throat. Her daughter’s presence had created magic. The stirrings of completeness came to Alyssa. She looked at the wall of photos, the girls in particular, then looked at John, finally realizing what was happening to her.

She was re-awakening to what it meant to be part of a family. Her vessel, for at least this moment, felt full.

“Thanks, John.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” he said, before going outside to repair boards on the front steps.

* * * *

On Sunday at exactly three p.m., with slate clouds spitting snow, dead relatives walked through walls carrying food from their era and culture. A Belgian pioneer from Door County brought wicker baskets of blood sausage and small crocks of fresh, hot fried cabbage. A German relative arrived with knofli noodles topped with strips of goat cheese.

Joette brought true American cuisine, a tater-tot casserole. Moonbeam arrived with macaroni and cheese with catsup as garnish. Alyssa’s mother’s deceased aunt from the 1960s brought a lime gelatin ring with carrots and celery chopped inside. She’d put dollops of mayonnaise on top, with more mayo lathered around the perimeter of the wiggly green concoction.

Alyssa’s Uncle Jay—twinkly mischievous eyes—brought a sack of dead squirrels. He passed through the kitchen wall to the outdoors to skin them. Others from the 1700s and 1800s brought freshly shot fowl and a wild boar, which somebody mentioned was roasting in a pit somewhere in Alyssa’s yard.

Relatives from the 1940s and ’50s brought coconut and German chocolate cakes four layers tall. They proudly told Alyssa their secret—toothpicks. She smiled because she remembered her mother showing her the same trick when she was a little girl.

One relative in his Union blue uniform brought salt-water pickles, of all things. Alyssa noted he was missing a hand.

Uncle Jay's first wife in the Americas, Betsy, brought homemade root beer, concocted from hops, roots of burdock, yellow dock, sarsaparilla and spikenard.

Alyssa exchanged a look with John across the crowded living room. He winked at her. She winked back.

She rushed about finding space for all the dishes-to-pass, some with hand-carved wood ladles and gourd dippers.

Kirsten arrived with her stuffed mushrooms and tombstone cupcakes with red syrup blood drizzled over the top. Alyssa assumed Kirsten wouldn't be able to see, smell, or taste any of the dishes-to-pass from her dead relatives, yet the chef bounded in as if she'd landed in nirvana. "You cooked! Didn't you sleep?"

"I didn't, I did, I'm not sure." Alyssa closed the front door.

Kirsten had already dipped a fork into the succotash. "How quaint! A Pilgrim dish. How ever did you think to make this?"

"Oh," she said, taking in the crowded room of motley relatives, including her Uncle Jay tacking fuzzy rodent tails on the front wall, "I was in the mood for squirrel, corned beef, and turnips."

"Let me at your card file. Flash me the succotash."

"I..." In all her years of cooking Alyssa had never thought of writing down the recipes of her relatives, including her own mother. An oversight to be corrected. "I'll see what I can do."

Tootsie and Bob Winters knocked next on the front door. Tootsie, dressed in a shocking pink princess outfit not unlike the photo of Alyssa's daughter, proudly handed her a big bowl of something she called "Spit-Up Casserole."

"What's in it?"

“Spam, spaghetti, mayo, Velveeta cheese cubes melted, and broccoli to cancel out the fat. I melt the cheese with a little Seven-Up, thus the name.”

“I love Spit-Up Casserole already, Tootsie. The perfect side dish for squirrel succotash.”

As Tootsie and Bob found a spot for the gut-bomb dish, Kirsten came up to Alyssa screaming, “You have mulgipuder, reeble, and abenkater!”

“I do?”

“Thank goodness you created the cards with historical notes for each dish-to-pass.”

“I did?”

“I love Halloween. It’s fun to think about how our relatives might be partying up in the sky. What do you think your relatives are doing?”

Uncle Jay was helping other men haul in the whole, roasted boar, its skin mahogany color. “Oh, I suspect they’re bobbing for apples.”

“Where should I put this caramel apple pie?” asked Kirsten. “On the casket?”

Casket?! Following the men with the boar, a mix of dead men relatives and real neighbors hefted an ornate, wood casket through the front door and the living room, finally resting it in place on a sturdy frame in the parlor.

This can’t be. Alyssa remembered what Grandma Sadie had said about needing a fancy casket to help one pass over.

When the men left the parlor, Alyssa wound through the crowd in the living room to get to the casket. “John, where are you?”

A draft fluttered Alyssa’s hair. Grandma Sadie stood at her side. “Deary, we miss him, too.”

Alyssa trembled. “He can’t be dead yet. He promised.”

Kirsten asked, “Who’s dead?”

The dead people rearranged the furniture to give the casket space. They put dishes-to-pass about the room. A couple of women in long dresses brought pitchers of lemonade to side tables.

Alyssa didn't see a preacher. Good. They couldn't perform a funeral service yet. She must have time. To do what? She had to save John, but how? She refused to let him die right here in her parlor. He said he'd wait until she resolved the mystery of the brooch.

Kirsten peered at her with a quirky grin. "Relax. It's going well. Even Tootsie's impressed. I can't figure out why she hasn't dissed you as she's always done with everybody who's new to the Moonstone community."

"So you really don't see anything out of place?"

"This is the most fabulous party I've ever attended. I still can't believe you roasted a whole pig."

"Neither can I." Alyssa tested her. "Did you check out the blood sausage?"

"It's half gone already. Where do you find that delicacy?"

She lied. "My mother sent it from Door County."

Kirsten rushed off to serve punch. Alyssa searched frantically for John. He needed to know the whole truth about Sadie Rose. It must be her fault he was eager to pass over. Had he sensed that she'd held back a lot of things from him? That he couldn't trust Alyssa?

She went to the photo of her pink princess. "Please help me find John."

"They're darling." A tall woman with long, auburn hair stood beside Alyssa. "I'm Crystal Hagan. My farm is a couple of miles as the crow flies from yours. I teach first grade."

The grade Sadie Rose would be in had she lived. "Have you seen a tall man with black, wavy hair and brown eyes that twinkle?"

Crystal wrapped an arm around the man beside her. "Sounds yummy, but I've already caught my man. This is my fiancé, Peter LeBarron."

Alyssa's heart lurched at how handsome he was because he reminded her of John, but a generation older. "You're getting married at Christmas."

"We hope," he said. "We thought it'd be last summer, then that got changed with the horrible pie contest death. Now nothing's coming together with our additions to the North Pole. I want the setting to look just right for my lovely bride."

He kissed Crystal in a way that made Alyssa long for John even more. The yearning scared the heck out of her. She didn't want to be an empty vessel anymore.

When the Santa Claus-like Henri LeBarron came in, assisted by his young, drop-dead gorgeous girlfriend, Felicity Starr, Kirsten nudged Alyssa. "You two could be sisters."

Felicity laughed. "I used to be a sister. A nun, that is."

Henri eased into a chair. "There's been nothing nun-like about you, Felix."

She wrapped her arms around him and kissed his rosy cheeks. "Shall I tell them?"

"Don't see why not," he said. "Half the town's here. Might as well control our own gossip."

"We're having a baby! If it's a girl, we're naming her Rose. If it's a boy, well, we don't know yet!"

Henri pulled Felicity into his lap.

While the crowd clapped, Alyssa turned away in shock. *Rose? The name on the back of the brooch is Rose.*

Sadie's face soured. "She's with child and they're not married? The old coot should be horse-whipped."

Henri toasted with a cup of punch. "I would be honored if my daughter could have all of Moonstone's women as her

godmothers. That includes our newest addition, Alyssa Swain.”

This was awful. Worse than awful. Everybody was clapping for Alyssa, even the dead relatives and her grandmother.

Alyssa whispered to Grandma Sadie, “How can you be unhappy that they’re having a baby but happy that I’m a god-mother for that baby?”

“Didn’t you hear? They’re naming her Rose. Like your daughter.”

Alyssa noticed Grandma Sadie was wearing the brooch again. Did that mean it wasn’t real, that it belonged to a Rose in the afterlife? “Is my Rose getting ready to come back as—”

“Their Rose? No. That’s not how it works. But she may be the one to find your godchild a guardian angel. That is, if your daughter is allowed to cross over. You can’t find angels if you’re not in Heaven yet.”

“What do you mean by ‘allowed’?”

“She wouldn’t be hesitating to cross over unless something in her real life wasn’t returned to rights yet. Perhaps she’s waiting for John to finish putting things to right, and then he’ll help her across.”

Alyssa shivered. “No, it’s me, Grandma.” She had to figure out how to help John and Sadie Rose. “Can I have the brooch?”

Sadie fingered the gems. “For what purpose? It’s a keep-sake. You have no children to hand it down to.”

“Thanks for the reminder.” Alyssa took back the brooch. “It says ‘To Rose, Love Hank.’ Is Felicity’s baby the Rose on this brooch?”

Sadie frowned. “If so, that means you need to find a Hank and give this back to him. He has to have it if he’s ever going to give it to Rose someday. And, deary, I advise you must do this by midnight because after Halloween is done most of us

will likely disappear for a year and the brooch might go with us.”

“Crap.” She had to find a “Hank”? On Halloween? “Double crap.”

“Watch your mouth. I said the S-word after learning my husband had an affair. That’s why I’m still in the in-between.”

“Sadie, do this one good deed and maybe you’ll cross over. Give me a sign that the brooch is okay to claim as my own, that it wasn’t stolen by my father or part of some drug deal.”

The brooch fell to the floor with a clatter. That was a sign? Alyssa slipped it into her pocket.

Sadie had disappeared. A dirge in the parlor caught Alyssa’s attention.

She bolted to the casket and lifted the lid. “John?” She didn’t find a body. Her heart sprouted wings. But where was he? She knew. He was tenacious about saving the person in the BMW.

After grabbing her yellow barn coat, Alyssa fought her way outside through spits of sleet and snow, got in her Jeep, then sailed down Porcupine Hill.

“John!”

He was hanging upside down in the car, blood dripping off his jaw.

“John, get out of there.”

“I can’t.”

“You have to. It’s your turn to have faith in me. You have to stop these death-defying things, like working on mansion roofs without ropes. I’m going to make things right with Rose. I’m going to return things to their original condition. It could be that the BMW crash is related. That’s why it happened here. I was supposed to find you.”

“I told you your little Rose is fine.”

“Not that Rose. The waitress I knew.”

Sleet pricked like knives at her. She crouched down to touch his face but felt nothing, which frightened her. “John, I have to hurry. Hang in there.”

“Very funny.”

“I didn’t mean it that way.”

It was crazy to abandon her own party, but Alyssa suspected they’d be too busy talking about babies, weddings, and squirrel tails to notice.

With roads getting progressively icier as she headed west, it took her over an hour to get to Duluth, and then another half hour to find the Fuel & Food Truck Stop on the west edge of the city.

The interior bright lights of the diner blinded her. The place had a black-checkered floor dirtied by snow slush, auto racing posters, and a jukebox playing a plaintive love song. Alyssa spotted Rose Davenport at a long counter where truckers hunkered over coffee or a cheap meal.

Her nerves on fire, Alyssa made her way to the counter. Rose didn’t recognize her. She poured coffee like a robot. Despite being twenty, the woman with “Rose” on the nametag had dark circles under her eyes and looked as worn as the slouching truckers. Her waist-length, blonde hair was tucked haphazardly behind her ears. She wore no jewelry, no wedding ring. But she was very pregnant.

Compassion burst inside Alyssa. “Rose? It’s me. Alyssa Swain. Your daughter’s mother.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 6

“Ya cut yer hair.”

Rose's simple greeting after four years helped Alyssa keep her courage. "Yes, well, after the funeral I couldn't be bothered with taking care of hair."

"Me, too. Haven't cut mine or curled it since then. Want some of that pumpkin pie there?"

"Sure." Alyssa sipped the hot, black coffee. "You're having a baby."

"Suppose." Rose served the pie. "Want whipped cream? We got real Cool Whip."

"No, thanks." She couldn't touch the pie.

Rose went to refill a coffee cup and came back.

Alyssa asked, "Are you getting married?"

"Not sure, but I'm keepin' it, no matter what David does."

David. Not Hank. "What does David do? How'd you meet?"

"At the tech school. We got our GEDs. He's a welder at a body shop."

"But there's something wrong? You don't love each other?"

Rose shrugged it off.

Alyssa flinched. This couple had to get back together or disaster could happen. She knew. She fingered the brooch in her jeans' pocket, mulling. "What do you mean 'no matter what David does'?"

"He wants to start his own auto body shop. Wants to move away from the city."

"What's wrong with that?"

"We don't have money. That's why we're not married. He says he wants to find a place first. But a business costs money. We'll be stuck somewhere with nothing and a baby. I'd rather keep on livin' with my mom."

Who Alyssa remembered had been divorced twice and worked as little as possible. Alyssa could see the essence of a lost dream in Rose's dull eyes that once were sparkling at sixteen. Rose had resigned herself to a life she didn't deserve. But the welder boyfriend had a dream. If he got his dream, Rose might have her dream, too. Alyssa recalled the young woman was quite the artist in high school and had wanted to create her own comic strip, to make people laugh.

Alyssa asked, "Do you know what your baby is? A boy?"
"A girl."

This wasn't working out at all. If Henri and Felicity were having a girl, then this woman had to have a boy to make destiny work out for everybody. "The doctor said so?"

"No. But mom says it's the way I'm carrying the baby."

The unreliable mom said that? Alyssa grinned. "If it's a girl, what're you going to name her?"

"Petunia."

Think quick. "You're so beautiful and your name is beautiful. Maybe our baby Rose wouldn't mind if you named your baby Rose after her big sister."

A smile spread on the girl's face for the first time. "That's sweeter 'n' pie."

Close call. But there was still this thing with Felicity and Henri being sure they were having a girl. "What if it's a boy?"

A snapping energy erupted in Rose's blue eyes. "After my grandpa. He always remembered my birthday, always bought a cake, and when I was little having a store-bought cake was tits."

"What's your grandpa's name?"

"Hank."

Alyssa wanted to dance about the diner. Instead, she laid her hand over the young woman's hand. "Rose, everything's going to be all right for you and David. I promise." *Some day,*

your little boy is going to marry a very, very rich little girl. But for now...

Alyssa took out the brooch and laid it on the counter. "This is yours."

"Holy smokes!"

"Somebody gave it to me, but it won't really do me much good." She turned it over for Rose to read.

"To Rose, Love Hank." Rose's mouth twitched. "You're spooking me out."

"It's Halloween, after all."

"So if I have a Hank, how does he find this little Rose?"

"I'm betting if you sold off some of the emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds in that brooch that you and David can marry, start your own business in some other place, even buy a house. But keep all the moonstones. They might give David a hint of where to start his business. Maybe your son will meet some nice girl in this new community. He can give her that brooch with a great family story attached."

Tears shimmered in Rose's eyes as she touched the gems. "We can start our life for real? Are you sure you want to do this?"

"I'm very sure, Rose. I'm sorry I haven't stayed in touch. That was wrong. You gave me the best years of my life. You deserve a magical life."

"So do you, Mrs. Swain. You were a good mother. You'll be one again. I know it. If that's what you want."

It was a question. Alyssa's heart pounded harder than ever. "I need to get a husband first."

Alyssa fought her way through the snowy evening back to the bottom of Porcupine Hill. But there was no trace of John or the BMW. Alyssa sat for a moment in her truck, bereft. What had she done wrong? She'd set things right, hadn't she? Why hadn't it worked? Why hadn't John waited for her?

When had she fallen so hopelessly in love with a man she'd never met but knew so well?

* * * *

Alyssa rushed into the kitchen bursting from her coat and gloves. The dirge no longer played. That confirmed her fear.

Kirsten walked in with a large pan. "Did you find the firewood?"

"Firewood?"

"That's why you went outside. With the roads the way they are you insisted we all stay until the salt trucks go by."

"I did?"

"You even invited anybody to stay the night. How much did you have to drink? Nobody wants to do a sleepover with Tootsie Winters."

Alyssa sort of did. Tootsie was the one person who might explain all this, or at least help Alyssa feel better. She peeked in the living room. There were no ghosts. Just her neighbors. Bob Winters stoked the fireplace.

Alyssa muttered, "John?"

From behind her, Kirsten said, "You heard? Not sure how because Claire just called here."

"Heard what?"

"John Christopherson went back into ICU. They don't think he's going to make it. Something about bleeding on the brain now."

"He's alive!" Alyssa gripped Kirsten by the arms and jumped up and down. "I'm sorry." A trickle of sweat ran down her back. "Can you start some cocoa and serve it?"

"Glad to."

Alyssa hurried to the empty parlor where the casket served as the dessert table. "Sadie? Joette? Moonbeam? Anybody?"

Nobody appeared.

She moved the cemetery cupcakes, bloody eyeball cake, and worm desserts off the casket. When she lifted the lid, she stifled a scream. John lay inside stretched out in a dark suit and tie, his eyes closed.

“John! Stop it! Come back to me. I have to tell you about Rose. And Hank.”

He lay still.

A shiver whipped down Alyssa. “You can’t do this. I put things to right, more than right. Rose and David needed hope. I gave them their dream back. I know that sounds horribly lofty, but I did. Because of you. You gave me direction for my life. But you and I have tons more work to do.”

John didn’t move.

She touched his cheek, but her fingertips detected only tepid air. “What about the man in the BMW? You have to save him.” She’d try anything to get him to stay on this side of the river.

She swiped at tears. “Damn you!”

Sadie appeared on the other side of the casket. “Must I wash your mouth out with soap?”

“Grandma!” She rushed to hug the woman but of course felt nothing but thick air that smelled of fireplace smoke. “Why are you back and everybody else is gone?”

“They’re having a committee meeting about me. I might get to pass over tonight.”

“I’ll miss you.”

“There’ll be others. This family seems to have its share of flaws that’ll get them stuck in the in-between.”

Alyssa motioned Sadie to follow her around the open casket. “You can see him, can’t you?”

“Oh yes. He’s well-mannered, good for a dance, but why do you care?”

"I care because he's been helpful, funny, and he's made me change."

"Have you told him those things?"

"He's dead. He's refusing to come back."

"His soul hasn't passed on or he wouldn't be lying here in the coffin yet. Get his attention."

"What if he wants to join his daughters more than stay with me?"

"While you were out, we received word his girls became guardian angels. There was something about two children being born in Moonstone within the year who would need them. Of all things, your Uncle Jay repented for stealing horses and he was allowed to take the little girls across the river."

John's daughters were guardian angels for Rose and Hank! Alyssa's brain churned. "How do I get John to stay? Is it selfish of me to even ask?"

"Of course you're being selfish, but we women battle that flaw all the time so I say phfft! Have you told him that you love him and why?"

"I didn't think it fair to bring up the L word if this wasn't going to work. I'm not ready to die, and he's in the in-between."

"Heavens to mergatroid, but how can a romance happen if the people involved don't say out loud they love each other? Shit! I mean, snickelfritz!" Sadie looked up in panic, then with relief. "I think I got away with that one."

Alyssa stepped up to the casket and reached out—Sadie shut the lid. "I'm afraid that won't work. That's only his soul. You have to talk to his brain and heart and body in order to revive them."

"But he's in a Texas hospital. How do I get there in time? And I'm not related. They'll never let me in the ICU."

"I believe they let a fiancée in."

"I'm supposed to tell everybody I'm engaged to a dying man I've never met? Who's going to believe that?"

Sadie shook her head. "Look around at all these people having a good time. Don't you want John to be a part of next year's dish-to-pass party? To know that you were asked to be a Moonstone godmother? If you desire something enough, isn't it worth a little lie that maybe isn't quite a lie? Perhaps you're not John's fiancée now, but if he lives, might you become his bride? And the mother of his child?"

"That's a lot to lay on a man I don't know for real."

"I believe somebody is calling you."

It was Kirsten.

The party had gone quiet. Alyssa asked, "What's wrong?"

"They're flying John Christopherson up to the Duluth hospital tonight so he can be near his relatives when he dies. Peter LeBarron paid for the private plane."

Alyssa bit her lip to stifle a sob.

She headed for the kitchen with Kirsten trailing her. Kirsten said, "Stay here. It's turning into a blizzard out there."

"I need to be with John."

"How do you know him?"

"I...catered his children's birthday party years ago." It was a lie, but it felt okay, as Sadie had counseled.

Kirsten frowned. "You're a caterer? I thought you said you were a card dealer?"

"I am and I love it." She pulled on tall boots. "I used to cook for crowds, but I've discovered I love this dish-to-pass party concept. If John survives, I'll organize the biggest pot-luck, dish-to-pass event ever seen in Moonstone's downtown square come next summer. We'll have another roasted pig. Your cranberry stuffed mushrooms. And silkie chicken deviled eggs!"

Pink-attired Tootsie in her tiara waddled in. "I'll invite the governor!"

Alyssa hugged the stout woman. "It's a deal!"

Sadie showed up behind Tootsie. "Hurry, dear. It's going to be midnight before you know it."

Alyssa threw herself against the snowstorm, but minutes later found herself stuck behind a slow snowplow all the way to Duluth with the clock speeding past ten.

When she finally arrived at the hospital, she couldn't go inside the ICU to see John, even if she were his fiancée. The nurse told her that a priest was giving John his last rites.

* * *

At the sight of the priest coming out of the ICU, Alyssa broke into tears. She slumped onto the sofa in the small waiting area.

Father Lockhart eased down beside her. "Would you like to share a prayer?"

"Is he..."

"Not yet."

"Where's his family?" It saddened Alyssa to think John was dying alone.

"They're in the hospital chapel."

"Oh." Now she was upset with herself for being disingenuous.

"I suggested they think about John's gifts. What gift did he give you?"

Alyssa sobered. Gift? She stared at her hands, roughened by the work she and John had completed since she'd met him on Thursday. With the dish-to-pass party he'd handed her a new community, a family really, people who had brought her purpose again and a way out of her grief.

Alyssa asked, "Can you really talk to God?"

"We all can. He's a spirit among us."

"I've had enough of spirits lately."

Father Lockhart raised his eyebrows. "What about John's spirit?"

"He's been busy."

"How so?"

"He's been laying tile and sanding floors for me." *Oh how stupid this sounds.*

"You saw his spirit."

She considered his unwavering smile. "I worked beside him. But how is that possible?"

"It's Halloween. We celebrate the dead. Supposedly they rise at this time of year to celebrate. Some of us have faith that rising from the dead can really happen."

"Count me in. But he was also at my house in a coffin, like he was dead again. And now he's in a coma. I have all kinds of things to tell him, but I think I'm too late."

"Never admit defeat so soon. What if you left a message on God's voice mail system for John? Perhaps John is just in a holy restroom or something."

She giggled before she knew what happened. "How does Heavenly voice mail work?"

He cradled her hands in his. "I'm like a cell phone tower. I'll relay your message between here and where it counts. Please leave a message for John Christopherson. Beeeeeep."

Alyssa found strength in the priest's silliness laced with sincerity. "John, hi."

That was a start, but now what? Maybe like Rose, the mother of her lost child, she could now look ahead in life. "We have to finish the house. Next summer, you'll have to help me paint the upper story."

The priest squeezed her hand. "It's okay to be more personal."

Her brain went blank. She'd fought her way through the storm twice tonight for this? "John, what color do you think I should paint the house?"

She cringed, but the priest nodded. "Color is personal, it has emotion. What's his favorite color?"

"I don't know."

"How did he make you feel?"

"He made my life...bright yellow. He was as warm as the sun, too."

The priest patted her hands. "He must have loved you."

Alyssa fought to breathe. "We never had the chance to say those words." *Because I was too afraid to say them.* The revelation struck her like plaster falling on her head at her house.

"Your chance is now." Father Lockhart left for the hospital chapel.

Alyssa got up to leave, too, but then halted. It dawned on her that the priest had purposely left her alone. If she hurried, nobody would know she'd sneaked into John's room.

The clock was pushing eleven.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 7

Stitches criss-crossed John's bruised face and bald head. His new look gave Alyssa pause. He lay in repose on a shallow pillow, his shoulders peeking out of a sheet. She guessed he was in leg casts. One arm was in a cast. Wires snaking out from under the sheet tethered him to monitors. An IV apparatus stood like a sentinel.

Alyssa edged to his bedside, wondering how this fragile patient could possibly be the robust John she knew.

Perspiration prickled her face and broke out in her palms. By reflex she reached into a pocket and came up with Sadie's hankie with the crocheted *yellow* edges.

"Hey, John. Mr. Sunshine."

She reached out. She was surprised to find his shoulder toasty. They'd outfitted the bed with a warming blanket. No wonder he'd always been humming with heat around her.

She touched the stubble on his jawline. It was itchy. He was real. "John, I can't stay long. Your relatives will be here soon. But I wanted to tell you..."

Where do I begin?

"I need you to stay because I owe you. You gave me the gift of bravery to live my life in a new way, all because you had that silly idea about a dish-to-pass party for my dead relatives. And let me tell you, remembering my relatives has been quite a party. I put all their pictures up on a wall in the house. I come from a motley crew. They're imperfect, every one of them. Like me. They swear, steal horses, and make lime gelatin with shredded carrots and mayonnaise for garnish." She shuddered. "You have to be brave to eat lime gelatin with mayo."

She sank at his non-response. Could she be brave enough to say goodbye? Yes. He didn't deserve to live in pain or be an invalid the rest of his life.

Alyssa backed away, intending to leave, sniffing into the handkerchief with the yellow roses on the edges, when she took a good look at the hankie. She got mad. The last few days had been glorious. She wanted them to continue.

She shook the hankie at him. "Wake up! You're making me ruin this heirloom. I've been crying buckets for you. I might've been hiding out from life, but your flaw was that you kept running away to do death defying construction jobs to

tempt fate. Talk about selfish. I need you. Wherever you are now, get your butt back here!”

She marched back to the bed, cupped his chin with the greatest of care, and pressed a hard kiss on his lips. They were cool as a corpse, though. She kissed him again to warm him as he’d warmed her so many times.

To her surprise a tiny grunt emanated from him.

She detected a slight movement under his eyelids.

“Come back, John.”

His lips parted. A faint whisper ebbed out. “Who are you?”

Alyssa swallowed her disappointment. “I’m a...volunteer here. Would you like a magazine? I have *Penthouse*, *Playboy* and *Popular Mechanics* on my cart.”

John grunted.

“Come on, John. Stay with me. John? I love you.”

He never responded. But Alyssa clung to hope. She went in search of a nurse with the news about him speaking.

The nurse said that momentary glimmers were common for comatose and dying patients.

Alyssa glanced at the clock on the wall. Twelve-ten. To her horror, she wasn’t sure if she’d told him she loved him before midnight.

* * * *

When she finally pulled into her driveway in the wee morning hours, her guests were gone and the driveway plowed. Her heart lifted. She imagined John had done the plowing and shoveled the paths to the doors. He loved to pitch in. She loved him for it.

Inside the kitchen, she stamped her boots on the newspapers put down to collect the melting snow. “John?”

Tootsie Winters, in her pink fairy princess costume and tiara, came into the kitchen carrying a stack of dishes. "That's the last of it."

"You stayed to clean up?" Alyssa fought back tears at the unexpected kindness.

"Hon, it's the neighborly thing to do. How is he?"

Alyssa flinched.

Tootsie put the plates on the counter. She hugged Alyssa. "You tried. That's what's important."

"But he didn't know me."

"That was only his body that didn't know you tonight. You stepped between two worlds. You knew the spirit of a man who was in the middle of making a huge decision. All you can do now is accept his decision."

Tootsie proceeded to wash dishes.

"Do you need a ride home? Where's your husband?"

"He was so impressed with your antiques that he took the key off the hook and went to your barn to look at more. Since retiring he's become obsessed with decorating the yacht with local historical items. I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all. He can have them all." She'd love to make sure some of that stuff wasn't dragged back into her house by wayward dead relatives. "I'll vacuum the living room. I won't be able to sleep anyway."

"When Bob landed in the hospital I came home and cleaned out two closets. Found an old girdle. It seemed symbolic to burn it. I used to be an uptight woman, in case people haven't told you."

"No, they haven't." Sadie would appreciate the white lie.

"With Bob on his death bed I vowed to let it all hang out. I vowed to change."

"I understand."

"I know you do, hon." Tootsie winked at her.

When Alyssa went to the living room with the vacuum, she almost fainted.

The photo of John's girls remained on the wall. If she'd never met John before tonight in the hospital, how had that photo ended up here?

She shook it off. Common sense said somebody at the party must have put it there.

* * * *

Alyssa took extra shifts at the casino. Monday flowed into a bitterly cold Tuesday and John clung to life. It was an awful feeling to know he lingered in the in-between, undecided, unable yet to live a full life on either side of the river.

Early Wednesday, a rapping downstairs stirred Millicent into a "meow." The cat leaped off the bed, eschewing her usual hideout to slip out of the bedroom and thump down the stairs.

The rapping grew louder.

"I'm coming." Alyssa flung on her lavender robe. The house had gone frigid. She wondered if the ancient oil furnace had finally belched its last smelly vapor. She'd ask John to take a look at it—

Or not. She dragged herself downstairs.

In the kitchen Millicent stood fluffed twice her usual size in watch-cat form, staring at the door.

"Who is it?" Alyssa glanced at the clock above the sink. It was only seven o'clock.

When no answer came, she shuffled to the curtains and pulled them aside. She saw nobody.

But when she unlocked the door, in slid a foul-smelling, brown-and-copper mottled cat. "Dillinger?"

He smacked his lips, suffusing the air with the odor of decaying mice. Burrs stuck to his hips like holsters for six-

shooters. Alyssa closed her eyes to will him back into her dreams.

But Millicent hissed at him. *For the very first time.*

Alyssa went wide-eyed. "You're real?"

Dillinger arched his back at Millicent. Then he whipped his tail. He whipped it again as if proud of the ugly striped brush matted with burrs.

A rapping at the front door didn't give Alyssa time to think except to leave the kitchen door open to the cold outdoors in hopes the feral cat would run away.

At the front door Deputy Lily Schuster held a mannequin. "I found your guy."

The dummy had dark hair, a camouflage jacket, denims, and red stains on its face, hair and shoulders. Alyssa sagged. "Come in."

Her cheeks ruddy from the cold, Lily beamed. "This showed up behind the hardware store where it'd been dumped. One of the culprits dropped his cell phone in the snow. I tracked it to a teenager and his buddies. Case closed."

"But..." How could she explain her disappointment? John had been a dummy? A Halloween trick? That she dreamed about? He'd never really been at her house?

Lily said, "Say, you heard about John?"

"What?" She grabbed at her robe for support.

"Claire hasn't called you?"

"I'll be seeing her at work today. But tell me."

"He woke up. I guess they're saying there's hope for a recovery now. A miracle. He keeps asking for the magazine lady."

Magazines? He remembers me!

The snarling sounds of cats distracted them.

"Crap. That's a feral cat that got in my kitchen just as you knocked on the door."

"I'll help you get rid of him."

"And then I need your help getting me to Duluth in record time."

"Be glad to. It'll be the first time I've used my new squad's siren and lights."

* * * *

Alyssa found an army of doctors, therapists and nurses in the ICU waiting area. Alyssa's bravery faltered a notch with them staring at her.

The nurse asked, "May we help you?"

"I'm the volunteer who tried to bring him magazines on Halloween. Is he going to be all right?"

A woman who introduced herself as his physical therapist said, "He's got several months of recovery ahead. We'll be moving him to a nursing home soon."

In numb terror, Alyssa blurted out, "He can live with me. I have lots of things he can do for therapy."

The therapist raised her eyebrows. "You're a relative?"

"Yes. No. Maybe."

The army frowned.

The therapist said, "He needs a place equipped with a hospital bed, and other equipment for rehabilitation."

"I've got plenty of room in my parlor." *If I make sure the casket stays out of there.*

"But he'll have to agree to this. It'll be embarrassing for him, possibly for you. There'll be things you may have to do for him that—"

"I have a lot of neighbors I can call on."

The therapist nodded to the others. "It's up to John, I guess."

The doctor allowed Alyssa into John's room. He was awake, but he didn't look much better.

"Hey, John. Remember me?"

"Not really."

She expected that. "I'm the volunteer."

"The one with the *Playboys*. I'm afraid I'm in no shape for centerfolds, but it's always the thought that counts."

She blushed. "How about *Popular Mechanics*? The centerfold of the car engine looked like it could get you up."

He chuckled then winced in pain. "They tell me I was about to die. That would've been a nice way to go."

With a shrug, she said, "A lot of people meet the Maker after sex."

"I meant the kiss. Your kiss."

Now she really did get hot. "You remember that I kissed you?"

"Probably not medical protocol here, but a sweet kiss beats being fed soup by the other volunteers." He winked.

A thrill bolted up her spine and into her hair. Did he remember the other life? She winked back. "They're talking about moving you to a nursing home."

"The next step. Before I get to look at *Playboys*."

"Now don't answer hastily, but you could come live with me. I have this huge house—"

"Do I know you?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know? You're not a kook, are you? Like those women who marry guys in prison?"

Stunned, she couldn't think of a thing to say. Then she smiled. She had a new purpose in life and she better get on with it. "Yeah. I'm a kook. And we know each other already. We're friends."

"So my memory's not so good?"

She took a deep breath. She had to put all this in lay terms, something mere mortals like Bob Winters and John would accept. "Did you have any dreams while you were in

your coma?" When he shook his head, she got braver. "Yes, you did. You were at a party, in a house with a running toilet that you fixed. That was my house."

"It was?"

"You remember the toilet?"

"Stuff in here gurgles. I dreamt about a toilet, yeah."

"I'll take what I can get. What about a man in a BMW? Did you see him alive?"

He frowned. "Nothing like that in a dream, but one of my docs said he was speeding on his way to get here for me last night and rolled his BMW. Came out of it fine, luckily, but I think it taught him a lesson. He was pretty shaken up."

"Thank goodness you're both all right." She had to smile. The doctor, in being dedicated to saving John, had speeded but had learned a lesson that would likely save him in the future and untold others. By clinging to life, by hanging upside down in the in-between, John had found his purpose. He'd saved the doctor's life.

Now for the final test. With fingers shaking, she pulled the special photos out of her pocket. "That's my daughter and those are your girls."

"Where'd you get this?"

"You put it up on the wall of my house. John, you were in my house. You said that someday I might know what my daughter's last words were for me before she died."

He stared at her for a long time. "You're spooking me out."

"I know. But you have to trust me. We knew each other. And I fell in love with you."

He stared at her again, then at the photos. *She knew* he loved her; he just didn't know it yet. "John, I've never done something as goofy as this. You're going to wake up one day and realize you love me and that you feel like you've known

me for a long, long time. You have to say yes. You have to try this new life."

He touched his girls' faces, then Sadie Rose's. "I know what she said. Your daughter."

Her heartbeat paused. "You do?"

"It's what every little girl says when she says goodnight. It's always the last thing a little angel says before she goes to sleep. 'I love you, daddy. I love you, mommy.'"

"She said that? You know for sure?" Alyssa wanted to skip about the room.

"For sure. My daughters said that every night before they went to bed."

"My daughter said that, too."

"Then you have to trust she said those words and had no fear before going to sleep the last time. I'll trust you, if you'll trust me."

"I heard that your daughters are guardian angels now."

"And your daughter?"

"I'm not sure. We'll have to find some child who needs one."

She kissed him, letting the heat build and simmer and swirl about them in an aura shimmering with a rainbow of emotions.

When she rose, he caught her with the one hand not in a cast. "Did we used to kiss like that?"

"Always."

She kissed him soundly again, but this time he gave back with a lightning bolt of sizzling razzle dazzle that brought her to her tiptoes.

Catching her breath, she said, "We definitely knew each other before this."

"Well, heavens to mergatroid."

Alyssa cocked her head. "Where'd you hear that? And what the heck does it mean?"

"My father used to love the cartoon character who said it, a cat named Snagglepuss. Are you allergic to cats?"

"No. I have one, a big white fluffy thing. You have a cat, too?"

"A Maine coon cat. A street fighter. Brown-and-orange. Friend of mine in Moonstone's been keeping him. Said he ran away last Thursday."

Thank goodness! "He probably misses you."

"Nah. He runs away every time there's a cat in heat within miles around."

The blood drained from her head. "Oh no."

"Something wrong?"

I left Dillinger and Millicent alone in the kitchen when I talked with Lily. Dillinger's tail was whipping in a peculiar way. A flirting sort of way.

"I think we're having kittens. I think you and I are starting a family."

Alyssa kissed John before he could ask any more questions.

She knew this would work out. She was brave again because of John. She'd reconnect with her mother, find her father, make sure Rose and David thrived, and get John back on his feet. John had helped her find the courage to accept surprises. She could now dare to live in many dimensions, to live fully—no matter how spooky.

She also knew she'd have a dish-to-pass party for her wedding reception. Whenever that would be. They'd have skubanky, reeble, mulgipuder, abenkater, blood sausage, roast boar, succotash, lime green gelatin, macaroni and cheese with catsup, a chocolate layer bridal cake held together with toothpicks...

Shadows in the Heart

And love. Heavens to mergatroid, but life was gonna be good again.

She knew.

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Don't miss "When Rudolph Was Kidnapped," the first Mischief in Moonstone Series story in Small Gifts, A Jewels of the Quill Christmas Anthology; "Misbehavin' in Moonstone," Book 2 of the Mischief in Moonstone Series in Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume II; and "Mrs. Claus and the Moonstone Murder," Book 3 in the series, in Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume III, Jewels of the Quill Anthologies (available now). Christine's Mischief in Moonstone Series will also be packaged in a collection with a bonus story in April 2008. Look for a new mini series from Christine, Men of Moonstone, coming March 2008's in Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume IV!

About Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone):

Christine DeSmet is a novelist, screenwriter, and faculty associate in writing at University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Liberal Studies and the Arts. Her novel manuscripts have earned a Golden Heart plus two Golden Heart nominations in the Romance Writers of America (RWA) contest. Her novel, *Spirit Lake*, also won an RWA contest before being published and becoming a bestseller. With other Jewels of the Quill authors, she earned an EPPIE award and a reader's choice award from *Romantic Times Magazine* for their 2005 anthology, *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume I*. She is the author of the humorous mystery series called "Mischiefs in Moonstone" appearing in Jewels of the Quill anthologies. Her Mischiefs in Moonstone Series, including a bonus story, will be packaged in a collection coming Spring 2008 from Whiskey Creek Press. Other romantic suspense novels and a romantic mystery series are represented by Three Seas Literary Agency. Christine works with many authors as a coach and book doctor, as well, and judges writing contests.

As a screenwriter, she's a past winner of the Slamdance Film Festival and optioned that screenplay to New Line Cinema. She has optioned other screenplays and a TV series. She recently adapted to film a Madison author's acclaimed book of short stories. Her current projects include writing a stage play.

She is the director of the UW-Madison's annual Writers' Institute, now in its 18th year, and coordinates the Write-by-the-Lake Writer's Workshop & Retreat. Christine also teaches online workshops and has students from around the

Shadows in the Heart

world. Her workshops include “The Dialogue Shop” and “Screenwriting: Write Your First Draft Fast.” One of her screenwriting clients optioned in the past year, and another made the semi-finals of the prestigious Nicholl Fellowship Contest. Christine is a fellowship graduate of the Warner Bros. Sitcom Writers Workshop, and member of Wisconsin Screenwriters Forum, Romance Writers of America, Electronic Publishing Internet Connection, Writers Guild of America, East, and Jewels of the Quill.

Find out more about Christine at:
<http://www.angelfire.com/stars4/kswiesner/jewels2.html#Christine>.

TRICK OR TREAT

by Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz)

“Aw, Mom!”

We say it together, the same words at the same time, and though I start out lower, we end on the same high, squeaky note. My neck gets all hot, but Squirt doesn’t care. She looks up at Mom, blinks her baby blues and gives her chin a little quiver. “You promised.”

Yeah, like that makes a difference. Still, I’ve got to try. “I can’t skip the Middle School Halloween Monster Mash. All the guys are going. Everyone except the total social rejects.”

Mom just keeps messing with her hair. “We’ve been through this before, Derrick. They need me at the hospital.”

It’s so unfair. Why should I miss the biggest party of the year just because some bitch nurse decided she didn’t want to work on Halloween? “Mom, me and Brian entered the costume contest together. If I let him down, he’ll hate me forever.”

“It’s an emergency, Derrick.” Her voice has that don’t-argue-with-me-or-else tone. “Brian’s your best friend. I’m sure he’ll understand.”

“Like hell he will!”

Shit, I don't mean to say that. It just comes out. Mom drops the hairbrush and spins around. "Derrick Olsen! I know you're disappointed, but—"

"I'll miss trick-or-treating."

It sounds like Squirt's about to cry. I shoot her a grateful glance. I hate Mom's "I know you're disappointed, but..." speeches. They last forever and usually end up with me grounded. Not that I care about trick-or-treating, but Mom might soften up if she sees me doing the responsible, big brother thing. I kneel down until I'm eye level with my sister. "Don't worry, Squirt. I'll take you out before the party. It doesn't start until seven. You'll get a two and a half hour candy grab before I leave."

"Sorry, Derrick." Mom touches my arm and I stand up. "I called all the sitters and everyone has plans for tonight. Lilly's only six. You have to stay with her until I get home."

I have more arguments, but Mom just shakes her head. "Don't."

I feel so helpless, my throat gets tight and I want to punch something. Yell some swears, slam out of the house and never come back. I want to, but I don't. That's what Dad did, and I'm not like him.

Mom must see how I'm feeling, because she gives me a hug, like she used to when I was little. I don't want to show it, but I love the way she smells, like face cream and soap mixed together. It's weird, though, how she's littler than me now. I kind of shrug away from her. "There'll be other Halloween dances," she says.

"Not at the middle school," I say.

"No, not at the middle school." The way she says it, I feel like the one who's breaking promises and screwing up Halloween. Then she puts on this fake smile that makes me feel

even worse. "Maybe one of the other nurses will come in early and you'll be able to make the end of the dance."

Right. The last time Mom got home early from a shift was when Dad still lived with us. She won't get home until midnight or later. I know it. She knows it.

Squirt takes my hand. "Come on, Derrick. I'll give you all my Snickers."

Yeah, right.

"That's the spirit." Mom grabs her purse, and we follow her to the mud room where she throws on her coat. She gives Squirt a hug and me a kiss on the cheek. "You can stop by the firehouse for dinner. I'll call if I get a break."

"The firehouse? Aw, Mom!" But she's already running for the Volvo. She hops in, waves and drives away.

After the car disappears around the corner, I turn to Squirt, who's still waving like crazy. Me, I still want to punch something. Instead, I say, "Come on. Let's get our stupid costumes on."

She stops waving and gives me this big grin. "This is going to be the best Halloween ever."

Yeah, right.

* * * *

The thing about trick-or-treating is, the smaller you are, the more candy you get. No kidding. Last year when I went out with Brian, half the houses with porch lights on didn't even open the door when we knocked. And that was before I outgrew my clothes twice. Now I'm as tall as Dad. That's part of the reason we were going to the Monster Mash this year. That and this is the only time anyone can remember when the Middle School Halloween Dance actually fell on Halloween. Ms. Pavitch, our principal, promised extra candy, a monster movie marathon in the library and a special prize for the best

costume. It's going to be a blast, and everyone in the eighth grade will be there. Everyone but me.

Me, I'm watching Squirt run ahead to the next house. It works better that way, at least for places where they don't already know us. The old ladies have the door open before they see me. Most are cool after that and slip a candy bar into my bag too, though some give me funny looks, like what's a dad doing dressing up and cadging candy?

I'm her brother, I want to say, but that would spoil the effect. See, me and Brian decided to dress up as a Shao-lin monk and his arch-enemy, the Ninja of the Black Hand. I'm the ninja, dark, silent, and deadly. Brian's really into karate and stuff, so he worked out a martial arts routine. Me, I keep tripping over my feet, but Brian's good enough to make my falling down look like part of the act. We would have won the prize for best costume, I know it.

"Trick-or-Treat!" Squirt's holding out her bag when I walk up to Mrs. Kohlmeyer's door. I'm all in black—black sweats, black shoes, black ninja mask on my face. Mom made me put reflective tape on the back of my coat, but it's warmer this year than last and we left our coats at home. I pull Brian's second best samurai sword out of its plastic scabbard and strike a pose. "Hi-ya!"

Mrs. Kohlmeyer grins and gives us each a Hershey bar. "Hi, Derrick, Lilly. Cute costumes." Mrs. Kohlmeyer knows me because I cut her grass in the summer. I want to say my costume's cool, not cute, but sheathe the sword instead and bow. Got to keep in character.

"Thank you," Squirt says.

Her costume is cute, though it didn't start out that way. Back when I was in kindergarten, my favorite movie was *The Jungle Book*, and my favorite character was the panther, Bagheera. For Halloween, Mom took a pair of my old black

sweats—even then I wore a lot of black—and sewed on a tail. She painted whiskers on my face and bought me a cap with cat ears. Mom still has the picture she took of me that year. For a little kid, I looked pretty good.

Squirt's a lot smaller than I was at her age—because of her asthma medicine, Mom says. That's why Squirt's wearing my panther costume this year instead of last. Only, she didn't want to be a cool panther. She wanted to go as her best friend's cat, Pumpkin. Mom got her a sparkly choker for a collar and sewed a pink bow between the ears on the cap. She also sewed a white bib on the front of my sweatshirt, because the dumb cat has a white spot on its chest. Good-bye cool, hello cute.

After hitting all the houses in our neighborhood, we stop at home to dump our bags. The fridge is empty, except for a couple of Mom's low-fat microwave meals, so I let Squirt drag me to the firehouse. The firefighters give out free hot-dogs, chips and pop every Halloween. The hot dogs are pretty good, just not worth the hassle I'll catch if the guys from school see me hanging out with my six-year-old sister. Lucky for me, no one's in sight but a bunch of little kids and their dads.

I'm wolfing down my third hotdog when the clock over Village Hall chimes seven. To take my mind off the party I'm missing, I take Squirt across Volpe Park to the houses along the ravine. Hardly any kids go down there—the street's dark and it's kind of spooky—but the ones who do get the best treats. Last year, one old dude gave me and Brian each a dollar bill and a king-size bag of M&M's. He said we were the only kids who knocked on his door all night.

One thing about Squirt, she's game. She skips down that dark street like she's got night vision goggles on. I'm chasing after her, trying to keep her in sight when something grabs my

foot. I go down. Hard. My knee hits the pavement. My hands slam into gravel. For a moment, I lie in the road, stunned. My palms burn, but my knee doesn't hurt yet. It feels cold, though. My pants must have torn when I fell. I'm struggling to my feet when something shoves me between the shoulder blades and I go down again. There's a hiss, then the smell of menthol, and something wet hits the back of my neck. Shaving cream. I've been creamed but good. A familiar voice sneers, "Gotcha, Bean Pole."

Matt Harmon.

Squirt shrieks. "Let me go!"

"What's this, a Bean Pole mini-me?" Matt's shadow, Vincent Snyder. He's bigger than Matt, dumber than Matt and even meaner. I've got to get Squirt away from him before she does something stupid.

"Oww!" Something hits the ground. "The little bitch bit me!"

Too late. "Run!" I say and scramble to my feet. Quick crunches tell me she listened for once. I can't see her, though. The nearest streetlight is a block away. Vincent, I can see. He's wearing a sheet, like he's supposed to be a ghost or a big, white mountain. I throw myself into that mountain, right where I think his legs should be, and for once my aim's good. Vincent goes down, swearing.

I jump up. Ignoring my knee, which is beginning to kill, I race after Squirt's footsteps. Maybe Mom was right about bringing a flashlight. At the far end of the block, there's a house with its porch light on, and I hope Squirt runs there. I catch a flash of the bib, though, darting up the nearest driveway.

The drive is long, narrow and even darker than the street. About the time I run out of driveway, I hear hinges squeak. I follow the noise to an open gate and an overgrown

yard. A yellow slice of moon peeks over the trees and casts just enough light for me to see a "For Sale" sign stuck in the lawn and some boarded up windows on the first floor. Squirt's found a good place to hide, but a terrible place to seek help. From the threats coming up the driveway, we need help fast.

"Squirt," I whisper, but of course she doesn't hear me. My heart's banging so hard, I can barely hear myself. "Squirt!" I call again, louder this time, but she's already running up the front steps.

Hurrying after her, I trip on a loose board, stumble past Squirt and bang my forehead on the door. A deep, hollow knock echoes through the house, and a yellow porch light flares above us.

My eyes are so used to the dark, it blinds me for a second. Matt and Vincent swear, yell a couple more threats and run back down the driveway. I grab Squirt's hand, ready to run, too, when the door creaks open.

It's dark inside, and a cold draft blows through the open door. It smells like old books and makes me shiver. I'm ready to bolt when a girl a little older than me steps into the light.

Holy shit!

She looks like some kind of movie star, with legs that stretch forever into the shortest little black skirt I ever saw and a black scoop neck top that doesn't hide anything, especially when she leans down to Squirt and says, "How cute!"

My eyes lock on those boobs, and my brain freezes.

Squirt holds up her empty bag and says, "Trick-or-treat."

The girl laughs, a smooth, soft sound that warms my skin. She straightens and looks at me. Her eyes glitter gold in the porch light. Her hair is as black as her outfit, bottle black, with a pointy hat perched on top. I suddenly realize it's a cos-

tume and she's supposed to be a witch. "Which do you want, a trick or a treat?"

She's talking to me, and the way she says it makes me go all hot and cold at the same time. Forget about answering, I can't even breathe.

She laughs again. "On such a fine Samhain, you need a trick." She puts a finger to her lips and blows me a kiss.

You know how kids scuff their feet across a carpet to give each other shocks? I feel that kiss like a shock on my lips. The prickly feeling spreads down my neck, under my sweatshirt and along my legs. It makes me itch. Squirt gasps and points. Sparks are dancing across her costume, and I guess mine as well. Her bow pops off and that stupid white bib. She drops her treat bag and clutches at the choker—it's cutting into her neck. I forget about the witch girl and grab the necklace, breaking the elastic and scattering the sparkly beads. Squirt sucks in a breath and falls on her hands. Her back stretches. Her legs thicken and bend the wrong way. Her fingernails shoot into claws that disappear into black paws. My old sweats turn to thick, black fur. The fur races up her neck and over her head. Whiskers sprout above her mouth. Her face pushes out; her nose turns black and feline. Cat ears twitch. She crouches, bares long, sharp teeth and growls.

I understand her.

I draw my sword, spin to face the witch and ask my sister's question. "What have you done to us?" My voice is deeper and doesn't crack. The porch light gleams off the sword's honed edge. It's a true katana, I realize, samurai steel and sharp enough to shave grass.

"Happy Halloween," she says. The porch light goes out with a pop, and the door slams shut.

I try the knob, but the door's locked. Only echoes answer when I pound the hilt of the sword against the wood.

The house feels empty, and somehow I know the witch is gone. Sheathing my katana, I kneel beside the great cat. My knee no longer hurts and the smell of menthol has vanished. "Bagheera?" I ask, but I know the answer even before she butts me with her head. Somehow, she is Bagheera and Squirt both, as I am both Derrick Olsen, eighth grader, and Derikku Osaki, Ninja of the Black Hand.

Squirt's bag blows off the steps and catches on an overgrown bush. Somehow, I don't think she's interested in candy anymore. I tuck my own bag into my sash, and my fingers brush something cool. I pull out a shuriken, a ninja throwing star. Like the katana, the plastic toys Brian glued to the costume are now steel, razor-sharp and deadly. They rest inside specially lined pockets in my sash. Derikku knows how to use them.

Bagheera stands and stretches. Like all ninjas, I see well in the dark, well enough to make out the grooves the panther's claws cut in the weathered stair.

I slip the shuriken back into its pocket. "Too bad Matt and Vincent aren't here. I'd like to see them try to jump us now."

Her tail twitches. "We could find them. That soap they carry stinks. I can smell it from here." Bagheera's mouth opens in a feline grin. "It's a good night for a hunt."

I match her smile. "Which way?"

"To the lake."

Reflected starlight guides me as I run with long, easy strides to the bluff overlooking the lake. Rickety, wooden steps zig-zag from the road to the beach below. The panther ignores them and plunges down the bluff in three elegant leaps.

I attack the stairs. One, two, three at a time, until one cracks under my weight. My balance tips. I throw myself off the stairs, tuck and roll. Derikku's skill and training control

my spin. I straighten just in time to plant my feet securely in the sand.

Bagheera sits on her haunches, laughing. I laugh back. My blood sings. The night is cool and fine. We are alone, except for the murmur of surf and the jumble of stones that separate the beaches and extend into the lake to form a breakwater. A rising breeze carries sparks over the stones, sparks from a fire we can smell but not see.

A scream blows by. Bagheera's ears swivel toward the rocks. She draws herself together and leaps. I race after her. We vault over the breakwater to the beach on the other side.

A bonfire burns high and bright, casting a gold reflection across the incoming waves. Caught in the glow are five figures, girls. Four cluster around the fifth. Their hands flutter and angry murmurs compete with the crackle of burning wood. There is no sign of our quarry.

"Stay in the shadows," I tell Bagheera. "No need to frighten them."

She growls her assent and stretches out next to the stones. For a moment, the flames dance in her golden eyes. Then she closes them and becomes invisible, a shadow among shadows.

I walk toward the fire, one hand on my hilt, the other raised in greeting.

They spin to face me. One girl runs forward. "Get out of here and take your stupid shaving cream with you. You already got some in Jenny's eyes." She stops and her frown fades into confusion. "Derrick? Is that you?"

It's Anne, Brian's big sister. I recognize her and her friends from the JV Pom Squad. They're in their Pommer's uniforms, short-short skirts and tight sweaters. Brian had said something about there being a game tonight.

The part of me that's Derrick chokes. I've had a crush on Anne since the summer before last, and now she's looking at me like she expects me to answer. This is where I usually stammer something stupid and take off. Not tonight, though. The Ninja of the Black Hand isn't afraid of anything, not even a high school Pommer in a tight sweater.

Dark and silent, I bow but do not speak. The other girls crowd closer, and one of them giggles. Foam drips off her bangs and her eyes are teary. She smiles right at me and knocks Anne with her elbow. "Who is he?" she asks in a whisper that carries above the crack and snap of the bonfire.

"I don't... I mean, I thought..." Anne swallows and sticks out her hand. "Hi, I'm Anne and this is my best friend Jenny." Then she introduces me to the other Pommers.

I bow again. "Derikku Osaki." The name comes out very smooth and very Japanese, like the costume's talking, not me.

Anne frowns again, but Jenny's all smiles. She takes my arm and leans close enough for the smell of menthol to overpower the woodsmoke. "You must be that exchange student from Kyoto. One of the guys on the New Trier team was telling me about you, but he didn't say anything about you being so tall." She squeezes my arm, and I resist the urge to throw off her grip. She's pretty, but her mindless prattle annoys me.

Lucky for her, the Ninja of the Black Hand is always kind to those weaker than he. I gently pull away before turning toward Anne. "What happened?"

"A couple of idiots tried to crash the party. When we told them to get lost, they sprayed us with shaving cream. Jenny got the worst of it, but we all got hit. See?" She turns to reveal a streak dripping down the back of her sweater. "Then they took off."

I scan the beach. It appears empty, as does the bluff above. "Which way?"

The girls all start talking at once, and each one points in a different direction. I'm trying to make sense of their conflict-stories when a high-pitched yowl pierces the night.

They stop talking. Anne wraps her arms around herself and shivers. "What was that?"

Another cry rises. The girls look around, wide-eyed and scared. Bagheera growls. Pitched for my ears alone, it is both an answer and a summons.

"A cat," I translate. "I must go."

"Do you have to?" Even in the dim light, I can see Anne's blush. "I mean, I'll see you around, right?"

"Perhaps." A small smile, another bow, and I melt into the night.

Bagheera crouches beside the rocks. "Follow me," she says and bounds up the bluff.

I cast a final backward glance. The searching way the girls' eyes move tell me they no longer see me. I leap after Bagheera, my feet surer on the packed soil than on the rickety stairs. Soon, we stand together on the road above the beach.

The cries are louder here. They rise and fall like a baby's screams. Bagheera growls and her tail lashes.

"What is it?" I ask.

Instead of answering, she races down the middle of the street toward town. Even with my ninja-enhanced sight she's little more than a black streak, visible only at the lit intersections.

Panther or not, she's still only six. "Squirt, watch out for cars," I call, running after her. Her strides are longer than mine, but I keep pace with her, turn after her into an alley and then again to cross the dimly lit park.

The cries begin to fade. "Hurry," Bagheera calls over her shoulder. Her strides lengthen and she disappears into the darkness.

I hurtle after her, scattering fallen leaves and leaping downed branches. Suddenly, an angry snarl shakes more leaves from the trees overhead. I swerve into the playground and see Bagheera crouched on the woodchips beside the jungle gym. She's gazing at a black doll dangling from the highest rung. The wind gusts, and the doll swings and turns to reveal a white spot on its chest.

A chill runs through me. That's no doll; it's the cat, Pumpkin. Someone tied one end of a cord to her hind leg and the other to the top of the jungle gym.

"The open spaces are too small for me to leap through, and the bars are too narrow to climb." Bagheera's voice shakes with frustration. "Do something."

The cat hangs limp and defeated. The chill I felt grows hot, angry. Only a real asshole would do something like this. "Get ready to catch her." I take a throwing star from my sash and send it spinning toward the taut string.

The strands snick as they part. The star ricochets off the near-by swing set and embeds itself in a tree. The cat drops. Bagheera thrusts her head between the bars, snatches the cat as she falls and lays her gently on the woodchips while clanging echoes still bounce around the park. I retrieve the shuriken and kneel beside the panther.

The cat sprawls motionless even after I untie the cord and toss it aside. Her black fur is matted and the smell of menthol hovers over her.

"Is she okay?" I ask.

Bagheera's lips pull back from her teeth. "How can she be okay with her leg half pulled out?" She works her mouth and tongue, as if trying to get rid of a nasty taste. "Not to mention being covered in soap."

Pumpkin stirs and opens her eyes. A moment later, she's on her feet, running like her fur's on fire. I can't blame her.

The closest thing she's probably ever seen to a black panther is her neighbor's Rottweiler. Rumor is he eats cats for breakfast.

"How can they be so mean?" It's strange, hearing Squirt's question in Bagheera's deep voice.

I shrug and return the shurken to my sash. "They're assholes. Hurting things makes them feel big."

"I'd like to catch them doing it." She's all Bagheera now, teeth bared, tail thrashing.

The village clock begins to toll the hour. One, two, three... I expect the dongs to stop at eight or nine, but they continue to eleven. When did it get so late? "Squirt, we've got to go home."

"Not now. I'm having too much fun."

Again, the words are Squirt's but the voice belongs to a panther. An uneasy weight settles in my stomach. Derikku might be able to pass as Derrick, but no way would Mom take a black panther in place of her baby girl.

"Yes, now," I say. "But first we have to make that witch-girl turn us back to normal."

"No!" Bagheera lashes her tail in the same rhythm Squirt uses when she stamps her feet. Two, real fast, swish, swish. A panther's face isn't built for expression, but the ghost of a pout settles around her mouth, and she bounds off in giant cat strides.

"Wait!" I run after her. It's spooky how dead the town feels. The streets are empty, the houses dark. Even the firehouse looks deserted. I chase Squirt past the train station, past the middle school, all the way to the high school football field.

Bagheera stops so suddenly, I almost run into her. "Listen," she says.

Voices are coming from under the stands. I can't make out the words, but the bullying tone is painfully familiar. "Matt and Vincent?" I ask.

Bagheera growls in agreement and stalks toward the stands.

I pace beside her. Not in a hurry, exactly, but not reluctant either. My heart beats a steady counterpoint to my steps. The words grow clearer as we draw closer. As usual, Matt's doing most of the talking with occasional grunts from Vincent.

"Hand it over," says Matt.

"Yeah," goes Vincent.

"No." The voice is high and squeaky with a little quiver in it like Squirt gets when she's about to cry.

We're next to the bleachers now, looking under them from the side. Vincent is easy to see in his ghost costume. Matt's harder to make out. He's dressed in black, but his hair's light enough that the spikes show in the dim light. They face away from us.

"Give us the candy, or we'll Nair you good." Matt again. Something rustles. A metal rim catches the light. "How'd you like to be bald?"

"No!" Higher, squeakier, more quiver.

Okay, I know the kid they're picking on is no innocent little trick-or-treater. It's after curfew. He's probably been egging cars and spraying who-knows-what all over the high school parking lot. But Nair in the eyes can blind someone. Over a couple bucks worth of candy?

"No," I say, and my voice isn't squeaky at all.

Matt and Vincent spin around. I hear footsteps scrambling away, the kid bolting. There's just enough light sifting through the bleachers to see Matt's face. He's wearing white makeup with black around his lips and eyes. He looks like a pissed off raccoon.

"Hey, Vincent," he says. "It's our buddy, Bean Pole."

“And the mini-me.” Vincent’s white bulk lurches toward us. He’s rubbing his hand. “I got a score to settle with her.”

Bagheera is sitting beside me, and I realize Matt and Vincent can only see our silhouettes. Sitting, Bagheera’s about as tall as Squirt, and the outline of her ears must look like that cat costume.

A prickle dances across my skin, like my costume’s sparking again, and dark joy rushes through me. My hand moves. I touch cool steel, and a shuriken flies from my fingers. Derikku Osaki, Ninja of the Black Hand, is dark, silent and deadly. Death is his profession and he rejoices in it.

The razor edges spin toward Vincent’s throat.

Despite the costume’s glee, my insides go stone cold. Derrick Olsen is not a ninja. He’s just an eighth grader, and though Vincent is an asshole and a bully, Derrick doesn’t want to kill him. He doesn’t want to kill anyone.

For a timeless moment I hang suspended between my two selves, then I grab a second shuriken. The first throwing star is only halfway to Vincent when I throw the second, harder, faster than the first.

The clang when they hit breaks the illusion of slow motion. The two stars bounce off each other, one to the right, the other to the left. Their edges slice Vincent’s sheet in twin arcs from his chin to the trampled dirt at his feet. The sheet peels down to reveal an old sweatshirt and ragged jeans.

Bagheera hits Vincent an instant later and knocks him backwards.

Head down, shoulder first, Matt charges me. Normally he’d have me on the ground and gasping before I could think of what to do. Normally.

I let ninja reflexes take over. Catching Matt’s collar, I roll backward. My feet slam his stomach.

He soars over my head and hits the grass with an “oof” you could hear on the other end of the field. The spray can clatters from his hand.

I flip to my feet and spin around. My prey lies on his back in the center of the field, gasping like a stranded turtle. Blood singing, I race toward him. My hand grasps the hilt of my katana. The blade whispers from its sheath and arcs toward his naked throat.

The part of me that’s Derrick screams inside my head and wrenches the sword aside. The blade misses Matt’s face by less than an inch and scalps his spikes.

He pisses his pants and starts to bawl.

I’m shaking so hard I can barely get the sword back in its scabbard. Shit, I almost wasted him. Worse, part of me wants to finish the job.

Bagheera’s snarls and Vincent’s screams rise from beneath the bleachers. Oh God, Squirt’s gonna kill him. I turn and sprint toward them. After a couple of steps, though, I begin to understand what she’s saying. My footsteps slow and I smile.

She’s sitting on him, her haunches pinning his hips to the ground, and she’s slapping his cheeks between her paws. “Don’t you ever—” slap, “ever—” slap, “hurt any cat—” slap, “ever—” slap, “again!”

Her claws are sheathed. She’s not hurting him, but from the blubbering, I think she may be scaring him to death. I lay my hand on her head. “It’s time to go.”

Bagheera rumbles a protest, but I hold firm. It’s late. We have to find that witch girl, make her turn us back to normal and get home before Mom gets there. With a great, cat sigh, Bagheera finally agrees. She leans forward and snaps her teeth just above Vincent’s big nose. He turns whiter than his sheet, his eyes roll up into his head, and he faints dead away.

“Now it’s time to go,” she says, standing.

We head straight for Ravine Drive, but the moon’s behind a cloud and even with ninja sight it takes me forever to find the right driveway. The breeze has died and the only sounds are my feet crunching the leaves. With each step I grow more scared. What if the witch isn’t here? What if we stay like this forever? What am I going to tell Mom?

The house is dark when we get there, and nothing happens when I pound on the door. Nothing except the village clock starts chiming again. At the first note, a prickly feeling spreads across my skin.

I stop knocking.

Bagheera growls. Sparks are dancing across her fur. She drops to her haunches. As midnight tolls, her face shrinks, her legs change, and the fur pulls back into worn, black cloth. She’s Squirt again, my little sister. “Derrick, I wanna go home.”

“Sure thing.” I can tell she’s too tired to walk, so I pick her up. She’s little, like I said, and doesn’t weigh much, but my knee’s stinging again and I kind of limp as I carry her up Ravine Drive and past the firehouse to our block.

She tries to stay awake, but her head finally flops against my shoulder as I carry her up the walk to the house. It’s tricky to unlock the door while holding her, but I manage. I carry her to her room, sleepwalk her out of her costume and tuck her into bed.

My knee’s a mess, red and scabby with dirt caught in the smaller scratches. I wash it out, slap on a bandage and am in bed pretending to sleep when Mom comes home. I hid the costumes at the bottom of my dresser drawer. As far as I know, Mom never even looks for them.

When I get to school on Monday, Brian tells me all about the dance I missed. I guess he’s not mad at me for not show-

ing, because he invites me to come to the pizza party he won for having the best costume. The pizza's pretty good.

That was last year. Nothing's changed, not really. I still stammer and choke whenever Anne talks to me. It happens more now that I'm at the high school. Bullies, though, leave me alone. Maybe it's the karate classes. Brian says for a klutz, I'm pretty good.

Hard to believe it's already Halloween again. Brian's going to the party at the Youth Center. I'd go with him, but Mom has to work late. Guess what I get to do.

Squirt doesn't remember much about last year. Everything that happened after the hot dogs is tangled up with a dream or something. And she's too big for the panther costume. She grew three inches last year.

Me, I remember everything. It was cool being a ninja—particularly when I was talking to Anne—but for a moment there, I really wanted to hear Matt's death gurgle and see his blood spill across the grass. The costume wanted to kill. It made me want to kill. What if it's been waiting for this Halloween to try again?

I dig through my drawer until I get to the mask, the sash, the torn pants. They just lay there, bits of old, black cloth. There's nothing weird or scary about them, but when I reach for the mask, a spark pricks my finger, a spark like you get by scuffing across a carpet.

It's Halloween. Trick or treat?

About Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz):

Carrie S. Masek has been telling stories since she was three and discovered she got into less trouble when she provided creative explanations for the chaos that swirled around her. She now lives in a comfortably messy house on Chicago's North Shore. Contributing to the chaos are her husband, four children, and a ditzzy dog.

Carrie has won awards for both short and novel-length fiction. Her horror short, "Cybergeist," is in the anthology *Beyond the Mundane: Unravelings*, the 2005 EPPIE winner for best anthology. Carrie's YA paranormal romance, *Under A Bear Moon* (5/99), won both the 2000 EPPIE and the 2000 Dream Realms Award for best YA novel.

Her most current releases include a short, paranormal romance, "The Topaz Locket," in the *Jewels of the Quill* anthology, *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume I* (Whiskey Creek Press, 9/05) and two new novels: a futuristic vampire romance, *Twice Damned* (2/05), and *A Dragon's Tail* (3/05), a YA fantasy written by Carrie and her son William. Carrie is currently working on more short stories as well as sequels to both novels. For more information about Carrie and her books, visit her website at <http://www.masek.net>.

GHOST OF A CHANCE

by Karen Woods (Dame Coral)

Chapter 1

Jake Reynolds sat glaring alternately at the docket for this afternoon and the lunch he was trying to force himself to eat before going back to the courtroom. He'd been either in his chambers or in the courtroom since seven this morning. Now he was taking his lunch hour at his desk in chambers with a fast food salad and a bottle of designer water, both of which were his otherwise level-headed secretary's idea of a suitable meal. Frankly, he'd rather eat the plastic container than the unappetizing mixture inside. He put the clear plastic lid on it and tossed the whole mess into the trash. Missing a meal wouldn't kill him. Heaven knew he'd missed enough of them in the last eleven months.

Today would have been Cathy's fifty-second birthday. She'd always claimed her Halloween birthday made her certifiably spooky. But the only thing that had ever frightened him was living without her. He'd lived with that terror for nearly a year now, since Cathy's murder last November.

“Happy birthday, Cathy,” he whispered, his voice pained. “I miss you.”

He rose from his chair and went to the window. He stretched to relieve the tension in his muscles.

Looking out across the street, he saw several small groups of young mothers with Halloween costume clad toddlers going from one shop and office to the next, participating in the Chamber of Commerce’s “Safe Halloween for Tots” program. Seemed like yesterday that his son Tony was that size. Yesterday. Only yesterday. Now Tony was grown and married, with a life of his own. Where had the years gone?

Motion drew his attention to the window ledge. That black cat was here again. It looked much like the sleek, black Bombay kitten with golden eyes Cathy had been so fond of when they were first married. This one wore a red leather collar with a heart-shaped tag. The name “Mystery” was engraved on it. But the only thing mysterious about the cat seemed to be how it disappeared whenever anyone else was around.

Jake opened the window and let the cat in from the ledge. As usual, it leapt into his arms.

“Hello, kitty.”

The cat purred and bumped its nose into his.

“Silly cat,” Jake said with affection. He stroked the sleek black fur and listened to the animal purr contentedly. “How come you always show up when I’m feeling down?”

His cell phone rang. The cat leapt from his arms back out the window. Jake answered the phone. “Judge Reynolds.”

“Hello, Dad.”

“Tony! What’s up, son?”

“Does anything have to be ‘up’ for me to check in with the old man?” Tony asked.

Jake allowed his adult son the white lie. They both knew Tony had called because of today's date. This was the gesture of a loving son. At least Jake knew he'd done one thing right in his life in raising a good man. Of course, much of that credit really went to Cathy, rest her soul. "Not at all. You know you can call me anytime. How is Shelly?"

"Fine. She sends her love. How are you doing, Dad?"

"I'm fine."

"Really?" Tony asked, his voice doubtful.

"Today's not a great day. But did you expect it to be?"

"No. I miss her, too, Dad. Especially today."

"I know."

"Listen, Shelly and I were thinking of coming home for the weekend. Do you think you could tolerate us?"

"You're welcome any time you want to come. It's good to have people in the house. But you don't have to make a special trip. You and my beautiful daughter-in-law have lives of your own to live."

"We want to come home for the weekend."

"Then come. Your room is always ready for you."

"So, what are you doing today?"

"Traffic court."

"Oh, that sounds like fun," Tony said with obvious sarcasm in his voice.

"Only if you have a large streak of masochism in your soul. That's never been one of my quirks."

Tony laughed. "Too much information, Dad."

Jake chuckled in reaction. "I am so proud of you, Tony. No one could have a better son. I don't tell you that very often. I should."

After a moment, Tony said, "Well, I had a good father to pattern myself on. I only hope I can do as good of a job."

"Is Shelly pregnant?"

“We got confirmation this afternoon. It’s an unbelievable feeling, Dad, to see that little heartbeat on the ultrasound monitor.”

Jake felt himself smile. “I’d imagine it would be. Ultrasounds weren’t so common when your mom was pregnant with you.”

“Shelly wanted to tell you herself. She’ll be upset with me for telling you.”

“She can’t be upset if she doesn’t know I’ve been told. We’ll go out for dinner Saturday night. We’ll go to that new steak place Shelly liked so well when you were home on the Fourth of July. But then I remember your mom couldn’t keep anything down except red meat for the first three months when she was expecting you.”

“We’ll be home tomorrow morning.”

“Okay, son. I’ll look forward to seeing all three of you.”

George, his bailiff, stepped into Chambers. Jake hung up the phone. “It’s two minutes until one o’clock, Your Honor.”

“Be right there.”

Traffic court lasted until he heard the last case at quarter to five. There were times he really hated seeing the same people time and time again, on the same charges.

Exhausted from a long day hearing case after case, he left the bench and went into chambers. He hung his judicial robe on the hook on the wall.

Jake had nothing to go home to except an empty house. Today, of all days, the last thing he wanted was to be alone and surrounded by the ghosts of memories. So he might as well write the law journal article he’d promised.

He worked long after the courthouse fell into the silence of the end of the day. Well into the evening, Jake rose from his desk and went over to the window, looking out onto the street below. The time and temperature clock on the bank

across the street said that it was fifteen past eight and forty-seven degrees.

The trick-or-treaters would have been out in force by this time. Finding his house dark wouldn't please the kids in the neighborhood. Cathy and he had always thrown quite a party on Halloween. A block party with a couple of live bands and much dancing, a bonfire, a hayride, and all the activities to go along with Halloween—from bobbing for apples to a scavenger hunt to a pumpkin carving contest. Cathy did the work of making all that happen. She'd called the party her birthday present to herself. This year, however, the Reynolds' house stood dark and silent, a good metaphor for his life without Cathy.

"Jake, honey, it's been eleven months," he heard—only in his mind—the gentle voice of his late wife Cathy. *"Pushing yourself this hard isn't going to solve anything. You've got another good thirty, maybe more, years ahead of you, if you take care of yourself. I want you to enjoy every moment of your mortal life. Find another woman to love and stop working yourself to death. No one knows better than me just how much you need a woman in your life, in your bed. You're a man who knows how to please a woman in bed. Enjoy the life you have, live it, have love, be happy."*

There'd been times since Cathy's murder that he swore she was sitting here with him, talking to him. He'd never believed in ghosts. He wasn't sure he believed in them now, although he couldn't deny he heard Cathy speak to him. Sometimes, he even thought he smelled her perfume or felt her touch.

Of course, he hadn't told anyone about any of this. Who would he tell anyway? This wasn't something that you announced to friends over coffee. It wasn't something you dropped into casual dinner conversation at the Country Club.

Off hand, the only place he could think that announcing something like this would be appropriate would be in a psychotherapist's office or in a discussion with clergy.

No, it really wouldn't do for a sitting judge to publicly admit he heard dead people talking to him. Many would pity him in his grief. Other people would question his grasp on reality. More than one lawyer would automatically appeal his judgments. There'd be no good consequence in letting this be known.

Hearing Cathy's voice always rattled him. At times he doubted his own sanity. Then again, he'd never signed commitment orders for any person who actually doubted his or her perceptions. Most of the insane thought of themselves as perfectly rational. Maybe questioning his sanity was a good thing. At least it meant he was still mostly grounded in reality. Didn't it?

He rubbed his neck. Maybe it was time to go home. Tony and Shelly would be coming tomorrow morning. He needed to go to the grocery store and lay in some decent food since he'd be indirectly feeding his grandchild. Grandchild. Cathy would have been delighted at the prospect of a grandchild. Tony couldn't have given her a better birthday present.

"Your Honor?" Mary Edwards-Robins asked from the doorway to his chambers, breaking into his thoughts.

He didn't have to turn around to identify her. No one else had that particular beautiful musical voice.

Jake moved to look at her anyway. She always made him feel like a kid with a first crush. Mary was the only woman besides Cathy who'd ever raised his temperature even one iota just by being in the same room.

Still, Mary had never, not once in all the twenty-five years he'd known her, shown any degree of interest in him as a man. But that was a good thing. If she'd ever shown any in-

terest in him, it would have been difficult to ignore her, even though he'd been happy with Cathy.

He'd been alone for almost a year. She'd been widowed for nearly two years. He had to face facts. If she'd been at all interested in him, she would have said something to him by now about it. Mary was many things, but she'd never hesitated to pursue the things she wanted. The difference in their ages wouldn't have stopped her, if she had been the least interested in him.

It dawned on him something was seriously wrong. Mary's eyes looked like she'd been crying. He'd only seen Mary's face bear the signs of tears three times: when her father died, when her husband died, and now. *Something awful has happened.*

Normally, he would take refuge in their professional relationship. But, seeing her in distress, he couldn't take shelter in formality. "What's wrong, Mary?"

She came into chambers and took a seat near his desk. Sighing, she said, "I wish I didn't need to bother you tonight, of all nights. But I need an emergency guardianship order."

Oh, business. Of course, it's business. Do you think a beautiful woman like Mary would seek you out for romance? Why would she want a man thirteen years her senior when she could have any man her own age she wants? She's smart, funny, and sexy as any woman could ever be. Why would she settle for you? What do you have to offer her?

"Tell me all about it," he invited.

"Laura was involved in a serious car crash about ninety minutes ago. The other driver is dead. And Laura's..."

Jake saw the agony on her face and heard her voice break under the stress of her sister's accident. He watched her blink back tears and struggle in vain for her lost composure. Seeing her like this broke his heart. He wanted to take her into his

arms and comfort her. He wanted to tell her that everything would be okay and to let her cry. Yet he couldn't. For her to be this upset, Laura's condition had to be grave. He hated to hear that. Jake liked Laura. Ed, Laura's husband, was a member of Jake's regular Sunday afternoon golf foursome.

"How bad is she?"

Mary shook her head. "Bad." She took another ragged breath, obviously in search of control. "I left Ed and the rest of the family at the hospital and went back to my office to draft the emergency order to bring to you. None of us are sure he's even going to need it." Her voice broke again.

He watched as she closed her eyes and took a couple of slow deep breaths.

She looked at him and continued in a calmer voice, "She very well could die on the operating table. But I couldn't just sit there. I had to *do* something."

Jake nodded. "Of course you did. It wouldn't be like you to sit and worry when you could be doing something constructive to try to make things better."

"Sometimes I think you know me entirely too well," Mary said in a low voice, struggling for her composure.

"Not nearly as well as you want to know her," Cathy's voice echoed in his mind.

Jake drew a deep breath to steady himself. Maybe he was really going crazy. But he had to admit the truth of the thought about wanting to know Mary better, regardless of the source. "I'm sorry to hear about Laura."

"Assuming she lives through the next few hours, which may be a big assumption, Ed needs to be legally authorized to handle her affairs while she's under the influence of heavy pain medications. Laura has a couple of major real estate deals pending that need to be closed no later than tomorrow. She was on her way to close those when the accident happened."

“He doesn’t hold her general power of attorney or at least a medical one?” Jake asked, his surprise evident even to his own ears.

Mary rolled her eyes. “You’d think with Ed being the administrator of the hospital, he would have gotten at least a springing medical POA conditional upon her incapacitation, wouldn’t you? His office provides those forms to other people every day.”

“Often people, even people who know better, don’t plan for all contingencies. It’s very human not to want to think about these things.”

“You see why guardianship is necessary. Will you help them?”

He nodded. “Seems a reasonable request. You have the emergency order for me to sign? And the petition to open this up for the full probate guardianship process?”

“Yes. Both.” She handed him the documents she’d prepared.

Their hands touched in the process of her giving him the documents. For the longest moment neither of them moved, only looking at one another, their eyes searching one another’s face.

Jake didn’t miss the blush reddening her cheeks. That, at least, encouraged him to believe she wasn’t totally immune to him.

He took the documents from her, read them. “Thorough as usual, Mary.” Then he signed the documents. Looking at the list of local attorneys he assigned to such matters on a rotating basis, he told her, “I’m appointing Mike Madigan as guardian *ad litem* for Laura.”

He pulled a form from a file drawer in his desk and filled in the appropriate blanks to notify Mike of his new case.

She nodded. "Mike's a good man. Thanks. With any luck, this won't need to go further than the temporary guardianship order."

"We can hope and pray Laura recovers fully. Hang tight, Mary. I'll get you copies of all of this." He went to his secretary's office to use the photocopier.

When he came back into the room, he saw Mary wiping away tears. It wrenched his heart to see her cry. But he understood. He simply couldn't think of anything he could say or do to make things better for her. Well, nothing she'd accept from him anyway.

"Have you eaten dinner?" Jake asked her, after he put all the original forms in his outbox for the court clerk to stamp and file.

"No."

He handed her the photocopies. "Were you planning on going directly to the hospital?"

"I'd planned on grabbing some sandwiches before going back. I'm sure no one has left the waiting room and the cafeteria at the hospital is closed by now. I'm not really hungry. I'm sure none of us are. But it won't do Laura any good for any of us to miss meals. I know Mom has to eat or her blood sugar will get way out of balance."

"Let me buy you dinner. Say at Sinclair's. That's on the way to the hospital. We both have to eat. And you can take carryout from there. I want to be there for Ed. Besides, you seem like you need a friend right now."

Mary smiled at him.

He felt like she'd just given him a tremendous gift—a smile when all she obviously felt like doing was crying. But then Mary had always been a generous soul.

"I'd like that. I'll meet you there."

"I'll walk out with you," he offered.

They walked down one flight of stairs, then down the second flight to the street level.

Pete Henson, the deputy on courthouse security detail tonight, wished them a good night before he let them out and locked up behind them.

"I walked this morning," Jake said. "Would you mind me riding to the hospital with you?"

She smiled at him. "Not at all. My car's across the street."

Jake looked for Mary's Lincoln. But all he saw across the street was an oriental red 1957 MGA Roadster parked in the halo of a street lamp. "The red Roadster?"

"Yes. Cute, isn't it?"

Mystery the cat walked beside the car, stopped and looked at them. After meowing loudly, it moved on.

"Halloween," Jake dismissed while they crossed the street.

"Yeah. This has to be the most frightening Halloween ever."

Reaching the car, he took her hand in his.

Mary looked at him in surprise. She squeezed his hand, then released it.

"I'm sure that it is the scariest Halloween ever for your family. I wish I could tell you that everything is going to be okay," he told her.

"I wish you could, too. But you've never lied to me. And you aren't about to start now. Get in. It's unlocked."

He settled into the new white leather upholstery. "I had a Roadster in college," Jake said, his voice quiet.

Mary put the car into gear and drove off.

"Only mine was black and a beater. I'd picked it up for forty bucks at an auction and put another two hundred into it in parts to get it mechanically sound again. But it ran me through college and law school before it finally gave up the

ghost. By that time, Cathy was pregnant with Tony and we needed something bigger than the MGA anyway.”

“How is Tony?” Mary asked, clearly trying to focus on something other than her sister’s injury. “I haven’t seen him since he was home in July.”

“He’s fine. He and Shelly are coming home tomorrow.”

“That’s nice. He grew into a good man. I still look at him and see the toddler he was when you and Cathy moved here.”

“You aren’t the only one.” He fought the impulse to tell her about his grandchild. But since he wasn’t supposed to know, he couldn’t very well tell her. He smiled in anticipation of his lovely daughter-in-law telling him about the baby.

Mary looked over at him. “What’s the smile for?”

“This is a wonderful car,” he said, finding something he could talk about. “Where did you get it?”

“From a salvage yard, actually. I took possession of this the day after we buried Matt. Working on the car kept me sane during that terrible time. I think I would have fallen apart without something to do late at night, since I couldn’t sleep.”

Jake nodded. “I imagine it would have kept you busy. You’ve done a good job with it.”

“I didn’t do all the work on it myself. I paid Ricky Carls to paint it. Painting cars needs more equipment than I have. The upholstery is new, so are the carpets. The rag top was in sad shape, so I had a shop make me a new one. Today’s the first time I’ve actually let myself drive it. I’ll drive it for a couple of years, then sell it and get another to restore. I’ve found I actually like restoring old cars. It’s an expensive and time consuming hobby, but I like watching something that was a disaster turn into beauty.”

Jake looked at Mary as though he had never seen her before. He found her even more fascinating than ever.

She removed her cell phone from her purse and punched two buttons. "Ed, Mary. How's Laura?" She listened for a moment before continuing, "Jake Reynolds and I are on our way out to the hospital, after we stop for a bite at Sinclair's. What shall I bring you and the family?" She listened again. "Okay. I'll bring that when I come. See you.

"Laura's still in surgery," she told Jake after she hung up.

"That's good. At least, it means she's still alive."

Mary nodded. "That's true. It really doesn't look good. If she survives, it might be without the use of her legs."

"Laura's a strong woman. She'll deal with what comes when it comes."

Mary pulled the car into the parking lot of the restaurant.

Jake smelled the faint hint of Cathy's perfume, then heard Cathy speaking to him again, *"I used to watch how Mary tried not to look at you. There's nothing quite as obvious as a woman trying to hide her emotions for a man she knows she can't have. And you never even saw her as a woman. See her as a woman now, Jacob. She'd make you a wonderful wife."*

"Are you okay?" Mary asked, her concern clear.

"I'm fine."

"You look like you just saw a ghost."

That really wasn't far from the truth. Of course, he couldn't tell her that.

"Just hungry," he dismissed. "I haven't eaten since breakfast."

She looked at him. "You shouldn't really miss meals, Jake. It's not good for you."

"Today is Cathy's birthday. It's been a difficult day. I've just been trying to keep busy."

"Yeah, I remember Matt's birthday after he died. I almost didn't make it through that day. Difficult was not the word for it. I swore I was losing my mind."

“How so?” Jake asked.

“It really doesn’t matter. Come on, let’s get you some food.”

Jake climbed out of the car and followed Mary into the local “quick service” restaurant. The food was good here. They made everything from scratch, including their wide varieties of breads and rolls, soups, roasts, pies and pastries. Service was standard fast food carryout, paper and plastic.

Mary placed a to-go order for a cold roast lamb on garlic herb bread, a ham on rye, a salad topped with grilled chicken, and two roast beef sandwiches on whole wheat sub rolls.

“What do you want to eat, Mary?”

She shook her head. “I’m not really hungry.”

“I understand. But you have to eat.”

“Another of those salads with grilled chicken and a glass of raspberry iced tea, with a grilled slice of four cheese bread on the side. No dressing.”

“Sure you weren’t hungry,” Jake said with a chuckle.

Mary smiled at him. “I’m not really that hungry. But this is delicious.”

“Sir?” the counter girl asked. “What would you have?”

Jake ordered, “Clam chowder in a sourdough bread bowl, please. Large coffee.”

“Is that all you’re having?” Mary demanded.

“It’s enough.”

“You haven’t had anything to eat all day, and all you’re having is a bowl of soup?”

“It’s good soup. Very filling. This is all I want.”

The counter girl handed them their paper drink cups, took Jake’s money for all of it along with his name, and told them to have a seat. Their orders would be out soon.

Jake filled their drinks from the beverage bar. Mary had taken a seat at one of the glass-topped tables.

He put her tea down before her.

"You know, you can't change anything by worrying about it," Jake told her, his voice gentle.

She sipped her tea. "I know. This is all so stressful."

"No one promised that life would be easy."

"If they had, I probably would have sued by now for breach of contract."

"That could have been a class action with much of the world joining in."

Mary chuckled. "Yep. Thanks, Jake. I appreciate this."

"It's always terrible when the people we care about are suffering."

Mary blinked back tears. "Yeah, it is. Thanks for being here for us, for me. Especially today when you have so much else on your mind. But you've always been a kind and generous man."

Jake took her hand in his. She looked at him. He saw both the confusion and longing in her eyes. "Mary, I will always be here for you, if you'll let me. I promise you that."

The counter girl called, "Reynolds."

Jake squeezed her hand and rose from the table. "I'll be right back."

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Chapter 2

She watched him walk over to the counter and retrieve the tray containing their food and a bag she assumed contained the sandwiches for her family.

He's just being nice. He's a good man trying to help you through a bad time. He'd do the same thing for anyone else who needed help. That's just the way he has always been.

He's always given the shirt off his back to anyone who needed it. He's a good, generous, kind man. There's no way he's romantically interested in you. Since he's single again, he could have any woman he wanted. Why should he want you? What do you have to give him? Don't get your hopes up. Don't read more into this than is here.

Yet reading more into this was precisely what she wanted to do. The idea of Jake Reynolds being interested in her filled her with both hope and dread. Ever since their first meeting, the summer she was fourteen, he'd been her idea of everything her perfect man should be. She compared every man she dated to Jake Reynolds, and most of them had come out decidedly lacking. Matt had been the only one who had ever measured up to, and even surpassed, the standards she had set for the man in her life. But poor Matt had been dead for twenty months, taken less than two weeks following his diagnosis of endstage cancer. She still reached for Matt in the middle of the night, even after almost two years of him being gone.

It did no good to dwell on things that weren't to be. If there was one thing she could say about the chances of her and Jake Reynolds being together, it was that it wasn't to be. She'd learned to accept that a long time ago.

"Looks good," Jake told her, putting her salad down in front of her.

Drawn from her own journey down memory lane, she glanced at the salad as though she'd never seen one before.

"It usually is very good. I've never had their clam chowder. Is it as good as it smells?"

"I've never had a bad bowl of it here." He peeled off a bit of bread from the core the restaurant cut out of the round loaf of sourdough bread to make a bowl. After dipping it in his soup, he offered it to her. "Have a taste."

Mary found her face growing hot again at the intimacy of sharing food with him. But she leaned forward and ate the offered morsel of food from his fingers.

Jake laughed. "Well?"

"That's scrumptious." She gave him a brief mischievous look. "You have very good taste."

"We've known each other a very long time, Mary. Is this a surprise to you?"

"No," she admitted. "I've always known that about you." Feeling obligated and wanting to be on an even basis with him, she cut up a bit of her chicken, put it on the fork with a mandarin orange segment, a bit of the greens, and a toasted almond silver. "Here, try this," she said, holding out her fork to him.

He smiled at her, then took the bite from her fork.

"That's good, too."

"Seems we both have good taste."

"Why haven't you remarried?" he asked suddenly, between bites of his soup.

"Matt's only been gone for twenty months," she stammered her reply. *Where did that question come from? What is he getting at?*

"Aren't you lonely?"

Lonely? Yes. "There are times the silence of the house has almost been unbearable," she confessed. "That's when I escaped to the garage and worked on the car until I was too tired to worry about feeling lonely."

"You ought to find someone else. For you to stay single would be such a waste. You have so much to give."

Mary felt her face grow warm again. *He thinks I have a lot to give to a man. Boy, is he wrong about that. I feel empty inside much of the time.* "I'm hardly bemoaning my single state. I have plenty of nieces and nephews to spoil rotten. I

keep busy between my practice and community choir, church groups, and a couple of charities whose boards I sit on. My life is pretty full."

"I'm glad your life is full. Mine's basically empty. I work, eat, and sleep. I go to the Y and swim my mile in the mornings before walking to work because I always have done that and it's good for me. I run a couple of miles in the evenings just so I'll exhaust myself enough to get some sleep. And I play eighteen holes of golf on Sunday afternoons with Ed and a couple of other people. Aside from professional organizations, that's my life right now. Most nights I don't sleep very well. I seldom have much of an appetite."

She nodded. "I know what you mean. The first year after Matt died was the worst for me. I couldn't sleep in my bed. The house felt so damned lonely, I could barely stand it. I went from a size sixteen to an eight in the first four months after he died."

"I've had to buy new clothes, too."

Carefully choosing her words, Mary said, "It's been weight you really didn't have to spare."

Jake nodded. "I didn't get rid of my older clothes. But I think I'd rather be thin than fight a middle age spread, if I have a choice in the matter."

"People have been speculating that you were sick," Mary told him, her voice quiet.

"No, Mary. I'm fine. I got a clean bill of health after my annual physical two weeks ago."

"I'm absolutely delighted to hear that." Then she smiled at him. "We could always use another male voice in community choir, if you're looking for something to do with your spare time."

Jake laughed. "Not my voice. I can't carry a tune."

“I hear you sing at church. You can’t give me that. You have a very good voice.”

Jake shook his head. Mary thought he looked embarrassed. She raised her hand to reach out to touch him, then settled for closing her hand around her glass and taking a sip of her tea.

He said, “Hymns are easy. I’ve heard those since I was a small boy. But the truth is, and don’t you dare laugh at me, I’ve never learned to read music. I look at written music without the least comprehension. I see the notes go up and down the scale. And I know the difference between a solid note and one that’s just outlined is the length you hold the sound. Beyond that, I’m absolutely hopeless.”

Mary smiled. That sounded like Jake. “Lots of people can’t read music. Everyone has things that don’t make sense to them. Personally, I’ve never understood ice hockey.”

Jake looked at his empty bread bowl. “I can’t believe that’s gone already. It’s been a long time since I’ve enjoyed any meal this much.”

Mary glanced at her own plate to see most of her salad was gone as well. She really didn’t remember eating that much of it.

He tore apart the bread bowl and started eating that. With most gone, he said, “I’m going to top off my coffee. Would you like more tea?”

“Please.”

When he returned, she smiled at him. “Thanks, Jake. I do appreciate this.”

“No problem. We’d better get those sandwiches to Ed and the bunch.”

She nodded. “Yes. I really don’t want to go sit at the hospital. Last time I was in that waiting room, before today, we

got the word that Dad had died. It doesn't hold good memories for me."

"I know. I doubt I'll ever forget when Bill Rafferty came in to tell me Cathy was dead."

Mary cleared her throat. The last thing she ever wanted to do was to hurt him. "Heard that Lee Davis is going to trial in Montgomery County next month for Cathy's murder."

"The change of venue won't do him much good. It was a homicide committed in the course of a home invasion/robbery. If he's smart, he'll take the deal of life without parole and spare everyone the pain of the trial. No reasonable jury will give him less than lethal injection."

"A reasonable jury? Where do you find one of those?" Mary said, trying to lighten up the mood.

He shook his head. "I don't know. For all the years I've participated in the process, I'm still amazed it works as well as it does."

"How do you feel about the possibility of his facing lethal injection?"

"Killing him won't bring Cathy back. Besides, he's likely to sit on death row for years awaiting execution as the mandatory appeals go through."

"No, it won't bring her back. It would make sure Davis couldn't kill again."

"So will locking him up and throwing away the key."

"True enough. Unless he escapes."

Jake rose from his chair. "Come on, Mary. I know you don't want to go to the hospital. But postponing things we don't want to do doesn't make them any easier."

She picked up the bag containing the sandwiches after she stood. "You're right."

He laughed. "I usually am."

"Except when you're not," she said playfully.

“Yeah, except when I’m not. So I guess that makes me human, huh?”

She chuckled. “Yep. My how the mighty have fallen.”

He shook his head. “So now you rank me among the fallen. Nice to know I’m so highly regarded.”

“You have no idea how well regarded you are,” she thought, and then realized she’d actually whispered the words.

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Chapter 3

The whisper was almost, but not quite, too quiet to be heard. Jake didn’t know what to make of Mary’s *sotto voce* comment. He was afraid to read too much into it.

Through the restaurant windows, he saw Mystery the cat standing on Mary’s ragtop.

He smelled Cathy’s favorite perfume and felt her hand touch him on the shoulder. In the reflection of the glass, for just a moment, he thought he saw Cathy’s sweet face smiling.

Jake shuddered.

Mary looked at him. “A goose walk over your grave?” she asked, but her tone held more concern than her words indicated.

“Something like that.”

When they were outside of the restaurant, Mary confessed in a low voice, “Until Matt died, I never thought much about the whole subject of ghosts.”

Where is she going with this? “But you have thought about it in the interim?” he said, choosing his words carefully.

“Yes. I have.”

“And you’ve come to what conclusion?”

Mary took his hand in hers. "Experience trumps theory, Jake. I just saw Cathy. I know you did, too."

Jake drew a deep breath while searching Mary's face for any sign she was telling him less than the truth. He saw only honesty there. "Then I haven't lost my mind," he said in a low voice. "That's a relief."

"I understand. Fully. But you're as sane as you ever were."

Jake bit back a laugh, but couldn't contain the smile he felt. "Quite a phrasing, Counselor. Just how sane is that?"

"Not being an expert witness, anything I'd say on the matter would be highly speculative, Your Honor," she bantered.

Jake let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her shoulder. Giving her a brief hug, he said, "Ed needs his friends around him now. We better go."

"Yes. Get in."

Driving toward the hospital, Mary announced, "You're a good man, Jake Reynolds."

"Good for what?"

"It would take longer than we have for me to list the ways. Thank you for being my friend."

"You might as well thank the sun for shining."

Mary laughed. "So, you compare your friendship to that which provides the energy for all life on earth. No excess of humility there."

Jake joined in her laughter. She pulled the car into the hospital parking lot and parked near the door. They walked into the hospital. Mary looped her arm through his. She stopped walking abruptly. "I don't think I can do this," she confessed. "I don't want to go in there. I'm terrified of hearing bad news about her, Jake."

He nodded. The true panic in her voice tore at his heart. "I know you are. I can't change anything. But I'm here with you. Lean on me."

"I'm going to hold you to that."

He removed her arm from his and turned to her. Jake stroked her face. He didn't miss the way she turned her face to nuzzle his hand. No, the woman wasn't immune to him. He wasn't going to let her get away now that he knew she was interested in him. "You can hold me to it, you know. I'll never let you down, Mary. You can count on me. Always."

She stepped back from him, a blush coming to her cheeks. Moving down the hall with him, she said, "I don't know what I'll do if Laura dies, Jake."

"Laura could die. I wish I could tell you otherwise."

Mary drew a breath and blinked back the tears. "I wish you could, too. You've always told me the truth."

"Whatever comes, you'll handle it. You are one of the strongest women I know. Ed will need all the strength of everyone around him."

Mary stopped and looked at him. "Ed's a strong man."

"No man, facing the loss of his woman, is strong," Jake said, his voice laden with old pain. "No more than a woman is strong when she loses her man. That, more than any other time in a person's life, makes people weak."

She spoke tenderly to him, "If this is too painful for you, say so. I don't want to hurt you, Jake."

"Ed and Laura are my friends. You have your bad memories of this place. So do I. We both have to be here for Ed and Laura now. Life is about helping those we care about."

"You care about me?"

"More than you probably want to know."

Mary kissed his cheek. "Don't be so sure of that, Jake."

He let her back away from him, even though all he wanted to do was to pull her into his arms and kiss her boneless. Knowing she was interested in him, he could be a little patient. A little. Maybe not much.

"Fair enough. We'll talk about this later."

"That's a good description of you. Fair."

"I try to be."

"We know how trying you are." They resumed walking. She took his arm again.

Having her arm in his felt so right. "I'm especially trying when wearing black robes," he added.

She chuckled. "Even now, you make me feel happier."

"Your laugh is infectious," he told her.

"It makes people sick? Then I'm in the right place, aren't I?"

Jake shook his head, dismissing that. "No. Your laughter has always brightened any room."

Down another hall and around the corner was the ICU/surgical waiting room. Mary's immediate family were present. Her mother, Meg, sat on a sofa with her other sister, Nicole. Her brothers, Brad and George, sat in recliners. Ed was seated at a small round table in the corner.

Jake saw that no one of her family missed how Mary held onto his arm. He exchanged challenging glances with her brothers, then they smiled and nodded at him. Relief washed over him when none of them protested. Mary cared about what her family thought. Getting her in his life would be more difficult if they protested.

Mary passed out the sandwiches.

"Any word, yet?" Mary asked. She and Jake walked over to Ed.

"Haven't heard anything new," Ed answered. "She's still in surgery."

"Here's your sandwich," Mary told her brother-in-law. She and Jake sat down at the table with him.

"Thanks for coming, Jake," Ed said.

"What else are friends for?"

"Thanks, Jake," Ed replied, punctuating his words with a ragged sigh. "This waiting is endless."

"The waiting ends faster than bad news you have to live with forever. While you're waiting, there's hope."

Ed looked at Jake. "The police have been here. The driver who hit Laura had been drinking, celebrating Halloween a little too enthusiastically. And he was driving without a valid license, so he had no insurance."

"You've got medical coverage here for her? Right?" Mary asked.

"Yeah. I do. The hospital self-insures employees and their families."

"And you have uninsured motorist coverage on your auto policy?" Mary questioned.

"Sure."

"Then you don't need him to have insurance," Mary said. "All the expenses will be covered, one way or another."

"I guess you're right about that," Ed replied.

"Who was the other driver?" Jake asked.

"Mike Young. He was just twenty-five years old. How does a twenty-five year old kid get that messed up?"

Jake shook his head. "I remember him. Last time he appeared before me, he came into court drunk as a skunk and put in a plea of not guilty to driving while intoxicated. He was just twenty-two and that was his fifth DWI conviction. I sent him to a minimum security prison for three years, just to get him off the roads. I hoped that would get him sober and straightened out."

“Apparently, he came right out of prison and started drinking again. He died in this crash.”

“I wish I could have given him a longer sentence,” Jake said.

“I doubt it would have done any good. Some people just seem to self-destruct,” Ed said.

“At least his death is some measure of closure. You won’t have the months of an emotional roller coaster of personal injury litigation as you sue him to recover damages from his insurance company.”

“In a bad sort of way,” Ed allowed. “Yes, it’s closure. I don’t think I could endure facing litigation right now.”

Having this over with so that all they had to focus on was getting Laura healthy was a huge improvement over waiting almost a year for a murder trial of the thieving drug addict who killed your wife, Jake thought. “How badly is Laura hurt?”

“It will be a miracle if she comes out of this,” Ed said, his voice heavy with fear.

“Miracles do happen,” Jake assured him. “Don’t lose hope.”

“Hope. Right now, hope isn’t even on the horizon. Miracles happen, sure, but they aren’t anything you can count on,” Ed said, unwrapping his food. He took a bite. “Now, that’s one thing you can count on—Sinclair’s. They make a good sandwich every time.”

“Yes, they do,” Mary answered her brother-in-law, her voice clearly concerned. She looked at Jake, pleading in her eyes.

When Mary looked at him like that, he knew he’d do almost anything to try to take the shadows out from her eyes. Jake understood how Ed felt. Knowing that the woman you loved more than your own life could very possibly be dying

was enough to send any man into despair. A terrible sense of frustration and uselessness, a sensation that no one should have to live through, came over you. He only hoped Ed wouldn't have to endure the news of Laura's death. That might well destroy him.

"Mary came to me with the guardianship papers for Laura. I signed them, putting you temporarily as guardian of Laura's person and estate. Mary has the papers. This is a matter of public record. Should Laura once more have the ability to manage her affairs, we'll take her off adult-in-need-of-care status. You'll be able to get officially sealed copies of the papers on Monday."

"If she makes it through the surgery, I'll worry about it," Ed said in a tone that said he'd already given up hope.

"Let's assume you're going to have some need of these. Okay?" Jake said.

Ed nodded, blinking back tears. "This is all so damned stressful."

"Yeah. It's the most challenging thing any of us ever does, to sit and wait, helpless, for news of someone we love. We're here for you, Ed. Just like you have always been there for all of us. There's not much we can do but sit and wait with you and pray. I wish we could do more."

"There's nothing else to be done. I don't know that prayers always help. But waiting with people is better than sitting and waiting alone."

"Yeah," Jake agreed. He reached into his suit pocket and brought out a deck of cards. "Name your game, Ed. Something to help pass the time."

"Blackjack. That's mindless enough."

Jake shuffled his special deck expertly and handed them to Mary to cut. He dealt out six cards. Showing for Ed was a king. Mary had an eight face up. He dealt himself a two.

Ed turned his cards over. A small smile came to his lips.
“Twenty-one.”

“Beats me,” Mary said.

“Me, too.”

They went through the deck a half dozen times, Jake making sure to deal Ed more winning hands than not, before Ed called a halt to the cards and went into the restroom.

Mary reached over and took Jake’s hand. He didn’t resist the temptation to squeeze her hand in return. “How did you do that?” she asked him, her voice low.

He smiled and answered in a voice no louder than the one she’d used. “Do what?”

“You know what you did. Somehow you purposefully dealt him winning hands almost every time. Didn’t you?”

Jake smiled and hedged, “He needed the distraction.”

“Yes, he did. How did you do it?”

Jake reshuffled the deck and spread out the cards on the table in front of her. “What kind of hand do you want?”

“An ace and a jack.”

Jake pulled out all four aces and four jacks.

“A marked deck?” she asked, her voice mostly amused.

Jake shrugged. “A friend gave it to me for Christmas three years ago. It took me a couple of months to learn to read the backs.”

“And you carry it, why?”

“Actually, I keep it in my desk for my own amusement. Figuring that Ed would need to have something to take his mind off Laura’s situation, at least for a few minutes, I brought it.”

She smiled at him. “You’re a good man, Jake Reynolds.”

“Considering I’m a card shark?”

“Something like that. That was a nice thing you did for Ed.”

Jake squeezed her hand once more. "Come on, let's take a walk."

Mary smiled at him and rose to her feet. "I don't want to miss the surgeon."

"We won't."

"I've got my pager, if you need me," she told her family before the two of them left the waiting room.

Jake and Mary took a short walk down to the corridor by the operating rooms. There was a bench in a bay with a large window looking out onto the well-illuminated courtyard. They sat down.

He debated about putting his arm around her shoulder and decided he would. She didn't protest. Instead, she snuggled closer to him, resting her head on his shoulder. Glancing out on the courtyard, Jake saw Mystery Cat climbing one of the trees.

"Mary?"

"Yes."

"Would you go steady with me?"

"That's an old-fashioned turn of a phrase."

"After spending most of my life as a married man, I'm a little out of practice with strange women," he said on a sigh.

"So I'm strange, am I?" she challenged.

"We have a strange and wonderful relationship. Since you say I'm wonderful, that makes you the strange one by default. Now doesn't it?" he offered in return.

She chuckled. "Oh, Jake."

"I never was very smooth with women."

"I have a hard time believing that."

"Most of my high school years, I was this tall, reedy nerd. President of the Latin Club. President of the Chess Club. President of the Math Club. Captain of the debating team. Captain of the cross country team. Co-captain of the swim

team. Girls never looked at me twice, except if they needed help with their homework.”

“Then they were both blind and stupid.”

Jake laughed. “Swear to God. Cathy looked, when we met that first week of our freshman year at the university, and she liked what she saw. I’ll always be grateful for that. She was the first woman I ever loved.”

“The first? Have there been others?”

“Just you.”

At Mary’s startled expression, Jake scrambled for something to say. “I told you I’ve never been very smooth with women. I always could make a cogent argument in court on almost any subject. But I get all awkward with women.”

“Jake,” Mary began, “I...”

The sound of the men’s locker room door opening cut off whatever she was going to say. They both saw Laura’s surgeon come out.

Mary stood. Jake followed her to his feet.

“Pete, how is Laura?” Mary asked the surgeon, real fear in her voice.

Jake wrapped his arm around her waist.

“I’m on my way to see Ed,” the surgeon, Peter Greene, said.

“Just give me the bottom line!” Mary demanded. “Is Laura okay?”

“Mary, you know that I can’t say anything to you because of HIPA. I can talk to Ed, but not to you, unless he approves. You know the privacy laws as well or better than I do.”

Mary shrugged. “Go see Ed. He’s waiting. I’ll be right behind you.”

They followed the doctor into the waiting room. Ed rose to his feet. “Pete?”

"Is it okay if I talk to you here with her family around?" the doctor asked.

Ed nodded. When he spoke, there was fear in his voice. "There are no secrets here. How is she?"

"She came through okay, Ed," Pete told them. "If I were a betting man, I'd put money on her full recovery."

"Thank God!" Ed and Mary's family said almost as one.

Ed began to cry great silent tears. "I was almost afraid to hope."

The surgeon nodded. "Laura's had more trauma to her system today than anyone should have to endure. More than many people could endure. The good news is the neurologist doesn't think the damage to her spine is anything serious. She still has more surgeries ahead of her to put her back together. But so far so good."

"What happens now, Pete?" Mary asked.

"I'm putting her in ICU at least overnight when she comes out of recovery. I'll let Ed and Meg see her tonight, but that's the limit on visitors. She won't know anyone tonight. Go home, everyone. My guess is that she'll spend much of tomorrow and/or the next day having surgical repairs of the broken bones in her arm and leg. When all this is over, the rest of you can see her."

Mary began to cry tears of relief.

Jake pulled her into his arms and held her tightly, letting her cry. "It's okay, Mary."

"I know. I can't help it."

"Yeah, honey. Sometimes we all need to cry."

A few long minutes later, she stepped back from him. Jake reached out with both hands. Framing her face in his hands, he wiped her eyes with the pads of his thumbs.

"There's nothing more to do here, right now. Why don't you take me home?" Jake asked.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 4

Mary pulled the MGA Roadster into the driveway of Jake's house.

"Come in for a coffee?" he offered.

"Jake, don't play games with me tonight. I'm way too vulnerable."

"I'm not playing games. Come in?"

"We both know if I come in, it won't be just for coffee and I won't be leaving until after dawn."

Jake smiled at her. "I wouldn't complain at all. And what makes you think I'd let you leave at all?"

"No, you probably wouldn't complain," she answered with a chuckle.

"Definitely wouldn't. And neither would you."

"I think I need not to be alone tonight," she admitted, turning off the car and placing the keys in her purse. She climbed out.

Jake removed himself from the little car and caught up with her on the well-lighted sidewalk to the house. "Tonight? Is that enough?" he asked, taking her by the arm.

"It'll have to be."

"Why does it have to be?"

"Every Cinderella has her midnight. All beautiful fantasies end," Mary replied.

"What if I want more from you than just one night?"

"Do you?"

"Answer the question. What would you say if I told you that I want more from you than that?"

"Are you saying that?"

"We're both entirely too well trained in cross examination to be having this conversation this way. Come on in for coffee. Let's talk. Then we'll decide where we want to go."

"Where we want to go?" Mary asked.

Mystery Cat walked in front of them and stopped, mew-ing loudly.

"Hello, pretty kitty," Mary greeted the animal.

"That's Mystery Cat."

"You own it?" Mary asked.

"No one ever owns a cat. Dogs have masters. Cats have staff."

"Too true," she replied with a chuckle. "Does this one have a judge on staff?"

"It's been around since Cathy's funeral. Actually, this is the first time the cat's actually stuck around when anyone else was present. You're privileged."

"Am I? They say it's bad luck for a black cat to cross your path."

"On the contrary, cats like these are called the Chat d'Argent or the Magician Cat in parts of France. They're considered to be profound good luck to any family who takes them in. If you are given to superstitions, might as well choose the superstition that's favorable."

Mary chuckled. "Sounds like a good idea to me."

The cat walked in a circle around them, mew-ing loudly. Then it repeated the process, until seven circles had been made. Mary and Jake just looked on, fascinated. The cat stopped in front of them after the seventh circle, then leapt up into Jake's arms.

"You are such a strange kitty," he said, petting it.

Mystery mewed and bumped noses with him. Twisting around in Jake's arms, the cat reached out a paw to Mary and moved into her arms. After bumping noses with Mary and

mewing, the animal jumped to the ground and wandered off, disappearing into the blackness.

"That was odd," Mary said. "I almost feel like we've just been given a blessing of a sort."

"Seven is a mystical number, representing completeness and holiness," Jake reflected.

"Completeness and holiness," she echoed on a breath.

"How's New Year's Eve for you?" Jake asked.

Mary blinked at the *non sequitur*. "It's my birthday. Why?"

"I know. Figured that I'd have only one date to remember instead of two."

She cocked her head and looked at him. "Jake, I'm missing something. What does my birthday have to do with you remembering anything?"

"If we got married on your birthday, I'd only have one date to remember."

"*Jake, that's no way to propose!*" Cathy warned in his head.

"You haven't asked," Mary protested with a laugh.

"I told you I'm awkward at this kind of thing. I can't promise you the world, Mary. All I can offer you is myself. There's only been one other woman in the world that was enough for."

"Did I ask for any promises?"

"I'm not given to poetry or romantic gestures. I'll probably never think to bring you flowers or candy. It's not my nature. A gift from me is more likely to be a new set of tires, a tune-up, a tool, a piece of sporting equipment, a book, or a donation in your name to a favored charity."

"Cut flowers die and I don't eat sweets, except on special occasions. Most poetry leaves me cold. I usually handle my own car. But I've got a couple of golf clubs I wouldn't mind

having. Books are some of my favorite things. And my favorite charity is Habitat for Humanity.”

He laughed. “A woman after my own heart.”

“Yeah. That’s about the size of it, Jake. I’m very interested in your heart. I love you.”

“Those are the words I was waiting to hear. I know I’m not any woman’s dream of a romantic hero.”

“Says who?” she dismissed, then hurried into speech. “It’ll be a push to get married on December 31st. But who wants a big wedding anyway? We’ve both had one of those. The important thing is to have family and friends around us. I think we can talk Pastor Jamison into expediting things. I can’t think of a more lovely birthday present for you to give me than yourself.”

“How about a week on a beach in Tahiti, with nothing to do but enjoy the sun, sail, snorkel, and make love?”

“In that order?”

He chuckled. “I don’t think so.”

“As long as you don’t expect me to clean fish, we’re fine. But Tahiti is so expensive. Matt and I looked at it once and decided we’d need to be much richer before we’d feel comfortable spending that much money on any vacation.”

“Honeymoons should be memorable. And by New Year’s, I’ll be longing for warmth.”

“Another option is to go to a ski resort and stay in by a blazing fire most of the time with hot buttered rum.”

“We could fly to Hawaii and take a cruise around the islands,” Jake offered.

“There are a lot of options for a honeymoon trip. We can discuss them later. I’m still waiting for an actual marriage proposal.”

He laughed. “I do love you. Will you marry me, Mary?”

“Yes, Jake. I’ll marry you. And it’s a good thing you love me because you’re stuck with me, now and forever.”

Jake looked over Mary’s shoulder to a ghostly figure of his first wife. As he watched, Cathy’s form changed into a big black cat with a red collar and a heart shaped tag. The cat winked at him. Then she changed back into the image of the woman he’d loved for so many years. Cathy faded out, her smiling face disappearing last. *“Goodbye, Jake. I love you. Be happy.”*

About Karen Woods (Dame Coral):

Karen Woods has published a number of works with a variety of small press publishers. Primarily, she writes thrillers, historicals, futuristics, and romantic suspense.

Karen is a member of EPIC (www.epicauthors.org), serving there as listcop on the Business list. Karen is also the founder of *Flowersandhearts.com*. For more information about Karen and her work, visit her website at <http://www.flowersandhearts.com/karenwoods.htm>.

WHITE ELEPHANTS

by C.J. Winters (Dame Tanzanite)

Fraternal twins Noel and Merry Callaghan would be twenty-three on Christmas, if they didn't kill each other on Halloween.

"We wouldn't be so far behind if you hadn't strained your back trying to pry out the fireplace mantel by yourself," grumbled Merry.

"Or if you hadn't taken the weekend off for a romp in Branson with Toyboy here," snapped Noel.

"Hey," whined Toyboy, "use me, but don't abuse me. I'm the muscle, remember?"

Noel sighed. Nineteen-year-old Jonas had muscles all right, but the one between his ears wasn't the most notable. Still, he worked for free, which was all that mattered right now.

"Look," she said. "We can still make it. If my muscle relaxants hold out, I can have the upstairs partitions ripped in say three hours. If you two get the cabinets into the pickup by then, we'll have six hands to take out the windows. It'll take us all night to finish, but then we didn't plan to go trick-or-treating...did we?" she finished with an attempt at levity.

Three months before, the twins had inherited their father's one-man deconstruction business. Now, unable to afford skilled help, they were frantically trying to fulfill the first contract they'd gained on their own, gutting the interior of a three-story Victorian house before the bulldozers arrived at eight the next morning to level the site. The developer of the Wake Up to a VIEW vacation homes project outside Bleu Clay wouldn't hold back his growling beasts and their expensive operators to give a pair of amateurs time to unscrew the door knobs. Sale of the salvaged oak floors, woodwork, black walnut kitchen cabinets, decorative hardware and stained glass windows would pay the twins' living expenses while they worked out their foreseeable future. So far their liberal arts degrees hadn't produced a flood of job offers from the Missouri lake area they'd lived in and loved all their lives.

Jonas patted Merry on the tush. "C'mon, baby, let's show your older sister what we can do."

Noel trudged up to the third floor, her headlamp throwing a conical beam on the powdery staircase, and hoped they'd have time to save the thick oak treads and risers. If only she and Merry had paid closer attention to the deconstruction techniques their father had tried to teach them. Occupied by college, social activities and boyfriends, they'd spent little time helping with the business. After all, parents weren't supposed to die until their children were at least middle-aged. However, a car accident had taken their mother seven years ago, and last summer their father had succumbed to a massive heart attack. As only children, the twins inherited his small estate. Now learning fast was their only hope of saving Callaghan Salvage Service. Having a taste of being their own bosses, they'd come to hate the idea of being someone's employee.

Powered by frustration, Noel swung the sledge hammer with all the strength her chemically-loosened muscles could muster, striking the wall in the front bedroom just below the sloping ceiling. Chips of plaster and lathing flew in every direction. Coughing, she paused to pull up her dust mask. At least she'd remembered her safety glasses.

Fifteen minutes later, she put down the sledge and went over to hang her head out the east window, fill her lungs with clean air and wait for the dust to settle. The nearest street light was two blocks away, but a full moon rising in the denim sky over the forested ridge spread its cold light over the stripped acres surrounding the old house. Someday the VIEW would resemble many small bedroom communities, except in this case the commuters would fly, van or SUV themselves in for a couple of days or weeks at a time. Then, like locusts, they'd disappear until the next leisure period earned at their city jobs. Ozark winters weren't harsh. Some owners would come to celebrate the winter holidays, Branson shows and glittering lights, others to escape their everyday lives.

For now the twins lived in their family home, one they wouldn't see before daylight if Noel didn't get a move on. She picked up the big, battery-powered lantern and carried it over to the opening where the side wall had been and shined it under the slanted rafters. To think no one had seen this space for over a hundred years—

She screamed. "Merry! Jonas! Come up here!"

The pair thundered upstairs, headlamps bobbing and slashing the dark interior like bats frantic to find their roosting places on a cave ceiling.

Merry skidded into the room, crying, "What happened? Are you through the floor? I told you to watch—"

“No!” Noel swung her headlamp and the lantern to blast the triangular space between the rafters and floor joists with spooky light. “Look!”

Jonas stuck his head into the opening and sneezed. “*Oh-migod!*”

Merry shoved him aside to peer between the upright studs. “Ohmigod! It’s a body!”

“N-n-not a body.” Noel’s teeth were making chattering noises like a scolding squirrel. “A s-sk-skeleton!”

They all talked at once, asking demanding questions for which none had answers. Then Jonas apparently decided it was time someone took charge, and, as the only male on the premises, he naturally assumed the responsibility. He said, “It’s been here a long time.”

Noel struck her forehead with the ham of her hand, knocking her headlamp askew. “Well-duh! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Who do you suppose it is—or was?” quavered Merry.

“Well—” by now Jonas’s tone exuded authority, “—we figured this floor belonged to kids and servants. Maybe this was the nursery and that’s the nanny.”

Noel cast a pitying glance at her sister. “Or maybe it’s the kids’ grandmother, or the stable boy, or the pastor, or a traveling salesman—”

“You needn’t be so snippy,” Merry said. “Anyway, it’s a problem for the police. Nothing to do with us.”

“Nothing,” returned Noel, “except that the police will declare this a crime scene and string yellow tape all over the place and we’ll never get this damned house gutted by eight a.m.!”

“Oh,” said Merry in her smallest Barbie doll voice.

“Oh,” echoed Jonas.

“Right.” Tears stung Noel’s eyes. Their father had worked for years to build the business, and now his daughters were set to lose it after just three months. People didn’t go out of their way to hire a pair of female losers who couldn’t fulfill a simple contract to tear out the insides of a house.

Then Jonas brightened. “I know! We’ll gather up the bones and dump them in the woods. Some hiker or hunter will find them and nobody’ll have a clue where they came from.”

Merry wailed, “But if anyone *does* find out, we’ll go to jail and have a record. And all for something we didn’t do.”

Noel stripped off a glove and nibbled on her thumbnail, thinking. At the moment she was less interested in adhering to the letter of a law than in paying Merry’s and her health insurance premiums, due next week.

“Hold on here,” she said. “Think about it. I broke down a wall I swear was as old as the house and not a patch job. Which means that it—the body—was put here when the house was built, over a hundred years ago.” Her confidence rising, she expanded her theory. “So whoever the skeleton belonged to either died from natural causes, or committed suicide, or was killed accidentally or on purpose.” She paused. “Those are the only ways, right?”

Wide-eyed and looking very young, Merry and Jonas nodded.

“So unless the person was murdered, there really wasn’t much of a crime. I mean in those days people took care of their own. Prepared the body for burial and everything. The way it’s stretched out on its back suggests it was put there after death. Maybe it was winter and the ground was too hard to dig, and they were waiting for spring to bury it. Or maybe they moved away and just forgot.”

“Yeah,” Jonas said. “Lots of people died in the olden days. Sometimes nobody even knew why. Like in a scourge or something.”

“Or from consumption,” contributed Merry. “They had awful diseases back then, too.”

Jonas bobbed his head, reminding Noel of a doggie in the rear window of a car. “My dad told me there were guys who died from a disease that made them go so crazy they’d bark like a dog.” His greenish-tan eyes brightened. “Maybe that’s where the term ‘barking mad’ came from!”

“Okay,” Noel said. “If it *was* murder, sure, the police ought to investigate. But say they do. What are they going to find out? If they test a bunch of possible relatives, they might eventually identify the person’s DNA, but that’s got to be expensive, and what good would it do? The murderer has to be dead, and so are any relatives of the deceased. As for genealogists—” She shrugged. “They can use the internet.”

Jonas said, “You’re right. There’d be a lot of stewing and excitement and delay, but in the end all for nothing. I say we take the bones out to the woods and let whatever happens to them, happen. You know, let nature do its thing.”

“Still—” Merry began.

Riding roughshod over her compliant sister, Noel said firmly, “Look at it this way. It’s our only chance to save our business reputation. Dad would’ve wanted us to carry on, and if it takes a little subterfuge, so be it. Look at it this way, Merry, *we* haven’t done anything wrong.”

Her twin looked down at her boot toes. “When you put it like that— Well...all right.”

Jonas bravely volunteered to collect the bones and dispose of them so the girls could keep on working.

Standing at the edge of the flooring, Noel peered at the skeleton. "From the relative width of the hips, I'd say it was an adult female."

"But she's so little," Merry said. "Barely five feet."

"People were smaller in those days. They didn't have vitamin pills, or salads in the winter. And lots of people just didn't get enough to eat."

"I'm glad it wasn't a child," Merry said, wiping away a tear. "If it was, I'd want to bury it."

"So would I," Noel said. "But then we might be guilty of something more than abandonment." She picked up a trash bag and handed it to Jonas. "Here. Use the pickup. The van's too heavily loaded for the timber road. Be sure no one sees you, and bring back the bag."

"Why?" demanded Merry with a delicate shudder.

"Not many folks around here use industrial strength bags. It might point an arrow in our direction."

Committed, Jonas ducked into the cramped space and made his way under the sloping rafters. He experienced a few queasy moments squatted beside the skeleton, but then he studied it with an investigator's eye. "There's no sign of clothing or wrapping, and I don't see any breakage like it had been struck with a blunt instrument. Of course a bullet or knife could've missed bone."

"Thank you for your grisly report and professional analysis, Doctor Postmortem," said Noel.

"Be nice," Merry snapped. "Unless *you* want the job!"

Gingerly Jonas picked up the bones, placed them in the bag and dragged it into the room. In slinging it over his shoulder, he stumbled, and Merry reached out to steady him.

"What would we do without you?" she said.

"Need help?" asked Noel, a little too sweetly.

As he adjusted his load, the thought crossed Jonas's mind that he probably looked a little like Santa with his pack. That made him think of Christmas goodies, and of the Halloween treats being gobbled up by the swarm of kids in town. "I'll pick us up some snacks," he said. "We're burning calories like crazy."

"Get some extra batteries for the radio, too," Noel said. "We may need them before the night's over."

The moon was bright enough to read the Callaghan Salvage logo emblazoned on the truck doors. Jonas decided to drive without lights until he got on the timber road east of the VIEW site. He didn't want to attract attention. He glanced at the bulging sack on the seat beside him and hoped someone would find the bones before the animals got to them. He knew what they were doing wasn't technically *right*, but their motives were pure enough, which ought to count for something.

As he neared Elmo's Gas-and-Go, his stomach rumbled. It seemed like a long time since he and the girls ate an early supper on the front steps of the old house. He'd just duck in and pick up a six-pack of root beer, some chips, beef jerky and a few candy bars before heading into the woods.

"You throwin' a Halloween party?" asked the pimply kid at the cash register. "Where's your costume? Soon's I get off work I'm goin' to a party. I'll be a vampire. You oughta see my cape and fake teeth! I'll scare the livin' bejeesus outta my girl."

"I'll bet you will," Jonas said dryly. He forked over most of the money in his wallet and grabbed his two bags. "Well, have fun and stay out of trouble."

"Can't do both." The kid's leer showed a lot of his own teeth. "Y'all take care yourself. Don't do nothin' I wouldn't."

Jonas hustled out to the pickup and flung open the passenger door, intending to toss his groceries on the floor. Instead he let out a yelp and squeezed the bags to his chest, crunching the chips. "What the hell? Who're you?"

A small black figure, its head concealed by a Batman mask complete with tall, pointy ears, peered down at him from the high seat. A tittering sound issued from the masked mouth. "Hey, Jonas, don't you recognize a neighbor?"

"Tobias! Why aren't you out trick-or-treating?"

"I was, 'til James and his buddies met up with some dumb girls. They went to the park to hang around 'til nine. That's when the downtown stores give out stuff."

Jonas frowned. Tobias was only eight, his brother James twelve. "They just leave you here alone?"

"Nah. I told 'em to go on. Said I'd hang around Elmo's and catch a ride downtown with somebody I knew."

"Still, James shouldn't have left you."

Tobias shrugged. "It's okay. He's got a cell phone and I've got Dad's. Our folks are at a party, but they'll be home by ten-thirty or so."

Jonas didn't like the arrangement. Elmo's was a good three blocks from the next open business, a diner. Between them lay a car dealership, the town museum, an apartment building, a thrift store and a couple of vacant lots.

"All right," he said. "I'll run you downtown, but then you stay where there's plenty of people, okay?" He shoved his bags of groceries into the boy's lap. "Hang onto these—"

Ohmigod!

He'd forgotten about the skeleton. Nearly invisible, the black bag of bones lay on the floor, under Tobias' feet.

The boy must have caught his glance for he said, "What're you going to do with all these old bones?"

Jonas slammed the door, rounded the pickup, climbed in and leaned back against the headrest to think. What *was* he going to do with the bones? Tobias was a smart, and talkative, little devil. If he heard about somebody finding them later, he'd remember.

Maybe if he told the kid the truth—

"Gonna bury 'em?" asked Tobias. "I can help. I got time."

Jonas considered that. But if he buried the bones and then somebody found them, he was pretty sure he and the girls would be in bigger trouble than he was in now. Still, Tobias might think they were cow bones—

Then the brat said, "It's a real neat skull. You don't want it, I'll take it. Put it on a shelf next to my mask." He laughed. "It'll look like the bat picked it clean!"

Controlling a shudder, Jonas made a snap decision. "Tobe, can you keep a secret? I mean *really* keep your mouth shut, for as long as you live, and maybe afterward?"

Tobias nodded his bat head. "You bet. I know plenty things folks don't know I know. I even know why old Jessup keeps a secret post office box."

Testing, Jonas said, "Okay, so why *does* he keep it?"

Batman giggled. "You want to know, look in his trash."

Mollified, Jonas said, "You'd get me in a whole peck of trouble if you tell *anybody*."

"So I won't."

"Okay." Jonas drew a deep breath. "I swiped the skeleton from my anatomy professor's office at the Community College."

"Hey, that's cool! I didn't know you went to college."

"Well, I just started. But I've been thinking about it ever since I met Merry. Anyhow," he continued, improvising on the fly, "seeing it's Halloween, I figured I'd just borrow Skinny Sam—that's what we call the skeleton—to scare some

folks and then return it later tonight. I know a guy who has keys to the place where the prof keeps Sam. But then he—the guy, that is—got called out of town, so I don't have any way of putting Sam back before class tomorrow. If the school finds out what I did, they'll flunk me out faster a vampire can draw blood, and Merry will think I'll never amount to anything. I really like her..." He gazed soulfully at Tobias. "You see my problem, pal?"

"Sure." The boy drew his thumb and forefinger across his mouth. "See? Zipped."

"Forever and ever?"

"You bet." Tobias wriggled in his seat, his feet rustling the plastic bag and causing the bones to scrape against themselves. "Now, what're you gonna do with Sam?"

"Well—" Jonas was really getting into his creative fiction. It was kind of fun. Maybe he should go to college to be a writer. "I figured I'd dump him in the woods and leave an anonymous message on the prof's answering machine telling him where to find the bones. That way he can get them right back and no harm done."

"Cool! I'll go with you. You can use my phone to call your prof. He can pick up Sam before he gets dirty."

"Well..." Jonas chewed his lower lip and considered his options. "I guess maybe you'd be better off with me than running loose downtown and eating enough candy to rot your teeth."

"Yeah, I sure don't want real false teeth. Mom makes us put all our soft candies in the freezer. Takes us months to get it away from her." Drawing back his cape, Tobias delved into a pillow case-size orange burlap sack and dangled a pound package of red-hot candies in front of Jonas. "Want some? James won't eat 'em. Says they burn like hell. You know anything about hell? Do folks really get roasted there—like at a

pig roast? You think somebody eats them then? You suppose that's what happened to Skinny Sam? I mean, since he didn't get buried in the ground like most people?"

Jonas preferred not to think about such things and pointed at his grocery sack. "No, but I'll take a beef jerky. I never worked this hard on Halloween before."

Five minutes later the pickup crawled, still without lights, along the rutted timber road normally used by hikers, household loggers and lovers. Enough moonlight showed through the half-bare branches that Jonas wasn't worried about running over a slow-moving possum or skunk.

"Last time I was out here at night was after my senior prom." He smiled to himself, remembering.

"Big night, huh? You score?"

"Watch it, kid. You're barely out of kindergarten!"

"Yeah. I even passed finger painting." Tobias rolled down his window and peered out. "We need some kind of marker. So your prof can find the skeleton."

"How about that fork up ahead?"

Tobias was leaning forward, his nose inches from the windshield. "Hey, I think I see fire off to the right! You think somebody torched the woods?"

Then Jonas saw it too, orange flickers among the dense trees, and hit the brake. "More likely a bonfire and beer bust. You stay put. I'll go take a look. Last thing I need is some drunk watching me dump the bones."

He was out of the truck and moving toward the fire a hundred yards away when a twig snapped behind him.

"Tobias! I told you—"

"You expect me to just sit still while you run into the teeth of danger?"

"*The teeth of danger—*"

"Yeah. Last night on TV this bunch of knights—"

“Shush, Sherlock,” Jonas whispered. “I hear something.”

“It’s like women singing,” Tobias whispered back, “only *not* singing.”

“They’re chanting. So it’s a bonfire.” A chill ran up Jonas’ backbone, and he grabbed Tobias. “Nobody’d hang around chanting in the middle of a fire. Maybe it’s a UFO abduction. Let’s get out of here.”

Tobias wriggled loose from his grip. “Hey, you never know about women. Leastways that’s what Dad says. Let’s go see what they’re up to.”

Jonas, wearing only jeans and a sweatshirt, shivered. “I think we should go back—”

Tobias, though, skulked ahead a couple of yards. “Hey, come look! It’s just a bunch of women in long white dresses waving their arms around a big kettle in the bonfire.”

Curiosity got the best of him and Jonas eased up behind the kid. “Well, holy hell.”

“Looks like it,” Tobias said, sounding happy. “Listen.”

The women’s chanting and swaying motions had stopped and there came the crooning sound of a lone female. “Diana, queen of night...O, Lady Moon...”

“Hey, man, you think it’s a covey of witches?”

Hair prickled the back of Jonas’s neck, and he grabbed Tobias by the scruff of his dark sweater. “I don’t know and I don’t want to! Whoever they are, it’s no place to leave the prof’s skeleton. We’re outta here.”

“Why? You afraid they’ll make soup out of Sam?”

Jonas hustled the protesting boy back to the truck and thrust him into the passenger seat. Tobias craned his head out the window for a last look as they backed down the bumpy dirt road as fast as the driver dared.

"Tobe, don't say anything to anybody about what we just saw. Folks might get to wondering what *we* were doing in the woods."

The kid made another zip-lip motion. "I don't rat out a partner."

At the stop sign before the main road, Jonas struck the steering wheel with the heel of his hand. "Well, hell! Now what'll we do?"

"We could put the bones in our freezer. I'll tell Mom it's my candy, and you can sneak them into the prof's office later."

"That's the worst idea I ever heard of."

Tobias was quiet for a moment. Then he said, "I know! Leave them in the cemetery."

Jonas shot upright in his seat. The kid was brilliant! Nobody would take the bones; anybody seeing them would run like hell. "Now you're talking. Want to go downtown now, or to the cemetery?"

The boy plucked at his bat sleeve and checked the luminous dial of his watch. "Plenty of time. I always wanted to go to the cemetery on Halloween, but James wouldn't. Tell the truth, I think he's chicken."

One thing was sure, Tobias was no chicken. The second Jonas pulled up to the Peace in the Valley cemetery across from the water tower, the kid was out of the truck and rattling the chain on the gate. Then, disgust in every line of his bat frame, he trotted back and climbed into the truck.

"Wouldn't you know," he said. "Damn thing's padlocked. I guess cemetery folks don't have any fun left in them."

"I reckon not." Jonas sighed, then brightened. "Hey, I got it! We'll leave them in the *old* cemetery. Nobody'll see us there."

Figuring no kids would be roaming the stretch of highway leading out of town, Jonas switched on the headlights and opened up the pickup. He'd made fifty when whirling blue lights and a siren pulled out of a side road.

He groaned and pulled onto the shoulder, visualizing himself behind bars the rest of his life for abducting a live kid and what was left of a dead woman. "Tobe, you got to help me out here."

Tobias ripped off his head mask, and, when the cop appeared in the open window, leaned across the seat and waved his bag of red hots at the cop. "Officer, these made me sick, so we're in a hurry to get me home before I puke all over Jonas' truck."

Eyeing them both, the cop held out his hand to Jonas. "License."

Silently he dug the license out of his wallet and passed it over. Lawyers on TV were always telling their clients not to say a word until he was sitting next to you. The cop walked back to his car.

"What's he doing?" whispered Tobias. "Checking your outstanding warrants?"

"Yeah. Especially those for kidnapping."

Ten minutes later—during which Tobias leaned out the truck door and gagged, talked to James on his cell phone and blitzed the cop with questions—they were allowed to go, a ticket for fifty in a forty mile zone burning inside Jonas's pocket.

"You want me to help pay for it?" Tobias asked. "Sometimes I get paid for things, like carrying old man Jessup's trash cans to the curb."

Jonas shook his head. "You helped me out back there. I owe you."

"Then we better take care of Sam. I was a little nervous with my feet sitting on him. What if that cop—"

"Tobias," said Jonas wearily, "please just shut up."

A gravel road led past Maple Hill, once the town cemetery, now relegated to the occasional burial of a very senior citizen. To Jonas's surprise a new metal gate barred the only lane into the graveyard. He was driving without lights again, so it was fortunate the full moon reflected off the gate or he'd have plowed right into it. A wire fence topped by barbed wire surrounded the rest of the cemetery.

"What do you think?" Tobias' voice was smaller than usual. "Are old graveyards haunted?"

"Nah. Old ghosts have better things to do."

"Like—"

"I dunno. Ask me when I'm a ghost."

Across the road stood an old farm house, dark except for the cold flicker of TV light in one of the downstairs windows.

"Think I'll park further down," Jonas said, backing onto the road. "If those folks looked out the window, they'd see the truck here." He drove past the house a couple of hundred yards to the first field entrance. "We can walk back and climb over the gate. No point tearing our clothes on the barb wire."

As soon as they'd dropped over the gate onto the cemetery grounds, Tobias said, "Where you going to put the bones?"

"Behind one of the big monuments, so they won't be seen from the road."

"How about that one?" The boy ran over to a big chunk of pinkish marble with "Matthews" chiseled on the front. "There's a kid named Matthews in my class. You think I'm walking on some of his relatives?"

"Could be." Jonas swung the bag off his shoulder. "Looks like as good a place as—"

“You heathen trespassers! Get outta there ’fore I blow your heads off!”

Electrified by a man’s shout, followed by a shotgun blast and the sound of hail on nearby gravestones, Jonas and Tobias galloped across the cemetery, leaping over smaller stones and ducking around monuments in the direction of the pickup. The bag of bones hit Jonas’s butt with every step. At the fence, Jonas tossed over the bag and then Tobias. Finally he mounted the weak wire squares of the fence and leapt over it. A barb caught his jeans, ripping denim and the flesh under it.

He limped to the truck, plunged into the cab, and without bothering to close the door, started the motor, made a bootleg turn and took off like a bat out of dusty hell.

Half a mile later, Tobias said, “Wow. We’re lucky that guy didn’t have a missile launcher.”

Jonas’s thigh stung and he felt as cross as a bear with a sore paw. “I’m not going to try and unload these damn bones again. I’ll take them to the police in the morning and tell the truth.”

“Why don’t you call your prof instead? Maybe he’ll be so glad to get Sam back, he won’t tell anybody.”

Hoping confession would get him out of trouble with the Almighty for his skullduggery tonight, Jonas said, “Tobe, I got a confession to make. I lied about Sam so as not to involve Merry and Noel. I’m not going to college—at least not yet. We found the skeleton tonight, walled up in the house the girls are tearing apart. A bulldozer’s going to flatten everything in the morning we don’t take out tonight. If we called the police, they’d have to investigate the scene, and the girls couldn’t meet their contract. That could cost them the company, and they need it to live on.”

“So let the bulldozer grind up the bones.”

“The operator sees a bone, we’re up sh—well, a creek. No way we wouldn’t have known about it.”

“But what if the skeleton was *murdered*?”

“It happened over a hundred years ago. The killer’s dead by now.”

“Well,” Tobias said stoutly, “then I think you did the right thing. Trying to help the girls.”

“I just hope the cops don’t put me in jail. I’ve got this closetphobia thing. Being shut up makes me crazy.” Jonas sighed. “I’ll run you downtown. I need to get back and help Merry take out some cabinets.”

“I can help. ’Long as I get downtown by nine.”

“Can you handle a battery screwdriver?”

“Sure. Mom says I been taking things apart since I was two.”

“Okay, then. You can take off the fancy doorknobs. I’ll do the heavy stuff.”

Noel wasn’t thrilled to see Tobias, even minus the bat mask and cape, muttering something about liability. Merry, however, grinned, popped a headlamp on him and said, “Two more hands! You can start in the dining room, Tobe. Just watch where you step. We don’t have time to dig you out of the basement.”

Both girls fell on the snacks Jonas had brought, though it was obvious Noel placed beef jerky somewhere below stir-fried possum on the food chain, saying it tasted like “fat smoke.” While they nibbled, he related the events of the evening.

When he’d finished, Noel heaved a weary sigh. “We can’t afford bail.”

At eight-forty-five, Tobias came into the kitchen dragging a trash bag with its load of porcelain knobs and oxidized brass

doorplates. Merry kissed him on the cheek and called him “a darling.”

“Want me to put this bag in the truck?” he asked.

“No, the van,” Jonas said. “I’m saving the truck bed for the big stuff.” He picked up a towel and wiped his sweaty face. “I’ll grab these cupboard doors and be right out.”

Once in the truck, Tobias asked to be let out by the drugstore. “James says maybe they’ll have outdated chocolates.”

Except for a few sleepy toddlers in strollers or parent arms, most of the kids swarming the three-block downtown were pre-teens and teenagers. Stores had closed for the night, but employees standing in front of the lighted ones were busy passing out the contents of boxes at their feet. Jonas braked in front of the drugstore mob long enough for Tobias to jump from the pickup with his cape, mask and treat bag bundled in his arms.

He leaned over to pull the door shut. “Good luck filling up the freezer.”

Jonas, Noel and Merry worked until midnight before taking another snack break. Jonas changed the batteries in the radio that had died an hour before, finishing in time to catch a local news break by a breathless reporter.

“Now, more on the exciting event that transpired in downtown Bleu Clay this Halloween evening. After sponsoring a day-long White Elephant sale featuring hard-to-sell items at ridiculously low prices, local merchants closed their stores and then gave away their remaining White Elephant goods to trick-or-treaters in costume. However, near Topp’s drugstore a small figure in a Batman costume reportedly took loose human bones from his big orange bag and put them in the sacks of eager youngsters! By the time the police discovered what was going on, the bat had flown. The hunt is on and anyone with knowledge of the perpetrator, or of his ghoulish sup-

Shadows in the Heart

plier, should contact the Bleu Clay police department at once!"

About C.J. Winters (Dame Tanzanite):

C. J. Winters was always more interested in tomorrow than yesterday. Then she discovered the American past offers a wealth of backgrounds for some of her offbeat story ideas. The discovery, combined with her fascination for the extra-normal, has resulted in ten published or soon-to-be published books in electronic formats and paperback. Time-travel romances include *Right Man*, *Wrong Time*; *Sleighride*; *Moon Night*; and *A Star in The Earth*. *Foredestined Summer*, *Fires of War and Winter*, *A Dazzling Spring*, and *Autumn in Cranky Otter* comprise a generational series of love stories. *Show-Me Murder* is a cozy mystery trio. Coming soon: *Mai's Ties*, a contemporary romance, and a paranormal anthology, *Deadknots*, co-authored with Jennifer DiCamillo. Visit C.J.'s website at <http://www.cjwinters.com/>.

PAPA

**{Woodcutter's Grim Series—Classic Tales of Horror Retold,
Book 1}**

by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)

Chapter 1

October 30th...

The apartment was silent as a tomb. The only sound came from somewhere else in the building. Crying. Even from a distance, the young girl's helpless sobbing triggered a pain so deep inside him, Randall Parker leaned heavily against the wall, closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to control it.

So many mistakes and memories, never far enough away. But would he want to forget?

His watch beeped to signal he had to leave for work in a few minutes or he'd be late.

He pushed himself into the bedroom where his wife still lay asleep. He sat beside her. Her form barely raised the covers. She'd become so slight these past few months.

Though she snuggled nearer to him when he bent to kiss her and hold her, she didn't respond to his whisper that he loved her and would see her later.

Unsmiling, he grabbed his worn leather jacket from the hook next to the front door and shrugged into it while walking down to his ten-year-old Chevy.

Amy wasn't getting any better, he acknowledged on the thirty-minute drive across the city to the multi-million dollar corporation he worked as head of security for. His wife had quit her job a month ago—just before the new school year began. He couldn't imagine Amy not teaching a passel of fresh-faced, elementary age children. She adored them; she truly believed them capable of magical feats.

Henry and Grace had loved her like a mother.

The unbidden reminder brought a sting of old tears to his eyes, but he pushed the agony away. She wouldn't get any better if he never did. All that mattered now was that Amy hadn't been right since his ex-wife and children died in that freak car accident six months earlier. Repeatedly, he'd asked himself who she blamed for that. Him? Or herself?

The question was only too valid. Since his divorce from Josephine—Joey—Amy had shouldered the weight of their actions like a cross she alone had to bear.

Sharing with Amy his devastation over the loss of his kids, Henry and Grace, hadn't been easy. For the most part, he kept his grief inside, where she couldn't see it. He'd probably never heal fully because of it, but he always managed to function no matter his circumstances. *Excel is more like it*, he heard Joey's bitter voice in his head and pushed that out ruthlessly, too.

Amy hadn't functioned, not since the divorce a year ago. But, since the accident, she rarely left the apartment, let alone their bed. Her depression had afflicted her physically as well.

She'd lost more weight than she could afford to. His wife had become little more than a ghost of the woman he'd fallen for so irrevocably.

I'm losing her. Rand's fingers gripped the steering wheel in a stranglehold. *When did I stop being able to meet all her needs?* He still remembered poignantly a time when Amy hadn't seemed to need anything but him. For a morally pure person like Amy, that was really saying something.

He'd lost track of the number of times he went over the options of how to help her and ultimately discarded all of them. He had to do something to bring her out of the dark place she'd locked herself inside. What was the key? While he couldn't be sure it'd have any effect, he'd taken a week-long vacation from work—starting tomorrow—as the starting point to getting her the help she needed.

Inside the locker room at work, he put on his uniform and gun holster. An hour into his shift, he was called down to the main desk to take a call.

"Rand Parker," he said, his voice a monotone.

"Rand, Simon Wiley."

The lawyer who'd handled Joey's end of the divorce, the custody battle and the execution of Rand's ex-wife's will. "What can I do for you, Mr. Wiley?" he asked coolly.

"You'll recall I mentioned that as part of what you've inherited from Josephine's will, you'll receive a cabin she owned up north?"

Frowning, Rand turned toward the window in the small office. He still couldn't fathom why Joey hadn't changed her will after their divorce. He'd expected her to do it the second she was served with the papers. He'd gotten a call from Simon Wiley shortly after the funeral, basically saying he'd inherited everything since their children had perished with her and

she'd wanted him to get everything when she first made the will after they married. Why hadn't she changed it?

Joey's own fortune, and the one she'd inherited upon her mother's death two years ago, had caused his personal worth to reach heights he never could have imagined even when he and Joey lived together as husband and wife. He'd suspected *her* worth was vast, of course, but he was a man who made his own way in the world. Even now, six months since he'd become filthy rich, he hadn't touched one red cent. For that reason, the mention of the cabin in the reading of the will hadn't done more than register in his consciousness.

Joey's parents owned the cabin in the northern part of Wisconsin, in a place called Woodcutter's Grim. He knew that much, and he knew her parents used it for "romantic get-aways" when Joey was little...before her father suffered that deadly accident with an axe in the woods behind the cabin.

He and Joey had never used the cabin after she inherited it. Their marriage had been in decline for so many years before the divorce, neither of them cared about getting counseling to repair the damage. A romantic getaway had been unimaginable.

"You can come by the law offices at any time to pick up the keys," Wiley offered in parting, and Rand hung up after a non-committal reply.

Wiley knew as well as he did that the mention of the cabin would bring back torment he didn't want to feel anymore. Joey had taken the children to the cabin last April for Easter vacation. The unfathomable car accident happened a quarter mile from Woodcutter's Grim. No one had been able to conclude what caused the car to flip and go over the bridge just outside the town's borders. The car had blown up on impact. In all the newspaper accounts of the tragedy, Woodcutter's Grim hadn't been mentioned. Rand only knew because

Joey told him where she was going, and Wiley related the details afterward.

Once Rand went back to work, the cabin continued to intrude on his thoughts. Amy didn't know where the accident had taken place. She knew nothing about Joey's inherited cabin in Woodcutter's Grim. Certainly, she didn't need to know the details of either. If he could get her to go there with him, get her to leave this place where so much damage had been done, maybe he could save her. Maybe he could bring the woman he loved back from the brink.

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Chapter 2

Amy heard the locks just before the apartment door opened. Tucking one last pin in the hair she'd pulled up into a loose twist, she went out to greet Rand. He'd become the only joy in her day. She knew he must question her feelings on that often lately. He was the only reason to drag herself from the sleep she craved above all else. Anything to shut her mind off. Each day, she showered and made herself presentable for when he got home at five-thirty. She couldn't lose him. Whenever she couldn't sleep, she worried he was searching for a reason to stay with her. How long before he couldn't find a single one?

He'd gone from the front door directly to the kitchen of their tiny, cheap apartment. She found him unloading a bag of the Italian food they used to love so much. For several months now, she couldn't remember what it felt like to be hungry, though she still got sick when she didn't eat before her stomach became too empty. Now, without even her paltry teacher's salary, Rand had been supporting them entirely on

just his slightly above average salary. It hadn't been easy for him to handle everything alone. This was the first time in a long time he'd splurged on take-out for them.

"What's the occasion?" she asked, her voice sounding rusty from disuse. She went up behind him and put her arms around him. Just being close to him, her cheek against his solid back muscles, made her feel safer. Tears came into her eyes the way they seemed to all the time of late.

Pivoting from the counter, he faced her with a broad smile that lit up his handsome, boyish face. The dimples bracketing his mouth softened all the parts she steeled against him. He pulled her into his arms.

Amy pressed her face to the wall of his chest. How she loved him! She had no right to. Dear God, she knew it and couldn't fight her own convictions. But he would never belong to her. Even in death, Joey owned him. Amy's unwilling thievery could never change that.

His beautiful mouth that fitted her own so perfectly touched hers, and she felt her tears spill over. The flicker of sorrow in his blue eyes made her withdraw emotionally and hold onto to him even harder, stealing the breath from each of them.

"It doesn't have to be an occasion for us to celebrate, sweetheart," he said on a sigh. "I love you. We should celebrate our love every day."

She loved how romantic he was. And she believed he did love her. His every glance, every touch filled her with his tender, steadfast love. It wasn't him she doubted. She simply couldn't put her trust in the fact that love was always right.

He bent slightly so she could see his eyes. "I do wanna talk to you about something, Amy. While we eat."

Tension filled her spine when he turned, slid dishes from the cupboards and then handed her a stack. Obediently, she

brought them into the dining room, worried he would...expect things. Things she might not be able to give him. When he told her last night he planned to take a week's vacation from work, she realized something would happen. Rand wanted to help her, but he didn't know she couldn't leave the apartment. If she left, would *they* be waiting?

Once all the food was on the table, he served her with forced enthusiasm. While he did, he told her about some cabin a friend from work owned. "It's up north. Maybe a four hour drive. I've got it all planned. I'll pack for us tonight. Run out first thing in the morning to stock up on food and supplies before we hit the road."

Just as she'd feared, his expectations were more than she could give him. She couldn't leave the apartment. She just couldn't. But she was equally certain Rand wouldn't allow her to hedge out of it this time.

He'd imagined their life together as two people so wildly in love, the rest of the world...the complications associated with them being together...ceased to matter. Never had she received more than a few tender moments to allow herself to consider their love in the ideal. Not when it'd been so wrong from the very beginning. She'd foolishly allowed herself to be the immoral, selfish "other" woman in Rand's life. In turn, Rand's feelings for her had given him the courage to do what he hadn't dared before. He left his wife and his miserably unhappy life—lit only by his children—for *her*. For a long time, she held onto her principles that they couldn't be together. But the very first time he touched her, kissed her so sweetly, she drowned in her own carefully hidden emotions for him. That sinful capitulation led to his divorce, the loss of his children—children who'd been her favorite students. Unwillingly but helplessly, she'd destroyed a family, all for a selfish desire for love.

No, love didn't right the wrongs. All her life, she'd imagined love and marriage as a fairy tale of innocent perfection. What she and Rand shared was anything but. The baggage that went with the love tore at her constantly. How could she blissfully ignore all the damage she'd caused to so many?

Over and over, Rand insisted that the problems between him and Joey existed in spades for too many years to count. He'd paid his dues, he said, persevering in his marriage because he believed it was the right thing to do for their children. Didn't he deserve happiness and love, too? He believed he'd found both of those. With her.

Amy's guilt for the divorce continued long after the deed was done, long after she and Rand married quietly. She loved him more because he filed for custody of his precious children, but she was afraid for the day he might win, might lose. *Not only did I take Joey's husband, but I would have taken her children, too...if not for the accident. One that wouldn't have happened if I'd had the strength to walk away from Rand before our relationship went too far to turn back.*

Rand reached across the small table to take her hand and urge her onto his lap. "Ah, sweetheart, you're so haunted all the time. It's killing me to see you like this every day. Even when we're just sitting down to dinner together, you're so lost in the past, I can't reach you half the time." He cradled her chin in one hand, his gaze gentle but frustrated. "We can't live like this, Amy. *You* didn't kill Joey or my kids."

She flinched violently at his unexpected words, and he embraced her more securely. "I mean, we didn't do anything wrong. I might not've left Joey for a year or two if I hadn't fallen for you and finally had the incentive to do what I wanted to for years, but I believe love can heal us. Love is right. Don't you believe our love is good?"

Oh, she didn't want to hurt him with the truth anymore. Nothing could ever feel more good and right than being in his arms. Yet only that *feeling* was right. The action, the means they used to get there...everything that happened since then was wrong. Beyond wrong. *Sinful. We sinned against God, as well as Joey and the children.*

"What we've done...it's not how I was raised, Rand. My parents...*I*...believe divorce is unacceptable except in the case of abuse."

His eyes shifted from hers in mild annoyance. He'd heard all this before. She was well aware she couldn't convince him this time either.

"So I was supposed to live forever in a loveless marriage? Until death do us part? Death would have been a relief. All because your parents think it's the moral thing to do."

"I'm not a mindless drone, Rand. I have my own convictions. I know right from wrong."

"And right is putting up and shutting up and being miserable just so we don't tread on someone's delicate sensibilities?"

She laid her cheek against his rough one, wanting to heal him even as she inflicted her own cuts of truth on him. "God would have helped you and Joey work out your problems if you'd asked Him, Rand."

He snorted. "You're right—we never did ask for help. But do you think I didn't spent *years* trying to make it work?"

Amy shook her head. "You spent years tolerating your misery because it was easier than confronting the cause of it. You never really tried to fix the problems. You believed you could never love her and refused to accept anything else."

He shook his head defensively at her. "No one and nothing could have made me love her. Counseling couldn't've produced that. You remember I dated her while in college? I

only did that because our parents wanted us to be together. I broke up with her knowing I couldn't love her, let alone spend a lifetime with her. But she got pregnant. I did the right thing then and I married her. It didn't produce love, Amy. I tried to make it work, but it was impossible. *You're* the only woman I can love."

She knew the story. Joey and Rand had been in each other's lives *all* their lives. Born to parents who'd been best friends forever. They'd joked often that their two kids would marry someday and have kids of their own. The expectation was there, even in the jesting.

"You felt enough for Joey to sleep with her and get her pregnant, Rand," Amy reminded quietly.

Somehow, his zinged expression shamed *her*. She'd never been able to back down from the convictions that ruled her life though. "Even if men can sleep with any woman any time, Rand, we're not animals. We should be able to control ourselves, especially when there's the potential for damage—the way there was between you and Joey, considering your background together and your families."

Rand's eyes uncharacteristically narrowed on her. "I guess you and me both have a problem with self-control, huh, sweetheart?"

His words were more than justifiable. Even telling herself she was bound to Rand and couldn't give herself emotional, sexually or otherwise to any other man but the one she loved couldn't release her from her share of the guilt.

"God designed marriage to last a lifetime. I can't understand how someone would never consider giving up on their children yet will give up on a spouse like it's simply not worth the effort to hold onto him or her. Then they divorce and call it no-fault when there *is* fault—the fault is that they've given up."

Rand sighed, looking down at her hand pressed to his chest. "This moralistic stuff doesn't fit your own actions, Amy. Can't you see that? I'm not saying it to condemn you. But your views are too damn hard. You don't take so much into account. Sometimes marriage doesn't work out. It's a shame, yeah. It's bad. We maybe didn't try hard enough or went into it for the wrong reasons. But we can admit we made a mistake. We can do everything in our power to reverse it. You don't really expect me to be a masochist and spend the rest of my life in misery just because it's against 'the ideal', do you? Isn't there any room for second chances in your view? For forgiveness and redemption?"

She couldn't answer him. She'd debated endlessly over the same questions. Her answers brought her back to the same response—you could justify sin until it came up roses, but you couldn't get rid of the stench it left behind. And sin wasn't an action you took once. It had consequences, side effects, life-changing implications. It continued to grow and flourish long after the deed was done.

"I love you, Amy. I never loved her. I know I made mistakes. In an ideal world, I wouldn't have, and I would've met you first. My kids would've been your kids."

The shaft of torment he caused made her stomach feel like it flipped over.

"You've always claimed I gave up everything with Joey just to selfishly get what I wanted with you. But you make it sound like that was an easy thing to do. The only easy thing I did was to stay in a rotten marriage for too damn long, just going along accepting that I'd never love anyone the way I wanted to and would never have the love I needed. I made a *hard* choice when I fell in love with you. I took the road filled with pain instead of pleasure. I believe it was worth it. Everything was worth it to be with you."

“How can you say that?” she cried, too shocked to check herself. “Joey and your children are dead! And it never would have happened if we hadn’t started this thing. Didn’t we deserve what happened? We can’t escape our sin. Sooner or later, it’ll come back to haunt us.” *Like it’s haunting me. In flesh and blood.*

Tears sprang from her eyes through her tirade as though crying had become her reaction to everything in life. She could see the wounds she’d given Rand through her weeping, wounds she’d torn open with her accusations, but she couldn’t escape the truth she saw in those very words. She fully expected him to push her away and take his leave of her permanently. How much more pain could he stand?

“Oh Rand, I love you beyond reason. I just wish I could accept everything that’s happened like you do. I can’t let myself believe it was worth it like the rest was just some unfortunate, random accident I didn’t have any hand in. I can’t get past the fact that I took away another woman’s husband. That I’m the reason you abandoned your children.”

“Abandoned?” he barked in obvious shock. “I didn’t abandon Henry and Grace. I fought for them. I never would’ve stopped. You know Joey’s parents were filthy rich. I barely had two dimes to rub together. She had the best lawyer in the city. She wasn’t gonna let me win easily.”

“It wasn’t about winning for her. She loved her children more than anything. She wouldn’t lose them and you.”

Disgust filled his expression. “You are so damn naïve, Amy. Hell, you’ve always been that way about her. Yeah, she was a pretty good mother. Maybe too good. She smothered them, wouldn’t let them function without her one inch away at all times. But that custody battle wasn’t all about her winning. She wanted to punish me because the spoiled little rich girl didn’t get what she wanted. She hated me for that.”

With those words, he eased her up and away, then stood to dish their special dinner back into the plastic containers. For once, he didn't clean up though. She could see he didn't have it in him tonight.

Her hollow stomach turned somersaults as she faced that he was right. She wasn't being fair to him. They'd all made mistakes, Joey included. She was the only one who couldn't let those mistakes go and get on with her life. Somehow doing that seemed even more unfair than the rest of it to her. Joey didn't have that choice about any of it. Why should she?

Amy leaned against the wall on the opposite side of the table, tracing the streaks of rain on the outside of the window.

All Rand wanted to do was love her. What crime was there in that? Deep down, she knew his love for her made everything completely right in his mind. The shadows in her own mind whispered, *How long will he continue to love you when all you do is push him away, wallow in the inescapable agony of the past and throw your mutual sins in his face?*

Even in death, Joey was winning. She was letting her win. She refused to believe Rand when he said Joey had turned his own children against him. She wanted to believe in Joey's innocence. Even now, she couldn't say why.

Because Joey made a pact with the devil so her children could come back and make sure Rand and I never forget what we've done to betray her.

Movement below drew Amy's gaze. She couldn't escape the sin. It would come back and haunt them. In flesh and blood.

The ghostly shapes below in the parking lot came closer. Pale, child-like figures. Nightmares. The reality she'd been seeing for months. Rand's children, back from the dead.

Amy's entire body trembled as she fought to break free of their hold on her. A scream rose in her throat when they

stopped below the window. “*Papa,*” they called in watery, unnatural voices carried on the wind of a storm blowing in. The storm that always blew in when they appeared. “*Papa, we’re lost. Help us.*”

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Chapter 3

Halloween, October 31st...

Rand pushed the last of the luggage and supplies into the trunk. He glanced back up at their window. Would Amy be ready to go? he wondered, still surprised about how she’d come to him last night, after their disastrous dinner and argument to say she wanted to go with him to the cabin. “Maybe we do need to get away from here,” were her words.

Despite them, she’d been wary that morning when he got up and started getting ready for their trip. A part of him fully anticipated her change of mind now that the time had arrived. Did she suffer from agoraphobia? Was that why she hadn’t emerged from their apartment for any reason in a full month?

Even more reason for me to talk her into coming away with me.

Slamming the trunk, he turned toward their window on the fourth floor again, half expecting her to be there with a look of terror on her delicately formed face. She wasn’t standing at the window though. He still had to face the probability she’d refuse to go.

Once inside the building, he climbed the stairs floor by floor, remembering their argument last night. Amy believed divorce was immoral. Only abuse qualified as a legitimate excuse for walking out. Abuse or death. Abuse, outside of ver-

bal, hadn't played a part in his and Joey's marriage or divorce. But Joey was dead. Certainly not a fact that made him happy then or now. But, by Amy's own standards, shouldn't they be free of immorality because of Joey's death? Apparently not. But it was time for her to forgive herself, him, and to stop believing their mistakes would come back to bite them in the butt. It was long past time for them to get on with their life together instead of futilely closeting themselves in their own little world as if they were prisoners of war.

He let himself into the apartment, estimating in his head how long it'd take to wake her, convince her, and then urge her to shower and get dressed. But she sat in the living room, her shoes next to her feet. Her gaze lifted to him, and he saw all the fears he expected her to harbor there. If he gave her half the chance, she'd argue against going.

Striding against the room to the sofa, he didn't dare speak a word. He knelt before her, slipped her shoes on her feet and tied the laces. When he rose, he drew her up with him to ease her into a reassuring embrace. "You won't regret this, sweetheart. This time away..." He urged her chin up so he could see her heart-breaking pale gray eyes, fringed thickly with exotic lashes. He would have had to be blind not to see the sheer terror in those eyes. "We're gonna find a way to put the past behind us, Amy. We can't go on like this. You know that as well as I do."

"What if I can't, Rand?"

She'd washed her strawberry blond hair and pulled it back and up in that wispy, messy twist that made him feel vulnerable and protective of her. "I don't have all the answers, Amy. All I've ever known is that I love you and I can't live without you. If you feel the same about me, we can make it work."

She hugged him hard, murmuring, "I do. I love you more than anything. I couldn't survive if you left me."

And he believed that. He was at a crossroads between knowing he couldn't continue on the way they had been and believing firmly he couldn't survive without her either.

When he drew back slightly, he saw the adorably gorgeous woman he'd fallen for almost at first sight. Cradling her face in his hands, he bent to kiss her. Her generous response almost made him lose control. It'd been a long time since her sensually slanted eyes turned that smoky color of passion, since her mouth followed her heart to give him pleasure and give in to her own mutual hunger for him. When they made love now, the frequency was there but desperation tainted everything. She seemed even needier and more unwilling to let him go than usual during their lovemaking last night and this morning. If they didn't go now, though, she wouldn't go at all. Maybe that was her plan, he conceded.

He broke away and snagged her coat from its peg near the door. As soon as he helped her into it, he urged her to the door, out, and then locked up after them. At the base of the steps, she clung to his arm when he put it around her. He quickly became aware she trembled against him. The weather had gotten colder, seemingly overnight, with tiny flakes of icy snow drifting lazily on the wind left over from last night's storm. But they weren't even outside yet.

When he glanced down at her, he saw the reason for her shaking. Fear tightened her almost colorless face.

"What's the matter, Amy? Are you sick? Did you eat breakfast?" He knew when her blood sugar plummeted because she'd let her stomach get too empty, she turned white, shivery and sometimes even fainted. Something sweet seemed to be the thing that brought it back up the fastest.

She didn't speak until he twirled her toward him fully and put his face right before her unfocused gaze. "Amy, tell me what's wrong. You're scaring me. Do you need candy?"

Her lips moved but, for a long minute, no words issued from them. He stroked her face, trying to get her attention on him.

"They'll come," she whispered. "They'll come and beg you to help them, Rand. Beg you to come find them... because they're lost. Because their mother sent them back."

"What? Who do you mean?" he asked in confusion.

His entire body stiffened when she murmured the names of his two children taken from him, from this world, six endless months ago. Was she delirious? Did she need a sugar fix? Or was the one fear he never let himself consider for longer than a second happening before his very eyes? Her fear of being outside had created paranoid delusions in her mind that leaving the apartment had triggered.

He had to help her. Right now, the only way he could think of to do that was to get her away from the place she chained herself to. "We need to go, Amy." He put his arm around her back and led her to the bottom floor.

"Are you hungry?" he asked again as they approached the exit to the parking lot.

She merely shook her head, her eyes still unfocused and far away. They couldn't stop now. He had candy bars in the glove box. Once she ate one, she'd be fine, he told himself.

He all but carried her out to the car. By the time they reached the passenger's side, her breathing had become dangerously erratic. She surprised him when she had the presence of mind to cast a glance of trepidation around the parking lot, like she felt certain someone or something that terrified her would appear.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he encouraged, opening the door. He saw something on the seat that he swore hadn’t been there when he got back from stocking up on supplies. A white powder sat in a small pile on the passenger’s seat. He reached inside and brushed it as best as he could off the cloth seats before he helped her inside and closed the door. Some of the granules clung to his damp palm. Frowning, he lifted it to his nose and sniffed. No smell, but the tentative touch of his tongue to it brought the taste of sugar.

Just before he started around the front of the car, he heard her push the lock on her side down. She still scanned the parking lot fearfully when he got in and deliberately locked his own door to give her a sense of security. Did she expect some creature to pop up in the window growling menacingly? Her expression implied she did expect it.

He pulled one of the candy bars out of the glove box and put it on her lap.

“I’m okay,” she told him softly. “Let’s just go.”

“Why don’t you try to sleep. It’s a long drive to the cabin.”

Until they left the city limits behind, she didn’t relax one bit. He concluded then that maybe she’d be all right on this trip toward their new beginning.

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Chapter 4

Rand picked up the scrap of paper Joey’s lawyer had scrawled the directions to the cabin on. Since Woodcutter’s Grim wasn’t listed on any maps, this was all he had to go by. He traced their current location based on the directions, then

glanced at Amy, finally asleep. They had another hour or so to go.

He wondered about the town. Unincorporated, no doubt, but even then most state maps included them. Why wasn't this one worth mentioning? When Rand had asked Wiley yesterday about the cabin and how Joey's family got interested in buying it, the lawyer told him it'd been inherited from generation to generation, but he couldn't remember who'd first taken possession of it. It'd been many years before. "I've heard it's quite picturesque and quaint," Wiley offered. "Despite a few misfortunes, of course. No point in making any of it more than mere coincidence though. Josephine's mother loved painting out there. Oh, not painting in the traditional sense, but she said she felt most inspired there. Claimed to fall under the spell of her artist-muse only at the cabin. You may see a few of the paintings still there."

Rand had tired of the old guy's nervous babbling, took the keys and left the law offices. He knew enough about Joey's father's accident and the one that'd happened to his own family just outside the town to know they had to be just coincidences. If there were more misfortunes than that, well, he'd never been the type to jump to superstitious conclusions.

Beside him, Amy shifted toward him and his gaze left the road for her once more. Her smooth, heart-shaped face made an invisible hand squeeze his heart until he thought he'd scream for mercy. She was so young and pure. *Irresistible when I met her. How could she not be? She loved kids—she glowed around them like an angel, and they worshipped her. Her face looked just like this then...before she got so caught up in punishing both of us for falling in love. Why can't love right all the wrongs? How can it be wrong to love Amy?*

Rand harbored his own guilt and shame for many things. He just couldn't see the point in living in it. Couldn't see

beating himself up endlessly until he no longer recognized his own face in the mirror.

If I can just convince her there is mercy, there is forgiveness, maybe we'll be restored.

He'd suppressed his attraction to Amy for a long time while his son was her student. When Gracie became Miss Pierce's pet student a few years later, Rand started attending school functions without his wife. At first he told himself he'd just gotten tired of fighting with Joey before, during and after. But deep down he knew it was because it gave him time to be alone with the beautiful teacher.

The slightest excuse for visiting the school—Amy's classroom—would do for him. Even now, he cringed at how he used his children as an excuse just to catch a glimpse of Amy. Just to hear her soft, beguiling voice. How her adoring gaze lifted shyly from his children to him.

He lost sleep. His every thought centered on her. For the first time, he'd been so captivated by the *innocence* of a woman, he had no other option but pursuit.

One day, he'd asked his kids to wait outside the classroom and he told Amy the truth. Hearing out loud what they both tried so hard to hide shocked her. She protested almost incoherently. When he touched her, she fled with the words, "This can never happen, Rand...Mr. Parker!" thrown hastily behind.

His heart became set on her. No one else could ever do for him. Certainly not his wife. He grew colder toward Joey every day. For six miserable months, he cornered Amy at every turn. Looking back on it, he supposed she could have reported him as a stalker if she hadn't longed to see him as much as he did her. He followed her all over the city every day, as often as he could.

Toward the end, just after he left Joey and served her with divorce papers, Amy started dating another man. Insanely jealous, Rand followed her on those dates, too, desperate to convince himself she dated just to forget him.

Watching her send the poor schmuck away one night without so much as a peck on the cheek, he knocked on her door. She called him "Mr. Parker" again, to create a distance that didn't exist between them. Foolishly, she asked him what he was doing there when she knew good and well his intentions. Amy wasn't a modern day woman at all. Even when she wanted to sound off-hand, she couldn't manage it. She finally just walked away, leaving her door open. The clear, silent invitation surprised and encouraged him. He went inside and closed the door behind him. She'd been on the other side of the living room, looking too nervous to even hide the fact. He targeted her in a heartbeat. He could see she wanted to run again, but she didn't. Not this night. This night ended the running.

"I left Joey. I served her with divorce papers this morning." He'd waited this long to come to Amy with the news. Much as he wanted to start forever with the love of his life immediately, it was only right that Joey hear it first.

Amy's shocked, horrified expression didn't exactly live up to the hopes he had of her throwing her arms around him and exclaiming, "Finally! We can be together now."

"I told you, Amy, I wanna be the one you're with. Always. I think about you every second. I've never felt this way for any woman before. I never will again."

"Of course you have!" she insisted indignantly. "You felt it with your wife."

Rand shook his head. "You're the only woman I've ever loved."

If he thought she was horrified before, these words catapulted her into a whole new realm of shock. She burst into raging tears, begging him to go and not say any more. Not to mean what he implied.

When he slid closer, she shook her head and pushed him away so he couldn't comfort her the way he wanted to. "You're married. You'll always be married to her in my eyes. I don't believe in divorce. I can't be with someone who's been divorced."

This was one he hadn't heard before. "Why not?" he asked, sure she was joking.

"God doesn't want divorce. It's not the way He designed things to be."

Rand took an emotional step back. "Look around you, sweetheart. There's not much left that *is* how God designed it."

She continued to shake her head at him, her cheeks glistening with tears he couldn't comprehend. He'd spent many a night himself soul-searching, not always dry-eyed, but why would this upset Amy so much?

"I'm confused," she murmured. "I can't have these feelings."

"Feelings for me?"

She shook off his hopeful tone with a wild toss of her head. "I told Mark I couldn't see him anymore. I can't... I just can't..."

She looked up at him so helplessly, he couldn't prevent himself from taking the steps to hold her.

"I can't sin this way," she moaned when he touched her. Frantically, she darted to the other side of the room.

Rand rubbed a hand of frustration over his jaw. "Two people falling in love isn't sin, Amy. It's the only thing worth anything in this world."

"It's not right. You can't abandon your marriage just because I caught your eye. Your poor children. I can't be...the wicked stepmother. What about your wife? How can you take her children away when you've already devastated her by leaving her?"

It was time for some truth to wake her up about the mutual problems that caused his and Joey's marriage to fail. "She's a closet drinker. Has been for years, but she hides it so well, she never leaves any evidence. She's a good mother. I know she'd never hurt Henry and Grace, but I can't let it continue. It's what happens to a person who's always gotten everything they wanted and never known what it's truly like to need something they can't have. She creates problems that don't really exist until she starts them, okay? But she's not my problem anymore. I won't trust her with my kids, though, especially since she's spent years trying to turn them both against me."

"Why would she do that?"

"Jealousy."

"Will she let you have them, Rand?"

He shook his head. "I doubt it, but I won't abandon them."

He'd quieted her with his words, but she pulled away again once he reached toward her. His instincts told him not to let her go so easily this time. When he gently eased her back and cradled her face between his hands, his tenacity was rewarded. He almost expected her to scream and beat against him to stop it, but instead every ounce of fight went out of her at his kiss. Her knees buckled, and he held on to her even tighter.

At twenty-five, Amy had known nothing of passion. She'd devoted herself to her parents' morals, her schooling and then teaching and nurturing the children she adored. If his

kisses put her in a defenseless trance, his lovemaking mesmerized her completely. That night, they went too far to turn back.

She's never stopped believing our sin will come back to avenge Joey. Not since that night. And his love for her had metastasized beyond comprehension. All he wanted was a fresh start—one without guilt or pain. He didn't want to pay for falling in love forever, like they'd committed a crime instead of given their hearts to each other.

Rand reached over and brushed Amy's cheek in a butterfly caress. "I'm gonna prove to you all that we had to do to be together was worth it," he whispered in the confines of the car. "It's time our happily-ever-after started."

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Chapter 5

Through half-closed eyes, she saw Rand's smile. This wasn't the forced kind he gave her so often in an effort to cheer her up. This was genuine, as genuine as the ones they shared on their unspeakably happy honeymoon.

She'd lived under a shroud of terror and shame for so long, she could barely remember her life without them. Those emotions seemed far away now. They weren't in the city, in the home they'd made. They were far from the ghostly yet corporeal figures and thin voices of Rand's children resurrected to a mockery of life. They'd left behind the constant reminder of sin.

After the ghost images calling for their papa last night, Amy realized getting out of the city might be her only escape. A month ago, she convinced herself she'd be safe if she never left their apartment. She quit her beloved job. Stepping out-

side the apartment again, she'd been convinced the horrors would be there. Without a last glimpse of them, her mind embraced peace.

Maybe far away from the place it all happened, I can convince myself it was an illusion—a manifestation of my crushing guilt. Maybe. Please, God.

"What are you smiling about?" she asked sleepily.

He reached over and enclosed her hand in his comfortably rough one. "Just remembering our honeymoon."

Without a center console, Amy easily scooted closer to him and threaded both her arms through his. For the first time, she let herself recall that utopia time they had together. Not once during their honeymoon had she felt like they didn't deserve it. When they got back...

She laid her head on his shoulder, hiding her face from him slightly to prevent him from reading the truth in her expression. Whenever she remembered their honeymoon, she recalled her mother's words when they returned.

While her parents didn't approve of her relationship with a divorced man, they were firm believers in loving the sinner while hating the sin. They embraced Rand instead of ostracizing both of them, the way she'd anguished they would. Only her parents attended their wedding since Joey had easily gotten a judge to refuse Rand all but the barest of visitation rights during the custody battle. After the simple ceremony in front of the judge, Amy's parents gave them an all-expenses-paid week in Italy. The gift meant as much to her as hearing her parents say "You're free from guilt" would. Correspondingly, she gave her love to Rand completely during those short days.

The guilt returned in spades the very day they returned home and her mother burst her fragile bubble with the careless words, "We can't escape our sins forever, darling. Sooner or later they come back to haunt us. There's no escaping it."

Rand eased her closer to him. "You were so beautiful and open on our honeymoon. I'd never seen you happier, before or after."

Amy sighed. "I'd never been happier." She slipped her fingers into his well-trimmed blond hair, breathing in his cologne as she remembered his happiness then, too.

"Maybe this trip can be like that one," he suggested. "Maybe we can forget the past enough to wipe the slate clean."

She wanted that with him more than anything. To feel as free as they had with each other on their honeymoon. How she wanted to find the courage to accept her life and her own decisions, poor as some of them had been. Maybe then she wouldn't experience overwhelming shame each time she thought of the life growing inside her. She could be happy about it.

Rand wanted the words "I love you" from her desperately, but he had to know those three tiny words were attached to heavy baggage. So many wishes for a reality that might not even exist.

I love you. If only... I love you...but it's not right. It won't last. It can't because our sins always come back to haunt us. There's no escape. Love can't mend the wrongs and bring back the dead, let alone revise or erase time, decisions and the lingering wounds that won't heal.

In her case, everything that happened between her and Rand became one more link in the chain she'd wear around her neck for all eternity. Already it felt too heavy to bear.

Seeming to sense her withdrawing into her torment again, Rand squeezed her thigh. "Woodcutter's Grim shouldn't be too far away now. Should we stop here in Spirit Falls for gas and lunch? Or wait until we get there?"

Her stomach rumbled hollowly, but she just wanted to get where they were going. “Can we make it?” She indicated the fuel gauge with the nod of her head.

“No problem.”

“Then let’s wait for our vacation to officially begin.”

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Chapter 6

They’d been on the forest-shrouded road Joey’s lawyer put Rand on for more than an hour after he’d believed they were almost there. He assumed then they were close enough to forego a fuel fill-up and lunch for a little while.

Rand didn’t have the slightest clue where they were anymore, nor could he remember seeing any road signs since they left Spirit Falls. Only now did he acknowledge they should have stopped an hour ago when he asked Amy what she preferred. The gas gauge was at a quarter tank. While he knew some roads in Wisconsin seemed to go on forever without a break or change in the scenery, this stretch beat them all.

He suddenly felt like they were the last two people in the world. They hadn’t passed any other cars since they left the last town.

As if thinking the same thing he was, Amy turned to him. “Where are we?”

He shook his head, not wanting to alarm her. “Not sure. You ever been up this way before?”

“No. Have you?”

“Never. According to the directions I have, we should’ve been there by now.”

Her arched brows drew together on a perplexed look. She reached into the glove box for the map.

"It's not on there," he warned, "but since you got it out, can you see where we should be an hour or so northwest of Spirit Falls?"

For a minute, she fell silent while studying the map. When she spoke again, she sounded frustrated. "We should have reached another town long ago," she concluded. "You're sure it's actually been an hour since we left that last town?"

"Yeah. It had to have been." But a glance at his watch told him it wasn't much later since they'd left Spirit Falls. About twelve-thirty now and about twelve-thirty then couldn't be right. Maybe he was anxious, that was all, turning minutes into hours.

As if her stomach responded to his lunch-time estimations, a vicious rumble filled the car.

Rand grinned. "Maybe we should break out those candy bars."

Amy's cheeks colored, but she smiled and handed him one from the glove box. She tore into hers like she couldn't wait another second.

"How long have these been in here?" she asked while chewing her first bite.

"I just bought 'em today." But she was right, he realized, tearing off a good chunk of his own with his teeth. The thing didn't even taste stale—it simply had no taste at all. He could've been eating air. The experience wasn't exactly appetizing, but they both finished the candy anyway. Soon, they'd be in a restaurant that hopefully served food bursting with flavor.

Rand grimaced at the unending road. Maybe. Maybe not.

"What's that?" Amy asked, leaning forward.

He didn't see what she meant at first, but once they crossed a bridge and got closer, the ill-kept sign hidden in an overgrown cluster of pine trees emerged. "Welcome to

Woodcutter's Grim—a truly magical place” it read. The population below, in a smaller font, had faded to the point that only one number was legible. “Population 2.”

Rand got a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach when he realized the bridge they'd crossed over a minute ago was the one Joey's car went off and exploded when it hit the gully below. *Talk about walking over your own grave.*

He turned his face to the driver's side window, wishing he didn't feel the need to look. To examine the place his childrens' bodies...

No, not now. We came here to forget.

“Well, we didn't make great time,” he murmured, inspiring Amy to glance at her watch. He did the same. His still read 12:28.

They passed a church on the way into town. An elaborate wood sign in front of it announced that Judgment Day had come—were they ready?

The few businesses on what Rand supposed had to be the main drag looked deserted. Only a few antique cars were parked in front of the restaurant and a tiny grocery store badly in need of a new coat of paint. No people stood on the streets, walked them, or even loitered inside the buildings from what he could see.

“No one's here,” Amy said.

She couldn't be right, but there was no denying the mutual observation had merit.

“It's a weekend,” she went on. “Maybe they're all...visiting out of town or something.”

Rand chuckled at that. “A mass exodus? On Halloween? Did all the trick-or-treaters skip town for better digs?”

She smiled at his teasing, but he could see her tension rising in it. Not seeing a soul anywhere in the area unnerved him almost as much as the unnatural silence around them did.

He steered ahead to an ancient Victorian house that'd been converted to an eatery. A quaint sign on the porch read "The Gingerbread House."

"Here we go," he said, easing into a space in front of the brown, white and pink confection of a building. "We should be able to find some home-cooked food here."

Three other cars were parked in front of the restaurant. When he unfolded his stiff body from his Chevy and stood for the first time in hours, Rand noticed the dust and rust competing on each vehicle nearby. How long had they been parked there? Did the old farts in this town bring out their antiques just in time for Halloween? Most collectors put more time into upkeep.

Not wanting to panic Amy, he didn't mention it, instead going to help her out. A disturbed expression filled her face as she looked around. The weather had been chilly all day. Out here, it seemed worse. He reached inside for the coat she'd shed during the ride.

Despite the sheer number of trees that'd led them into town, there were very few here, and no green grass he could see either. Once more, the unnatural silence came to him. Amy would pick up on it, too, if he didn't say something to break it. "We'll grab lunch, fuel up and head out to the cabin." His own voice didn't sound any more natural, and Amy seemed aware of it.

"I didn't see a gas station."

"Probably off this main drag somewhere," he assured her, though it struck him as odd that there wouldn't be one here. This was the optimal place for someone to make good money off those who passed through town, stopping only for fuel and snacks.

She nodded, and he noticed how pale she'd become, almost as badly as just before they left the apartment. The lack of color in her face made her eyes look sunken and hollow.

"You okay?" he asked.

"I'm hungry."

"Come on." He put a loose arm around her shoulders, then led her to the porch of the restaurant. In the dirty glass door hung a sign, politely informing those interested that they were open.

A soft crunch beneath his boot made him glance down. Dozens of piles of the white powder he'd found on Amy's seat earlier littered the steps, the porch, the window sills. Sugar again? Salt? Ancient bird shit? Rand wasn't sure, but he wanted to know. Crouching on the porch, he wet a finger and captured a bit of it. The granules looked the same as before. He sniffed and tasted it.

He glanced up to see Amy staring at him, her mouth open, her breathing ragged. "Sugar," she uttered the same way air leaving a tire would.

"You've seen this before?"

"Rand, let's go," she begged suddenly.

He straightened. *A mass exodus on Halloween. All the trick-or-treaters fled town, leaving their sugar behind them...*

Though he knew he was making Amy panic, he gazed around the streets from the view of the restaurant porch. What were the sugar piles? And why the hell was it so ungodly quiet here?

We're the only two people here. Amy's gonna freak out if I mention the fact though.

He turned and reached out for the door, not surprised when he met resistance. Despite the welcoming sign, saying the restaurant was open and the hours of operations matched the current time, his gut feeling the instant he parked had

been that it was deserted just like all the others on the streets they passed.

Ducking down, he peered into the filthy, oversized windows on both sides of the door. While he'd never had official training beyond that required for security supervision, he instinctively sensed when something bad was about to or had happened. He didn't like what he saw inside the gloom beyond. Petrified scraps of food, left uncleared from the tables. No, this place hadn't been open for business in long years.

The sudden, sharp peal of a church bell brought Rand to his full height. Amy cried out in alarm, jumping into his arms.

This sound should have relieved him. It implied the opposite of the very conclusion he'd reached. The church bell told him they hadn't come into a ghost town on vacation.

Even so, even with the sound of life, Rand was sure they were alone in Woodcutter's Grim. He knew it on a visceral level that made his gut twist defensively.

If they were all alone, who was ringing the church bell? If they weren't alone, what did the church bell announce?

Judgment Day—are you ready?

"Rand," Amy begged, fearfully clutching at him.

Okay, he was freaked out, too, but he needed to figure out what'd happened in this place. "Amy, I want you to get back in the car and stay there. Lock the doors if you want. I wanna see if somebody else is here. Over at the church."

She shook her head at him.

"I won't be long."

"No! Rand, please."

"Everything's okay..."

"No it's not. Don't go. Let's..." She shook her head again, tears filling her eyes. "They followed us here. They're here. We can't stay. Please, let's just go."

“Who followed us?” he demanded. What the hell was she talking about?

“It’s Judgment Day.”

Her irrational behavior before they left their apartment building was back, and he watched her eyes become unfocused and wild.

“Everything’s all right, Amy. Stay in the car. I’ll check it out and come right back.”

She shook her head frantically at him again.

“I have to check this out. I know you’re afraid, but I need to do this. Either stay in the car or come with me.”

When she said nothing, clinging desperately to his arm, Rand didn’t wait for her to start looking around for the creature she expected to pop out at her. He urged her down the stairs and onto the sidewalk.

While he didn’t care to encourage her illogical fear, he couldn’t deny something had happened in this place. He knew rationally that Joey had been here six months ago—Woodcutter’s Grim couldn’t have been deserted then. So where was everybody today? He told himself if he saw only one person, he’d give up and get Amy to the cabin, where he could calm her down.

They passed businesses on the way toward the church, and Rand ducked this way and that, trying to catch a sign of life in any of them. All were deserted with evidence that they’d once been inhabited with people who fled quickly. He saw the little piles of sugar everywhere.

The mini-mart had stood empty for years, too. Shelves that once held supplies and groceries had been attacked by rats and animals. Briefly, he was glad he’d stocked up on groceries before they left the city. Nowhere did he see an indication of Halloween—not even specials on sweets. Back in the city, the

kids would already be getting antsy about putting on their costumes and looting the neighborhoods of all candy.

This is a place of childhood horror, not holiday joy, Rand concluded grimly. Amy's hold on him grew tighter, and he glanced down at her. Her mouth was open wide as she stared at the sky. Rand followed her gaze and swore when he saw the dark clouds accumulating and rolling over their heads. He'd seen storm fronts before, but he'd never seen one travel this fast before. Blackness unfurled like a rug across the sky in seconds, almost completely obscuring the sun that'd made every attempt to push out the chill a few minutes before.

Get this done. Quick.

But he returned his attention back to the church and frowned again. It wasn't any closer. They'd walked three blocks toward it, but he could still see it in the distance—what appeared to him to be the *same* distance as when he stood on the porch of The Gingerbread House. Had he imagined it was only four or five blocks away?

The breath of wind turned into a full-force gale. Fat sheets of rain dropped from the pitch-black sky. His shock prevented him from taking in anything except the storm and the church, but Amy's screams rode over the wail of the gusts slamming past them. She frantically pulled him back toward the car. His protective instincts kicked in then, and he took a firm hold of her hand and ran with her.

Once he made sure she was inside the car, he dove around to the other side. She reached over and pounded down the lock the instant he slammed the door shut after him.

For a second, they sat gasping for breath. "Let's go, Rand," she moaned as soon as she was able. "Please, it's not safe here."

The storm had come straight out of nowhere. He glanced anxiously back at the church and had to tamp down on his

shock. Much as he wanted to deny it for logic's sake, he acknowledged now that he wasn't crazy. Through the bursts of sky-splitting lightning, he saw the church five blocks away—closer from the car than when they stood a mere two blocks from it.

“Rand!”

He braced his back on the seat, rising to get the car keys from the front pocket of his jeans. When he came down again, he felt something beneath him. His hand was wet from the rain, but even in the growing darkness, he knew what it was he felt under him. Another pile of sugar—one that hadn't been here before. What the hell?

Amy sobbed in frustration at his lack of action. He jammed the key in the ignition and started the car, flipping on the headlights with his other hand.

He'd all but memorized the directions from this street out to the cabin. When he backed out from his spot in front of the restaurant, he went in the opposite direction they entered town in.

“You're going the wrong way,” Amy cried out. “We need to leave!”

Leave? “What about the cabin?”

“We can't stay here.”

He hadn't expected her reaction. Yeah, a lot of weird shit was happening here, but, first and foremost, they needed to keep their heads. It didn't make sense for them to flee town and forego their vacation at the cabin simply because people had stayed home, maybe expecting the sudden storm.

“Amy, we can't let a thunderstorm and a seemingly empty town make us panic. You're freaking out. Everything'll look different in the morning.”

He knew if they went home to their apartment now, she'd never get any better. They needed this.

“Besides, we can’t leave until we find a gas station.” The fuel gauge was nearly on empty. They could go past that but not by much.

He took a left turn onto the road that’d lead them straight out to the cabin after two or three miles. They had enough gas to get there and come back to fill up on their way out of town at the end of the week. The compelling fact even Amy couldn’t deny was that they couldn’t leave without getting gas.

“We’ll be okay,” he promised. “Trust me.”

She didn’t respond. She stared straight ahead with that glassy look in her eyes. Her wet hair was plastered around her face.

Before long, the claustrophobically dense woods closed in again on both sides of the road, obscuring the desolate town from their view. When at least five minutes had passed with no sign of any inhabitation, his tension vibrated to life again. The rain came down so thickly, his wipers did him no good. He told himself he didn’t need to worry when the cabin didn’t come into sight—after all, he drove slow enough to cause a major delay. But what had to be another five minutes passed. Then another and another. He glanced at his watch. The darkness prevented him from seeing the numbers.

“Can you push the light button on my watch and tell me what time it is?” he asked, holding his right arm with the digital watch on it out to Amy.

Sniffing, she did as he asked, but for another endless minute she didn’t say anything. She kept peering at it, lifting her own watch and shining the light from his on that one, too.

“What is it?”

“It’s still 12:28. Both of our watches stopped.”

They must have stopped somewhere outside of Spirit Falls, Rand reasoned. But it didn’t seem possible to him. His

watch had been a Christmas watch three years ago from Joey's parents—the best that money could buy. It'd proved to be utterly trustworthy in that time, even when he played shark and Gracie “drown-did” the shark in her bath water by holding his watch underwater for a minute. Amy's was a less expensive wind-up, but she'd had it since she graduated college. It hadn't failed her once in that time. How could both watches stop at exactly the same minute?

Too damn many strange things were happening. He hated it when he couldn't solve a mystery, even one not worth trying to figure out.

The unverified minutes ticked by, and the cabin still didn't come into sight. He began to wonder if they'd passed it, but Wiley said it was off on the left and he couldn't miss it.

His teeth clenched, Rand tried to estimate the time. Logically, it couldn't have been any later than two in the afternoon, but, with the storm painting the world black with angry flashes of yellow from the lightning ripping the sky, it felt like the witching hour.

He glanced at the fuel gauge. They'd been on the road for at least a half hour, maybe more. Watch or no watch, he knew that. Yet the gauge hadn't moved even a millimeter. Just one more strange thing, one that should have relieved him but didn't.

No damn cars out here, no sign of habitation—no houses lit up by candles or electric lights. Amy and I are the last two people on the earth tonight...today. We're in a place that doesn't exist on any map. Time's stopped. Logic doesn't have a place here. I'd believe this was a freaking nightmare if I didn't know it was real.

“What's that?” Amy asked on a snuffle.

Like when they went over the bridge that brought them into town, Amy saw something he didn't...until, out of no-

where, the road swung to the left as Wiley said it would. Rand swung with it at a sharp angle that made the car spin in a complete circle. Punching the brakes in short bursts, he managed to get it under control.

Lightning streaked across the sky, highlighting the cabin he'd started to believe didn't exist until Amy seemingly spoke it into reality.

Figures. Wiley set me up for a deluxe cabin, considering how filthy rich Joey's ma and pop were, and instead we get Bates Cabin for the Psychotic.

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Chapter 7

The cabin resembled the haunted house she'd had nightmares about all her life. Endless black trees stood sentry all around the cabin with no passage through them into the beyond. Through the sheets of rain and darkness pierced only by the car headlights, she saw a small shed off on the other side of the clearing. *Why was that always in my nightmares, too?* Amy wondered, swallowing hard.

"Lot smaller than I imagined," Rand broke their silence with calm words she couldn't respond in kind to.

He didn't know what she did. He'd seen the tiny hills of sugar everywhere, but he didn't know she started seeing them since the death of his family. He wouldn't accept that anything they experienced today was anything more than annoyances and puzzles that had rational explanations—or would in the light of day.

She knew better. Judgment Day had come. There would be no escape from it. They'd already crossed the bridge. They couldn't turn back.

Rand twisted in his seat, reaching into the back. A moment later, he flicked on a flashlight which he handed to her with the light pointing ahead. "I'll try to carry as much as I can on the first trip."

How could he even consider staying here? All she wanted to do was leave and never come back. But he talked about getting settled in like this was all normal. Digging into his jacket pocket, he brought out a keychain with two keys on it. To the cabin and the shed, she realized—neither of which she wanted to go into. From here, the covered porch looked like a huge, black maw, waiting to swallow them up instead of shelter them from the storm and terrors outside.

"You understand this kind of cabin is...rustic, don't you?" Rand continued. "We'll get electricity from a generator in the shed. I have to start the generator by hand before we have light. The heat's from wood. We'll burn it in the fireplace. Until it warms up, it'll probably be pretty cold in the cabin. Might as well sleep in front of the fireplace tonight."

None of his words meant anything to her. All she heard was that he'd leave her. As soon as they got inside the cabin, he had to go back out. She'd be alone.

"There might be some wood left in the house, but I'm not counting on it," he went on, and she wondered if his expression matched how calm his tone sounded. "I'll have to bring in a couple loads from the shed, plus anything else I can't carry from the car this first time."

I'll be alone. In the dark.

She shook her head at him, but she recognized the determined look in his eyes when he leaned closer enough for her to see it. He wouldn't let her go with him, not this time. "No sense both of us getting any wetter than we have to. It's unfortunate the weather isn't better, but I knew from the start I'd have to do all this stuff once we got here. We'll manage."

“Rand—”

He put a finger to her lips. “Everything’ll be okay once we’ve got lights and a fire going, sweetheart. We’re both tired from the drive. Hungry. As soon as we can relax, we’ll be glad to be on vacation.”

She understood he wanted to believe that, but she’d seen how unnerved he was in the ghost of a town. The silence hadn’t been the same as emptiness in an abandoned theater. This silence had been the kind of something menacing lying in wait. For them.

She’d convinced herself leaving the city would be just what they needed to escape the past and her continuing fears, but now she accepted that they’d been lured to this place. The place of their final reckoning, where their sin would be paid for once and for all.

“There’s another flashlight in the trunk,” he told her. “You can have that one in the cabin. It’s a lamp. Better light.”

He actually grinned at her when he added, “Who knows? Maybe the cabin’ll be bigger and more luxurious on the inside than it looks from out here.”

She couldn’t breathe. Air felt trapped in her chest, where it burned like fire. How could she warn him? She had to, somehow.

Before she could say anything, he jumped out and rushed around to the back of the car. She felt paralyzed. If she left her relative safety inside the car...she exposed herself to the evil. But Rand was already out there.

The trunk slammed, a sound muffled by the reckless storm. Her door flew open. She let out a gasp at the sound of the thunder, so close now.

“If you take this...” He held a small duffel bag out to her. “...I’ll only have to make one more trip to the car for the cooler and bags of food.”

He had to shout over the ear-splitting crash overhead. Unbelievably, she worried someone else would hear them shouting in all this. A shiver slithered down her spine.

Only at Rand's frantic urging did she force herself out of the car. He slammed the door behind her and took her hand, not giving her a chance to argue. He pulled her along beside him, aiming for the porch though it was almost impossible to see forward. The glow from the flashlight did nothing to illuminate the path before them in the rain, and it wavered eerily as she ran. The feeling that something was behind, chasing them, didn't let up even when they burst onto the porch, out of the rain, and she whipped her head around to see where they'd come from. The sheet of rain blocked even her vision of the car across the clearing.

"Get the key," Rand shouted.

She closed her hand around it in her coat pocket and drew it out fearfully. *I can't go in there. I can't be alone in the cabin, in the dark while Rand is out where they are.*

When she made no move to unlock the door, he snatched the keychain from her hand. As the lock released, the door fell forward hard and struck the wall inside as if it were plunging down a hill.

"Cabin must slope down toward the woods," Rand commented on the creak of the front door swinging back and forth as though suspended in mid-air.

"I want to go with you."

Wordlessly, like he hadn't heard her, he picked up the luggage and moved inside, into the dark maw beyond. She followed him only because she was terrified to stay outside. He switched on the lantern, but even that did little to dispel the pitch black insides of the cabin.

"What did you mean when you said in town that they're here?" he asked suddenly.

Could he actually not know? “Don’t you ever see them, Rand? Hear them calling for you?”

“Who?”

“You know who. Your children.”

She saw his head swing toward her, but she couldn’t see the shock she knew must be on his face.

He drew the lantern around the room, pointing out the sink that indicated running water, possibly a shower in the alcove of a bathroom, a fireplace along with a small table and chairs. Above, a ladder led to a loft.

She wondered if he hadn’t heard her, or hadn’t wanted to.

“It’s dry in here at least. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

If he’d given her one instant, she would have persisted in refusing to stay in the cabin alone. But he darted out the door and slammed it closed behind him before she could utter a word.

Shut up inside the cabin the way they were, the outside world sounded far away. But as she stood motionless, afraid to move, she recognized the unnatural silence. Waiting. Biding its time.

Shivering, she wondered who would be the first target.

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Chapter 8

Nothing moved outside save for the black trees that enclosed the cabin like an impenetrable shroud. The wind whipped their tops back and forth—they appeared to be fighting back.

Rand pointed the beam of his flashlight toward the shed, but it did almost nothing to light his path. Only the occasional burst of lightning streaking near the area showed the way.

Putting his head down, glancing up periodically to check himself, he ran through the driving rain until he finally reached the shed. A heavy, old-fashioned padlock hung from the wide door. The rusted state made it difficult to open it with the wind slamming against him as if making a concentrated effort to knock him over and blow him away.

When he finally got the lock open and off, he slid the door open enough to slip through. He plunged into the even deeper blackness of the shed, leaving behind the raging elements for the moment. He tossed the padlock on the ground and flashed his light around. The shed was big enough to drive the car into, but he didn't want to worry about anything else tonight.

He became aware suddenly of how loud his breathing sounded in the utter silence. The hairs at the back of his neck stood at attention in it. His hand went instinctively to flip on a light, needing the comfort right now, but the lack of a switch reminded him he'd need the generator for that. Again, he shone the flashlight around the room, trying to locate what he'd come for.

"Do you ever see them? Hear them calling for you? They're here. They followed us. Your children."

Amy's strange words in town and a few minutes ago inside the cabin came back to him. Like then, he didn't want to hear them. Henry and Grace were dead. But, in point of fact, he didn't feel alone in this supposed-to-be empty shed.

You're jumping at shadows, just like Amy. You want somebody to be here. You want someone to explain what the hell's wrong with this ghost town in the middle of the Twilight Zone.

Rand darted his flashlight around the room once more, trying to pick out distinct shapes. Piles of wood lined the wall. An axe was propped up against it. *The one that slipped and killed Joey's father outside in these very woods? Misfortunes, Wiley called 'em. No, no point making any of it more than mere coincidences.*

The shape of the generator revealed itself to him at last, and he forced himself to take a step toward it. The profound sensation that he wasn't alone came again, stronger. *Imagination—it goes wild in the dark.* But he didn't imagine the footstep that matched his own.

"Someone here?" he called out deliberately, not caring how shaky his voice sounded. The silence seemed to grow, expanding to absorb his words. He could almost hear it saying, *"Yes, someone's here. Find me if you can. Dare you."*

Rand took a deep breath. Jumping at shadows, hell yeah, but when no response came, his unease increased again. His call seemed to hang in the air like an accusation...like a beacon for someone or something to hear him and home in on his location.

You're alone, you idiot. Now get the generator started so Amy doesn't have to be in the cabin in the pitch black. She'll really lose it if you're not back soon.

Striding purposefully across the dirt floor, he tried not to listen to the echoes—from his own steps or someone else's. *Gotta get the generator going,* he repeated to himself endlessly in the unnaturally long walk to the generator. Anything to ignore the goose bumps popping up all over his body.

He reached for the pull on the old generator, holding the flashlight on it with the other hand. When he gave it a yank, it spluttered half-heartedly. *Probably as old as it looks.* A half dozen tries later, he accepted that he'd have to set the flashlight down and give the generator all his strength. Even then,

he hauled on the pull again and again, and the thing seemed in no mood to cooperate. *Icing on this already freakish cake*, Rand thought, gritting his teeth.

Knowing he needed to stop and let the thing rest for a minute, he let the pull slide back in. Amy wasn't going to be happy if the only light they had tonight came from the fireplace and the flashlight and lantern. Couldn't say he blamed her either.

The prickling started again in his neck, and the sweat he'd worked up felt bitterly cold as it trickled down his back. *Don't let it take hold. Get this ancient of days started and get outta here.*

Rand bent to it again and gave a fierce yank that brought the generator to roaring life. *Turn on the lights, sweetheart, this bad boy's coming home.*

Quickly, he swiped up his flashlight and went to the woodpile for as much as he could carry in one trip. A grimace twisted his mouth when he realized he'd have to put the flashlight in his belt if he wanted to get enough to last for more than a couple hours. Before he put it away, he sent the light skittering around the shed one more time. He saw what he expected to, didn't want to. *Shit. Ah, shit.* Near the door were two piles of the white substance. He would have bet money it hadn't been there before, so where did it come from?

Dammit, I've never been one to buy into ghosts or evil spirits. There's a perfectly logical reason for this crap that's happening. But then maybe it doesn't even matter. Get outta here. Get back to Amy. That's what matters.

The shuffle of a clandestine footfall—bare foot on a dirt floor—came so close, he whirled around toward it.

"Amy?" he called when he didn't see anything. He knew it couldn't be her. Dark as it was outside, he would have heard or seen her slip into the shed with him.

Something fluttered by his head, wings on a wind that didn't exist in the shed that creaked and fought to stand straight in the storm.

"Papa," came as a mere breath directly against his ear. Every hair on his body stood at rapt attention while his hand instinctively went to his service revolver. Like he should have known, he didn't have it.

"Who's there?" he demanded. His throat felt dry. He found himself saying softly, "Grace?"

His mind played bad tricks on him, he frantically told himself. Amy'd started it, asking him if he ever saw his dead kids, if they ever called to him.

Papa...

Rand shoved his flashlight into his belt and hoisted a sizeable load of wood into his arms. He refused to acknowledge how tight his chest felt as he dove toward the shed door. The footfalls behind him sounded loud, matching his.

Don't turn around. You're not alone. They're here. Oh, shit.

He didn't bother closing the shed door behind him. He flew back to the cabin, dumped the wood on the porch where it wouldn't get any wetter, then went back for the last load from the car. The entire time, he refused to let himself look around. He did what he had to do.

I can't let Amy know what I felt... what I heard or saw in the shed. She's already past the point of panic. She won't spend the night here if I tell her about my own spooked nerves. We can't leave, not when the car's on empty.

Staying here at least for the night was their best option. Rand told himself again that everything would look better in

the morning. He pushed open the front door, and he heard Amy close by—exactly where he left her?—jump and let out a terrified scream. He searched and found the light switch. The electricity hummed, then lit up the room. Amy launched herself toward his full arms. He set down the cooler and other stuff he'd brought in.

"Everything okay in here?" he asked, running his hands over her shaking arms.

"Oh Rand, don't leave me again."

"I need to bring the firewood in. It's out on the porch. Leave the door open. It'll only take a second."

She followed him to the door, letting him go only when he crossed the threshold back out onto the porch. He could feel her watching him anxiously while he bent to gather the wood.

He cast a glance out to the clearing, to the shed. Beyond the storm, he saw nothing, but it gave him no consolation. Tomorrow he'd accept he imagined the whole thing. Right now, he still felt that breath of wind against his ear, whispering, "*Papa*"...in Grace's voice. Gracie was all love and sweetness. Whatever'd been in that shed with him was the opposite. A threat to him, playing with him, enjoying his fear. That couldn't be right. Joey had gone out of her way those last few years to turn his own kids against him, but he always managed to draw them back into his arms. They loved him. Grace would never mean him harm. Never.

"Rand, what is this?" Amy asked quietly when he shut and locked the cabin door behind him.

Her gaze fixed on the soft rifle case next to the cooler. He'd brought his gun along in anticipation of some hunting during vacation. He knew Amy asked why he brought it in the cabin tonight.

He shrugged like it wasn't a big deal, barely glancing at her while he prepared to get a fire going in the crumbling fieldstone fireplace. "I brought everything in, sweetheart. I thought it'd make you feel safer."

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Chapter 9

"Generator's old. Gasoline in it's probably old, too," Rand explained when Amy asked why the lights kept flickering. "Besides, who knows how long the bulbs have been in that fixture? Probably wouldn't hurt to pick up some new ones in town tomorrow."

As if they'd stay out the week. She wanted to leave tonight but knew they couldn't.

He looked up as he balled up newspaper. "If the power cuts out, all we're gonna have is this fire for a couple hours, but if we get through this night we'll be fine."

The words sent a scream into her throat like the one that'd been trapped there since she heard fingernails scraping down the windows behind the curtains. She'd heard the voice calling "*Papa*" that she knew so well from the year she had Henry in her classroom. If Rand hadn't come when he had, she would have walked to the other side of the room, drawn the curtain...and seen the nightmare of Henry's pale form. Milky eyes. Rotted teeth...

"Why did you take so long?" she murmured.

"Generator wouldn't start," he said simply.

Did she imagine the catch in his voice? Or had he heard the same thing she did in their separation? "Rand, did you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

He wouldn't face her, and that scared her even more. It was as if he deliberately didn't want to tell her something.

"*Papa*," she whispered, and his head snapped up. She could almost see a blade of ice go down his spine. She hadn't imagined his reaction. Rand heard the voices, calling for him.

"We're both tired, Amy. Let's get this fire going, dry off and eat. Did you look to see if there's a shower?"

She hadn't moved one inch from the spot he left her in during their endless separation until he came inside. She shook her head, not surprised when his gaze pleaded along with his words. "Let's get through this night, sweetheart. Tomorrow everything's gonna look different."

"Are we safe here, Rand?" she asked, certain he wouldn't tell her the truth regardless of the danger. He hadn't brought that gun in here to ease *her* mind. Rand was a protector; he'd often said his many years of being a security guard had honed his awareness. He sensed danger and knew how to handle it—he'd armed himself tonight for their protection.

If they got through this night, he'd said, but she accepted that she wasn't alone in feeling this night would never end. Not with both of them alive.

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Chapter 10

Despite the dampness of the wood, Rand was able to get a fire going. With the musty, yellowed towels in the bathroom, they dried off separately and dressed in fresh clothes in front of the fire.

"There's enough ice in the cooler to keep this stuff cold until morning," he said, skewering hot dogs on long, steel tongs to cook over the flames.

Amy didn't seem capable of conversation. She jumped at every sound, and her gaze kept returning to the window on the opposite side of the room. When he thought the hot dogs were done, he pulled one off the skewer with a bun and offered it to her. Not bothering with any of the condiments on the nearby table, she took a bite, then another after a few seconds. Her chewing was hesitant. When her eyebrows pulled together in a frown, he asked, "Not hot yet?"

"I can't taste this, like I couldn't the candy bar."

When his hot dog was ready, Rand loaded it with relish, spicy mustard and hot sauce. But he knew from the first bite Amy was right. He couldn't taste anything, not even the tabasco. After he swallowed the unappetizing bite, he lifted the bottle of hot sauce to his mouth and shook a few drops onto his tongue—something that should have had him ready to call the fire department. Nothing. No taste, no heat, no steam coming out his ears.

"Maybe we're coming down with something. Eat it. We need to keep up our strength."

They both ate, but she shook her head when he offered to cook her another one. Food without taste was pretty disgusting. He couldn't force himself to have another one either.

He got up and packed all the food back where it came from, then lay beside her on the sleeping bag they'd opened and piled pillows on, using the other bag to cover themselves with. She put her head on his chest. For a few minutes, he stared at the flames.

"What did you mean?" he asked in a husky voice. "When you asked if I see or hear my kids? Henry and Grace are dead. I'm too practical to believe in ghosts, even if I wanted to see and hear 'em..."

He wouldn't let himself think about Gracie's voice in that shed. Whatever it was, *whoever* it was, he knew his daughter. *It was Grace...but it couldn't've been.*

Amy lifted her head to gaze into his face. "About two months ago, I started seeing them, Rand. Hearing them. I was at the school, getting my curriculum ready for the new school year. And I saw them out on the playground. They weren't playing, though. They were just... standing there... lifeless... in front of the slides, staring into my classroom window. I've seen them everywhere since then, everywhere but inside our apartment. They keep calling for you, even there, from the parking lot. Calling for you and saying they're lost, that Joey sent them back. They keep begging you to help them."

The whole thing was crazy. Yet Rand could see Amy believed it was real. *No wonder she hasn't left our apartment for so long. Quit the job she loved so much, without a word of explanation for it.*

"At first...I thought it was my guilt. I thought it was manifesting itself into their ghosts. But then I started noticing what they left behind when they went."

The tension in his chest bothered him, even as he asked a question he already knew the answer to. He didn't want to know.

"The little hills of sugar, Rand. They're everywhere in this place. I know you saw them on the steps of the restaurant."

"They're here. They followed us. Your children."

"I can't explain it, Rand. They're not ghosts. They're not human. They're like...zombies or something. Their eyes are..." She closed her eyes, her breathing unsteady. "...covered with a milky film, like they're blind. Like they're bodies, and someone else is animating them. Commanding them. For evil. And their teeth are all rotted. Remember how

much sugar Joey let them have? These things...I keep thinking of Hansel and Gretel, especially when they call to you, saying their mother sent them back. Now they're lost and you have to find them. Hansel and Gretel, abandoned by their father, betrayed by the wicked step-mother. Lost in the woods."

Rand had to fight to keep the disbelief out of his expression and his voice. "You think Joey somehow made a pact with the devil so they'd come back and...what? Exact revenge on us?"

"Not the devil. The witch in the woods. The witch in the gingerbread house."

She had to know how insane it all sounded, but the tears of horror in her eyes told him she was convinced of everything she said. She believed it was real.

"Joey turned your children against you, Rand. For revenge because you betrayed her with me. She made a pact with the evil in this place, and it's brought your children back to call for you to help them. We followed them here to this place. And, as soon as we find your children—what was sent back of Henry and Grace—we'll be forced to follow them into the woods going by the trail of sugar..."

"I know the story," Rand scolded lightly. Lost in the woods, starving, the kids wandered until they stumbled onto the delectable gingerbread house. They gorged themselves, fell into a deep sleep and woke up in a cell in the basement. Once the witch fattened them up, she shoved them in the oven, but the kids turned the tables on her, and she ended up as their dinner.

"Rand, do you think Joey was actively trying to do everything in her power to turn Henry and Gracie against you?"

He wanted to deny it because he understood it fit into the crazy scenario of events she thought was taking place right now. Truthfully, the few times he'd been allowed to see his

kids after he filed for divorce, they either couldn't look at him or talk to him, or they asked him questions that tormented him. *"Why don't you love us anymore? Mama says you don't love us, and that's why you left us. That's why you're shackled up with Miss Pierce."* *"How could you abandon us, Papa?"* *"Mama says you only care about yourself. And your precious Miss Pierce."*

How many times had he held back his own tears to reassure them, to coax them into his arms and tell him none of it was true? That he'd never stop loving them. He'd never stop fighting for them.

"Don't you think Joey wanted revenge for what we did?" Amy asked, and Rand looked away with tears stinging his eyes. Joey despised him with such a passion. He'd never forget the predatory hatred in her eyes when she found Henry or Grace or both in his arms, laughing or crying. There was nothing she wouldn't have done to destroy him beyond recognition. *I think she would've even sacrificed our children if it meant hurting me. Anything to keep me away from them. Anything to get back at me.*

But Amy couldn't know this was the very place Joey'd been with Henry and Grace before the three of them were killed. Yeah, oh yeah, Joey wanted him and Amy to roast in hell in accordance with their sins.

"This is insane, sweetheart," Rand muttered, even while he held her. Insane as it was, though, he couldn't explain the things that happened today. Why this town appeared out of nowhere. Why the town was deserted. The church bell sounding out judgment, and the population sign of two. Their watches stopping at exactly the same minute. He couldn't forget the voice of his baby girl, that presence in the shed with him.

The longer he dwelled on the puzzles, the more insane he'd get. He had to stop this now. But the unbidden thoughts came anyway. *What if all the roads out of Woodcutter's Grim lead to one place? The woods. What if there's no way to escape? We're in a kind of Twilight Zone. If I believe that, it makes sense why this town isn't on any maps, why it appeared out of nowhere, why the cabin did the same thing just when I thought we'd never find it. Why none of the food has any taste. Why time stopped. Why no one occupied the town. None of this exists because it's not real. We're in a child's horror story become reality.*

What was it Sherlock Holmes had said? Once all the rational possibilities were eliminated, it left only the irrational impossibilities as truth.

"No!" Rand jumped up, and Amy let out a cry of shock and dismay. This was his and Amy's fresh start. Joey couldn't take that from them. She was dead. But he couldn't help wondering even then, if Joey had made a pact with the devil so their kids would come back to haunt him and Amy...why did Joey die? Why sacrifice herself and their children if she didn't even get the satisfaction of seeing him and Amy suffer for their sins?

No, all this had to be Halloween tricks. Jumping at shadows. If he didn't believe it, it couldn't be true. As soon as he started believing the impossible, he couldn't do a damn thing to save them.

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Chapter 11

Rand insisted on exploring the cabin, what little there was of it, and Amy didn't leave his side for an instant. Up in

the loft, all they found was a small bed and extra bedding. The air felt absolutely frigid. She couldn't imagine the fireplace ever reaching beyond a few feet in front of it. In the absolutely tiny bathroom, they discovered a shower. She shook her head when Rand asked if she wanted to him to fire up the hot water heater.

All through the cabin were strange paintings. Some actually had a frame and canvas, but most were painted on scraps of bark from trees or oversized, brittle leaves. They were tacked on the walls, propped on the floor against the walls. All of them were basically the same with only subtle differences. Pure blackness with two ethereal splotches of white. Something about them put a chill inside her chest she couldn't shake. She knew what they represented. Thick, black trees. The woods. The white forms were the zombie things Rand's children had become.

"What are these, Rand? Why are they painted over and over, the same thing?"

They were in an alcove near the window opposite the door. The hot water heater occupied most of the space, but the paintings were also in here. On the shelves sat dozens of black and white spray paint cans. She knew whoever painted these used the spray paint.

Rand shook his head. "Joey's lawyer said her mother painted out here at the cabin. Not in the traditional sense—I can see that. He mentioned her saying she felt most inspired here. Fell under the spell of her artist-muse only here at the cabin. I don't know if I'd go so far to say she even had an artist-muse. These're nothing but spray paint on any piece of junk she could find."

For a long minute, Amy couldn't say anything. Dawning realization landed on her with the stunning blow of an anvil dropped from a rooftop. "Rand, you told me...you told me

this cabin belonged to a friend of yours at work.” *But deep down I knew. I’ve known since we got here that it was somehow associated with Joey and her pact with the witch in the woods.*

He didn’t need to hit himself on the forehead at his stupid slip. She could see him doing that mentally. But then he accepted the truth was out with a nod. “This is Joey’s parents’ cabin. The one where her father was killed. She inherited it after her mother died.”

“And you...you inherited it when Joey died?”

Rand nodded, and she felt faint. They *had* been lured here. Dear God, they’d fallen right into Joey’s trap. “How could you, Rand? How could you bring me here?”

Frustrated, he ran a hand through his hair. “I knew you wouldn’t come with me if I told you the truth.”

Amy swallowed in dread. “Is there anything else you’re not telling me about this?”

She knew it before she saw the honesty in his face. Surprising her, he didn’t simply brush it off and insist there was nothing. He told her the truth, with his usual prefacing disclaimer. “It doesn’t mean anything, Amy. It’s just a coincidence. No sense making it out to be more than that. Joey...she brought the kids here before the accident. The car went off that bridge we crossed before we reached this town.”

Ice seemed to trickle into her lungs. Joey had been here, in this very place out of a nightmare, before her death. If anyone was going to make a deal with the devil, this was the place to do it. “There’s evil in this town. Don’t tell me you don’t feel it, too,” she said in a whisper.

He shook his head. “It can’t matter. All that matters is you’re the only woman I’ve ever loved. We came here to find a place to start over.”

But this wasn't the place for healing! He had to know that. Only death happened here. They couldn't escape what they'd walked right into. They were hemmed in with demons from every possible side.

"You keep talking about...things in the ideal, Rand. Things aren't normal here. We can't ignore... Joey knew. She knows..."

Her need to tell him overwhelmed her, but the certainty of loss made her nearly double over with protectiveness and agony.

"What, Amy? What does she know? Are you all right?"

"I'm pregnant, Rand. I've known for a couple months now. I've been so scared." *Scared that I'd lose this miracle because I don't deserve it.*

He pulled her into his arms, and she closed her eyes against the cold sweat covering her body. "Ah, sweetheart, this is exactly what we need. I knew you weren't ready to even think about it, but..." He eased back and kissed her forehead and nose. "This baby will heal us. I know it."

But she couldn't agree with him. No matter how much she wanted this child—a child with the man she loved—it wasn't right. It was one more thing they could lose.

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Chapter 12

The soft slither of bare feet on the floor entered the menacing blackness behind Rand's eyes. Cold air made every inch of his skin turn to goose bumps though Amy still lay warmly

on top of him, their bodies intimately connected. Amy's mouth pressed to his ear, and she whispered desperately to get him to wake up.

He opened his eyes to the same blackness. The lights had gone off—*piece of crap generator probably quit*—and the last of their wood in the fireplace had become ashes. The slither came again.

Real.

He tightened his arm around Amy's back to let her know he was conscious and aware they were in trouble. Her breathing was harsh and unsteady, loud in the eerie, hushed silence blanketing the room. Reaching out with his other hand, he noiselessly felt around for the gun that'd been pressed to his side before he closed his eyes. It'd been there when he and Amy lay in each other's arms and pushed back the horror for a few stolen moments in a celebration of the life they created together.

How much time had passed since then? He had no memory of sleeping. Still fully dressed, they'd made love the way they used to before his divorce was final. Shoving whatever they needed to out of the way to give them access, grasping frantically for partial satisfaction as if they had to hurry, as if they'd be caught. As if they were doing something wrong.

He'd closed his eyes. A minute, maybe a dozen seconds had passed since she pressed her mouth to his chest to hold back her cry of pleasure and he took his groaning release in her sweet body.

The gun was gone. A zigzag of lightning close by flashed in the window on the other side of the cabin. His lifted his head, and, in the momentary blast of light, he saw that the curtains had been pulled back on the window. Neither of them had done it.

Amy's nails dug into his chest, and he lifted her slightly, just enough to put himself back together and get his zipper mostly closed.

"They're here," she moaned in a barely there voice.

He didn't need to ask who, but, until another burst of lightning came in the window, he didn't believe anything beyond that someone'd come into the cabin door he double locked. He saw them standing in the window, outside. Two of them. A boy Henry's height, and a small girl beside him. Pale. Ghostly pale, but they weren't ghosts. Weren't human either. "*Papa,*" they called as one, but even from across the room, Rand could see their lips didn't move. Nothing about them showed they'd spoken. They stood like...corpses. "*Papa, we're lost in the woods. The witch will eat us. Help us. Find us.*"

Suddenly, like a puppet master had pulled the strings, their arms rose and they scratched against the window pane. Amy screamed hysterically, and Rand held her. The lightning faded to black again.

It wasn't real. None of it was real. But his gun was gone. When he sat up and set Amy aside, he hunted around for the flashlights and the matches he left on the hearth. He couldn't find any of those either. Without the generator, they'd have to wait for morning to come and make all this insanity go away. "It's a trick-or-treater, Amy, playing a joke. You'll realize that in the morning."

She shook her head, clutching him. "It's always dark here. Morning won't come. We have to leave. We can't stay here. I can't."

That much he agreed with her about. They couldn't stay beyond morning. "We'll leave in the morning. We can't go out in this storm, especially with the gas tank in the car on

empty. Remember, we still haven't come across a gas station."

She didn't like it but didn't argue. For a long time, she sobbed against his chest, her fingernails like talons in his skin. The darkness didn't abate in the long hours they waited—more than a full night had to have passed, but the storm finally quieted. He didn't want to admit she was right about the supernatural stuff, but he accepted they weren't safe here.

He had to find his gun. It was their only means of protection. His experience told him that a gun could make a difference. How often had he been in a situation at work where a criminal responded to the threat of a gun trained on him when nothing else made him back down? If he had the rifle, he could protect them. Without it, they were sitting ducks here. But Amy wasn't going to like what he had to do.

"Amy, I want you to do something for me. We're gonna try to leave this place. I don't see any sign it's gonna be morning soon. Without our watches..." Rand shook his head. None of that mattered. He couldn't let it matter. "Look, I need to find my rifle. I think if I can get the generator going, I'll be able to see enough in here to find it. Then we'll go."

"Forget the gun. Let's go," she begged hoarsely.

"No. Whatever's out there isn't friendly, sweetheart. I don't know what the hell is going on here, but I can't protect us any other way. Let me at least look for it. Then we'll go."

They both got up, and she surprised him by moving away just far enough to do her own blind search in the darkness. "It's not here," he said awhile later. "We've been over everything. Twice. I can't see. We must've missed something."

"What if it's not here? What if they took it?"

He swallowed on that fear, the dread of being unable to protect his family. "We'll go anyway. I'll get the generator working, search for it. But we'll go. Let's get you in the car

and you can lock the doors. It shouldn't take long." *Like hell. If I get that ancient generator to start again, it'll be nothing short of a miracle. But I have to try.*

He went to the table and found the bag with food. Somehow, the quiet outside unnerved him even more than the storm had. He ushered Amy quickly toward where they parked. Once he tossed the bag of food in the driver's seat, he locked both passenger doors, then led Amy to the driver's side. Tucking her inside, he couldn't have missed the glistening evidence of her tears. Gulping back his own guilt for having to do this, he reached in to flip the back door lock down.

"If I don't return in five minutes, I want you to drive away from here," he said gently. He ducked in front of her long enough to insert the key into the ignition.

"I won't leave you," she said frantically. "Please, Rand, let me come with you this time. I can't be out here alone. Please."

Her hysterical state would only get worse in the shed. He couldn't allow it. "I wanna know you're safe here in the car, sweetheart. Lock this door after I'm gone. I love you. Everything'll be okay. Trust me."

"Rand—"

He pressed a ruthlessly hard kiss on her mouth, and she grabbed his arm, her sobbing wild. Extracting himself from her, he backed up enough to slam the door after him. He tapped on the window near the lock. Obediently, she pushed it down, but she shouted for him to get in the car, too.

Rand turned away from her violent misery, facing the shed.

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Chapter 13

Only unreliable flashes of lingering lightning gave her glimpses she desperately needed of Rand before he disappeared into the black maw of the shed.

She was alone. Another sob choked her. She was so scared, so tired. Her head spun deliriously the harder she cried, bringing with it the corresponding emptiness in her stomach. As usual, she didn't recognize the plummeting of her blood sugar until she felt her entire body trembling fiercely. If she didn't eat something soon, she knew she'd faint.

She stared at the shed. What if he didn't come back? She couldn't leave without him, no matter what. Right now, she didn't have the ability to leave either.

Little dots of hot light flickered before her eyes. Blindly, she reached for the bag of food Rand had thrown on the passenger seat. A cookie was the first thing her hand touched. Before she'd even lifted it to her mouth, she smelled the sharp tang of molasses. *Gingerbread.*

She devoured it quickly, barely registering that she could taste again as she waited for the tell-tale instant when her blood sugar righted itself and she didn't feel so weak. This time, it didn't come. Instead, an utter lethargy crept over her. The bitter taste of gingerbread faded into a swirl of darkness when she slumped against the steering wheel.

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Chapter 14

Rand swore, wanting to kick the useless generator. It wouldn't turn over, no matter how many times he ran the pull through. More than five minutes had passed—he felt sure

of it. He wouldn't let himself consider that he could be alone in this godforsaken place if Amy did as he told her to.

His toe kicked something in the dirt. Rand reached down, amazed but equally distrustful when his hand closed around the textured handle of his flashlight. No way could he get himself to believe he'd left it out here by the generator. It'd been in his belt until he put it with the rest of their luggage in the cabin. Regardless of how it'd gotten to the shed, reality proved it was here when he needed it and he could use it to search the cabin for his gun.

After giving the shed a going-over—after all, the flashlight wasn't where it was supposed to be either—he concluded his rifle hadn't sprouted legs along with the flashlight and walked on its own volition out to the shed. Either the gun was in the house or it was gone.

He rushed outside, turning his light on the car long enough to verify it remained and to give Amy proof *he* was still here before he ran to the cabin. He couldn't see anything inside the car in the darkness, and the lightning had moved on completely.

After throwing open the door, he walked over to the makeshift bed on the floor and trained his flashlight on it. The rifle lay on the sleeping bag, right where he'd left it at his elbow. His eyes narrowed on it as he bent to retrieve it. With the light under his armpit, he checked the chamber to make sure it was still loaded.

This didn't make sense, and his annoyance ratcheted it up another notch. He wasn't crazy, dammit. The gun had been gone. He'd checked every inch of the sleeping bag two, three times. It hadn't been here. So what was it doing right where he left it?

Those damn things are playing with us.

Even realizing that brought the question of why. Why take the gun and then put it back where it was a few minutes later, other than to make him think he was going bonkers?

Because if they separate us, sending me chasing all over hell looking for my gun, they get us alone. Unprotected.

Amy!

The shuffle of footsteps behind him sounded loud without the storm to mask it. He whipped around and let out a gruff cry. Pale face, not human, not ghost, milky film over the blind eyes, rotted teeth in the open mouth, child fingers reaching for him...

Not Henry.

Dear God. Henry.

Rand opened his mouth, to call for Amy, to scream, but the cold, dead hands closed around his throat and stole his sanity.

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Chapter 15

Rand groaned, clawing his way toward consciousness. His neck hurt, as if he'd worn a necklace of fire around it. Sunlight shocked his eyes from where it spilled through the open door of the cabin over him, and he blinked back tears from it.

"Amy?" he called, his throat hoarse. His mind flashed back to pale hands, reaching for him, the icy fingers closing around his neck, squeezing...

It hurt too much to even touch when he jumped to his feet and raced out to the clearing. All he could see was mud, the shed, trees as far as the eye could see. Tire tracks led to

the road. Amy had left him, heeded his command to leave and go into town. Just go.

Remember what happened when Joey tried to leave this freakish town? She didn't make it past the bridge with Henry and Grace. Amy, what have I done, sending you away?

Rand doubled over, putting his hands on his knees. Maybe he could believe now that it'd all been a bad dream. Amy wouldn't leave him without a compelling reason. Even in the clear light of the morning, he couldn't get past that or the memories haunting him from the night before.

Henry tried to kill me. Or something that had a vague resemblance to my son.

He turned back and went into the cabin. In the wavy bathroom mirror, he met reality. Zombies or no zombies, vendettas or bargains with a devil witch, he couldn't logic away the red band of finger marks around his neck. He remembered how cold those fingers had been...dead. Yet his neck looked burned from the crushing grip.

It wasn't safe here. He needed to find Amy. In one of the luggage cases, he sought a bottle of ibuprofen and swallowed four of the pills—painfully—with a tasteless soda. He'd go into town, search for her. And he'd bring his gun. Until he was as far out of this town as he could get, he wouldn't let his only weapon out of his sight again.

She's not in town, his mind told him once he forced himself out of the clearing and onto the road. *You know she's not. She's in the woods. They set it all up last night—played with us. They separated us. They knew it was the only way to get us both out there.*

He turned in the direction of town, half believing he wouldn't find it, that he'd walk forever instead of the few miles it should have been. Out of force of habit, he lifted his

arm and pulled back the sleeve to look at his watch. It was working again. The digital numbers read 7:30.

He knew something had changed, too. He heard it long before he reached the edge of town. Everywhere, there were sounds of life. The morning after a fruitful Halloween for the kids. Candy wrappers littered the ditch. He saw the toilet-papered trees, eggs burst on the road. Plastic skeletons from home celebrations blown awry in the storm.

His entire body went rigid when he recognized the sound of a vehicle approaching. He fought the urge to toss his rifle into the ditch because normally he'd catch trouble if someone saw him lugging it around in the daylight on the open road. But everything he'd been through last night kept him from doing it. This town had been nothing but a ghost yesterday, just before the storm hit. But he saw signs of life now, and he couldn't be absolutely sure zombies didn't populate the town as a matter of common practice.

A brown and gold Explorer slowed down on approach, and Rand saw a sheriff's logo on the door. Another symbol—circles fitted over a cross—had been painted beneath the law enforcement star. The vehicle parked across the street from him, and an imposingly tall man stepped out. He was dressed in a brown and gold uniform with a badge dubbing him sheriff on the breast of his shirt. The guy wasn't much older than Rand. He crossed the street calmly and introduced himself as Sheriff Gabe Reece, got his name in return, and asked if everything was all right. His gaze only went briefly to the rifle Rand carried.

"My wife and I inherited the cabin a couple miles back up the way I came. We got in yesterday."

The sheriff nodded grimly. "The Shaussegeny cabin."

Joey's parents. Rand nodded.

“A lot of people in these parts believe that land is cursed, Mr. Parker.”

“After yesterday, I’d have to agree with them. My wife is gone. Have you seen anyone unfamiliar? Petite, strawberry blond hair? Or a ten-year-old blue Chevy?”

Reece shook his head at the descriptions. “What makes you think she came this way?”

“When everything turned hairy last night, I told her to make a run for it in our car.”

“You don’t think she’s in the woods?” Reece asked point-blank.

Rand felt like he’d been physically struck with the impact the words had on him. “How did you know?”

“I know this town, Mr. Parker. I grew up here, lived here my whole life. The woods aren’t safe. We’ve lost countless people—strangers included—in the woods. Do you think your wife is alive?”

Rand’s head spun as he stared at the sheriff in disbelief. No, he hadn’t allowed himself to consider that possibility. Amy was alive. She had to be. And he desperately wanted to hear from this law enforcement local that all the shit they’d seen and heard amounted to sheer lunacy. The last thing he wanted to hear was confirmation that last night hadn’t stemmed from an overactive imagination, like Halloween brought on. That Amy had been lured into the woods by two freaking zombies who looked like his dead kids.

“Do you think your wife is alive?”

Rand swallowed, looking away. “They’ll wait...until they have me,” he said to himself, out loud.

Surprising him again, Reece nodded. “Look, I was on my way to a call when I stopped. Unfortunately, I can’t go directly with you to the cabin, Mr. Parker. There are no minor calls in this town, especially on and after Halloween. But I’ll

bring back a search party of the brethren as soon as I can. Mark your entry point into the woods and your trail periodically, so we can find you.”

Rand wasn't capable of responding at the moment.

“Be careful, Mr. Parker. Woodcutter's Grim is a dangerous place, and the woods are where the most danger lies. Find your wife quickly. Don't talk to anyone you might meet in the woods, especially if they try to bargain with you. You can't win against them. Your best bet is not to talk at all. We'll follow you as soon as we're able.”

Rand didn't like this. Any of it. But the sense of urgency inside him increased with every weird word the sheriff uttered. Amy was all alone out there. Alone with a child inside her womb. His child.

Reece reached into his pocket, then held something out to Rand that he took on pure instinct. “Put this in your rifle. You'll know the time to use it when it comes.”

Before Rand even had a chance to speak or look at the cold thing in his palm, the sheriff got back into his vehicle and drove away.

Dread filling his throat, he opened his hand to see a silver bullet there, tipped blood red. On the side had been scratched a marking—the cross and multiple circles he'd seen on the sheriff's truck. *“I'll bring back a search party of the brethren.”*

What was this place? How could it exist? The townspeople obviously believed in the danger. The evil. Yet they lived here. Why?

Rand ran most of the miles back to the cabin and all but dropped upon seeing the turn-off to the cabin. He trudged unsteadily on, jolting hoarsely when he saw his car sitting in the clearing, exactly where he'd parked it last night. The driver's door stood open.

In a burst of energy he shouldn't have had left, he flew to it, calling Amy's name. On the seat were piles of sugar. On the ground by the car, long tracks had been carved in the mud. His years of hunting told him what the distinctive lines were. Someone dragged Amy through the mud. The drag marks led to the woods—to the place that seemed to be the only opening into the black gloom. Just past the first line of trees, he saw more piles of the sugar. *Bread crumbs. A trail that would lead right to Amy. And my own death.*

If they had to be punished for their sin, the sin of falling in love, he wanted to be the one to take that punishment. Never Amy. Never their unborn child.

First, he needed to find something to make his own path with. His initial thought when Gabe Reece mentioned marking his trail was the cans of spray paint in the cabin. He dumped over one of the duffel bags that had Amy's stuff in it, then ducked into the water heater alcove and started shoving as many of the cans as he could fit into the bag. Once he had that strapped to his back, he took out the red-tipped silver bullet from his pocket and loaded it into his gun, putting the one he removed from it in his front pocket. He considered taking time to eat something, but he couldn't. He didn't know what was happening to Amy.

Before he entered the trees, Rand cast an anxious look back toward the road, hoping he'd see the sheriff...and the brethren...coming up the road.

Completely alone, he stepped into the woods.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 16

Amy woke to musty air on the frigid floor of a dark cell. In the flickering of a small torch outside the bars, she assumed she had to be asleep still. Dreaming.

Nightmarish. I ate that gingerbread cookie on the seat.

And, like in the story of Hansel and Gretel, she'd come upon the gingerbread house, fell into the clutches of the evil witch, and now she was locked in a cell. Joey was the witch who'd made a bargain with the devil so her children would come back from death to take revenge on the evil stepmother who'd seduced their papa into abandoning them. Revenge served up sweet...

Amy felt sick. She had no memory of how she'd gotten here. Yet something was familiar. She'd had this same nightmare over and over when she was a little girl after her mother told her the horror story of poor Hansel and Gretel, abandoned by their own weak father. But this wasn't a fairy tale. It was real, and there was no escape. She had no protection here, if the evil even had a weakness.

She sat up, painfully aware that, while she lay alone in this cell, she wasn't completely alone. Somewhere upstairs, those things that called for Rand waited. For what?

Rand. They're waiting for their papa before they...

A sob slammed into her throat. Would they kill her first? Or wait for him to come?

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Chapter 17

His own stupidity came back to haunt him. Rand's only thought had been to get to Amy without delay. If he'd any presence of mind, he would have grabbed a sack of food. He could have eaten on the way. Now his hunger and the pain in his throat made him wonder how exactly he planned to save

her. He felt weak with the need for sustenance. He'd been walking in the darkness of the woods for hours. His watch had stopped again, this time at seven-forty-three—about the time the sheriff left him by the side of the road.

Maybe this was his punishment, he thought deliriously. To wander endlessly in the woods, searching for and never finding his wife.

He'd never experienced what Amy did when her blood sugar fell. He didn't understand or fully appreciate what drove her to keep a strict eating schedule so her stomach never became completely empty. He couldn't fight for her like this. The weakness made him barely able to walk, let alone focus on anything.

As if his desperation conjured the very thing he was pushing toward, the woods opened suddenly into a wide clearing. In the middle of it, glistening with supernatural light that didn't come from any natural or artificial source, stood a house. A gingerbread house. The comforting scent was so strong, he nearly fainted before he reached it. He tore at it with his hands and dislodged a cookie shingle. The instant his tongue touched it, he lost all sense of himself. As if in a dream, he gorged himself on the sweets until dizziness overwhelmed him and he collapsed.

He dreamed he rose in the eerie moonlight, picked up the axe next to stacks of uncut wood and began chopping. The piles of firewood grew huge beside him. In that same dream, he carried it load by endless load into the gingerbread house. When it was all inside the dark house, he lit a torch near the door and, in the process, burned himself. The veil of the dream fell, and he saw pale shapes in the dark alcove at the back of the house, watching him.

"Papa, now we're together again," Gracie called to him.

His little girl had been bubbly, filled with perpetual enthusiasm. Even when she'd grown wary and uncertain because her own mother so confused her about him, she'd never been this emotionless.

Joey tried to bargain with the evil she met in these woods, and she couldn't win. Best I don't say anything at all. Best that I go along with this, make them believe I'm under their power, until I can figure out where Amy is and how to get us out of here.

The scent of gingerbread came to him again, and he saw a load of it on the table. Without thinking, he reached for it.

As before, he was lost from his very first bite. He ate until the thought that he needed to remember something, something important, faded completely.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 18

A strange sensation of peace came over Amy while she lay on the straw-covered ground of her cell.

"All I ever wanted to do was fall in love," she murmured to the still air, her mind far away even as she spoke. "I wanted to be with the man I knew I'd love all my life. Forever. I knew it was sin, even when I gave in to it, but I love Rand so much. I love him. I knew we were destined to be together, and I couldn't walk away from it. He never loved her, though. And she's dead now. Dear God, I never wanted that. I didn't want it, but she's dead. She sinned, too, when she turned Rand's children against him. When she sacrificed her own children to get revenge on us.

“Lord, if love can right wrongs, if there is forgiveness and redemption, spare Rand. Spare this baby inside me. Help us survive. Show mercy even when we don’t deserve it.”

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter 19

“Build up the fire,” the watery voice of his son commanded. *“It’s time. When the oven is hot, bring her upstairs and bind her. She’s fat enough. Only then will we all be free again, Papa.”*

Rand mindlessly followed the small bit of light down the basement, where he knew he’d find her.

Light. Torch. Fire in the small, dank room with bars. Something niggled at his frozen mind. Fire.

He reached for the flame that lit the room and deliberately put the fingers of one hand in it. Pain lanced through him, and what had eluded him came back with force.

With the torch in his unburned hand, he rushed toward the bars. Amy lay on the floor of the cell, not moving. He had to save her and the child inside her. She’d be hysterical when she woke up, he realized. Somehow, he had to make all of this easy for her, so the things upstairs wouldn’t suspect he wasn’t under their control anymore. He’d tie her up, prepare her for the oven...letting them believe he mindlessly cooperated. But as soon as she woke up, she’d freak out.

His hand went to the front pocket of his jeans. He felt the bullet he’d taken out of his gun and replaced with the strange, red-tipped one the sheriff gave him. *“Put it in your gun. You’ll know the time to use it when it comes. Mark your trail.”*

That was it. The spray paint cans in the duffel bag. If he could find it, put it the whole bag in the oven when the fire blazed inside it, would the red-tipped bullet help them escape? He had the feeling it would. But he didn't know where his rifle was any more than he knew where he left the duffel bag. They had to be somewhere upstairs or out in the clearing.

First, he needed Amy to stay asleep, so she wouldn't wake when he brought her upstairs. He glanced at the two small windows made of spun sugar set in the walls. He broke out one of the panes. The urge to bring it to his own mouth almost overwhelmed him again. He felt ill with the need for it.

I can't eat any more of this stuff. If I fall under whatever is in 'em that makes me their mindless drone, I won't be able to save Amy and our baby.

Rand knelt before the bars with the pane of sugar and the torch. "Amy," he called softly. "Wake up."

She didn't move until he called again, and then she stirred, lifting her head at the sound of his voice. Her eyes opened a little, and he could tell how disoriented she felt. Yet the sight of him gave her the strength to drag herself to the bars, whispering his name. "God heard my prayer. I believe He'll save us from this, Rand, because you're alive."

Pointing weakly toward the wall where he'd gotten the torch, she made him see what she indicated. A key dangled from a peg. He jumped up and retrieved it, but didn't open the cell door yet.

"Amy, I need you to trust me," he said when he sank to his knees outside the bars by her again. "I can't get us out of here unless you trust me, no matter what I do."

He held out the sugar to her, and she glanced at it with confusion contracting her eyebrows. "No, it's what made me sick before, Rand. I got dizzy...and ended up here."

"I know, sweetheart. You'll pass out from it, but it's the only way we can get out. Do you trust me?"

The expression of sudden uncertainty on her face stung him, but she nodded and took the sugar. He inclined his head reassuringly when she hesitated to take a bite. Almost as soon as her lips touched it, she devoured it. The effect hit her immediately. Her eyes rolled back and she collapsed. Rand caught her through the bars. Once he laid her gently on the ground, he unlocked the cell door and scooped her up into her arms. The vulnerability in her beautiful, fragile face left him feeling inadequate.

I can't let her down. God, if I let her down, I lose everything. She trusts me. She did all of this for me. Help me save her.

Rand carried her upstairs. As he entered the kitchen again, he saw a rope hanging from the back of the door.

They were watching. He felt their blind, malevolent gazes in the dark alcove, watching him carefully while he tied Amy's arms and legs not tight and not loose. While he worked, he slowly glanced around in search of his things. He saw the duffel bag and rifle near the wood pile he brought in earlier. He didn't know how to get both of them into the fire without them seeing it. And then it came to him. He would put all the wood he'd chopped—a considerable amount—into the fire. Make it good and hot. He'd put the duffel bag and the gun in the fire as if merely following a command. Getting rid of the evidence.

Leaving Amy on the floor beside the front door, Rand rose in his feigned trance. He opened the oven door and began loading wood inside it. He expected a protest when he lifted

the duffel bag, but none came. He shoved it to the far back of the oven. He followed it with another load of wood, then the rifle, carefully positioned so it was trained on the bag full of spray cans.

More wood. Fire, slowly catching and finally burning too hot. He closed the door and went back to Amy to wait for it to get hot enough. To wait for the signal to get out.

He picked Amy up in his arms, continuing to stare mindlessly at the oven. For long minutes, nothing happened. He began to wonder if anything would. Sure, all spray paint cans included a warning about flammability. But he'd never actually tested it. Maybe they wouldn't blow without something to puncture them.

The gun. The bullet inside it. It'll provide the puncture and increase the fury of the explosion. Why else did Reece give it to me? But then maybe there is no escape from this place. No escape from sin. That would mean there's no forgiveness, no redemption, no mercy.

The sound of a minor explosion inside the oven jolted him. Rand knew it wasn't the signal to run yet though. A second explosion came a minute later. His grip on Amy tightened imperceptibly, his legs tensing for the run. He forced himself to remain in the feigned trance.

The sound that followed another explosion was unlike anything he expected. *The gun...it's gonna go off. The rifle's gonna shoot that bullet, targeting the bag of aerosol cans. It's time.*

When he flew to his feet, dragging Amy up with him, he heard hissing from the alcove as the white things emerged.

He'd been smelling gingerbread, mixed with the wood fire, all the while he waited for the oven to get hot enough to blow the cans and trigger the gun. The door was made of gingerbread, like the walls and roof. He threw himself at the

huge cookie while the zombies rushed across the room toward them. Their hissing made all the hair on the back of his neck stand in frozen attention, but he didn't stop ramming because the sounds emanating from the oven were getting bigger and louder, as if the whole thing was expanding and would blow the house to Kingdom Come.

"Papa!" the things Joey's hatred had created cried, reaching for him, their dead, icy fingers brushing his neck. He dove against the door again and it shattered outward, sending him and Amy flying out onto the porch. Behind them, the oven door exploded open. Fire and fragments burst around them like missiles. Rand covered Amy with his body, but he knew they couldn't stay here as "shrapnel" blew all around them. The things shrieked, calling for him, calling for Papa to help them.

His arms tightening around Amy, Rand dragged himself to his feet and swung her up with him. The ground rocked precariously, and he fell to one side, righted himself and ran forward again. Half carrying, half dragging her, he flew as the ground split open around them and the oven exploded again. Gingerbread, spun glass sugar, wood and pieces of furniture blew apart in every direction.

Twice, he stumbled and picked himself up, racing for the black trees.

Yet another explosion slammed into his back, scorching hot. The force of it sent him sprawling. His head struck a tree so hard, everything dropped away in that instant.

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Chapter 20

“Mr. Parker?”

The voice came from far away, then closer as Rand reached toward it. His eyelids flickered, but he couldn’t tolerate even a glimpse of light. He closed them tight.

The voice floated over him again, penetrating only when he blinked and rolled away from the light. From that angle, he could see a fuzzy brown and gold pant leg. Wooden floor. Sleeping bags.

“Mr. Parker,” the sheriff called again.

Rand glanced with one eye open halfway to see Gabe Reece kneeling beside him. He recognized the cabin.

“What happened? Where’s Amy?” he demanded, sounding hoarse. His throat protested even one word.

“She’s here. But we haven’t been able to wake her.”

Rand sat up and turned to see Amy beside him. She lay so still, he grabbed for her and hugged her to him. *God no, not dead.*

“She’s alive,” Reece asked softly. “Has she been drugged?”

The sugar. He’d been unconscious, responding only when those things commanded him. Fire brought him back to himself.

“You have a lighter?” Rand asked, sitting up with Amy half against him.

The sheriff handed him a Zippo. Rand lifted Amy’s hand, murmuring an apology she wouldn’t hear. Cringing himself, he lit the lighter and held it under her palm, close enough for her to feel but not enough to burn her.

She came awake with a cry. Rand tossed the lighter away. “Amy, can you hear me, sweetheart? Are you okay?”

“Where are we? Are we okay? Is it over?”

Was it over? He couldn't answer. The sheriff was here. Rand saw and heard from the open door of the cabin "the brethren" outside the cabin. He still felt burns on his fingers. His throat hurt like hell. He couldn't feel the pain from the stuff that hit him when the oven exploded.

"We searched the woods," Reece said. "Followed the trail of white paint. But there's no sign of the explosion we heard when we got here."

"You found us...in a clearing?"

"Well, in the first line of trees."

"Was there a house there?"

The sheriff shook his head. "There was no sign of anything except you and your wife, unconscious."

Then the gingerbread house...and its evil inhabitants...had been completely destroyed.

When Rand glanced down at Amy, he found her gaze on his scorched and melted watch. She raised her arm with her wind-up watch. "They're working again," she said softly. It was almost ten o'clock in the morning.

"Time has a way of stopping in this town," Reece murmured. "Or even returning to another period in time. It's how you know something is happening."

When time stopped here, Rand conceded grimly, that was when the evil came out to play. Reece's words also explained why the town had been deserted when they arrived. The evil shifted it to another time period.

"Insane, impossible things happen in Woodcutter's Grim all the time. Violent storms emerge out of a clear blue sky. Night comes during the day. Unaccounted for time passes, or simply seems to stand still for hours. Accidents, disappearances. No victim. No perpetrator. No evidence whatsoever that something foul has occurred."

“What is this place?” Rand demanded harshly. “What happens to those who choose to live here?”

A wane smile came over the sheriff’s mouth. “Chooses?” He shrugged. “It’s home to those of us born here. It’s my home, and I swore an oath to be a guardian and protector.”

Rand frowned at his wording. Reece had sworn an oath when he became sheriff? Or something more? Something stranger? What did he protect the people from? Guardian of what exactly?

“We’re ready to leave,” Rand said. “Don’t be surprised if we never return.”

“That’s common sense.” Rising, Reece offended them a hand up. “The two of you can follow me back to town in your car. I’ll make sure you get out on the highway safely.”

Rand nodded. As soon as he got Amy in the car, he went to pack up their things. He would have preferred to leave immediately, with or without the stuff, but the sheriff and some of his men helped so the task went quickly.

At the open trunk, the sheriff turned to him. “If you’re interested in selling this cabin and property...”

“It’s yours. Do with it what you will.” Rand handed over the keys. “Where should I send the deed to make it official?”

Reece handed him a business card. The strange cross and circles symbol decorated the corner of it. He also pulled a dollar out of his wallet, saying, “To fulfill the oath as guardian.”

Rand took both, not thinking about anything but getting the hell out.

“I need to ask you, Mr. Parker. Have either you or your wife seen...manifestations...outside of Woodcutter’s Grim? Have you seen them where you’re from?”

“My wife has.”

“Exactly as they appeared here? They could move, talk...leave things behind?”

“Yeah. Except she said they never came into our apartment. I don’t know why not, but I’m glad.”

With an abrupt nod and a disturbed expression, the sheriff walked toward his vehicle.

Not surprisingly, Amy didn’t seem to want to talk on the drive following the sheriff back to town. Neither of them said a word. He knew she thought the same thing he did—what if there was no escape from this place? Time could stop again, and the evil would begin. But Rand suspected there was much more to the sheriff than met the eye. His offer to take them out of town was a form of protection against the evil. The evil wouldn’t emerge when the guardian had them under his personal protection.

The town was so different today, Rand found it difficult to believe it was the same one they’d been in only yesterday. Some of the buildings remained the same, the streets, but the number of people filling them changed everything radically. The one thing the citizens all had in common—every single one of them stopped whatever they were doing when they saw the sheriff’s vehicle and stood watching as if they expected something to happen.

Rand swallowed the lump in his throat as they neared the church. The words on the sign in front of it had changed to “Forgive one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you.”

At the edge of town, another sign said, “Woodcutter’s Grim hopes you found our town a truly magical place. Come back soon!”

Not if my life depends on it.

Tense, Rand watched the sheriff’s vehicle pass the bridge, then pull off to the side. Beside him, he heard Amy take a deep breath. He reached for her hand. They crossed the bridge without anything happening at all. The sheriff waved,

and Rand returned it, but his instinct was to slam his foot down on the accelerator instead of to keep it steady.

“What time is it?” he asked, his eyes diligently on the road. “Exactly?”

“Ten twenty-one,” Amy told him.

They were on the highway that seemed to have no end and everything looked the same for miles.

“Time?” Rand asked several minutes later.

“Ten twenty-four.”

Time hadn’t stopped. But it wasn’t until he saw the sign, claiming Spirit Falls was two miles away, that he started to believe they might almost be free.

If Amy could forgive him and herself, then maybe they truly could be free...for the rest of their lives.

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Epilogue

February 14th...

“To our first year of marriage,” Rand toasted, lifting his champagne glass.

Across the small restaurant table, Amy also raised hers.

“May the second year be our best ever.”

They clinked glasses, then drank. Amy sipped only a little to share his sentiments before setting hers down. Her pregnancy was very prominent now. He’d never seen her more beautiful either.

Forgiving each other and themselves, knowing God had forgiven them, had lifted the inhibitions that kept Amy from giving him every part of herself. He knew she believed what happened to them three and a half months ago came about to

show them there was forgiveness and redemption for them—even in a world where nothing lived up to God’s ideals.

Rand would always remember the terrors they’d endured. They might share identical nightmares for years to come. But they’d never again forget to cherish the gift of their love for each other.

He closed his hand over Amy’s and brought it to his mouth. “I love you.”

She smiled freely. “I love you more.”

He was about to disagree when their waiter appeared with a tray of delectable sugar confections. “Can I tempt either of you?” he asked in a tone that implied no one in his right mind could turn down such an offer.

But Rand and Amy shared a long look before they turned and shook their heads at him emphatically. Rand couldn’t help laughing at the increased surprise on the waiter’s face when he said, “We never touch the stuff.”

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Woodcutter’s Grim Sheriff and Guardian Gabe Reece will face his deadliest foe yet when the woman he loves falls prey to a nameless creature that wants her very soul in “Blood of Amethyst” (loosely based on Rumpelstiltskin), Book 2 of the Woodcutter’s Grim Series—coming March 2008 in Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume IV.

About Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst):

Karen Wiesner is an accomplished author with 44 books published in the past 9 years, which have been nominated/won 54 awards, and 17 more titles contracted for spanning many categories and formats. Named a “leading romance writer” in *The Writer Magazine*, Karen’s many series’ include the Gypsy Road Series, the Angelfire Trilogy, Dare to Love Series as well as the newest, Wounded Warriors Series. Her fiction has been nominated for multiple *Romantic Times*’ Reviewer’s Choice Awards, the Frankfurt Award, FTHRWS’s The Lories’ Best Published Contest, the Daphne du Maurier Award, many L-edit Slip Contest awards, and numerous EPPIE’s.

Karen also writes police procedural mysteries with award-winning author Chris Spindler of Auenwald, Germany. The first book in their Falcon’s Bend Series, *Degrees of Separation*, was published as a limited edition hardcover. It received a 4 ½ star review from *Romantic Times* and was a March 2004 Top Pick. *Degrees of Separation* was re-issued in trade paperback and electronic formats in December 2006. The *Falcon’s Bend Case Files, Volume I* is now available. One of the stories from the Case Files anthology, “Fixated,” received an honorable mention in the L-edit Slip Contest. *Falcon’s Bend Case Files, Volume I* was an EPPIE 2007 finalist in the Mystery category. *Tears on Stone*, Book 2 in the series, is also available. Karen designed covers for all three books. Look for *The Fifteenth Letter* (Book 3), *Romantic Notions* (Book 4) and *Falcon’s Bend Case Files, Volume II* to be released between 2007 and 2008. Visit Karen and Chris’ Falcon’s Bend

Community, where you'll find a giveaway, excerpts, details on the next Falcon's Bend releases and information about the series at <http://www.falconsbend.com>.

Currently, Karen has sold a new romantic action/adventure series called the Incognito Series to Whiskey Creek Press. The following books are now available: *No Ordinary Love* (Book 1), *Until Death Do Us Part* (Book 2), *Bounty on the Rebel's Heart* (Book 3), *Dead Drop* (Book 4). Upcoming books in the series: *Under the Spell* (Book 5, coming October 2007), *Renegade's Rose* (Book 6, coming March 2008) and *Undercover Angel* (Book 7, coming October 2008). Books 1 and 2 were finalists in FTHRW's 2004 Lories' Best Proposal contest. In the L-Edit Slip contest, *No Ordinary Love* and *Until Death Do Us Part* both took a 3rd while DEAD DROP took 2nd place. *No Ordinary Love* was an EPPIE 2007 Finalist in the Romantic Suspense category as well as a 2006 CAPA nominee in Romantic Suspense. *Until Death Do Us Part* was a 2006 eCataromance Reviewer's Choice Nominee. Karen designed all the Incognito Series covers herself.

Karen's contemporary gothic romantic suspense with an inspirational twist, *The Bloodmoon Curse*, is available in trade paperback and electronic formats and was a 2006 eCataromance Reviewer's Choice Nominee.

Karen's first writing reference title with Writer's Digest Books, *First Draft in 30 Days* (a Writer's Digest Book Club Main Selection), is available wherever writing reference titles are sold. Visit the *First Draft* bonus website, where you'll find articles and supplementals to the book, at: <http://www.firstdraftin30days.com>.

Karen is the founding member of Jewels of the Quill www.JewelsoftheQuill.com, a promotional group of women authors who write in a variety of genres. The group has monthly spotlights and giveaways at their website, a newslet-

ter with over 600 subscribers, and was featured in the September 2003 issue of *Romantic Times*. Jewels of the Quill has sold several anthologies to Whiskey Creek Press. *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume I* was released September 2005 (with Karen's traditional romance "The Amethyst Angel"). It received a 4 ½ star review and was a September 2005 Top Pick from *Romantic Times BOOKclub*, was a *Romantic Times* 2005 Reviewers' Choice Award winner (Best Small Press Romance), an EPPIE 2006 winner, a Love Romance's Golden Rose Reviewer's Choice Award winner as well as an Ecataromance Best Book of the Year (2005) winner. *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume II* was released in September 2006 ("The Amethyst Star" by Karen Wiesner, futuristic romance). Also a recipient of a 4 ½ star review from *Romantic Times*, *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume III* was published March 2007 ("Revenge in Amethyst", Adventures in Amethyst Series, Book 2, by Karen Wiesner, romantic thriller). *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume IV* will be published March 2008 with Book 2 of Karen's Woodcutter's Grim Series, a romantic horror novella called "Blood of Amethyst." Jewels of the Quill also does annual holiday anthologies with Whiskey Creek Press. The first anthology, featuring six of the authors, was Christmas-themed and titled *Small Gifts* (available now and including Karen's inspirational romance "A Home for Christmas"). *Treasures of the Heart* was a Valentine's Day anthology (available now with "A Rose for Romeo," the first in Karen's Adventures in Amethyst Series). *Treasures of the Heart* was a finalist in The Romance Studio's Cupid and Psyche Awards for best contemporary romance and also in the 2006 CAPA's for best anthology. *Shadows in the Heart* was a Halloween anthology (released September 2007 with "Papa," romantic horror, the first in Karen's Woodcutter's Grim Series—Classic Tales of Horror Retold). Jewels of

the Quill's second Christmas anthology, *Christmas Wishes*, will be published September 2008 with the first in Karen's new Kaleidoscope Series—"Perfect Cadence." Karen has designed all the Jewels of the Quill covers.

In addition, Karen's Jewels of the Quill anthology stories are and will be packaged in the following collections published by Whiskey Creek Press: *Dame Amethyst Treasures* (available now) includes "The Amethyst Angel," "A Home for Christmas," "The Amethyst Star" and a bonus, never-before-published romantic paranormal novella called "Creatures of the Night." *Adventures in Amethyst Series* collection (available now) includes "A Rose for Romeo" (Book 1), "Revenge in Amethyst" (Book 2) plus two bonus stories never before published "Reckless Rose" (Story 3) and "Christmas in Amethyst" (Story 4). *Woodcutter's Grim Series* collection includes "Papa" (Book 1), "Blood of Amethyst" (Book 2), plus 3 bonus stories never before published: "A Friend in Need" (Book 3), "One Night of Eternity" (Book 4) and "The Amethyst Tower" (The Final Chapter), coming September 2008.

Find out more about Karen by visiting her website at <http://www.karenwiesner.com>. If you would like to receive Karen's free e-mail newsletter, Karen's Quill, send a blank message to KarensQuill-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

THE BEAST

by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)

The doctor is pleasant and bland with just a flick of tartness like sour cream. “You mustn’t fret over what you can’t remember,” he tells me.

Yet he’d like to know about the party—I’d seen his pupils contract and widen like a cat’s when he thought I wasn’t watching. Something must have gone dreadfully wrong at that party to put me where I am. Why can’t I remember?

Was it the party? Or am I here because of the Beast Man murders? I don’t know why people won’t talk about the murders. I can’t be the only one who’s heard the grisly details. The slashed and torn bodies, the missing hearts. What can the Beast be doing with the hearts? Before the party I asked my friend Betty Havighurst, “Do you think he eats them?” She didn’t want to listen, I could tell. No one ever wanted to. “I can picture him slaverling over a still-quivering bloody heart. There’d be great gouts of blood on the snow, melting it obscenely red.”

Betty had smiled uneasily, moving away from me. "I really must be off. We'll get together, dear, as soon as your Howard isn't so busy with his, uh, Chinese collection."

Chinese, indeed! She knows very well it's Chilean art that interests Howard.

Howard hasn't been in to see me. I wonder why. He must have been the one who took me to the party. He's always my companion at such affairs.

The doctor—such a sour little smile in that large bland face—hasn't asked me about Howard. But why should he? We're not married, Howard and I. I know some people think that's because of Papa's so-called Unbreakable Trust, set up so no one I marry can touch the money in it, even after I die. They're wrong. Money doesn't interest Howard any more than marriage does. Others believe the fifteen years difference in our ages matters. They're wrong as well. I'm not old at fifty, not fat, and I don't even need to touch up my hair. At thirty-five Howard certainly is far from a callow youth.

"Considering Howard's proclivities," Betty told me not long ago, "it's a good thing you're not the jealous type."

I've never been jealous. Not even of my baby brother, Johnny, who both my parents preferred to me. Johnny died tragically when he was almost three and I was nine. Someone left the door to the balcony open and he slipped out when no one was looking. Nobody knows how he managed to climb up and over the railing to fall to his death, poor little Johnny. It was the day before his third birthday and everyone forgot to notify the caterers. They brought the decorated cake the next day. No one wanted to eat it except me.

I'm not jealous of Howard. Why should I be? He's with me of his own free will. I know people talk, but why should he work when my father left me so much money in the trust? True, it can't be broken, but the bank that handles the money

always lets me have whatever I need. If I share with Howard, that's our business and no one else's. I certainly wouldn't care to have him filling a position in some dreary company where he wouldn't always be available as my companion, or have the time to take me where I want to go, when I want to go.

I don't like to go anywhere alone because of the Beast Man. Even Howard won't discuss the murders. The newspapers never carry a line about them nor do they discuss it on TV. But I know about him so others must. Yet they refuse to so much as speak the name. Do people feel if they mention the Beast Man he'll somehow sense it and seek them out?

I have to try to remember the party. On Halloween, as I recall. There'd been a freak cold snap, resulting in a Midwestern storm, so falling snow covered the streets.

Has the whole winter gone by already? Spring's here now for I smell lilacs when a window is opened. So much time seems to have passed.

Saints and Sinners was the party theme, so we went in costume. I don't remember exactly what I wore except that it was long and white. Nor can I picture Howard's costume. I must ask him when he comes in.

I could think better if the doctor didn't insist on so many pills and capsules. My mind feels fuzzy all over. A thought will break loose and drift away like dandelion fluff and I never get it back. I stay in bed because I teeter like a drunk when I'm on my feet. There's no place to go except the bathroom. Another door leads to the hall, but they come in. I don't have to go out. The third door is a closet.

I think something is in the closet. Not alive. But something frightening. Otherwise I'd go over and open the door. Is my costume in there, the one I wore to the party? Long and white with a veil and a bouquet. I lost my bouquet somewhere. In the snow?

Veils and bouquets make the costume sound like a wedding dress. Yes, I believe it was. No wonder Howard got so upset. He's not a fan of marriage.

"Good God, a bride!" I remember him saying. "Why in hell do you want to make a fool of yourself? The Beast Man nonsense is bad enough without dressing up like a bride."

"I wanted to go as a saint," I told him. "Ideally brides should be as pure as saints, shouldn't they?"

"There is no such thing as an ideal bride."

I can see his face again, cold and furious, as he paced back and forth across the living room. "You're alienating everyone we know with your foolishness." His anger must have made him decide then and there to dress as a sinner.

"Stop pacing," I told him. "You make me nervous."

"Brides," he muttered. "Beasts."

"Pacing like an animal in a cage."

He stopped in front of the fireplace and took a deep breath. "My dear, if you want my frank opinion, I think you're heading for trouble."

I stood up, angry myself. "I notice Earla Chang doesn't alienate you."

He pulled a poker from the fire set and jabbed at a burning log. When he turned to face me, his smile held no warmth. "You can't be jealous of Earla."

I used to dream of growing up to be tall and dark and exotic but I didn't, being a sandy Scot. Earla looks exactly like I wanted to. But my heart isn't green with envy. Or jealousy. I'm just not the jealous type.

In my mind I saw a quivering heart, reddening the snow. What do you suppose the Beast Man does with the hearts he rips from those he kills? When I was a child my mother used to ask the cook to roast deer hearts and slice them thin for sandwiches. I liked the taste.

“Here’s my final take,” Howard said. “I won’t escort you to this Halloween thing unless you promise not to mention the Beast Man.”

I swore I wouldn’t. I’d have kept my promise except for what happened on our way to the country club.

Howard wore a long black cloak over his costume. “I want to surprise everyone,” he told me, “and if you know ahead, the surprise will be spoiled.”

“Can’t I even peek at your mask?” I took mine out to try it on. The white velvet glittered with faux jewels.

He barely glanced away from the road. “Very attractive. You’ll see mine when you see the rest of my costume.”

I shifted my bouquet of white rosebuds and watched Howard’s gloved hands on the steering wheel. He doesn’t care for chauffeurs and so, when I bought him the Rolls, I ordered one he could drive himself. The unseasonable October snow thrust at the windshield, giving me the feeling I was falling through the glass and into the oncoming flakes. I wasn’t paying attention when he hit the black ice.

“Damn!”

Howard had no more time for words as the Rolls slued and skidded until the front wheel on the right dropped into a ditch. For some strange reason, Howard had taken the Cranston Park route to the club, and there was no other traffic on the isolated road. No matter what he did, the car refused to budge. He tried to alert Onstar, but when nothing happened, he pulled out his cell phone, held it to his ear and began muttering about a dead battery.

“You wait here,” he ordered. “I’ll walk back to the nearest house and call a tow truck.”

I couldn’t bear to wait alone in the car while the snow fell all about, smothering me. I flung my veil back to breathe better, slipped the hood of my evening wrap over my head, bun-

dled my long skirts up to my knees and went with him. I didn't mind the falling snow because I held Howard's arm.

I was fine until the dogs came. First one, then another, until four trailed us. I tensed when the first came up and sniffed at Howard. He stiffened. All the dogs sniffed him in turn, then fell back, still following. Big dogs, with pointed heads, they never made a sound. No barking, not even a growl.

"Dobermans," Howard warned. "Don't make any sudden moves."

I thought they behaved peculiarly for dogs, but I wasn't afraid. Not until a wordless message slithered through the snow and the darkness, a sign straight from the Beast Man. I stopped dead, clutching at Howard.

He was marked. Howard, my dear love, my Howard, was branded in some unknown way by the Beast. Chosen. The dogs knew. They could smell the brand. That's why they'd come up to him, why they'd only sniffed at him, then fell back. They were afraid to bark, afraid of the mark of the Beast.

My heart pounded in my throat. "The Beast, the Beast Man." I choked on the words.

"Stop raving," he muttered, watching the Dobermans—big, dark dogs—now circling us, staring at us in the constant snow. He yanked at my arm, pulling me with him as he turned and began to walk very fast back to the car.

The dogs hurried, too, never quite at our heels.

"They're afraid of you," I gasped, but Howard only stepped up his pace until we were as close to running as we could be with the snow and our long garments.

Something else ran with us, near us. Not the dogs. Something not as simple as an animal, something terrible. The snow fell on us, we moved with the dogs and something watched,

waiting. A dark and evil malevolent creature. I stumbled on, expecting the worst, certain the man I loved was doomed.

But Howard got us back to the car.

"It's all right," I said after I caught my breath, safe in the front seat, with him safe beside me. "The Beast Man never kills more than one at a time. I won't let him have you. I'll always stay near. He won't have a chance."

"Those damn dogs. Can't trust Dobermans. Never a sound, then—zap. They'd have done for us. Did you see the bastards circle? Like wolves." He started the motor and began rocking the car.

"You don't understand. The dogs knew you'd been marked. As his, not theirs. You might not have sensed the Beast Man, but the dogs knew he was there, and they fear him."

He didn't answer, rocking the car more and more violently until we shot free of the ditch. He drove less than a mile, then slowed to a crawl and turned on me.

"Your preoccupation with this Beast Man is insane!" He spoke through his teeth, close to a snarl. "Always nattering on about beasts and murders. What's the matter with you?"

"I don't want you killed," I cried.

"I am in no danger." He spat the words at me one at a time. "If you don't shut up right now, don't stop this crazy talk, I'm going to turn around and take you home."

When I opened my mouth to try to warn him once more, terror strangled me. I froze, afraid to move a finger. Someone, something listened to every word. Something very near. Could the Beast Man have gotten into the back, be even now riding with us? I huddled into my seat, afraid to look around.

When we parked at the club, Howard reached into the back before I could stop him and grabbed a parcel. "My mask."

I nodded, barely hearing, weak with relief to find the back of the car was empty. The Beast Man was still close, though. I could feel the rise of hair on my nape warning me.

“Hurry.” I tugged at Howard’s arm, eager to get him into the club and safety.

Howard lagged behind, hesitant. “On second thought, this may be a mistake. I’m afraid I shouldn’t have...”

“Oh, do hush!” I pulled at him. “Hurry.”

“I hope you won’t be too upset about it. I didn’t realize this obsession of yours was so...”

I had him under the building overhang now, out of the smothering, never-ceasing snow. “We must go inside right now.” I knew we had to be quick to elude the Beast. “I promise to behave.”

I gave up my wrap at the counter, but Howard kept his cloak about himself. I hurried into the powder room to fix my veil and adjust my mask properly. When I came out, Howard wasn’t to be seen. I stared about for a moment, looking for familiar faces. Despite my fears, I began to feel the happy fizz of a party bubbling up.

Betty waved from the lounge door, so I crossed the foyer to talk to her. My arms goose-fleshed in the icy draft from the entrance. The cold struck deep within, and I realized with horror it was more than the draft that chilled me. *He* was near. The Beast Man had followed us into the building; he was inside.

I must tell someone quickly. But who would listen?

Where was Howard? I stumbled away from Betty, looked into unknown rooms, found myself in the kitchen—a target of sidelong glances and uneasy smiles. No one spoke to me and the smiles stopped when I picked up one of their sharp shiny knives and thrust it into my bouquet. If nobody would listen, to save Howard, I must arm myself against the Beast.

Where could Howard have gone? Not here. Not there. Then, to my relief, I found him at the bar, his cloak off, leaning toward a tall, dark woman, intent on her.

"You're very naughty, Howie Baby," I heard her say. "I don't think she'll find it amusing, poor thing. That mask isn't funny—it's too real. And you know how she is..."

Earla Chang. Her long fingers were fastened on Howard's furry arm, her slightly slanted, insufferably exotic eyes fastened to his. He didn't see me, he only saw Earla.

I stopped in the archway, feeling quite ill. Not in front of her. Please don't let me be sick in front of her.

Howard—Howie Baby?—looked strange. Illness made my vision faulty. He looked fuzzy. Tremors shook me so I could hardly stand. It wasn't my eyes. His costume? Yes, his costume. He was all...why, he was furry! Even as I stared, not able to understand, he lifted his hand and I saw the hideous, grotesque mask he carried. Fangs, red malevolent eyes and the hairy beast's head.

I must have made a noise because he turned, saw me and dropped his hand, not putting on the mask. But I'd seen it. He was too late. At last I understood. Exaggeration is the best disguise.

I leaned against the wall, half-fainting, helpless to move as he padded over to me. All brown and furry with the cloak gone. No wonder the dogs came to smell him. Dogs recognize and fear a Beast. He must have seen they knew and retreated. Changed his mind. He'd taken the detour by Cranston Park for a specific reason, and I knew what it was. He'd intended to kill me there. To devour my bloody heart in the snow.

He wrapped a horrible, hairy arm around my waist and half-carried me into the lounge. Betty was there. The lounge was crowded with people. He put me on a settee and bent

over me. Were they blind that none of them saw? Dear God, did none see as he tore at my heart in front of them all?

Tearing at my heart, and not one of them stopped talking and laughing. None of them took notice...

It hurt, oh God, the pain. My friends stand by and let him mangle me—why don't they help me? They must see. I must do something, *anything*, to stop this pain...

The doctor has been here again with his needles and potions and small acid smiles. I can tell because the side rails have been pulled up on my bed again. His medicine unhooks my synapses so that my thoughts don't connect, but stack up awry. Then they slither off in all directions before I can capture them long enough to find any answers.

I remember blood on my white gown.

I've looked and looked at myself, but I can't find any scars.

I wonder where I lost my bouquet?

I hope they found the knife. I'm no thief.

And why doesn't Howard visit me?

About Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise):

Jane Toombs writes paranormal tales as well as Regency, suspense, gothic and fantasy. And, yes, romance. To date, she's the author of eighty plus published books in many different genres and has contributed stories ranging from horror to romance in twenty anthologies. She's been a finalist in the Romance Writers of America Rita awards twice for single title books, won a Prism Award for best dark fantasy from the Science Fiction, Fantasy and Paranormal RWA Chapter, a Bookrak Award for bestselling series book and an EPPIE award from the Electronically Published Authors Connection for a co-authored how-to writing book. She has a story in *Tales from the Treasure Trove, Volume I*, A Jewels of the Quill Anthology, which also won an EPPIE award as well as a Romantic Times Reviewers' Choice award. *Shifters*, a paranormal fantasy anthology she contributed to, was another EPPIE award winner as well as receiving the Dream Realm Award. Visit Jane's website for more information about her work: <http://www.JaneToombs.com>.

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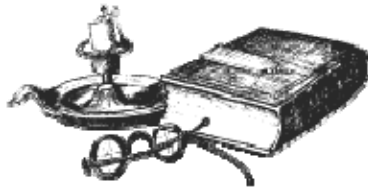
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