



**HALLOWEEN TREASURES,
A Jewels of the Quill Halloween Anthology
EXCERPTS**

["Mistress of the Shadow Hounds" by Margaret L. Carter \(Dame Onyx\)](#)

["Cuddly" by Dee Lloyd \(Dame Aquamarine\)](#)

["The Scarecrow and Ms. Moon" by Barbara Raffin \(Dame Jade\)](#)

["The Charmer" {North of Nonesuch Series} by Jane Toombs \(Dame Turquoise\)](#)

["Paper Tiger" {Kaleidoscope Series} by Karen Wiesner \(Dame Amethyst\)](#)



**"Mistress of the Shadow Hounds"
by Margaret L. Carter (Dame Onyx)
Excerpt**

October 30th

The encroaching presence crept over her like a cold draft. Enid rubbed her eyes to clear the fog in her head left over from the dream—the familiar, loathsome dream of a vast sunken city where tentacled creatures with huge, multi-lobed eyes swarmed through the murky depths.

She tried to convince herself some noise had awakened her, but she knew she would have sensed an intruder even in complete silence. A glance at the clock showed she'd slept little more than an hour, just long enough to sink into the nightmare. She threw off the covers, shrugged into the terrycloth robe she'd left draped over a chair, and picked up the handset of the cordless phone on her nightstand. She tiptoed to the bedroom door, avoiding the boards that creaked. Once she stepped off the braided rug, the hardwood felt chilly on her bare feet.

In the three months since her uncle's death, she'd grown used to sleeping alone in the rambling, late-Victorian house. Although the death of a man in his seventies with a chronic heart problem and a lifelong smoking habit hadn't come as a surprise, the loss had still meant drastic adjustments. She prided herself on how she was coping. She didn't consider herself a timid female. Yet now she wished Uncle Evan were here. Even an elderly scholar as back-up would be preferable to facing a burglar alone.

Was the trespasser actually in the house or just prowling around the yard? She'd look like an idiot if she called for help only to have him disappear just as a police car drove up. Wanting to pinpoint his exact location before making the call, she tiptoed downstairs. In the front hall, she saw light from the desk lamp in her uncle's office spilling into the corridor. Hadn't she turned that off before going to bed?

Checking the front door, she found it still locked. A second later, she heard somebody in the office opening drawers and flinging objects around. She punched 911 on the phone. When the operator answered, Enid whispered her name and address. "There's an intruder in the house. I'm in the hall outside the room he's in." The operator told her to keep the line open.

Enid flattened herself against a wall of the entryway and started to inch back toward the stairs with the phone clutched in one hand. The pulse pounded in her temples, and her skin felt clammy.

Her silent prayer that the burglar hadn't heard her over his own racket went unanswered. A voice muttered what sounded like a curse, and a man charged out of the office. At a glance, she grasped only an impression of a thin build, scruffy brown hair, and a short beard. He held a leather-bound book in one of his black-gloved hands.

“Where is it?” he yelled. “The Shadow Hound talisman—hand it over!” His desperation hit her like a slap in the face.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she shot back. A sour taste of fear welled up in her throat.

With his free hand, he grabbed her by the shoulder. “Don’t give me that crap. You worked with the professor. You’ve got to know.” He shook her, making her drop the phone. Now that she got more than a glimpse of his face, she thought he looked familiar. Had he known her uncle? How else could he be aware of their working arrangements?

“I helped around the office. I wasn’t his research assistant.” That would be Greg, who probably knew all about what her late uncle, Professor Evan Armitage, had been working on. Very little of it got shared with her. When the man just scowled and tightened his grip, she added, “I tell you, you’re wasting your time. I don’t have a clue what ‘Shadow Hound’ means.”

“Liar. You’re part of the family. You have to know.” He gave her shoulder a painful squeeze.

The clutch of the man’s fingers infuriated her. Scalding anger erupted from the pit of her stomach. From a heap of books she glimpsed on the office floor, an encyclopedia volume launched itself at the intruder and slammed into the middle of his back.

He let go of her and whirled around. “What the hell?”

The hair bristled at the nape of her neck. Her skin prickled with static electricity. A vase rose from a small table in the foyer and floated toward him. It crashed into his head and shattered. With a yell that caused his panic to sweep over her like a gust of wind, he sprinted for the front door. That day’s mail, which Enid had dumped on the table when she’d come home in the afternoon, flew at him and flapped in his face like a maddened flock of birds. Screaming, he tried to bat away the barrage of paper but didn’t drop the book he’d snatched.

At that moment, the door burst open, and another man rushed in. At the sight of his familiar curly, black hair and tanned complexion, Enid didn’t know whether to feel relieved or further alarmed to see her uncle’s assistant. “Greg? What on earth are you doing here?” He’d never come to the house in her uncle’s absence, except for the reception after the funeral, and not once since then.

Without answering, Greg waved one hand. An azure bolt of energy crackled around the table, which levitated and attacked the intruder. It collided with the strange man’s legs. Cursing, he fell down but scrambled to his feet just as quickly. Greg made a grab for him.

Staring as if stunned, the intruder opened his mouth to speak. At another gesture from Greg, a magazine from the pile of mail lofted into the air and slapped the stranger in the face. He wrestled out of Greg’s grip, ducked under his reach, and dodged around him to trip Enid. She hit the floor with a bone-jarring thump to her

knees and right elbow. Again the man dashed for the exit. This time he made his escape.

Greg knelt beside her to help her up. “Damn, did he hurt you?”

“I’ll live,” she gasped, her eyes blurred with tears from the lingering pain. She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off the brisk October breeze blowing through the open front door. “Catch him.”

After running to the threshold and staring into the dark for a second, Greg slammed the door and returned to her side. “Hell, it’s too late. He’s out of sight, could’ve gone in any direction.”

“Police.” She let him lever her onto her feet. “I called 911. They should be here any minute.” Lightheaded, she staggered into the office, acutely aware of his arm around her waist. Lean and long-legged, he towered over her. Nothing but a threadbare robe and a nightshirt with a faded kitten picture shielded her skin from his touch. She assured herself that her heart raced only because of the scare she’d just had.

Drawers hung open, with papers scattered on the floor and the desk top. Open books from the shelves littered the floor like dead bats. A fresh wave of anger surged over her. She closed her eyes and swallowed hard as if to choke it down.

“Easy.” Greg enfolded her in a hug. Trembling, she yielded to the temptation to cling to him. His affection and concern draped around her like a fur coat. And something else—desire? No, that was her emotion, not his.

She squirmed out of the embrace. “Thanks for coming to my rescue. But why are you here?”

She felt him tighten defensively at the question, which he ignored again. Was he hiding something? He guided her to the swivel chair behind the desk. “The guy snagged only one book. It could’ve been worse.”

“It’s not Uncle Evan’s collection I’m mad about.” She brushed away the tears that burned her eyes. “It’s the invasion of my home.” Clenching her fists on the desk, she tried to stop her hands from shaking.

Greg stood behind her and massaged her shoulders. Warmth sluiced the tension from her neck and flowed down her spine. His clean aroma, tinged with spicy aftershave, tickled her nose. She fought the urge to lean back against his chest. For all she knew, he was only trying to distract her from his suspiciously opportune arrival. Even if he wasn’t, she couldn’t fool herself that he meant the gesture as anything but friendly comfort. The erotic undertone she sensed in his touch must have sprung from her own wishful thinking. He’d made his attitude clear the one time she’d thrown herself at him, soon after he’d started working with her uncle. Nicknaming her “carrot top” for her flame-colored hair had given her the first clue of his attitude toward her. If his feelings had heated up in the seven years since then, he would have acted on them by now. Sitting up straight, she tugged the robe tighter across her chest.

“We’re lucky your burglar didn’t find the Shadow Hound artifact.”

“The what?” She spun around and stared up at him. “How did you know that’s what he wanted?”

“I heard him yelling at you about it when I got to the front door.”

“Which reminds me, how did you get the door open?” She’d locked it that night, the same as always. Even if living alone hadn’t inspired caution, she’d long ago developed that habit, because her uncle had taught her the value of his collection of books and antiques.

“Used telekinesis on the lock,” Greg said.

“Yeah, right.” If Greg had psychic powers, why hadn’t he ever revealed them to her before? Furthermore, he still hadn’t explained what he was doing at her house after midnight.

“You don’t believe me? What do you call what you were doing when I came in?”

She flushed as if he’d caught her in some shameful act. “I wasn’t doing anything but trying to fight off an intruder.” Objects around her did unpredictable things when she got carried away by strong emotions. Tonight her strangeness had helped to protect her. Most of the time, it was something she didn’t want to think about, much less admit to anyone else.

“And the furniture was flying around, how? A high wind from nowhere?”

“I don’t know how that happened.” Her stomach clenched. The skepticism he radiated made it clear he knew she was lying.

His fingers trailed along her cheek to cup her chin. His gray eyes gazed into hers. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize. It’s out of your control. Why haven’t you been trained to handle your telekinetic power?”

“I don’t believe in that stuff.” Not that she didn’t believe in it, exactly, but she didn’t want it. Denying the phenomena had worked fine for her up to now.



"Cuddly"

by Dee Lloyd (Dame Aquamarine)

Excerpt

©Dee Lloyd

As Sam stepped out of the stuffy hospital into a dark alley, it struck him that the atmosphere couldn’t be more perfect for trick or treating. When he was a kid, he’d loved cold, black Hallowe’en nights as he and his brothers raced from house to house filling pillowslips with candy and apples. How he’d relished every moment of dashing

through the shadows, disguised as something evil. Tonight, he simply welcomed the chill blackness as a respite from the long, depressing shift in the emergency room.

Thin moonlight penetrated the shadows between the few, inadequate light standards in the narrow laneway flanked by the hospital buildings. Occasionally jagged strips of cloud scudded across the face of the moon and briefly cast the concrete path into darkness. Sam shuddered and picked up his pace.

The minute he emerged onto Bay Street, the biting northeast wind hit him full in the face. It was going to be a long, cold walk up to The Crown and Anchor. However, tonight, he simply couldn't face the exuberance of the university students who crowded the bars near the hospital, even though they were closer.

Damn! And now it was starting to rain. Shoving up his collar, he shrugged a little deeper into his leather jacket, hoping to keep the chill drizzle from dripping down the back of his neck. It didn't work.

Lord! He was tired. Tuesday nights were usually slow in Emerg at the General, but tonight all the crazies had come out. The combination of Hallowe'en and a full moon, he figured. The grand finale had come after one gang of kids got their hands on some automatic weapons and decided to wipe out as many of their rivals as possible. For the last four hours, Sam had tried desperately to piece the torn bodies of half a dozen twelve-year-olds back together. Not many of them had made it.

He was so sick of the smell of blood...and of failure. He needed company. Moments like this, he almost wished he had a woman to go home to. But that wasn't part of the plan. He wasn't about to get tied up with anyone for a long time yet. He had plans, ambitions. A woman would take too much time and effort away from his work.

Yet tonight he needed a diversion. Yes, cheerful, uncomplicated companionship and a stiff drink. By this time of night, there would be a lot of relaxed cheer at the Crown. If he was lucky, there might even be a friendly woman to share a few laughs with. He tried to dig his way out of the fog of gloom to find a bit of his usual optimism. Yes, maybe it would happen. He sure would love to finish up this dismal night with a good-looking blonde cuddled up to him! Hell, if she was friendly, she didn't even have to be that good-looking.



"The Scarecrow and Ms. Moon"
by Barbara Raffin (Dame Jade)
Excerpt

©Barbara Raffin

Coming soon!



**"The Charmer" {North of Nonesuch Series, Book 9}
by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)
Excerpt**

©Jane Toombs

Coming soon!



**"Paper Tiger"
{Kaleidoscope Series, Book 5}
by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)
Excerpt**

©Karen Wiesner

Chapter 1

October 27th...

His eyes resembled narrow blue flints glowing in the dark room, his face ethereally white as it emerged from the shadows.

"Ghost!" she cried, putting a hand over her mouth to stifle her instinctive scream. Where had he come from? And where was Sean?

"My dark Barbie," he said softly on a cruel chuckle. "Ah Livvy, you'll never know how much that term of affection means to me."

He brought his hand up, and she saw the glint of wickedly curved steel. The blade was saturated with black-red blood. Whose? Oh, God! He brought it to his mouth and licked it clean with one long sweep of his tongue.

She screamed. He flew at her. She turned to run, but he grabbed her from the back. One arm clamping around her waist, he put the sharp blade against her throat. He would kill her. This time, he would kill her. Oh God, what had made her think he would never find out the truth?

His hand slid up under the oversized button-down shirt she wore—Sean’s—and encountered nothing beneath. Growling his displeasure, he turned his face into her thick hair, breathing her in deeply enough to make her tremble with horror. His hand stroked her jaw, and he jerked her head around until he could kiss her mouth with his own bloody one. The salty, metallic taste made her want to gag. Breathing harshly, she fought the need to scream until they both drowned in it.

“You know why I had to do it, Livvy?”

He killed Sean. Somehow he found out we were together. We were so careful! And he came here and he killed Sean. Oh God, oh God, oh God.

“Tell me why!” he ordered, yanking her back against him so hard she felt the sharp edge of the blade slice her throat. Not deep. Never deep enough. Because...

“Because I belong to you, Ghost,” she whispered as defeated tears rampaged down her cheeks.

“And?”

“Because you’ll never let me go. In life or death, I belong to you and you alone...”

Veronica Spencer woke with a start, her heartbeat and breathing so loud, she couldn’t hear anything for a few minutes as she strained to remember what had woken her. Shattering glass?

No, everything was quiet. She swallowed, realizing how dry her mouth was. When she ran her tongue over her lips, she shuddered the memory of tasted blood.

Roni rubbed her hand over her sticky eyes, wishing the nightmares behind them could so easily be wiped away. Lifting her head slightly, she saw the vampirish red glow of the LCD clock. Just after nine-thirty.

She had to go. She couldn’t spend the night, no matter how badly she wanted to remain in the loving safety of Billy’s muscular arms. Her slightest move away had him tugging her back. “Where do you think you’re going, sweetness?” he growled, soft and sexy.

Roni responded instantly to his voice and the tightening of his embrace. When his hand covered one breast, the core of her contracted with newfound needs.

“I have to go, baby,” she insisted without any conviction at all.

Though by all standards she was tall and voluptuous, Billy's sheer size of six-foot-four, two hundred and seventy pounds of pure muscle dwarfed her. She felt delicate and treasured whenever she was next to him like this.

He eased her under him. "Where else could you possibly need to be at this time of night, Roni, except right here with your man?"

Instead of protesting, she opened her arms to him. His full lips covered hers. His body was hard and seductive, hers soft and utterly accommodating as he slid inside her again and they rocked together in a slow, deep grind. She cried out as fulfillment came, but he caught the breathy gasps inside the wet, warmth of his mouth. Damian's room was right down the hall...

The pleasure kept rolling through her, her legs curved around his hips, arching as her nipples scraped along his chest. His thrusts became deep enough to make her feel she might turn completely inside out. The tension in his body grew taut, and she felt the groan rumbling inside his chest. *There, almost there...*

The thin wire snapped, and he shuddered over her. Roni grasped his face, holding them together as they both stifled the sounds of gratification. At the same time, they murmured, "Love you, baby."

She muffled her giggle when he eased down her body and his tongue curled around her peaked nipple. "I have to go, Billy."

She understood his sexual appetite—it was as great as hers. With just a little coaxing, she would give in to him again. But she really needed to go. It wasn't safe. And Billy would never do anything to confuse his teenage son.

"Stay," her lover rumbled again, his clever mouth moving to her other breast.

"What about Damian, baby? He'll wake up and find me here, and then what?"

Billy nipped at her chin, his eyes bright in the darkness. "He's a bright kid, babe. I think he's already figured out I'm dead-gone on you, woman, and I'll take whatever you give me. I could go all night."

Roni's eyes rolled up in ecstasy at the mere idea of spending the night with this incredible man. But he was kissing her neck now, and tears stung her eyes. *The past is a million miles away. Maybe it really is over and done with. But...I can't take that chance. I'm not willing to risk Billy and Damian just because I'm happier than I've ever been in my life. I want it all with them. I can't. Oh God, I can't. Never, ever can they find out the truth about who I am, what I did...what I had to do to survive.*

Cradling his face in her hands, she traced his well-trimmed goatee with her fingers while she kissed him with all the love she had inside her.

“Ah Roni. I love you more than life itself, sweet darlin’. Spend the night. Move in here with us. Hell, just plain marry me and be done with this damn charade.”

The annoyance in his voice made tears burn her eyes again. *What right do I have to feel hurt? I don't deserve this good man.* “Our relationship is a charade to you, baby?” she asked, knowing he didn’t mean that.

He sighed, readjusting his weight so he didn’t lay so heavily on her. “Not what I meant and you know it. But this back and forth isn’t what I want for us. You know it. It’s not *all* I want. How long you gonna make me wait before you put me out of my misery?”

“I’m not playing a game here. I love you. I love Damian. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. But I can’t give you more than this right now, Billy.”

He rolled off her now, reaching out and tapping the touch lamp on his nightstand. “You’ve been saying that for four years now, babe. Why can’t you give in, give up, a little?”

She hated that her unwilling gaze on him—stretched out and so impossibly male and strong—aroused her all over again. “I have given in. A lot. None of this has been easy for me. I told you that four years ago, before we ever started this thing. You said you could handle it.”

“And maybe I could, but I always thought eventually you’d be able to tell me why the hell it’s so damn hard for you to be with me. All the way.”

Knowing this argument was going nowhere fast, she escaped the tangled sheets and blanket so she could dress. The way his gaze caressed her so hotly—as intense now as it’d been the first time they made love—looked as unwilling as her desire for him had been a moment ago. Sometimes she thought it would be better if she and Billy only had a physical relationship. But she knew he wasn’t built that way. When he fell in love, only death could sever it, the way it had for Damian’s mother, Monette, the first love of Billy’s life. Roni could never forget she was only the second woman he’d ever fallen in love and made love with.

I wasn't always monogamous...but Billy is the love of my life. I no longer believe I can exist whole without him. Why did I have to get involved? But nothing could make her regret it...nothing but the past coming back to haunt her.

Billy sat up, letting the covers fall off his black-coffee colored skin, and watched her dress. “Make me understand, babe. I’m only asking to know where you came from, who your family is, who *you* are or were. Just for starters. You knew that about me long before we started dating. Can’t understand why it’s a secret, or even needs to be.”

Of course he couldn’t understand. She’d never given him any means to do so. “If you don’t know who I am by now, then I don’t know what we’ve been doing all this time, baby.” She sat on the edge of the bed, back to him because she knew the fact that she always wore a special garter, mid-thigh, with a switchblade inside it bothered him and made him suspicious. Neither of them lived or worked in a dangerous neighborhood.

“Yeah. I kind of wonder about that mystery myself. If this isn’t leading to more...”

She looked over her shoulder at him. He grunted, rubbing his hand over the squared-off top of his shaved hairstyle. The annoyed look on his face didn’t fit him. William LaPointe was the kindest man she’d ever known in her life. It wasn’t like him to be like this. But they’d been fighting about the same thing for so long, worse than ever lately, and she knew he wouldn’t accept her inability to answer much longer. Then what would she do? Lose her soul when he dumped her because he had no other way to save his own heart?

“I’m happy,” she cried out, wishing she didn’t feel so desperate. “Aren’t you happy with me?”

“I’m happy, but I want you with me. All the time. All night. I want you to belong to me, Roni. Legally.”

The outdated notion should have rubbed her completely the wrong way. She’d been owned before by a man—and he’d kept her in a cage he had the only key in or out of. But with Billy... She *wanted* to belong to him. Because the chains Billy would put on her were woven with his love. His love would set her free.

“Or what?” she asked softly.

He didn’t answer. The expression on his handsome face was one of defeat. She recognized it only too well. He shook his head at her. Obviously, he didn’t want to fight any more than she did. But he said nothing.

Feeling stricken by his silence and the thought of losing Billy and Damian, she left the bedroom, shoes in hand to make her passage silent. The kitchen was lit by the stove lamp. She went to her purse on the island.

It wasn’t as if Billy asked for much. But his questions didn’t have easy answers.

Maybe I should call Mav. But what if I can't handle what he has to say? If nothing's wrong... Can I take the risk? Either way, telling Billy the truth could mean I lose everything. I'm just not ready for that. For the first time in her life, she was truly happy and content. She couldn't start over again.

She unzipped her purse and began the prolonged search of finding her keys in the disorganized, cluttered confines.

When Billy appeared in the doorway, she wasn't surprised to see him. In only unfastened jeans, he really was a mountain of a man, strong enough to take on the world. *To take on the horrors of my past?* Just looking at him took all the fight out of her. On a sob, she turned away and leaned back against the island countertop.

Just as she expected, he came to her, cradling her face and moving her into the solid comfort of his body. "Love you, sweet baby. I just wanna spend the rest of my life with you. Isn't that what you want, too?"

Blindly, she reached for him, tucking her face into his broad chest, putting her arms around as much of him as she could. "You know I do. But... I can't make you understand." She'd learned it was better not to try.

"You mean you won't even try to make me understand."

"No, I *can't*. Believe me, baby, I love you more than anything. But my life is complicated."

He tilted her face up to his. "Your *past*? Is that what you really mean, Roni?"

"Yes." She looked away from him. "I'm not sure I'll ever sort it out. Until I do, I can't make huge life changes like the ones you're asking for."

"Changes you might regret, you mean?"

She gasped, turning back to him. "You're putting words in my mouth. It's not what you think, Billy. I never want you or Damian to get hurt. Because of me."

He gave her a grin that, for an instant, made her feel foolish. "Have you looked at me lately, sweetness? I'm not exactly gonna blow away with the first hard wind. Neither will Damian. I can handle whatever you send my way. Anything and everything." He bracketed his hands around her face again. "Especially where you're concerned, darlin'. There's nothing I wouldn't do to be with you."

Choking on a sob, she grabbed on to him again. “I can’t. I can’t, Billy. Stop asking me. You’re killing me.”

She recognized the fight going out of him in the way he held her against him. Still, the tension in his chest was palpable.

“I have to go,” she murmured a few minutes later, lifting her head toward his face.

He nodded. As she’d hoped he would, he kissed her—so passionately, she wanted more even after having made love three times this night. *I’m completely safe in his arms, the way I’ve never been anywhere else. But maybe it’s just another illusion.*

He let her go when she drew back from his kiss. “I’ll see you tomorrow for work. Love you.”

When she grabbed her purse, she saw the way he crossed his arms over his chest. Stepping out of the side kitchen door, she realized what a chilly night it was. The porch light came on automatically as she emerged from the cozy, warm house. *Billy and Monette’s house. Billy and my house, if I just say the magic word.*

As she hurried down the path toward her car parked on the curb, pressing the button on the fob to unlock her doors, Roni glanced back at the house in hopes of catching one more glimpse of Billy. But all she saw were the creepy Halloween decorations making the house eerily festive in the porch illumination. She shivered. Halloween always made her jumpy. But it’d always been Damian’s favorite holiday. Though he’d stopped dressing up as ninjas, vampires and ghosts and no longer went trick-or-treating, instead participating in the haunted house the high school put on every year, he and his father still decorated their home as elaborately as they had when Damian was young. They even called upon Billy’s parents to come for the few hours they were at the haunted house and handle the trick-or-treaters who showed up ritualistically year in and year out knowing where the real fun would be.

Turning back to the street, now outside the light provided by the porch lamp, Roni realized just how dark the night was. The moon and stars were all but blotted out in the heavy black shroud stretched across the breadth of the sky. She could easily believe the forces of darkness had descended on the earth this evening.

It was then she realized that the street shouldn’t have been this dark. She peered up at the line of street lamps on either side of the streets. A block away, she saw the new orange fluorescents glowing, but all along Billy and Damian’s street, the lamps were dark. Had they burned out at the same time? No way.

A gust of sharply cold air blew against her back, sending her hair flying in all directions. She even stumbled forward a few steps at the force of the wind. All around her, she heard dry leaves running in terror at the breath of darkness blowing through the street.

Roni stopped breathing as a prickling sensation danced at the back of her neck. She wasn't alone. The world around her slumbered in the twilight that evil thrived on. And part of it was here, watching her. She could feel eyes on her back. Clenching her damp hands into fists, she pivoted slowly in a circle. Coming toward her in the shadows, narrow blue flints glowed. Roni licked her lips and imagined that she tasted blood again.

“Ghost?” she whispered, aware suddenly that the wind had died down until there was no sound to be heard. Utter stillness paralyzed the night. He was here. He'd come back to make sure she belonged to him and him alone...

With a cry, Roni turned and ran to her car, grappling with the door handle because of her sweat-slick hands. It came open, throwing her back slightly with the force of her fright. She swallowed, stepped off the curb and let out a scream when her foot came down on something soft. A yowl issued from the thing. Her dazed eyes saw the luminous glow of the eyes, then sharp, white teeth as the stray black cat that roamed Billy's neighborhood, looking for a handout, hissed at her. The feline streaked off into the bushes.

With her heart still thudding painfully, Roni threw her purse across the seats and slid behind the wheel. Quickly, she pulled the door closed behind her. For good measure, she started the car, satisfied at the automatic thump of the door locks engaging. Only then could she attempt to get her racing senses back into proper alignment.

But before she could even draw in a deep breath, her cell phone sounded shrilly, making her jump in her seat. *Billy! It's only Billy.* Swallowing the lump growing in her throat, she forced a smile that was anything but relieved. She reached across the seat and pulled her heavy purse over to her. *Just Billy, calling to tell me he wishes I hadn't left—and elaborating on all the lovely things he would have done to me if only I'd stayed...*

The ringing had stopped, though, before she'd even begun digging in her bag for it. She pulled out her leopard-print covered cell phone, pressed a button, and frowned. *No missed calls? But...*

Roni let out a slow moan of dread, then scabbled through her purse until she found her other cell phone, the emergency one that only Mav—Detective Zachary Maverick—would call her on.

Oh God, no.

Hands trembling, she worked the buttons to call up the last message left on the plain, black phone. She found a text message. Feeling vaguely light-headed and nauseous, she put her thumb over the OK button. *No...* She pressed the button.

Ghost was written across the screen. Terror shattered over her already over-stimulated senses. A hard knock on the window near her head reverberated through the car, and Roni let out of a death-wail scream.