



SHADOWS IN THE HEART, A Jewels of the Quill Halloween Anthology EXCERPTS

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**"The Unvanishing Hitchhiker"
by Margaret L. Carter (Dame Onyx)
Excerpt**

©Margaret L. Carter

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.”



**"When the Dead People Brought a Dish-to-Pass"
{A Mischief in Moonstone Story, Book 4}
by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone)
Excerpt**

©Christine DeSmet

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 ago 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.



"Trick or Treat"
by Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz)
Excerpt

©Carrie S. Masek

"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.



"The Beast"
by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)
Excerpt

©Jane Toombs

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 slavering 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.



"Papa"
{Woodcutter's Grim Series--Classic Tales of Horror Retold,
Book 1}
by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)
Excerpt

©Karen Wiesner

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 getaways’ 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.

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 spend *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."

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 disaster 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.



"White Elephants" by C.J. Winters (Dame Tanzanite) Excerpt

©C.J. Winters

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. "*Ohmigod!*"

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 chittering noises like a scolding squirrel. "A s-sk-skeleton!"



"Ghost of a Chance" by Karen Woods (Dame Coral) Excerpt

©Karen Woods

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?"