



TALES FROM THE TREASURE TROVE, Volume III EXCERPTS

"Mrs. Claus and the Moonstone Murder" {A Mischief in Moonstone Story} by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone)

"Garnet Nights" {Troubled Waters Series} by Liz Hunter (Dame Garnet)

"Princess Sapphire" by Nancy Pirri (Dame Sapphire)

"The Turquoise Talisman" {North of Nonesuch Series} by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)

"Bloodstone Legacy" {The Saurians Series} by Cassie Walder (Dame Bloodstone)

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"The Tanzanite Curse" by C.J. Winters (Dame Tanzanite)



**"Mrs. Claus and the Moonstone Murder"
{A Mischief in Moonstone Story, Book 3}
by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone)
Excerpt**

Chapter 1

Lily Schuster was two days on the job as a county deputy serving Moonstone, Wisconsin, when she got a call about a trespasser—digging for a giant beaver the size of a bear and scaring a lavender chicken.

Surely cleaning a nineteenth-century building in ninety-degree August heat had given her delusions.

She pulled her strawberry blonde hair off her perspiring neck and into a ponytail, then called her friend Kirsten Van Brocklin. They'd met in a Spanish class in Chicago a year ago.

Both women had been at crossroads in their lives, trying to leave dark shadows behind. Ironically, both had reasons to look to Moonstone, which sat on the shore of Lake Superior, for the answers they needed about their pasts. Kirsten's secret was exposed only a couple of months ago when she'd moved back to her roots in Moonstone to become a chef. In an almost unbelievable turn of events, Kirsten also became mayor—and last weekend, Mrs. Jonathon Van Brocklin—after foiling the tycoon's topless fishing tour business.

Amid the wedding hubbub, Lily had read in the local newspaper about a special crime-fighting grant for rural northern Wisconsin. The feelings of revenge she constantly battled coursed through her veins again. Lily, who at thirty-four had no desire to return to the spotlight on the West Coast that had nearly destroyed her family, begged Kirsten to put in a good word for her. Lily got the job.

At Lily's mention of Tootsie Winters, who had called about the animals, Kirsten burst into laughter on the cell phone. "Watch out. This could be one of Tootsie's famous tests. When I was new, she pointed out all my so-called faults, such as my straight hair."

"Your hair was a problem?"

"Too straight, too white-blonde. That's Tootsie's way, pointing out the "too's" in life. She and her husband Bob moved out of town last month to be closer to the docks over in Port Cliff where Bob runs his touring yacht. It used to be the topless fishing tour boat. He was mayor until the flap over the nude fishing gave him a heart attack. I'm betting Tootsie still wants the spotlight on her."

The mention of a spotlight sent sour panic into Lily's stomach. The one thing she needed most in life was to be taken seriously. Just once would be nice. "I'm supposed to be catching criminals, not chickens."

The cell phone practically vibrated from Kirsten's laughter. "Walk carefully around Toots...as if on egg shells—lavender egg shells!"

After goodbyes, Lily grimaced at the dirt on her yellow Green Bay Packer t-shirt and denim shorts. She dared not even brush at things. Who knew what microorganisms dwelled in a building constructed over a hundred years ago as a sundries store for lumberjacks. She moaned at her chipped manicure. A good manicure was a remnant from her past, but she didn't care. Even a woman deputy could be feminine. She needed to change clothes—and nail polish—so she looked professional for...a beaver-loving man and lavender chicken. And what was that about a nude fishing tour? *What has Kirsten gotten me into?*

Lily rushed about looking for her badge and handcuffs amid the junk she and Todd had brought up from the mouse-infested basement.

"Have you seen the handcuffs, Todd?"

Todd Arneson had walked in yesterday, a lanky, freckle-faced fourteen-year-old who was bored with summer. He had one week before school started. He was also six feet tall, so this morning she put a broom in the hands of "Tom Sawyer" and set him to wiping spider webs off the tin ceiling. With her grumpy boss coming for his first inspection next week, she was grateful for Todd's help, but he also proved mischievous.

He grinned down at her from the ladder. "Maybe your cuffs are in the basement."

Yesterday he'd gotten her twice with a cry of "Mouse!" She shuddered. "I'm not going down there again until we do something about the mice."

"I could bring ya some rat poison. Mom buys it in bulk for our motel."

Todd looked slap-happy as a naughty puppy. She admonished, "And I suppose you have a big fat rat for a pet. Now cough up the handcuffs."

He tossed them to her. "Is it really a giant beaver? Can I come along?"

"No." Lily used her handkerchief to swab a gob of spider web off the handcuffs. She put the hankie into a box with other rags to be washed, found her badge on top of the report she'd been reading about rural meth labs, then raced upstairs to her apartment to change.

Moments later, she headed out into the hot sun baking the sidewalk. She wore her brown uniform baseball cap, brown pants and short-sleeved shirt, with a fresh hankie tucked inside a pocket and her badge shined to match the sheen of her black shoes.

Todd scrambled after her. “Hey, you’re bitchin’.”

“Watch your language, kid.” She hid a smile. It still thrilled her to see her reflection in the mirror, the cap brim just so over her eyes, hair out of sight, the yellow county logo with green pines on the sleeve.

She unlocked her side of the gray Honda Civic. “Is the beaver alive?”

“He died some time ago,” she said. “Now get back to work, please.”

“Will there be maggots? If you have maggots you can tell how long somebody’s been dead. I can help you figure out how long the beaver’s been croaked.”

Tow-headed Todd, who tugged playfully at the locked door, reminded her of her brother at that age, ready to embrace any adventure. Oh, how she missed that. Because of her brother she’d changed her life and career, starting over in her thirties. “Just this once you can go along.”

* * * *

Tootsie Winters, a stout, silver-haired woman wearing a matching top and shorts sporting red cherries, charged over as Lily got out of the car. The Winters’ place, a few miles southeast of Moonstone, was a patch of sandy land carved from tall pine forest that abutted a marsh behind the peeling yellow house and weathered outbuildings.

The humid marsh air feathered into the clearing carrying the scent of decaying leaves, pine needles, and...chicken crap.

Lily gaped at the ball of flyaway lavender fluff sitting contentedly in the crook of Tootsie’s arm. Lavender fluff covered most of the chicken’s unusual black legs. Even among all the fowl of San Francisco’s Chinatown, Lily had never seen such chickens.

Todd laughed. “Looks like a hat.”

Tootsie’s scowl took the edge off Todd’s fun. She pointed to a wire fence enclosure the size of a three-car garage. “See what he’s done to my chicken yard? He’s like a crazed rooster scratching about.”

Several fluffy chickens of various colors—red, white, gray-blue, black—moseyed about a man hip deep in a hole tossing dirt. The chickens with their strange legs looked like can-can dancers wearing black tights and fuzzy pantaloons. They appeared to vie for the man’s attention. Lily could understand why. Her hand slipped inside a pocket to worry the hankie she always carried. She might need it to mop up her drool.

From this vantage point, he wore nothing but a bronze tan on well-defined back and shoulder muscles. The sun had lightened strands of wavy, chocolate brown hair that fluttered on his neck in the breeze. She understood the hens' urge to do-si-do up to him. She touched the badge on her pocket to quell her unprofessional reaction, but the dang shield vibrated from her ragged breathing.

Tootsie ranted on. "My prized chickens will fall in that hole. And why in heavens aren't you wearing a gun? My husband leaves me alone in the woods and this galoot needs to be warned. Where's your taser? Let's taser him. You look about as authoritative as my silkies."

Silkies? Was the woman talking about her underwear? Lily asked, "Who is he?"

"Marcus Linden. University big shot. He had a piece of paper he contends is a permit to dig here for beaver bones he says are ten thousand years old."

The lavender hen clucked at Todd. "She bite?" he asked.

"Heaven's no, not silkies. They love being petted, don't you, Lulu?" Tootsie said, stroking the chicken. "She's my prize. Lavender hues are the rarest. Had to drive down to Iowa for her." Tootsie handed the "hat" over to Todd.

Lily strode toward the chicken pen to meet the professor.

Once inside the gate, she picked her way around chicken poop landmines. "Hello?" She ducked to avoid dirt flying. She checked her shoes. So far, their polish remained pristine. "Mister Linden?"

Dirt smudged most of his body, though it didn't hide rippling biceps and forearms glistening with sweat.

Another shovel of dirt landed too close to be a mistake.

She leaped to the side, landing in chicken poop that spurted like gray toothpaste up the side of a black shoe. Her stomach twisted. "Do I need to arrest you?"

When he looked up, she was the one arrested by earthy brown eyes shaded with thick lashes. He cocked his head, challenging her with a sweeping smile that manacled her in place. "Arrest me. I'd be honored to spend some time with you."

She had a full view of a six-pack that led to low-riding denims. His gaze traveled up her form-fitting uniform, making the day hotter, making her grateful for chest pockets that

covered up her body's surprising reaction. His large palms wrapped around the shovel handle, the fingers playing it, as if itching for another type of action.

Okay, he was an oaf, but she'd still be in college if her professors had looked like this guy.

She mentally slapped herself. He was acting like the same uber-smart, but smart-alecky, playboys hand-picked by her mother for Lily. She stepped back. Carefully.

"Get out of there," she ordered, looking down at him in the hole, her thumbs hooked at her pockets to keep her hands from shaking.

His demeanor shifted like the sun ducking behind a cloud. "I have a right to dig here, little lady."

He wasn't getting points for calling her "little." She tapped the badge on her shirt pocket. "Deputy Schuster. I'd like to see your permit and I.D., please."

"Pat me down." He raised his arms. "Deputy...Schuuuu...ster."

He said her name as if blowing her a kiss. Lily's throat went dry, but she had the urge to kick chicken poop at him for his insolence. "I need to see your permit."

He made a grand show of slipping his hands into all the pockets of his denim jeans, the jeans shifting low enough to make her swallow at the tiny stripe of soft-looking hair that trailed from below his belly button into the white band of his underwear.

"I forgot," he said. "Left everything in my cooler over there."

Oh great. She'd have to touch that red thing covered with dirt and chicken crap.

Inside the large, red soft-sided canvas cooler, she riffled through a messy microcosm of his life. She found a fat file labeled "Casteroides ohioensis," a calculator, bags of dirt samples and stone arrowheads, a cell phone, a GPS device, an old-fashioned compass, two salted nut rolls, a clear plastic container of...live, wiggling maggots.

She wrenched her hand back. Hearty laughter behind her made her grit her teeth.

"Need some help with my Maggie gals?"

She shuddered. *The man names maggots!*



"Garnet Nights"
{Troubled Waters Series, Book 3}
by Liz Hunter (Dame Garnet)
Excerpt

©Liz Hunter

Chapter 1

Samuel Barrington sensed the intruder's presence on the red wooden sailboat well before he was close enough to see the ladder propped up against the stern. The sailboat lacked the sense of emptiness that all the other boats in dry dock radiated. Once he approached *Quintessence*, he noted the back of a car on the far side of the sloop. His heart beat in an anything-could-happen cadence, warning him to beware.

Weather in March on Lake Michigan was marginal, at best, even on a mild day. Though sixty degrees at mid-morning felt spring-like after months of freezing temperatures, a cold wind off the water negated the warmth of the sun. Or was it the identity of the person on board that chilled Sam's blood? Not only had the bastard emptied the family's bank accounts, but he'd withdrawn every penny in their retirement funds they'd set up, taken a second mortgage on the house, and borrowed every dollar in his paid-up life insurance. As if that wasn't enough, he took off with a female clerk in his insurance agency, leaving his wife and two young daughters penniless.

Sam crept up the ladder at the boat's stern, revolver drawn. He'd begged his superior at the FBI to give him time off so he could investigate this case, despite having a personal connection, convinced that he could operate objectively. Now he had only to prove himself.

Three-quarters of the way up the ladder, a woman's voice rang out from inside the boat. "You son of a bitch! How could you do this to me?"

Sam swore under his breath, unprepared for Sadie to be on the boat, as well as her husband Walter.

"Leaving me to deal with your stupidity! I hate you! I never should have married you."

Figuring Sadie provided the perfect diversion for him to move in on them, he eased over the transom and crept across the cockpit. He would have preferred that she not be here

to experience the traumatic scene. It had to be tough for a wife to see her husband arrested for embezzlement.

Or was his wife in on the heist?

Sam hoped not. He'd always had a soft spot for Sadie Carlisle ever since he'd joined the yacht club in southern Wisconsin—how many years ago? Her kids were babies when they first met, now they were six and four. It seemed longer, maybe because they were all so close during sailing season, every weekend for nearly three-quarters of the year. Deliberately ignoring the personal connection, he drew his firearm and eased across the cockpit. "*Quintessence!*" He showed himself within the transom. "FBI! Freeze!"

Sadie screamed and covered her head with her arms, as if that was any protection to gunfire. "Oh my God, oh my God."

Walt was nowhere in sight. "Where is he? Where's Walt?"

"He ran away. Don't you read the papers?"

Carefully, he descended the stairs to the cabin, weapon at the ready. He popped around the corner to check the navigation station, crossed the salon to the head and flung the door open. Nothing. No one in the locker or the forward berth either. No Walt.

"Where'd he go? You were talking to someone when I got here. Who?"

"I was cursing him out, the bastard. How dare he treat his family this way?"

She looked as if she was on the verge of tears and Sam checked his weapon, put the safety on and holstered it in the strap behind his back. He crossed the few feet between them and opened his arms. She stepped into the hug he offered and clung to him.

Sam had longed for this for years, ever since that New Year's Eve they'd all celebrated the holiday together. They'd had a little too much to drink and when the ball dropped on TV at midnight, they'd all shared kisses, all eight couples. Probably no one but Sam and Sadie realized their New Year's greeting was out of control. If not for the crowd, they surely would have become lovers. Sam even considered calling her the next day, but how could he justify breaking a family apart because of sexual appetite? Since then they'd been polite but guarded, and this was not an appropriate time to make a change in their relationship.

"Oh, Sam, I'm so glad it's you. I must have imagined it, but I thought you said FBI."

"You didn't imagine it," he said, resisting the urge to nibble her ear.

She pulled back from him. “But you’re in security. Isn’t that what you always told people when they asked what you did?”

He released his hold. “It’s not a lie, exactly, and people are often uncomfortable with my employer.”

She shook her head and leaned her hands on the navigation station, taking deep breaths. She glanced sideward at him. “For all I knew, you could have ridden an armored truck. So what is the FBI doing on my boat?”

“I’m looking for Walt.”

“Yeah, me, too. Let me know if you find the bastard.”

He raised his eyebrows, knowing her sentiments were sincere. There was no mistaking her bitterness. *Hell hath no fury than a woman scorned.* He would have given anything to protect her from the heartbreak. “I take it you haven’t heard from him.”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve heard from him...”

Sam’s interest perked up. “He called?”

“No, but the banks and creditors sure are. He wiped everything out and borrowed more.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s worse than that. You weren’t the only one he wiped out. A dozen of his clients have received notice that their funds were raided.”

“Oh, Lord. How do I pay them back?”

“You’re not responsible for their loss.”

“I’m still married to him. What do I tell our daughters? How will they learn to trust anyone again? And his parents? They’re elderly. They can’t handle the shock.”

“They raised him. Surely they’re partly responsible.”

She shook her head and he diverted her with another question. “How are you?”

“I’m fine. What choice do I have?”

“I’m sure it’s hard.” He patted her hand, realizing immediately that a pat was useless. She needed serious help. “What brings you here today?”

“I need to get *Quintessence* ready to sell.”

Sam grimaced, knowing how she loved the sailboat. She’d worked nearly one full year restoring the wooden boat to its original glory. “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me, too, but you do what you have to.”

He didn’t buy the cavalier attitude for a minute. Selling her pride and joy would break her heart. Or more likely, her heart was already broken by her husband’s betrayal.

“The guys at the marina tell me it will probably sell better in the water than in dry dock. We’re launching it today.”

“They’re probably right. Can I do anything?”

She shrugged. “That’s not necessary. Even when Walt was around, I did all the work. I loved him dearly, but I’m also realistic. He was a social animal. That’s what he does best. He left all the work to me and the girls, bless their little hearts.”

“Don’t be a martyr. I’m offering help.”

“Oh! If you really mean it, I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“Good. Name your poison.”

“I need to paint the bottom before she goes in, but you’re not dressed for it. You could clean up the insides while I paint.”

“I have jeans in the trunk. You forget I’m used to working on my own boat.”

She smiled gratefully at him, and, for a moment, he feared she was ready to cry. The poor woman had no one to count on anymore. No husband around, and her own parents lived in Florida. But she was a trooper, and with a big sigh, she went about unpacking paint brushes from the cardboard box.



"Princess Sapphire"
by Nancy Pirri (Dame Sapphire)
Excerpt

©Nancy Pirri

July 1880
South Central Montana
The Woodbury Ranch

“Twenty-one-year-old women do not have guardians,” Laura Woodbury huffed.

No wonder the ranch hands referred to her as Princess Sapphire, thought Matthew Black, stretched out in the side chair across from her. If it hadn’t been for the curve of her breasts, she could have been a child sitting behind the desk. He guessed her booted feet didn’t quite touch the floor. Bright red spots of color appeared on her fair cheeks, her complexion delicate as a porcelain doll. But the steel beneath that refined surface showed in her ramrod straight spine.

“I am sorry, Miss Woodbury,” the solicitor, Samuel Simpson, replied. “You do need a guardian. Your father was quite adamant that you wouldn’t be able to run this ranch on your own. And Mr. Black is a capable man. Give him a chance, won’t you?”

“But I had a perfectly capable foreman until Mr. Black decided to relieve him of his position. John Whitman was the best foreman we ever had.”

Sitting beside the lawyer, Matthew Black decided she was deliberately ignoring him by failing to ask why he had to be present at the reading of her father’s will. Though they’d met before, the circumstances were certainly less amiable this time.

“He was...until he showed a little bit too much personal interest in you,” Mr. Simpson said uncomfortably.

Matthew had found her in the barn, dressed as she was now in buckskin pants and a man’s shirt. More specifically, he’d found her in the clutching embrace of her foreman, apparently not struggling to get away. He wondered why a gently born and raised woman would allow a man such liberties.

Laura’s father had been a life-long friend of John Hill, Matthew’s uncle. Hill, being too ill himself to perform the duties for his friend upon his recent demise, had relegated the job to his nephew. Matthew owed much of his success in life to his uncle, so he’d willingly agreed to attend to Miss Woodbury’s future while on business in Montana.

“There’s no need to worry,” Samuel said. “Mr. Black will be in charge until he finds a new foreman for you. He’ll be staying here in one of the guestrooms until he’s completed his business.”

Laura sputtered, “There was nothing wrong with how John handled the foreman job.”

Matthew sighed. The man may have been an adequate foreman, but he had no business putting his hands on her. Which was exactly what Matthew told him when he tossed the no-good off the ranch.

“Miss Woodbury, this discussion should be between you and me, not Mr. Simpson.”

She turned an ice-blue gaze on Matthew, one he guessed likely silenced most men. Not him. He’d been blessed with four younger sisters. She was bluffing for beneath that cool exterior he sensed a gentle, amicable woman.

He continued, “Your father only wanted you to be cared for. He wanted you protected. That duty and responsibility has fallen to me.” He smiled. “I won’t be staying forever, just until you’re settled.”

Matthew had to wonder about the uncertainty crossing her face. She appeared to not believe a single word he’d said. Her uncertain expression changed to sadness, and he tried recalling what he’d said to make her so melancholy. Recalling his words about how much her father had wanted her cared for after he passed on entered his mind.

“What do you mean by ‘settled’? My father never said a word about any of this to me.”

“Settled, Miss Woodbury, as in married.” With her long, red-gold hair and pretty features, Matthew had the feeling finding a suitable man to marry her wouldn’t be difficult.

She gasped, then started coughing behind her hand, her eyes filling with tears.

“Are you all right?” Matthew asked.

She pulled a lace handkerchief from her shirt’s breast pocket and wiped her eyes. “You can’t be serious!”

“I most certainly am.” Matthew rose from his chair, stepped forward and planted his hands on the desk. When he leaned toward her, she sank back in her chair. “You may choose your future husband, but I have final approval.”

“What gives you the right to order me about?”

“As Mr. Simpson informed you, I’m your guardian and protector.” He straightened up and folded his arms across his chest.

“More like my jailer,” she muttered.

“No, you’re wrong. Your life won’t change a bit, but I have a duty to perform—a job to do. And, remember, this wasn’t my idea, but your father’s.”

Matthew returned to his chair. From the high color in her complexion, he knew she was furious with him. He hoped they wouldn’t clash too often before he finally married her off, yet somehow he guessed it would be inevitable. Laura Woodbury needed to learn that she was a woman meant to be cared for by a man. She was young and reminded him of his ex-wife, who’d been little more than a child bride herself when they married.

Women generally followed the natural order in life when led by a strong man with a gentle manner and good intentions. He hadn’t risen so far in life due to his sternness, but because of his charm. Treating her with care would make her see the way of things.

“Uh, could we continue with the reading of your father’s will, Miss Woodbury?” Mr. Simpson’s voice sounded worried.

She waved a careless hand. “In a moment. I’ve another question for Mr. Black. How did you know my father? He never spoke of you.”

“My uncle, James Hill, had been a life-long friend of your father.”

Laura smiled. “Yes, I remember Mr. Hill, though it’s been several years since I’ve seen him. How has he been?”

“Not well. Your father appointed him as your guardian. Due to illness, he isn’t up to the task. In his stead, he asked me to step in. Since I had railroad business to attend to here in Montana, it was convenient.”

“I see.” She grimaced. “How nice that my guardianship is so convenient for you.”

Damn. *Convenient*. He hadn’t meant to put things quite so crassly.

“Is there anything else?” she asked her solicitor.

“What you’ve just heard is the extent of it,” he replied, obviously trying to mollify her.

As Simpson’s low-pitched voice continued, Matthew found himself having difficulty concentrating on the conversation. Besides, the rest of the will was standard fair. Miss Woodbury should have no other complaints. She’d been left, as Woodbury’s only heir, an exceedingly wealthy woman.

Exhaustion overwhelmed him. His lack of sleep during his journey to Montana over the past week had finally caught up with him. Earlier in the day, he'd glimpsed the bed in the guest room and was looking forward to escaping into blissful slumber.

Laura's soft, melodic voice caught his attention. "That settles things, doesn't it?" She rose from her chair. Matthew and Simpson rose as well. She shook Simpson's hand—much as a man would, Matthew thought, not surprised—then strode from the library.

It hadn't taken Matthew long to realize Laura Woodbury had been allowed to wear the pants in her household far too long. That would stop immediately. No more wearing buckskin trousers as she'd worn today.

Simpson shook Matthew's hand. "I warned you that Miss Woodbury was used to being in charge, didn't I?"

"You did. I've never met a woman quite like her," Matthew said. Most women of his acquaintance would never want to take up the mantle of responsibility.

Simpson narrowed his eyes. "You admire her, don't you? I hear it in your voice."

"Yes, I do. If she has, in fact, been in charge of this ranch for the past several years, from all appearances she's done well by it."

Simpson picked up his satchel. "You know she'll object vehemently if you interfere with the ranch operations, don't you?"

Matthew shoved his hands into his pockets and sighed. "I know. I will only interfere if I believe she's being endangered, or if the work is too difficult."

"Good luck to you, Black. Call me if you need my services."

"I shall, and thank you."

On his way back out of the library, Matthew caught a glimpse of shapely, buckskin-clad legs and a tan colored, well-rounded rear at the top of the stair's landing.

He called out, "Miss Woodbury? Where are you off to?"

She peered down at him. "To change for dinner, of course."

Matthew gave an approving nod. "Excellent idea. I'll meet you in the dining room shortly."

Satisfied, he strode down the hall to the dining room, confident Miss Woodbury understood how things would be between them.



"The Turquoise Talisman"
{North of Nonesuch Series, Book 2}
by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)
Excerpt

©Jane Toombs

Chapter 1

Frowning, Ella Rose took the phone away from her ear and stared at it for a moment before listening again. “Did you say T. Karnik Rose? That’s a name no one would ever forget, so I’m sure I’ve never heard it before. Are you positive I’m the one you should be contacting? What? Theopholis was his first name?”

About to deny she’d ever heard that name either, Ella paused, a nonsense tongue twister running through her mind. *Theopholis Thistle, the successful thistle sister...*

“Uncle Thistle!” she cried. “I thought he’d died many years ago. What? He was a hundred and five? Whoa.”

She listened some more and finally said, “Yes, now that I’ve made the connection, I agree he was my great-uncle. I’m sorry to hear he passed on, but I have no idea why he’d leave me any legacy.”

She glanced at her friend Talissa Hunter sitting across the table from her and raised her eyebrows as the New Hampshire lawyer went on.

“Uncle Thistle called it a Talisman? What does that mean? It’s a what? A dagger? Are you saying he left me a dagger?” After a few more minutes of listening, she said, “Yes, that’s my correct address. Thank you for calling.” She hung up, feeling not only incredulous, but dazed.

“What?” Talissa asked. “Your Uncle Thistle died and left you a dagger?”

Ella nodded. “The lawyer told me he called it a Talisman. The dagger is an old one with a turquoise hilt. Apparently a family heirloom of some kind. It’s coming to me because I’m the—” she paused and controlled a shudder, “—the last of the Roses.”

“Makes you sound like that really old song—‘The Last Rose Of Summer.’”

“Summer is over,” Ella said absently, looking out the window behind Talissa where whitecaps ruffled the blue water of Lake Superior.

“Yeah, but you’re not. Were you fond of the old guy?”

“I barely remember Uncle Thistle. I couldn’t have been more than six or so when he visited my folks for the first and last time. They must have called him by name. I’d just learned a tongue twister about Theophilis Thistle, and...” Her words trailed off. “So I’m inheriting the family dagger.”

“What fun to get a weird heirloom like that. To be a Talisman, I bet it has a spooky history.”

“Hey, you’re the one who likes spooks, not me.” Ella drained her mug, the tepid coffee leaving a bitter aftertaste.

“Didn’t you say the dagger handle was turquoise? Probably worth a bunch.”

“I agree. But I’d feel funny selling something that’s supposedly been in the family a really long time.”

“Maybe it’s so ancient that if you rub the handle a genie will pop out and grant you three wishes.” Talissa grinned. “Or offer something sexy.”

Ella rolled her eyes. “You and your fantasies about creatures that don’t exist.”

“They’re better than the real men I meet, that’s for sure.”

“You may have a point. The pickings are mighty lean around here.”

“If that’s true for you, with your gorgeous red hair, what chance does a pudgy brunette like me have?”

“You’re not pudgy. You’re curvy. Besides, it’s lady’s choice, and I’ve yet to see anyone I’d pick for any kind of a serious relationship.” “Amen to that. And I’ll try to think curvy instead of pudgy.” Talissa glanced at her watch, sighed and got up. “Time to report for

duty. I hate these weekend gigs. Thanks for the coffee, and congratulations on your inheritance.”

“I’d rather no one else but you and me knew about my legacy,” Ella said as she grabbed a sweater against the late September wind, and went out of her house with Talissa.

“Hey, no problem.” Talissa made a gesture of zipping her mouth shut as she got in her car.

Ella waved her off. Before going back in, she walked down to the lake, smiling at Talissa’s impossible fantasies. A genie of all things. She sat on a driftwood log and watched seagulls swooping and diving over the water, their shrill cries drifting on the wind. Someone, somewhere was burning autumn leaves because the wind held a faint acrid tinge. She closed her eyes and pictured a genie in a turban and colorful Arabic garb popping out of Ali Baba’s magic lamp. Would he ever be a novelty in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula wilderness!

Sometimes they came in bottles, too, as she recalled, but never had she heard of a genie in a dagger. Not enough space probably. Not that it was possible to cram anything the size of a genie into a lamp or bottle either. Besides, they didn’t even exist.

* * * *

In town on Tuesday, when she saw the Fed Ex truck pull up to her Ojibway store—Rose Assayers and Appraisers—Ella figured it was the delivery of more copper items for the gift part of the store. She signed for the package, realizing she was wrong—too small. Then she saw the New Hampshire address and a thrill zipped through her. The legacy.

She waited until no one was left in the store before taking the package into the back room to open it. Inside the box, an envelope lay on the packing, addressed to her in thin, spidery script. She slit it open with her box cutting knife and extracted a sheet of heavy silken paper. There was no heading, just the same spidery handwriting. “You are the last of our branch of the Rose family, so you have become the Keeper of the Talisman. You must always keep it safe. In return, the Talisman will protect you, though in doing so, your life may be changed beyond recall. Be warned: The Talisman must never leave you until it is passed on to your heir at your demise. T.K R.”

Ella hadn’t intended to sell it anyway. As for an heir, she may never have one, since she had yet to meet a man she’d want to have a baby with. And she refused to think about her “demise.”

Shrugging, she slid the letter back in the envelope, set it aside and delved into the box. She soon saw, nestled amidst the packing, a curved bronze sheath embossed with gold

Arabic letters. Definitely not the kind of a sheath a warrior would wear, but if the dagger had been used in the long ago past, it was likely a leather sheath would have deteriorated with time. The turquoise hilt of the dagger protruded from the sheath, beautiful unmarred stones cut to fit the handle, all a heavenly shade, more blue than southwestern American turquoise. Possibly from what was Persia in olden days.

Talissa was right—worth a fortune.

Hesitantly, almost reverently, Ella's fingers touched the smooth surface of the stones, then closed around the dagger hilt. As she made contact, heated prickles ran along her spine from the contact, spreading throughout her body, creating a sense of unease when she pulled the blade free of the sheath. The wavy, curved steel blade shone as brightly as if it'd never been used. It looked so wickedly sharp she decided not to test it. Instead, she slipped the blade back into the sheath and took her hand off the hilt. The jingle of the bell alerted her that someone had entered the shop.

Tossing the discarded packing over the sheathed dagger, she went back into the outer room of the shop to greet the customer. "May I—?" She got that far before breaking off to stare in amazement at the man who stood at the counter, gazing into her eyes. She'd never seen such a delectable man in her life. Tall and broad-shouldered, tanned skin, hair as dark as jet, his rugged good looks were entirely masculine. His eyes, so deep a brown as to seem black, held her frozen in place.

"I'm Talal Aziz," he told her in a voice that resonated in her very bones. "I am the gift of the Talisman."

Gift? Somehow she found words. "Did the lawyer send you?"

"No one sent me. I follow the Talisman. It is here, so I am."

Ella wasn't often at a loss, but she couldn't process what the exotic stranger was saying to her. How could he know about the Talisman? Talissa was the only other person locally aware of the legacy and she wasn't a gossip. Besides, she certainly didn't know this man.

Possibly he'd heard about this in New Hampshire. Lawyers usually were close-mouthed to a fault, but... "Did you know my great-uncle?" she asked.

"Alas, I had not the honor."

"Where *did* you come from then?" Ella demanded.

He smiled, further devastating her. “I came when I was called by the former Guardian, who was relieved of her duty when your uncle died. The rule is—a new owner, a new Guardian.

“Gift, Guardian—I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Your great-uncle told you nothing, then? Unfortunate. Believing is essential to our union.”

She frowned at him. “What do you mean—union?”

“The Keeper and the Guardian must work together to preserve the Talisman.”

Ella drew herself up. “Look, Mr. Aziz, I don’t understand this. You’re a total stranger, yet you come into my store and expect me to believe you’re a gift to me, and that we’re supposed to become working partners? I don’t think so.”

“Your hair is like flame. Beautiful.”



"Bloodstone Legacy"
{The Saurian Series, Book 2}
by Cassie Walder (Dame Bloodstone)
Excerpt

©Cassie Walder

Chapter 1

Mina Dracosdautter supervised the firing of the great brick ovens in the community kitchens of the Holy City. Soup simmered in great cauldrons, coals banked under each. The bread for dinner would go onto the stone hearths just as soon as the ovens came to temperature. The mouthwatering scent of whole grains, malt and yeast would spread through the complex.

She wished she could give the People more than bread and soup for dinner. Yet the Servants had decreed this Season of Darkness to be a Solemn Fast. Their leaders could do little else. After two Seasons of Light in a row with small harvests, the People knew food to be precious. There was no hiding that fact from anyone. Fasting, taking one small meal every second turn of the great Temple glass, was an austerity measure

acceptable to the People. They wouldn't take it quite so calmly if they learned the entire city was now maintained solely by Mina's peculiar gift as a Maker and that their storerooms and warehouses were bare. Only she and the Servants knew that.

Mina couldn't shake the feeling that something was seriously wrong. There was too much pain in the air, too much anxiety, even outright terror. Mina felt the evil grow moment by moment. Still, she didn't know the cause. Since the emergency bells hadn't rung, she tried to dismiss her feelings as an overactive imagination.

"Mother Mina!" Ravenna Liamsdautter ran into the kitchen. "Light save us, Mother! We are lost."

"This is not how an acolyte of the Temple reports to a member of the Priesthood, regardless of the provocation. Now speak calmly to me of your concern, so I may understand and act."

"The beasts attack. They've breached the gates! They're inside the City, maybe even inside the Temple. The People of Light are dying, being eaten alive in the streets by the beasts."

Mina swallowed hard. Fear choked her. In the hundreds of cycles since the Holy City was built, this was the first time that the beasts had breached their defenses, actually coming past the gates and inside the walls. There would be an investigation, if any of them survived, to find out how this had happened, who among the priesthood had failed in his or her duty to protect the people.

She'd fought the animals before. Many times. Long ago, when eclipses had sent sudden Darkness upon them, the beasts, taking the transitory gloom for the beginning of the Season of Darkness, had come out from their deep, dark places in the rock. Always, when they came, it reminded her of great swarms of insects, feeding ravenously upon whatever living flesh they found: lemma, bova, any other game or tame animal, and even Heitans. Then only the return of Light at the end of the eclipse had stopped the attacks. That was why the Holy City was always well lighted in the Season of Darkness, with no shadows permitted along the outer walls, no avenues for them to exploit to gain entrance into the City.

Clearly, someone had failed to maintain the light at his or her post. That priest had likely already paid the price for his or her failure in becoming a meal for one or more of the Creatures of Darkness. The whole City would go that way unless these animals could be stopped.

Mina pushed her fear aside. She fully understood the panic felt by the younger woman. Action must be taken immediately. None of them, least of all her, could afford to be immobilized by fear.

After drawing a deep, calming breath, Mina said, “No time to lose. Pitch and arrows.”

“We can’t get to the Armory. The beasts have cut us off.”

Mina prayed on a breath, “Light, help us!”

“We’re dead, Mother,” Ravenna said.

The members of the kitchen staff nearly all spoke at once, making it impossible to be heard.

Mina whistled them into silence. She shook her head. “I have crossbows and bolts, oil, cloth, pitch, naphtha and fire. Torches. We will take the fight to them and purge the Holy City of their presence.”

“Can we, Mother?” Karl Nielssen, a novice member of the kitchen staff, asked.

“We must, Novice. This is survival,” Mina said. “Postulants, novices, and professed will go out to do battle with the creatures. The laity will remain behind locked doors with Acolyte Ravenna.”

“I can fight,” Ravenna replied.

“No. The laity needs leadership. Under obedience, I order you to stay here and serve as you are instructed. Protect the laity. This is the best way for you to serve.”

“Aye, Mother,” Ravenna said as she bowed her head in obedience.

“Each of the rest of us will take a cart, with a footed cauldron containing burning naphtha. Place cauldrons on the carts. I’ll be back in a moment with everything else we need. Torches and the cauldrons will cast enough light to keep the beasts off us as we fight them. We’ll be more effective spreading out and taking the City back one street at a time. May Light defend us.”

“Blessed be Light!” the Temple staff replied. Fear caused many a voice to tremble. Mina couldn’t blame them at all. A certain amount of fear was a good thing when facing the beasts. The trick was to control the fear instead of letting it control their actions.

She went alone to the empty warehouse. Taking the only set of keys from her belt, she entered the building. She closed her eyes and visualized several large carts full of all the weapons and torches they'd need for the coming battle. She made torches and mounting brackets, spears, crossbows, bolts with the heads wrapped in pitch-permeated cloth, and many clay jars of naphtha.

No one would be allowed to harm her people. No one. Least of all those animals. Whatever she had to do, she'd stop them. *Light, grant us strength*, she prayed.



"Revenge in Amethyst"
{Adventures in Amethyst Series, Story 2}
by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)
Excerpt

©Karen Wiesner

Chapter 1

“What do you think of planting the garden here?” Scott asked once they'd cleared the backyard of dead brush, branches, and many years' accumulation of leaves. Some of the maple, oak and pine trees, along with the lone willow, were dying or overgrown. They'd have to cut them back once the debris from the main yard surrounding their cabin had been burned.

It'd taken a month and a half of working together to make the rundown cabin Scott Romero and Melina Rose's dream house. Their relationship was still so new and overwhelming, they often became amorously distracted by each other while they worked up a sweat fixing the house. Just looking at Scott—covered in dirt, dried leaves in his reckless, russet brown hair from the morning of hard labor—Melina wanted to take an early lunch. She hadn't had a decent nibble of him since early that morning.

“I never thought I'd have a garden of my own,” she said with a lump in her throat.

She'd been in an overemotional state for some time now—at least since she came home to the small town of Amethyst, Wisconsin, where she and Scott had grown up. They'd both returned home, prodigal children. The instant Melina saw her sister Lona's old boyfriend—the drop-dead sexy and sweet Scott “Romeo” Romero—in the very cabin she'd decided to purchase herself, she knew her life would change radically. And it had. Never before had she fallen for someone so fast and strong. But then, after years of

having a crush on him before he dropped Lona and ran for his life after high school, it seemed like heaven itself had designed for them to be together.

Scott walked over to her, all rangy hips and muscles, and she couldn't wait for him to hold her. He stopped only long enough to remove a cluster of dried leaves from her orange curls before he drew her into his embrace.

“Aw man, you two gonna be kissin' all day again?” four-year-old Devlin groaned from the patch of lawn he cleared. He was Scott's cousin's son. She and Scott watched him during the day while Sheila worked.

Finding even a few minutes to be alone together wasn't easy, despite...or because...of Dev's independent spirit. He had a tendency to find trouble a bit too easily—usually with the local wildlife he wanted to adopt as domesticated pets.

Before any of them could say anything, a cherry red Corvette pulled into the clearing in front of the house and parked beside Scott's pickup. He made a face of dread, recognizing the audacious vehicle as surely as Melina did.

What was Lona doing here? Especially after her desperate and foolish antics at their engagement reception two weeks earlier? They'd invited the whole town—all seventy-five year round citizens—to the shindig. As much as Melina had wanted to reconsider inviting her sister, she knew she needed to make peace with her family. She and her father had reconciled prior to the engagement party, and they'd become closer than ever before. Her father told her recently that, when she left home at the age of eighteen, he hadn't had the courage to admit his regret in the annual Christmas cards they exchanged—their only correspondence—while she lived in New York. She'd certainly been too busy with her successful career as the nationally acclaimed sex therapist and bestselling self-help author Dr. Mindy Rose to consider things had changed back home.

“I'll talk to her,” Melina murmured to Scott, knowing he wouldn't want to be within a hundred miles of her sister.

She set down her rake and strode over to her sister's car in an effort to head her off from seeking out Scott, if that was Lona's intention in coming here.

“What are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be attending to Divorce #2?” she asked when Lona slipped out of her car with a cigarette in hand. As usual, she'd underdressed for the occasion. Both top and bottom were far too tight and revealing. Melina conceded that she'd managed to hold onto her killer figure, but then she suspected the vindictiveness of her current divorce made her sister forget meals and appetite.

“Dad keeps saying we should reconcile,” Lona said in an airily, *isn't-it-stupid?* tone before she looked past Melina at Scott and Dev now back at work in the yard.

“You came here to reconcile?” Melina confirmed in disbelief. *More like you're worried you'll lose your place as Daddy's girl.*

Lona glanced at her with her designer sunglasses in place. “You’re the one who disappeared for seventeen years, little sister,” Lona said in a defensive voice that didn’t reveal her true intentions.

Because Lona’s gaze lingered on Scott again, Melina offered reluctantly, “Do you want some iced tea?”

Her sister’s answer was to slam the driver’s door and follow her into the luxurious cabin. She muttered something under her breath, making Melina wonder if their father had mentioned to her how much time—and money—she and Scott had put into their love nest. The cabin had gone from a junk heap to a luxurious yet cozy home with every conceivable convenience. They’d spared no expense, and why shouldn’t they? The success of their prior careers allowed them at least that much.

The expression on her sister’s face progressed to decidedly sour by the time they reached the kitchen and Melina had poured them each tall glasses of iced tea. Lona kept glancing around the kitchen and family room beyond with plush, woodsy furniture and an immense fieldstone fireplace they’d restored to its former glory.

“Well, you certainly didn’t come home to live quietly, did you?” Lona said, her lips twisting jealously.

“Actually, I did.”

Lona hooted at that. “*This is not* inconspicuous, dear sister.” Lona cast another spiteful gaze around. “I’m not shittin’ you, darlin’. You’ve increased the value of this property to well over a hundred thousand. At least. You’ll never be able to sell it for what it’s worth now when you move.”

As a real estate agent, Lona would know.

Melina shrugged. “With the town’s push for tourists, I think we could sell it if we really wanted to. But Scott and I intend to live here together with a family for a very long time.”

Lona had removed her dark shades, and now faced her with glaring pity. “That’s what I thought when I got married. Both times.”

“Did you?” While her tone remained friendly, they both knew Lona didn’t commit to anything for the long haul.

“I still don’t understand why you came back,” Lona said, sweeping her long, over-styled and dyed hair back over her shoulder. Then she picked up the frosted glass of iced tea and sipped. As soon as she set it down again, she went on. “You had a good set-up in New York. You could’ve had any man you wanted. What could possibly have convinced you to come back to this shit-hole in the middle of nowhere to marry a loser?”

Oh, she had nerve. “Scott’s not a loser, and you know that as well as I do, after your unsuccessful attempt to steal him back.”

In a Sunday school room at the Baptist church in town, which was the only building large enough for the engagement party, Lona had tried to seduce Scott. Failing at that, she’d decided to follow up Melina and Scott’s April Fool’s Day wedding announcement and open invitation to town members to attend with one of her own. Lona had publicly objected to the engagement and upcoming wedding on the ridiculous grounds that Scott was still in love with her, not Melina. After a suspended moment of silence where she held the attention of every person in the building, everybody turned away guffawing while one person shouted “Sour grapes!” in response. Lona had stalked out of the church without the slightest notice of the townspeople—definitely not a situation she was accustomed to.

“I didn’t intend anything to happen when I came back here,” Melina continued. “I didn’t know he’d be here. Everything just...unfolded. And it didn’t take me more than a second to know it’s everything I want.” Why was she trying to justify herself to her sister anyway? Lona would mock her for it. *And I don’t give a damn what her opinion is anyway.*

Scott had assured her he’d never been in love with Lona, despite everyone in town’s assumption to that end. In the two years they’d dated as teenagers, Lona apparently threatened to kill herself each time he told her he wanted to break up with her. When the offer of a scholarship came, he’d taken it and never looked back—until two months ago, when injuries from his football career and what should have been a deadly car accident turned his thoughts to home and ‘smelling the roses.’

If she’d had any lingering doubts about Scott’s love for her, they’d vanished when he *laughed* at her sister’s silly attempts to woo him back. Remembering she wasn’t a gawky, pumpkin-haired giraffe of a kid anymore wasn’t easy for Melina. But Lona could no longer qualify as the uncontested beauty queen of Amethyst either. Too many people saw her for who she was and had grown disillusioned. Besides, at age thirty-nine, the years hadn’t been terribly kind to Lona, despite years of pampering herself with cash readily provided by her string of admirers. Wrinkles, shadows and dark spots she tried hard to

cover up with excessive make-up told of her fall from grace. Even as Melina scolded herself for being pleased about it, she couldn't seem to help it.

Lona shook her head as if Melina's defensive spiel about Scott and her choices had been gibberish to her. "What was that you mentioned at the engagement shindig anyway? Asking the town to hide you here and not reveal that you're *the* Dr. Mindy Rose, gone underground. You were as famous as Dr. Ruth, for Pete's sake! Why would you give it up? You're even stupider than I thought."

Expecting her sister to understand that her job counseling people with sexual obsessions, deviations and sick lusts had turned her into a head-case herself was plain stupid. How could expect a self-centered person like Lona to understand that she'd gotten to the point where she couldn't connect with people for fear of having them open up to her and get too close. When she was alone and unguarded, even then she couldn't find peace. She closed her eyes and the nightmares—in some cases, realities—her patients told her about filled her mind with horror.

Even now, eight weeks after returning to Amethyst, her panic attacks hadn't gone away. If anything, they seemed to return more often. The twisted words spoken by her patients came to her in transcripts, like those she'd recorded during sessions and gone over countless times to write her books. Sometimes every single sentence of the memories came back to her in transcript. She could hear them as they played themselves out in scarlet color behind her eyes. Her lack of control seemed to coincide with her overemotional state lately. She'd tried to hide it from Scott, but she knew he continued to worry about her the way he had the first time she had a panic attack while inside a nightmare. She frequently woke both of them with her screaming.

"I wasn't happy with my career, no matter how successful it was," Melina murmured, her stomach rolling and churning the way it had been a lot of late. Cold sweat and fatigue washed over her.

"Did it make you happy, betraying me?" Lona asked, lighting a new cigarette that increased the nausea Melina felt. "I mean, we've never been close, no shit, but it's an unspoken rule that you don't betray a sister."

Impatiently, Melina demanded, "Betray you? When did I do that?" Her voice sounded far away and weak, even to her own ears.

"You, with Scott. You knew how I felt about him. He's the only... Well, no one else has compared to him since."

"Oh, don't you dare give me that! Scott left Amethyst twenty-two years ago, Lona. Don't even try to make me believe you've harbored a thing for him all this time. He dumped

you because you treated him like crap. Those two years together, you manipulated and schemed and threatened him to get what you wanted. What part of that was supposed to enamor him to you? All he wanted to do was escape. And he never looked back either. He was relieved to be rid of you.”

“He loved me. He would have done anything for me. He was completely obsessed with me. His parents forced him to take the scholarship. If they hadn’t, we’d be married now.”

“You live in a dream world where you’re the queen, Lona. You always have. But it’s time to face facts. Scott was obsessed with the sex you so freely gave him. What teenage boy wouldn’t be? You were the only girl in town who’d put out. It had nothing to do with you personally, Lona. Trust me, anyone would have done just as well or better—without your constant load of complaints.”

Melina’s mouth filled with excessive saliva, and she knew she had to get out of here soon. But all the rage she’d kept pent up for years seemed to want to come out. Why did Lona seem to need to shatter her confidence at every turn? This time, Melina couldn’t stop herself from speaking her mind. “No one wants to be with someone who threatens to kill herself if dumped. It’s the only reason Scott stayed with you.” She snorted in unladylike scorn. “Anyone else would have known you only loved yourself. You’d never harm a head on your own precious head.”

“He told you about that?” Lona asked, unwilling embarrassment filling her flushed face.

“He told me everything. He loves me now, Lona, completely. And you can’t have him.”

Lona’s overgenerous top lip curled in derision. “I always knew you had the hots for him, even when you were a geeky ten-year-old with buck teeth and a million freckles.”

Shutting her mouth—and not simply because she felt she could easily barf if she opened it—Melina cast her gaze away from her sister. Only Lona could make her feel so worthless. Striking back at her this way wasn’t helping her own conscience either. The past was gone. None of this mattered. Silly as it sounded after her own cruel words, she wanted to reconcile with her sister, even if they never became close. She didn’t want any more regrets in her life.

“So you admit you’ve betrayed me,” Lona said triumphantly. “And how could we ever be anything like friends with that between us?”

Melina didn’t have it in her to respond at the moment. Her nausea had gone from mild seasickness to a hurricane rolling through her stomach. When Lona stood with a huff and stalked out of the kitchen on her ridiculous five-inch stiletto heels, Melina made no effort to restrain her. She rushed upstairs and into the master bathroom. The big, healthy

breakfast she and Scott prepared and consumed together, in preparation for a labor-intensive morning, left her violently.

Afterward, she lay weakly on the wood floor, not sure if she felt better or worse. But she knew Scott would come looking for her if she didn't go out soon. Dragging herself up, she saw through the window Scott in the yard below, wielding an oversized branch as if to keep Lona back if she tried anything. Melina watched his expression of impatience until her obviously displeased sister finally left them in peace.

I returned home, but I never expected everything to be perfect even after things unfolded in the unanticipated way they did. Lona and I have always been at odds—nice way to put it. Why would time change that?

More tired than before, she washed her face and brushed her teeth, taking care not to upset her stomach again. She heard Scott's distinctive footsteps enter their bedroom once she turned off the water. At the bathroom door, she took in the sight of him with the usual—but far from mild—zing of giddiness.

He loved *her*. He proved that in every glance, every word, every deed. Right now, she was in need of a little reassurance.

"I need a shower. And not just from clearin' brush," he said as she came to him.

He didn't enjoy seeing Lona, nor interacting with her, but he'd offered Melina the assurance that he'd tolerate her for the sole reason that they were sisters.

Boldly, she moved into his arms, and he didn't disappoint her with his earlier promise of a soul-deep kiss. It wasn't long at all before she wanted him so badly, she could hardly keep from begging him. But Dev was nearby. When he napped later...

"You all right, honey?" Scott asked, his forehead against hers after they broke apart, both gasping for breath. She wondered if he tasted the toothpaste she just used. "You look pale. Lona upset you that bad?"

Her arms wrapped around his neck so he couldn't get away from her, she murmured, "Uh-uh."

"You got sick again? Third time in as many days, isn't it?" Concern filled his expression.

She closed her eyes for a second, breathing in his scent, soaking up his presence and so-perfect love for her. "We haven't exactly been careful since we met up on Valentine's Day after almost two decades apart," she said in a soft voice, pressing butterfly kisses to his mouth and chin. "How would you feel about...?"

“A little cupid addition to our family?”

She let out an abundant exhale. “Yeah.”

The effect of his grin worked its way from her giddy head straight to her curling tiptoes.

“I’m in for the whole package with you, Melina Rose-soon-to-be-Romero. Bring it on.”

Giggling, she tightened her arms around him and kissed him happily.

He slid his hands up and down her sides, so close but not close enough to her breasts, clearly wanting to do much more that would satisfy their growing hunger for each other, but aware they couldn’t right now. Dev was waiting, would be calling... “How many cupids you think you’re up for?” he growled in her ear.

“As many as the Big Guy gives us.”

“Mhm, sounds like a plan.”

His mouth covered hers again, and she opened herself to him...a heartbeat from giving herself completely when the phone rang.

For the last year, Amethyst had put everything behind making their town a major summer tourist attraction. The job of developing a string of tourist cabins had gone out for bid only a few weeks ago and Scott’s uncle Jake had thrown his local construction company into the mix. He fully expected to get the job. If he did, Scott wanted to work beside his uncle the way he’d imagined himself doing as kid, before football became his life.

Although they hadn’t completed the landscaping around their home, Melina thought she could handle it alone while he worked the ten hour days required to complete the cabin development. The work needed to be done before summer was upon them and the tourists poured in, making Amethyst’s population surge from a mere seventy-five to seventy-five *hundred* or more.

“Go,” she insisted, pushing him toward the phone on the nightstand. “And I’ll go make sure Dev doesn’t try to kidnap that baby raccoon we saw with its mother in the dead oak tree.”



"The Tanzanite Curse"
by C.J. Winters (Dame Tanzanite)
Excerpt

©C.J. Winters

Prologue

In the darkness of her elegant bedroom, the old woman felt cool hands on her neck, lifting her head from the pillow. The pendant chain caught her hair as it was dragged over her head. Disabled and left speechless by a stroke, she made a futile grasp for the precious jewel.

My treasure!

She'd vowed to her husband never to take off the forty-one carat, square-cut tanzanite, his gift on their sixtieth—and last—anniversary.

In her mind, she shouted at the thief, *You are cursed! The thing you love best will be stolen from you!*

* * * *

Branson, Missouri
October, 1985

"A curse isn't like an antique," Bethany Appleton said, an edge of concern on her words. "It doesn't have to be a hundred years old to qualify as such."

Jillian Beaufort smiled indulgently at her friend. "That's one way we're different. You're superstitious and I'm not."

"If Archie Canther is including your tanzanite in his book about cursed stones, there must be something to the legend."

"I bought it as an investment, like a stock or a piece of rental property. I probably won't wear it half a dozen times. Surely it can't hurt me from the safety deposit box."

"How about the Hope diamond? It's supposed to be cursed."

"Hype to hike the price." Jillian glanced down at her pendant, a thirty-nine carat, cushion-cut tanzanite set in glittering white gold. Part of its appeal for her was that, as a

child, her eyes had been the blue-violet of the gem. In thirty-nine years, however, those eyes had lightened to a far less interesting gray-blue. “And even if this is the largest tanzanite of the best color, its value doesn’t compare to the Hope.”

Bethany giggled. “Or the Taylor-Burton diamond?”

“I’m not Elizabeth Taylor, and believe me, my ex-husband is no Richard Burton!”

“Okay, I’ll leave your destiny up to you.” Bethany stood up. “I’d like to stay and meet Canther, but I have to pick up the kids and distribute them to dance class, karate and soccer.” She glanced behind her. “I think I’m developing my own bucket seat.”

“Still,” Jillian said, sighing, “I envy you your family life. You’d think in exchange for all the grief Alan caused me, the least he could’ve done was impregnate me.”

Bethany gave her shoulder a sympathetic pat. “Look at it this way. A kid of his might’ve been a chip off the old rotten block.” She indicated the tanzanite. “Besides, if that trinket is any indication, you did well in the divorce settlement.”

“That I did.” Jillian’s mouth set in a grim line. “I can’t sleep with money, but I admit it’s some consolation for a woman scorned.”

When she’d seen her friend out, Jillian barely had time to smooth her short dark hair and apply fresh lipstick before her expected visitor rang the bell. Days after she’d purchased the tanzanite, Archie Canther sent her a personal note, inviting her to his booksigning in Branson and asking her to have dinner with him afterward. He said he was doing research for a future book and hoped she would help him. Intrigued, she’d met him and learned about the proposed book, *These Cursed Stones*. Now he’d come to interview her in more detail.

A taxi pulled away from the curb as she opened the door to *two* men. Standing beside the short, stout author, a trim, middle-aged man of her own height appraised her with dark eyes.

“Come in,” she said. “Mr. Canther, you’re looking well. Your portrait on the jacket of your latest novel is very distinguished.”

Still puffing from the exertion of climbing the steps to the porch of her contemporary home, the author produced the cherubic smile that had charmed two generations of his readers. “Kind of you to say so, Miz Beaufort,” he said in his famous soft drawl. “Took me two days to get all the makeup off!” He turned to his companion. “This is my research associate, Drew Ferris. He threatened to quit if I didn’t bring him along.”

Ferris grinned. “Nothing like getting the boss to pay for a little vacation. I’ve never visited this area.”

“Are either of you hungry?” Jillian asked. “I can make sandwiches in a couple of minutes.”

“Ma’am, you’re psychic—we’re famished!” Canther said. “Our plane was so late we had to run to make the connection, and I’m allergic to Ozark Air’s coconut cookies.”

“Follow me,” she said, smiling. “There isn’t a coconut palm on the place.”