



TALES FROM THE TREASURE TROVE, Volume II EXCERPTS

"Heart of Obsidian" {Angels on Patrol Series} by Michele Bardsley (Dame Obsidian)

"Misbehavin' in Moonstone" {Mischief in Moonstone Series} by Christine DeSmet
(Dame Moonstone)

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

"For the Love of Sapphire" by Nancy Pirri (Dame Sapphire)

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

"The Amethyst Star" by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)



"Heart of Obsidian" {Angels on Patrol Series} by Michele Bardsley (Dame Obsidian) Excerpt

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Prologue

Valentine's Day

Sophie Malloy floated toward the light. The unbearable pain, the urgent voices, the clang and beep of machines disappeared as she rose higher and higher. Freed from the mortal prison of her body, she laughed and spun, and zoomed toward the female figure waiting for her.

“Wait.” The gentle voice stilled Sophie’s joyful ephemeral dance. “Before you move into the next realm, I must ask one question. Is there anything you had wished to accomplish in your earthly life?”

Her life had been one filled with joy. She’d had money and love, and most important, had been surrounded by wonderful people. “I was blessed with a good life.”

“There is nothing?”

Sophie harbored one wish, one that had never been fulfilled. “I wanted to meet my soulmate,” she admitted. Thoughts of her brother and her sister drifted into her mind. They would miss her. And their lives...so busy, yet so empty. “Can I give my last wish to others?”

“It is allowed.”

“I want my brother and my sister to find their soulmates.”

“Your wish is granted. You will be allowed to guide your siblings in their quests for true love for one mortal year.”

Chapter 1

Max the Magnificent stood in the kitchen of Heart Dreams, the recently opened home for down-on-their-luck mothers. *What am I doing? I can't juggle. I can't ride the unicycle. I can't even wear the big shoes.* His younger brother Mark was the real Magnificent. He was at home battling a nasty cold by chugging Nyquil and popping Vitamin C. *And I'm here, a mechanic pretending to be a clown.* Right now, though, he didn't much look like one. He hadn't quite gotten up the nerve to put on the outrageous outfit his brother wore when he entertained at parties. And this party was a doozy—the first annual Haunted Hearts Spookapalooza had attracted Tulsa's glitterati. A crowd Max hadn't rubbed elbows with...ever.

He was shirtless—not in preparation for putting on the oversized polka-dot shirt, but because he'd splashed water all over his T-shirt in his effort to clean white grease paint off his face. He'd failed twice to get the clown make-up just right. *Screw it. I'll pay my brother to get out of this gig.*

“Where have you been?”

“I got soap in my eye,” he responded like a chastised school boy. Max turned, cupping his watering right eye. A raven-haired woman with a whiskey voice and pouting pink lips stood next to him.

“Oh.” Her gaze skittered over his bare chest.

“Sorry about the mess. The soap attacked me.”

She grinned. “So you’re not a stripper?”

Slack-jawed, Max blinked at her. “Uh...what kind of entertainer did you hire?”

“Relax. We don’t expect you to pop out of cake. But, right now, I need your psychic abilities.”

“My *what?*”

“My sister gave me an obsidian heart necklace, just before she—well, anyway, I’ve lost it. Marnie said that you have genuine abilities, and I’m desperate to find my heart.”



"Misbehavin' in Moonstone"
{Mischief in Moonstone Series}
by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone)
Excerpt

©Christine DeSmet

Chapter 1

“The men are missing.” Kirsten Peplinski stood in her white chef’s hat and apron staring at an empty restaurant on a Friday night. On a hot July evening, the place should’ve been filled with locals lapping up her bluegill special. “Don’t look at me that way, Crystal. Three afternoons and nights in a row—no men in Moonstone. No money in my register.”

With a cockeyed smile, Crystal Hagan, a redhead almost twenty years older than fair-haired Kirsten, clutched a stack of bridal magazines. “Kirstie, nobody’s been able to pass on your garlic mashed potatoes since you opened The Jingle Bell Inn last month. I heard

they're only fishing." But Kirsten had a bad feeling. She popped off her hat to run fingers through chin-length hair. "This much fishing? Is there a tournament?"

"Not that I know of, but you now how men can be."

"Unfortunately. That's why I prefer being busy."

Crystal laughed, settling in with her magazines at a maple table that normally held four paying customers by five o'clock. "Maybe you should go fishing. If Peter were back from Phoenix that's where I'd be. Since moving back to Wisconsin the man has become addicted to fishing. Recapturing a missed childhood."

Kirsten scrunched her starched hat. "They're boycotting my restaurant, aren't they? Because of..." She swallowed the secret that Crystal and only a precious few others knew. Kirsten had been born in Moonstone, but some unfortunate events during her teenage years had sent her packing. "What've they been saying about me around Moonstone?"

"I can't decide between sleeveless or cap sleeves. Do you think I'm too old for sleeveless?"

Groaning, Kirsten plopped down at the table. Ever since Crystal Hagan and Peter LeBarron had decided on a wedding date, all Kirsten could get out of her friend were lopsided grins, twinkles in her green eyes, and more effervescence than the Italian sodas Kirsten served.

"You're sure it's not about what happened back then?" She hadn't wanted to return to the village on the shores of Lake Superior, but her mother had insisted, threatening to have another heart attack. Thus, all three of the Peplinski women had returned to Moonstone, ring-leader Grandma included. Crystal ripped out a page picturing a veil. "Do you think a princess crown with the veil would be too pretentious?"

"You'll be a princess to your first-graders. Go for the crown."

"A crown it is."

Kirsten wished she could be that worry-free. The Jingle Bell Inn was located in what used to be the lavish dining hall of the historic mansion called the North Pole, a place replete with green roof, red trim, and creamy white siding. It got its name because elderly owner and upstairs resident Henri LeBarron had played Santa Claus for the town's Christmas celebrations for years. Henri was Peter's father. They'd given Kirsten a second chance at "doing good" in life. She didn't mind philanthropy. But now she'd fallen in love with the place. Its possibilities let her have dreams for the first time in her life.

The outdoor setting was as magical as the interior's polished oak floors with their inlaid designs. A sweeping yard hugged the craggy, Lake Superior shoreline. Tall pines and white birch rimmed the property. If the restaurant succeeded, she wanted to add a deck and patio for music and special events. But now that dream looked elusive. She was about to go out of business.

But because of fishing?

"Maybe my prices are too high."

Tisking at her, Crystal ripped out two more pages. "The trout are active on the Brule River, what with the mosquito hatch we've had."

It had to be something more. Kirsten's pride couldn't accept being beat by biting bugs. "Should I offer entertainment? I could clear the far corner for dancing."

"Don't even go there with your background."

Heat shimmied up Kirsten's neck and face. "You're right."

Somehow she had to win back the men. At twenty-five and fresh out of college, she was expected to fail. Refusing to succumb, she shot off the chair. "Can you watch things for me?" As if there was anything to watch.

"Where're you going?"

"I haven't a clue. To find the men and bring them back here."

Crystal held up a page again, green eyes going dewy. She wasn't going to be any help.

Kirsten swallowed her distress. "Wouldn't the sleeveless version be cold for a Christmas wedding?"

Crystal swooned. "Peter suggested taking advantage of the flower gardens out back that I've been restoring. Could you handle cooking for two hundred guests, say in a couple of weeks?"

Kirsten flinched. "Say what?"

"Okay, a month?"

Since Crystal would technically be her boss by marriage—soon, it appeared—Kirsten nodded, swallowing a whimper.

She hurried out and down the mansion's broad sidewalk. With hot sun slanting from the west, fighting through thick humidity, she almost ran headlong into the mayor's wife. Even the limpest hair stood up on the nape of Kirsten's neck.

Built like a bulldog never been denied a treat in its life, silver-haired Tootsie Winters blocked the sidewalk, panting. She'd stuffed herself into a red, flower-spangled sleeveless blouse and matching capris. "Good grief but it's hot. I heard eighty-five. Can you believe that? Right here next to the lake?"

Kirsten considered bolting. "Yeah, it's mighty hot, Mrs. Winters."

"What's on special? Bob already eating my share?"

"I think he's fishing."

Tootsie's jowls shook. "Again? He's been fishing for three days now."

"They've all been fishing. Haven't you noticed? And look there."

The town was so small they could see from one end of the main drag to the other. Cars glided by. Kirsten was tempted to lie down in the street in an attempt to get customers. "Nobody's stopped in the past three days."

"Damn fishing," Tootsie mused. "It's a religion here, just like Friday night fish fries. Did you change a recipe? I told Bob you were too young to handle this."

Too young? That was her concern? Not the rap sheet? But Tootsie was concerned about money. The five-person Chamber of Commerce had given a grant to Kirsten to help her buy restaurant equipment and start up Moonstone's first new business in years. Tootsie had argued that grants should go to people who had far more experience than a "college student cooking snooty food in a funny hat." Kirsten reminded her that a chef's hat was called a "toque." Tootsie hadn't liked it that her husband had voted for the "toque grant."

"I knew this would happen," Tootsie said. "People around here expect a cook to be professional looking."

Kirsten chewed on a lip to keep from talking. She had a tendency to say all the wrong things.

Tootsie prattled on. "Maybe you should put a perm in your straight hair, wear mascara. You can't really tell that you have eyelashes. Maybe you're freaking people out."

Her fingers coiled into fists, but Kirsten forced herself to relax. “I’ll try mascara. Thanks for the tip, Mrs. Winters. Is there anything going on in Duluth at the harbor? A fair? Maybe there’s a beer tent?”

“Not that I know of. Bob prefers brandy over beer. He hates loud music. That’s why he likes your place. It’s always dead.”

Kirsten choked that down as a compliment. “Excuse me, but I’ve got to find out why my regulars aren’t here.”

“I’ll come with. It’s not like Bob to miss a meal.” The older woman strutted her heft down the sidewalk ahead of Kirsten, taking command like the Pied Piper of Moonstone. “Rita might know what’s going on.”

Rita Johnson ran the post office which sat on a rocky lot west of the LeBarron mansion. Rita wasn’t there, so they headed across the town’s open square to the bar. All they found was a sign on the locked door: “Gone fishing. Back at ten p.m. –Lucas.”

Tootsie looked as perplexed as Kirsten. “Lucas is always open on Fridays. He has that special on brandy old-fashioned. Bob and I were coming here after dinner at your place. That’s another thing you need. A bar.”

Got it. Mascara and a bar. How about customers?

There was one more possibility—the hardware store on the corner, run by Rita Johnson’s husband, Greg. He sold live bait and fishing equipment. The lack of cars parked on the streets gave Kirsten little hope.

The place smelled of rope and twine, oil paint, and stale coffee, but no men. Kirsten would give anything to whiff a little cigar smoke, fish guts, and sweat.

Rita was alone at the counter putting orange sales tags on clear plastic bags of rubber worms. “Greg didn’t say where he was going. He called as I was locking up the post office and asked if I could fill in. I assume he’s picking up supplies in Duluth. We’re out of bug spray.”

Tootsie puffed, “Out of bug spray?! You can’t expect us all to wear long sleeves and pants in this weather. Those damn mosquitoes are killing me.”

“Toots, if you wouldn’t wear that dime store perfume you’d attract fewer mosquitoes and keep your husband close to you instead.”

Kirsten turned away so Tootsie wouldn’t see her smirk.

Tootsie ran a hand across her sweaty forehead. "I'm not the problem. It seems the men have up and gone fishing again."

"It's what we want them to do in summer," mused Rita, writing new prices on the tags.

Tootsie persisted, to Kirsten's surprise. "They haven't shown up for Kirstie's garlic mashed potatoes. As much as this pains me to say, they are pretty darn good. They don't even require gravy."

Rita put down the worms. "You know, this is odd. Every Friday night we go out for fish. They're fishing? Again?"

Kirsten nodded. "Henri was sitting out in his chair watching traffic and told me a guy waved from a truck and invited him to come along. Something about fishing being the new Viagra."

"Viagra?" yelped Tootsie. "Bob's heart can't handle that stuff."

Rita grunted. "You know, three fishing days in a row is a bit much. Greg wouldn't miss your pan-seared bluegills with the garlic mashed potatoes and cheddar cheesy muffins."

"With the blueberry pie and Kirsten's homemade vanilla ice cream."

Kirsten beamed in shock. "Thank you, Mrs. Winters. You sound as if you're on my side."

Tootsie squared her shoulders. "Having a restaurant here beats driving into Duluth. It's all about saving gas money."

"Of course." Kirsten wanted to mutter something about Tootsie not needing any more gas, but instead said to Rita, "Maybe Greg knows what's going on? Somebody must have stopped by today and said something."

"Good thought." Rita punched a button on her cell phone, then frowned. "That's odd. He must've turned his phone off. He never does that." Rita stared at the phone as if her husband would pop out.

Tootsie called her husband. She, too, got no answer. "Now I am concerned. Bob needs his food and pills on time to keep his blood pressure in check."

Kirsten offered, "Fishing's supposed to be relaxing."

"Bob doesn't need to relax. That's his problem," said Tootsie. "If he'd do more around the house, he'd lose weight. Did you know vacuuming is worth about three hundred

steps toward your ten-thousand a day? What's fishing? Ten steps to find a place to plop the beer cooler so you can sit and watch your bobber on the water."

Kirsten was saved from responding by the door flapping open.

Three frowning women sashayed in amid a whoosh of hot, humid air. Though Kirsten had seen them before in her restaurant, she didn't know their names. Tootsie introduced Jeri Kaminski, with long, blonde hair that Kirsten admired. The woman drove a bus when school was in session and had the muscular arms to go with the job. The petite, freckled brunette, Lily Bauer, wearing a string of pearls, was the head teller at the bank. Both maybe in their thirties, they wore conservative sundresses, too much makeup, and carried handbags that matched their dresses and sandals. The fiftyish, plump but curvaceous, dark-haired Margie Mueller wore a pink blouse with buttons bursting and matching pink pants. She managed the IGA grocery. Maybe looking like a giant strawberry was appropriate for a grocer. Kirsten hadn't socialized enough in Moonstone to know the fashion rules.

Jeri declared, "I thought our guys would be here. They were supposed to meet us at The Jingle Bell Inn. Don't tell me they're fishing again."

The comely Lily fingered her pearls. "We truly must stop this fishing thing. Three days without my man makes me itch."

Margie sniffled, fanning her generous cleavage. "Some blind date this has been so far. This is the last time I let you two do this to me. I even bought a new bra just in case."

In case of—? Kirsten didn't want to ask. "Maybe the guys are taking your blind date for a drink first before he meets you."

"He has to drink to get his courage to meet me?" Margie burst into tears, her bosom bouncing despite the new bra.

Kirsten wanted to evaporate. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it the way it sounded."

Little Lily stretched to pat Margie's ample shoulders. "Please don't cry. Think of your makeup."

Margie bawled louder. The women glared at Kirsten. In a panic she said, "All of you go over to the restaurant for a free dinner. Salad bar's ready. I'll get to the bottom of this and be back in a jiffy."

The women only stood there.

Kirsten's heart fell into her belly. "What's wrong? It's free food."

Jeri frowned. "You want us to go out on Friday night without our men? Kirk and I have been going out for fish on Friday nights together for years. We have our routine. Breaking it means our marriage is breaking."

Lily nodded. "Tom likes to eat early, then we do the hoochy-coo and go to bed by nine."

Did she wear her pearls for that, too?

Rita snapped her fingers. "Greg mentioned how the fishing had been picking up out on the lake. If there's a stiff wind, you know how easy it is to drift east to the casino in Port Cliff."

"Gambling?" Tootsie growled. "When I get my hands on him—"

Margie sucked back a sob. "I suppose I could meet my blind date at the casino for dinner instead of here."

"Ladies," Kirsten blurted, her brain racing. She couldn't lose them to a casino buffet, even though she'd heard good things about the woman who cooked there. "Go over to the Inn. Margie, I'll find your blind date. You're going to fall in love over my bluegills and garlic mashed potatoes. I guarantee it."

"I am?" Margie dabbed a tissue around her eyes.

"Fix your mascara and get ready to bat those eyelashes. You have lovely eyelashes."

"I do?"

Kirsten rushed out. She trotted back to the North Pole to get her car, then drove east out of Moonstone. Traffic was unusually heavy, which worried her. Maybe the casino's food was doing her in. She had driven only a couple of miles along the Lake Superior shoreline, though, before she discovered what had happened to Moonstone's men.

She slammed on the brakes.

Had she just seen...what she thought she saw?

She did a U-turn and pulled into a scenic lookout on a bluff overlooking the lake.

She grabbed her binoculars, got out, then paled at what she saw.

Was that legal?



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

©Liz Hunter

On the surface, calm reigned across Garnet Lake on this Monday morning. The rising sun peeked through the trees on the neighboring island, sending sparkles onto the water. LeeAnn shielded her eyes from the sudden glare and tucked her bare knees under her oversized shirt against the chill. Her dear, departed grandfather had always maintained that if the sun hit the lake just right, it colored the water garnet, hence the name for the lake. Grammy insisted that the change in color inevitably followed a mite too many drinks the night before, hence bloodshot eyes. In all the summers she'd spent here, LeeAnn had yet to witness his sunrise spectacle.

A dragonfly caught her attention, and just that quickly a long, lean pike leapt out of the water for the insect. A dead hit. A couple gulls fought over rights to a piling nearby, screeching at one another. Around the bend, the sound of a motor boat shattered the last of the morning's calm.

Hell, she may as well be in Chicago for all the peace and quiet she'd find here in Northern Wisconsin. She hadn't grasped sleep any easier than at home. She reached for her cup and found the coffee cold and bitter, a perfect match to her life.

About to head into the cabin for a fresh cup, she realized the motor boat she'd heard must be heading her way, though not necessarily stopping at her dock. She cupped her hands over her eyes to block the sun and stilled.

The boat, a classic Chris Craft, came in easy alongside the dock, and the driver handed her a line to secure the bow, while he nabbed a piling with the stern line.

"Well, I'll be... If it isn't Mike Hastings." She grinned so wide her face hurt.

He hopped onto the dock. "Hey, LeeAnn. You're lookin' mighty fine."

She melted inside with the pleasure of seeing him again after all these years. “You’re looking pretty good yourself.” Back when she knew him, ten years ago, he never wore anything beside cutoff jeans or swimming trunks. He hadn’t changed, apparently, judging by the cutoffs, but he had added a tee-shirt to hug his lean frame.

There was an awkward moment typical of old lovers when she wasn’t quite sure to offer her hand or a hug. He swept the hesitation away by pulling her into his arms in a bear hug. “Damn, it’s good to see you again.”

She clung to him and tears stung her eyes, only now realizing how much she’d missed him.

He pulled back to look at her. “I’m awfully sorry about your grandmother. She was one special lady.”

“Thanks, Mike. That means a lot to me. I’ll miss her.”

“Yeah, we all will.”

“I’m sorry about your loss, too. How tragic to lose your wife. She was so young.”

“Yeah, thanks. I got the son-of-a bitch who took her from me, though. He’ll never murder again.”

She remembered belatedly that Mike had killed the drug kingpin who was responsible for his wife’s death a year or so ago in Milwaukee. She’d been undercover in narcotics when her identity was compromised, and, once Mike achieved justice, he’d left the force. “And you have a daughter,” LeeAnn said.

“Yeah, she’s three and a half now, a real sweetheart.”

She was suddenly aware that their arms were still entwined, his heat warming her chilly skin. “I have a fresh pot of coffee inside. Can I offer you a cup?”

He seemed to notice their embrace, too, since he released his hold. “You couldn’t even boil water when I knew you.”

“It’s been a few years. I even learned how to fry an egg since then. Sound interesting?”

“Have you ever seen me refuse food?”

“So how was your motorcycle tour of Canada?” she asked on their short walk up the stone steps to the cabin. “You ride a Harley, right?”

“How’d you know?”

“Your mother mentioned it at the luncheon in the church hall after Grammy’s funeral.”

“Sorry I was away. I couldn’t get back in time for the funeral, but the trip was awesome. You would have loved it.”

“No I wouldn’t.” She laughed. “I like my creature comforts.”

“Then you’ve changed. You used to enjoy skinny dipping and sleeping out under the stars.”

She laughed again. “I don’t recall getting much sleep out there under the stars.”

Mike chuckled and opened the screen door for her. “That’s for sure. If our parents would have known…”

“They knew, all right. Why do you think my mother sent me to Europe for a year after I finished high school?” She indicated a chair at the table and poured coffee in two mugs. “Do you still use cream and sugar?”

“Sure do.”

She opened an overhead cabinet for creamer and sugar.

“Don’t bother with a pitcher. Just pour. I’m not that picky.”

LeeAnn did as he suggested and handed it over, and then pulled out skillet, eggs, ready-to-cook sausage links and bread for toast.

“Where are you staying?” she asked.

“In my parents’ guest cottage. Mom takes care of Abby when I’m not around, and I do their odd jobs and take care of the place when they travel. It works okay for now.” He took a sip of the coffee. “Mmm, good. So how long are you sticking around?”

Without pause she said, “I’m not sure. Grammy named me executor of her will, so I’ll need to stay long enough to get her affairs in order, at least. I want to get the cabin ready to put on the market, too.”

“I heard she left you the cabin. You really gonna sell?”

She shrugged. "What would I do with it? My life is in Chicago." *Or was, until last week.* Wasn't the saying, 'Bad things come in threes'? She'd had her limit. Surely the worst was behind her.

"Half the people around here are from Illinois," Mike said. "Besides, you know what they say, 'All work and no play makes Jill a dull girl.'"

"I don't know. I'll think about it." The skillet sizzled when she poured the beaten eggs in, adding cheesy potatoes someone had brought to the house. She could feed half the residents on the lake with the potluck all Grammy's friends and neighbors had dropped off. "So...do you know a good handyman?"

"Sure do."

Glancing at him over her shoulder, LeeAnn flipped the sausages and turned the eggs. "Yeah, but is he reliable and capable?"

"Would I lead you astray?"

She barked her answer. "You've done it before."



"For the Love of Sapphire"
by Nancy Pirri (Dame Sapphire)
Excerpt

©Nancy Pirri

St. Louis, Missouri
September 1877

"I'm sorry to have to ask you again, Sis, but, as I said in my letter, I need money."

"Good heavens, Georgie," Sapphire Jameson replied, glaring at her brother. "What have you done?"

"Uh, Sapphire? Call me George. I'm too old for Georgie."

She smoothed her russet-colored skirts as she sat in the parlor of their family home. "Until you show me some measure of maturity, you will remain Georgie. Tell me what happened."

He paced the floor, tugging at his shirt collar nervously the whole time. "I'm not quite sure where to begin."

"From the beginning is usually a good place."

He grimaced. "I drank too much and lost everything playing cards."

"What do you mean by *everything*? Be specific, and to whom?"

"Oh, damn, you're not going to be happy to hear this."

She sighed. "I suppose I won't, but you did write to me and ask me to travel over a thousand miles to help you."

"I've lost what little I had left of my inheritance to Patrick Falconer. Even if I hadn't, it wasn't enough to cover the debt. Which is why I'm asking you for help."

Sapphire placed her fingers against the racing pulse in her neck. "Patrick, you said?"

He nodded.

Heat seeped into the core of her as she thought about her ex-fiancé; thought about his tall, dark good looks, his charm. Oh, yes, Patrick could charm a woman. But he was also one of the worst pranksters she'd ever met. Sapphire thought of the tricks he and her brother played on her over the years. As a boy, Patrick could brew up a barrel of trouble and her brother happily followed in the older boy's footsteps. To have to face Patrick again would be difficult, but she had no choice.

She'd come to help George, even giving up her teaching position at Aimes Academy for Young Ladies in Upstate New York. Nothing had changed; she'd always made sacrifices for him. He was her baby brother, whom she adored, yet she knew it was long past time he grew up. At twenty-four, he should be mature. Heavens, he should be *married* by now with children in his nursery. *Now who's calling the kettle black? I should be married as well.*

"Well, there's nothing we can do but pay him a visit and see if we can arrange some sort of repayment schedule," she said sensibly.

George pulled out his pocket watch and frowned. "Let me see if I can catch up with him tonight." As he headed for the door, he said over his shoulder, "Thank you, Sis. I'll be forever in your debt."

Didn't she know it!

After he left, she rose from the divan and moved to one of the many windows in the parlor. Staring blindly into the night, memories flooded her, particularly those of her and Patrick's courtship and subsequent engagement eight years ago. They'd been so in love...until she'd heard accusations that Patrick had impregnated a past sweetheart, Virginia Pettigrew—one of St. Louis's wealthiest heiresses. Sapphire found herself convinced the gossip-mongers were to be believed instead of Patrick, and she broke off their engagement. Only later had she discovered the mistake she'd made in not believing him.

She'd fled St. Louis and moved to New York. There she'd used her inheritance to put herself through school at Wells Women's College, earning a teaching degree. After graduation, she'd secured a teaching position in Upstate New York. Much of her remaining inheritance she'd contributed to George's education to become a lawyer. She managed to live modestly on her teacher's pay and had little in savings.

Patrick had appeared at her school several times in the first few months after she'd left home, begging her to reconsider and marry him, explaining how it had all been a terrible mistake. Each time she'd informed him she never wanted to see him again.

Several months later, George contacted her and told her how Patrick had been wrongly accused. The true father had stepped forward to claim Virginia's child as his own. Patrick had been socially exonerated. He'd appeared on her doorstep each summer, during his travels to New York on business, but she'd been too humiliated to receive him. It was all her own doing, she knew. If she couldn't believe in him before they married, how could she afterwards?

At twenty-eight, she was a spinster-schoolteacher, living a lonely existence. After Patrick, she hadn't sought to be courted again, though she'd had invitations. She was convinced she'd never find a love like theirs again.

She chewed on her lower lip as she swept away from the window and paced back and forth across the red and gold-patterned carpeting, growing more agitated by the minute when she thought about her brother's irresponsible behavior. She'd helped him out far too many times. This would be the last.



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

©Jane Toombs

The waxing moon shed enough light so Raoul Dekalb could see he was naked. No wonder he was shivering. May nights in this north country were none too warm. Bad enough it had happened to him once. Twice was unthinkable. What the hell was wrong with him? The last he remembered was getting out of his kayak and pulling it up on the beach. Now here he was by that old Victorian house on the point just like last time. He'd heard the old woman who owned it had died last month, though right now a light shone from an upper window. He turned away, heading for where he'd left the kayak, hoping he'd find his clothes there like before. Naked left a guy feeling far too vulnerable.

Raoul reached the kayak, breathing a sigh of relief as he gathered the scattered clothes. He dressed quickly, thankful that he'd been in this remote spot both times when it happened. The Michigan Department of Natural Resources would take a dim view of somebody calling to tell them one of their officers had been seen wandering around naked in the night.

Checking his watch with his flashlight, he saw he'd been out of contact with himself for almost two hours. Just like before.

He knew why he'd come here, but the reason had nothing to do with his—his *what?* Affliction? Yeah, that word would do. He'd come during the day to check out two reports of a strange animal—a critter the first guy had called it—in the woods near here. He'd found nothing. The second report had come from teenagers who'd parked in the Victorian house driveway to make out—probably aware the old lady had died. The kids got nervous when they heard a “scary” noise, looked out and saw “something big with a long tail.”

Raoul believed they'd seen a wolf. Since it was his duty to check the area, he'd decided to use the kayak at night to keep from spooking the “critter.” Little danger of a wolf, or even a pack, attacking a man. He'd brought his gun just in case, anyway.

Yeah, and left it with his cast-off clothing. Real smart move. So what made him strip and wiped out his awareness of what he was doing for two hours? Raoul didn't like the gaping hole in his memory at all.

Should he go to a doctor? What good would that do when he felt fine? Besides he'd had his annual physical just two weeks before the first naked episode. By then his hair had grown enough to cover the scar on the back of his head from last winter's snowmobile accident. The doc was pleased to hear his headaches had finally disappeared and had given Raoul a clean slate.

Pushing the kayak into shallow water, he climbed in and paddled toward home, telling himself to stick to daylight in the future—and stay home nights.

* * * *

Sunlight creeping around the edges of the old-fashioned window shades in her bedroom roused Olivia Sumner from sleep. She stared at the shades uncomprehendingly until reality set in. Not California, but Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Her great-aunt's Victorian house. No, *her* house now. Great-aunt Olivia was dead, the house willed to her namesake. Her great-aunt would never know how desperately Olivia had needed this unexpected legacy.

Still suffering from jet lag, she forced herself out of bed and stood in the shower until she felt awake enough to face the day. Her second day in this house that was now *her* home and would be for the foreseeable future. If she could find the money to keep it up. And she would. Somehow. She pulled on jeans and a bright red T-shirt before going downstairs to fix breakfast.

Olivia had just started to pour a second cup of coffee when the doorbell chimed. The cuckoo clock on the kitchen wall said it wasn't quite nine. Early. And she certainly wasn't expecting anyone. As she hurried to open the front door, she heard the cuckoo begin his count down. An attractive thirtyish red-haired woman stood on the porch holding an animal carrier.

"Hi, I'm Ella Rose," she said. "You must be Olivia's niece. I was a friend of your great-aunt."

Olivia invited her in, leading the way to the kitchen. Ella set the carrier on a chair, opened it, and an odd-looking black and white cat shot out. It immediately leaped onto a counter and, from there, to the top of a cupboard where it stared down at the two women.

"Mask belonged to your great-aunt," Ella said. "I meant well when I said I'd take him, but he and my Monster don't get along. Frankly, it's been hell. I brought all his paraphernalia back with him. It's on the porch. I do hope you like cats."

Olivia looked up at Mask, noting his totally black head and all-white body while his green gaze assessed her. "I didn't know my great-aunt had a cat."

No pets had been allowed in their Sacramento apartment. Even if they had been, her ex-husband, Peter, couldn't stand cats.

“They do tend to be territorial animals,” Ella said. “I think Mask will be fine now that he’s home. He really is a lover. Which my Monster didn’t appreciate at all. I belong to her, so in her opinion, Mask had no right to my lap. He’s a house cat, not used to the outdoors. I wouldn’t let him out anyway, since there’s been some talk that a cougar’s been sighted around here. Not that the DNR will admit there are any in the U.P.”

“I’m glad to have Mask. He’ll be company for me. Please stay awhile. I’ll pour you some fresh coffee.”

“Thanks, but I can’t stay. I’m dropping Mask off on my way to work.”

“What do you do?”

“I’m a certified appraiser for Rose and Rose, Assayers and Appraisers. We’re down to one Rose now—me. Sorry I have to run. I’d really like to get to know you. Once you get settled in, let’s plan on lunch. I’m your nearest neighbor. My place is a couple miles down the road to town.”

“I’d like to have lunch with you.” Olivia meant every word. How long had it been since anyone had invited her to do anything with them? By nature she wasn’t a loner, though circumstances had forced her to become one. Ella was friendly, looked to be about her age and, if this first meeting was any indication, they seemed to click.

She walked Ella to the door, retrieved the cat’s things and carried them into the utility room next to the kitchen. After setting the litter pan in a corner, she poured water into one bowl and dried cat food into another.

Back in the kitchen, she looked up at Mask. “You’re all set,” she told him. “I’m off to the village.”

When she found herself starting to tell him she had an appointment with her great-aunt’s lawyer, Jack Masterson, she shook her head. You were in bad shape when you started talking to cats.



"The Amethyst Star"
by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)
Excerpt

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The hunter raised his head in sudden awareness. Unlike the native inhabitants and even the chameleon Patrollers, who had also come to the Earth in the time of humankind's greatest need, Randolph and his Hunter brothers used the roadways of old instead of the rail conveyances that kept humans out of reach from the fortress walls...and out of the sight and scent of the Carnivores.

All his senses attuned, Randolph turned slowly on the cracked tar, reached out to track with his keen sense of smell, his sensitive sight, his ultra-honed instincts. He probed beyond the steel fortress the humans had sealed themselves away inside from the thick jungle that had overrun the Earth in the time since the sun became one of their deadliest enemies. The Hunter and Patroller living areas, Comm Central, the City of Hope, and Castaway City—all lay within the fortress gates.

Darkness fell in a shroud across his path, and yet he could scent the tiger Carnivore, could feel its patient, mocking gaze despite the distance between them. This one wasn't like the ones he'd hunted and killed swiftly, with his bare hands and teeth. This one stalked him, eluded him. The vision...

Why do you watch me? Hunt me? Why do you not show yourself for what you are? You are not like the others.

Like a wind blowing through his mind, the words followed, not his own, and yet he knew they were truth. *I am not like the others. I am your destiny, Hunter. You will face me...and lose.*

Carnivores had no emotions and killed out of pure instinct, and yet they were clever. They had had no choice but to become so. Even before the men and women of Earth had fought in the first Intergalactic War thirty years earlier, their planet had begun turning on itself. The temperature had risen, increasing the carbon dioxide, and made prolonged exposure to the sun more deadly than ever before. Jungles and deserts had overtaken the Earth, and humans could survive only in jungle areas—the only place water and shelter remained. Unfortunately, Carnivores had risen to overtake the planet. Humankind—severely decreased in number—had returned to the Earth following the war to find their families slaughtered by the oversized man-eaters. In this time, men outnumbered women considerably.

Answering the humans' much belated cry for help, Hunters and Patrollers had come to the Earth and stopped the Carnivore blood baths. Humankind had sealed itself inside steel fortresses in an attempt to stop the Carnivores, yet despite the seemingly impenetrable fortress intended to keep them at bay, the beasts managed to kill even now. Always, they came without being seen, and though their coming was infrequent, they managed to kill stealthily and escape again unseen. The Hunters had searched endlessly and unsuccessfully without the fortress for the Carnivores' lair. It was as if the Carnivores had learned to control their hunger. No longer did they emerge and kill recklessly the way

they had during the years war had taken most of the Earth's inhabitants and threatened those left behind to the point of near extinction. Perhaps, the Hunters had speculated, the Carnivores themselves were becoming extinct.

Randolf stared through the closely spaced steel bars along the road that rose nearly ten feet into the air and ended in sharp spikes, but the Carnivore had withdrawn. The jungle beyond the fortress enclosure felt silent and cloying, ripe with the scent of flowers, overgrown plants...and blood.

No, the blood was on him. Many a fortnight had passed since the Carnivores ventured inside the fortress walls. The humans were afraid and rarely ventured out into the open from their sealed homes and rail conveyances. This day, Randolf had tracked one with fierce hunger inside the gates. Tracked and killed it. But the man-eater had given him his scar. He looked down at the barely visible swipe of needle sharp claws that had raked his chest only once before he ripped its throat out with his teeth. Now he wore those very same claws around his neck as a souvenir of his victory this day. Tonight he and his brothers—the warrior priests from the planet Chaashane—would have fresh meat instead of the dried stores they had brought with them from their planet.

Turning aside, Randolf again moved in the direction of the Hunter Abode. Killing the Carnivores was his duty, and he had pledged his service to the wary humans for his four-year enlistment, which drew near its end. The needs of many outweighed the needs of one. Life must not be wasted. Humankind needed help if it were to survive the Carnivores and re-populate their planet again. All of their focus was on keeping their species alive and pure, so they accepted the help and protection given them by the Hunters and Patrollers. But they'd never liked them or welcomed them on their planet. Nevertheless, the Hunters considered it their duty to serve their Creator by serving all those who needed aid.

Nearly every human Randolf had met could be described in one word: Afraid. The humans were afraid of the Carnivores, afraid to hunt them by themselves, for fear of reducing their numbers again. Afraid of the toxic environment their own hands had brought about with their pollutants in the time past. Afraid of their protectors because of the special abilities they possessed and for the potential threat they posed in tainting the purity of their people. Most of all, they were afraid of dying out completely. Many of their warrior women who had fought in the Intergalactic War had rebelled against the decree of their elders passed long before the end of the war forbidding humans to pair-bond with other species.

The very few women on their planet—those who were capable of reproducing—were worshipped, coveted as their most valuable possessions, and given privileges no one was given on the planet. These women—Queens—had become nothing more than prized breeders. Once in a moon-cycle, their eggs were harvested in the attempt to “grow” a

pure human race comparable to the days before their near extinction. The precious eggs were paired with sperm from only the strongest males and fertilized in a laboratory. Pair bonding was rare, allowed only in Castaway City, which was also within the enclosure, between sterile males and women who had failed to produce an heir. Families no longer existed in the City of Hope since children were gestated in labs and raised in sex-specific institutions to eliminate the likelihood that humans would be exposed to alien races.

Nevertheless, in the thirty years since the war had ended, the human race had continued to die out. Randolph believed if they continued in their fearful, illogical ways, they would not pass another thirty years without becoming extinct. The elders had refused to listen to anyone's counsel save their own, shrugging off anything not resembling their 'scientific logic' as superstitious nonsense. Nevertheless, Randolph believed the Creator of the Universe had judged and passed sentence on their illogical need to control the uncontrollable which had led them to futilely seek creation of pure humans untainted by the aliens in the universe around them.

Ahead, he could see the sprawling buildings of the Hunter Abode. As on their planet, all things connected, including family living spaces. The buildings on the Earth were not as elaborate as those on Chaashane, and the Hunters serving their tour of duty had brought very few possessions, as was their way. No home could equal the one on their own beloved planet. They accepted their role as protectors for a designated time—protectors with no mementos of home save those they wore on their person. The humans had given them a large parcel of land within the fortress walls far from their own dwellings, where Hunters and Patrollers took shifts around the clock guarding. Here in Hunter Abode, they could spend a few hours outside of the humans' unwelcoming tolerance. Or they had been able to...until one Queen had done the unthinkable.

Randolph's far-seeing gaze sought and found the window within the Abode where he knew she would be standing. Lady Sher of the Amethyst Star, a Queen and Procreator, had moved into the Hunter Abode two moon-cycles past. No one could have predicted it, could fathom it, nor could forbid it. As a Queen, all things were free to her on the planet. With her had come a garrison of Patrollers, further upsetting the balance of the Hunters' privacy and place of acceptance.

No one dared ask her "*Lady Sher, why have you come to live here among us?*" Randolph himself did not question her senseless decision. Because he knew.

Silhouetted in the growing darkness by the candlelight behind her, she stood in the window fragile and exquisite beyond anything he had ever seen. Without the light streaming in mercilessly during the day, she could tolerate this place she occupied when he came off-duty to his abode.

She risked the forbidden, unaware of her own intentions, he sensed. She, like the tiger carnivore that stalked him, was not like the others of her species. Unlike the rest of her people, Lady Sher of the Amethyst Star had absolutely no fear.

She had come to the Hunter Abode two moon-cycles previously to be nearer him just as he had taken a tour of duty to Earth to fulfill the vision foretold during his maturity ceremony. Randolph had come to meet his life-mate, sealed in the Amethyst Star.

* * * *

Sher didn't back away, out of the twilight, out of his reputedly sharp eyesight, even when Randolph looked up and searched out her window from more than a mile away.

How could she escape him? She had no desire to. For this very reason she'd come to the Hunter Abode. To watch him. To be near him. To fuel an obsession she knew could never be fulfilled the way she wished, was, in fact, forbidden by the laws of her people because she lived in a time when humans had become an endangered species.

Yet, as a Queen, she'd gone where previous procreators and those eventual ones wouldn't dare. What had she to fear, surrounded with protectors on the inside in the Patrollers, and protectors on the outside with the Hunters? Why shouldn't she know the state of their existence? Why shouldn't she live since she had no other hope in life?