



## TALES FROM THE TREASURE TROVE, Volume VI EXCERPTS

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"Choices"

{Aquamarine Series, Book 3}

by Dee Lloyd (Dame Aquamarine)  
Excerpt

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Chapter 1

Lights were dim on the crowded dance floor. Music, rich with muted brass, swelled and throbbed around them. While dreamy strains of Celine Dion's *Love Lift Me Up* floated over an underlying bass that reverberated like a heartbeat, Elly Jameson looked up at Barry Wilson's model-handsome face.

Unfortunately, the romantic ambiance was totally wasted. Nothing about Barry appealed to her. She felt no tenderness, no excitement, only vague annoyance at the warm pressure of his hands inching down her lower back. Barry was gorgeous but so dull! The poor man didn't possess even a hint of a sense of humor.

She'd made a big mistake accepting his offer to be her escort for her aunt, Carol Jameson, and Mario Donatelli's stag and doe party. She'd only agreed to come with him because she thought he'd be handy to have around when she was playing the not-exactly-compatible roles of guest and event coordinator. And now he was making a move on her. Although she was leaning away from him and keeping her palm firmly against his chest, he was still trying to hold her much too tightly. He didn't seem to realize that the well-toned body he'd worked so hard to maintain didn't do a thing for her. She hadn't expected this from him. Their day-to-day working relationship had always been pleasant but fairly impersonal. The women he usually dated were tall and model-thin—nothing like her. She suspected he'd asked her because he liked the idea of dating the daughter of the owners of the lodge complex.

Although Barry's dark good looks made him the kind of escort that other women sighed over, what Elly really appreciated about him was the logical brain that made him a good business manager for her family's lodge. However, this was the last time she would see him socially. Life was too short.

The slow piece finally ended.

"You are so beautiful, Elly," Barry murmured, giving her what he probably thought was a long, smoldering look.

She stifled a giggle. She mustn't laugh at him. This was no time for her quirky sense of humor to kick in. Did he think she didn't know what she looked like? Her mouth was

too wide and her slightly uptilted nose was too short. Then that pixie face was topped off with flyaway, totally unmanageable, fine blond hair. All that added up to *cute*, definitely not *beautiful*.

Not that she considered herself a complete dog. Her big, gray-blue eyes and thick lashes looked pretty good when she remembered to apply mascara. And she kept her five foot four figure trim even though she was a bit busty for her height. She couldn't hold back the laughter. "Not as beautiful as you are, Barry." She gave him a friendly pat on the cheek. "You're a doll!"

Barry relaxed his hold on her waist just enough for her to squirm out of his grasp.

She gave a totally phony sigh of regret. "Well, I have some things to check on. I wish I were only here as a bridesmaid tonight, but I have other duties. I'm counting on you to make sure the other bridesmaids are being looked after, Barry." She flashed him her most brilliant smile. "I really appreciate your help."

He looked put off and a little perplexed at her reaction to his compliment. However, she didn't give him another thought as she hurried up to her favorite spot on the gallery that overlooked the spacious Golf Club dining room. The elegant Lake Aquamarine Golf Club building was the newest addition to the five star hotel complex known as Lake Aquamarine Lodge Resort.

From here, she could see the whole room. With seating for well over a hundred and plenty of room for dancing, the room was perfect for Carol and Mario's party. Most of the guests were seated in the dining room but quite a number were taking advantage of the warm weather at the tables on the patio. The circulation from one area to the other all evening indicated that the relaxed atmosphere she'd worked hard to create had succeeded.

There were still quite a few people helping themselves at various stations of the international buffet. The bar was busy with the three bartenders handling the crowd easily. A long table on one side of the room was laden with colorfully gift-wrapped wine bottles. The bride and groom, both well established in their professions, were accepting donations to their wine cellar instead of using the stag and doe for the traditional purpose of raising cash. Judging by the number of bottles on the table, they would be able to entertain for years.

Elly's gaze was drawn to the edge of the dance floor where Ward O'Donnell was laughingly disengaging himself from one of the twin redheaded bridesmaids. Apparently, the best buddy of Elly's brother Scott, and long-time neighbor of the bride, was still making conquests. Elly recalled that the high school corridors had been littered with them. Ward was just too damned good looking. And he knew it. Good thing she was

immune to big, golden cops with blue, blue eyes, square jaws and stern mouths that melted into wide smiles. *And a slightly crooked nose that keeps him from being too handsome. Yeah, good thing.*

Like all her friends, she'd had such a crush on him in high school. And there'd been no way she could avoid him. Besides being an assistant coach for the junior girls' ski team, he, along with the rest of the boys' team, spent a lot of time hanging around the lodge with her big brother. Of course, to Ward, she was just a kid. Her feelings for him deepened at her first regional ski competition. She'd been in contention for the junior slalom cup when she fell at the final gates. Ward, the golden captain of the ski team, spent a whole hour comforting her.

Elly sighed. *One-sided romances are painful, especially when you are fourteen years old.* It had taken time and a lot of effort to get over him, but she'd done it. She'd had a brief relapse two years ago when Ward gave her a bone-crushing hug as she came off the course after winning the ladies' slalom cup. She got over that, too.

Like most of the men, Ward had removed his suit jacket. Try as she might, Elly couldn't help admiring the way his gray shirt molded his broad shoulders while he made his way over to the teens clustered around the non-alcoholic punch bowl. When he gave them his Officer Friendly smile, they returned slightly guilty grins and beat a hasty retreat out to the patio that overlooked the golf course.

She hadn't seen much of Ward since he returned to Aqua last year as a detective with the local Ontario Provincial Police unit. Nevertheless, she knew two things about him. He was definitely not the kind of man she ever wanted to get involved with and, she discovered tonight, he was a good man to have around. Several times, she'd seen him diffuse arguments that Erik Fallon, husband of the matron of honor, seemed determined to start. The more that man had to drink, the more belligerent he became. And Erik had spread his unpleasantness around. She'd seen him insult the band and the caterer. About half an hour ago, he'd even had a set-to with the bride. When Elly had approached them, he turned his attention to her and began to complain loudly about the quality of the drinks. Barry had proved his worth as her escort by taking him outside to calm him down. Erik wasn't anywhere to be seen at the moment. She sincerely hoped he was sleeping it off somewhere.

The tempo of the music picked up and the dance floor was even more crowded with laughing, gyrating guests of all ages. The engaged couple resolutely ignored the faster beat. Carol and Mario might be in their fifties but they continued slow dancing, wrapped around each other like a couple of teenagers. Carol's blond head rested on Mario's chest, and she wore a blissful smile. *It must be wonderful to love like that.*

Elly found herself moving to the beat, tempted to head back down to the dance floor. However, duty came first. Continuing to survey the party, she saw Ward at the punch table, helping himself to the non-alcoholic fruit punch. She hadn't been looking for him particularly but couldn't help watching him and thinking even the act of swallowing looked sexy when he did it. When he grimaced, then looked intently around, searching the crowd, she suspected the reason. He caught her eye and waved her down.

"I was too late," he said, handing her the little crystal cup filled with pink liquid and floating strawberries. "They'd already spiked it."

She didn't have to taste it. Before the cup reached her lips, the sharp scent of alcohol stung her nostrils.

"Whew! They must have used a whole bottle of vodka." She flagged down one of the serving staff. "Quickly. Take that punch bowl to the kitchen and get it refilled with the virgin punch." She turned back to Ward. "I don't know how to thank you for catching that."

"Just dance with me, Boss Lady." The words were light-hearted but, for a split second, those amazing, cobalt blue eyes fixed on hers. She must be imagining the blast of heat in them. She and Ward were casual acquaintances, barely friends. Even if, by some weird chance, he'd decided it was her turn to be his flavor of the week, he was going to be disappointed. She'd seen too many of his discards in high school.

"Boss Lady? You...you don't work for me." She was annoyed to find herself stammering.

"Almost everyone else in this place does."

She decided she wasn't imagining his bone-melting smile.

"Just trying to fit in." He placed a hand on her waist and, without waiting for her consent, guided her into his arms.

The band was pounding out such an intoxicating South American beat that she couldn't resist and allowed him to whirl her away. For a big man, Ward was surprisingly light on his feet. He threw himself into the samba with great zest. Though his hands rested only lightly on the tops of her hips, she was able to follow him easily. His enthusiasm was infectious. Feet flying and hips swinging, she abandoned herself to the syncopated rhythm. It was such fun to share the exuberant dance that they were both laughing when the number ended. His arms went around her and she leaned against him while they caught their breath.

The laughter ended abruptly when they caught angry words from a couple standing at the edge of the dance floor.

“I said I’d talk to you tomorrow, Erik.” The sharp words were firm, but Carol’s voice was tinged with fear. She was trying to tug her hand out of Erik Fallon’s grasp.

“And I said I wasn’t going to wait until tomorrow.” Erik’s words were slurred. He had the wide-legged stance of a man who wasn’t too sure of his balance.

Elly spun out of Ward’s arms to confront the drunken man. She had finally run out of patience with this drunken boor.

“Let go of her!” she bit out. It was all she could do to keep from screaming at him.

Ward moved in-between them. He placed one arm around Erik’s shoulder and, with his other hand, pried his fingers loose from Carol’s hand.

“Just the man I wanted to see.” Ward sounded friendly. “I need your help with a little matter outside, Erik,” he said.

To the casual observer, the arm wrapped around Erik’s shoulder might look friendly, but Elly could see how firmly his fingers gripped the angry man’s upper arm.

“I suspect some of the kids have been drinking. Need a partner to check around with me.”

“Call another cop!” Erik exploded. For an instant, he twisted in Ward’s grasp as if he was about to resist. Then he stopped and looked at his watch. “Well, shit! Might as well get out there,” he said, in an abrupt change of mood.

“Please excuse us, ladies,” Ward said as he began to walk Erik towards the nearest exit.

Elly wasn’t sure what to say to Carol. The two women stood quietly for a moment.

“It probably isn’t a bad idea for them to check on the kids,” Elly ventured.

Her face pale under her makeup, Carol didn’t respond immediately. Elly had never seen her aunt shaken like this. Although Carol was small in stature, she was normally supremely self-confident. She always displayed an air of authority in her practice of law and as mayor of Aqua. She’d recently embarked on a campaign to enter federal politics. Elly had always admired her.

“Erik seems to be having a problem holding his liquor this evening,” Carol said crisply as they watched Ward and Erik disappear out the door to the golf course.

“A little fresh air might help,” Elly commented.

“Ward has always been a good boy.”

It was strange to hear Ward referred to as a boy. Carol had lived next door and watched him grow up, so, to her, he would probably always be. By the time Mario and Erik’s wife, Sandra, made their way to them off the dance floor, Carol had regained her composure.

“It’s a great party,” Mario greeted them. “I hope you’ve told Elly how much we appreciate all her creative touches, sweetheart.”

“You’re a wonder, Elly,” Carol agreed, her social smile back in place. “Everything is running like a dream.”

“Thanks. If it’s going to continue to, I’d better go and see how the desserts are doing. We’re going to top them off with a chocolate fountain.”

So another minor crisis was defused. Elly hoped it was the last one of the evening. Checking her watch, she took a deep breath. Only an hour and a half more and the stag and doe could go down as another successful event on Elly’s record as Events Manager at the resort. She always felt that being one of the owners meant she had to work harder than anyone else would to validate her parents’ decision to put her in charge of such an important part of the business.

The rest of the evening passed quickly without any more unpleasantness. Barry came by to speak to her occasionally but appeared to understand that she didn’t want him to hover. He certainly had thrown himself wholeheartedly into his assignment to entertain the other bridesmaids. At the moment, he was quite happily dipping strawberries in chocolate for one of Erik and Sandra’s redheaded, twenty-year-old twins. Elly never could tell Tara and Allison apart.

“Your fountain’s a hit!” She didn’t have to turn around to recognize Ward’s deep voice.

“I was really pleased to see the older guests enjoying it. And the teenagers who doctored the punch seem happy enough to switch from vodka to chocolate.”

When she turned to face him, Ward handed her a skewer with a piece of chocolate-covered pineapple on it. His face lit up when he bit into his own.

“Good,” he pronounced, still chewing. “We’re lucky the kids didn’t have time to get too deeply into the booze. On my way back from escorting Erik out to the course, I found them all standing around the putting green looking pretty guilty and bored. One mention of dessert was all it took to get them back to the party.”

The chocolate fountain table had been mobbed from the moment of unveiling. The two-foot tall creation resembled a tiered wedding cake. Dark chocolate cascaded off each layer in sheets, into which guests eagerly dipped skewered strawberries, pineapple and other fruit, along with small cubes of cake.

“The last batch of chocolate should be running out any time now. I hope the fruit lasts.”

Ward grinned. “The way some of those old folks are into it, they’ll just dig into it and lick it off their fingers.”

She grinned back. “Or each other’s.”

Elly glanced at her watch and breathed a happy sigh. “Midnight. The bar is closing. I guess the party’s about over.”

She scanned the dining room. Things were winding down nicely. The crowd was thinning out. The band was almost packed up. Carol and Mario were making their final rounds of the tables and the serving staff was making a last circuit with carafes of coffee and tea.

“Speaking of Erik. I don’t see him. Sandra’s over there by herself looking a bit anxious.”

“I thought he’d be back by now.” Ward looked around with a frown. “I don’t see him either. But he should be fine. I didn’t have too much trouble convincing him he could use a little air. When I turned back at the first tee, he was staggering quite cheerfully down the fairway like a man with a mission.”

“He could be out on the patio. Oh, well, I guess even if he’s passed out on a bench somewhere, a little nap wouldn’t do him any harm.”

“Let’s hope he wakes up in a better frame of mind.”

Elly grinned and showed him crossed fingers on both hands.

“If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go see who’s still outside,” she said. It was only fair to give him an excuse to leave her.

Ward, however, stayed right at her side. The moonlit patio was virtually empty. Only two couples sat talking quietly at tables lit by flickering hurricane lamps.

“I guess he didn’t make it back yet.”

She could hear laughter out on the golf course.

“It sounds as if some of the guests are enjoying the warm air and the moonlight,” she said, with a brief twinge of envy. It had been a long workday.

“Why don’t you and I take a short stroll and see if we can’t find Erik and bring him back to his loving family?” he suggested as if he had read her mind.

“I really should stay here.” Even to her own ears, she sounded wistful.

“Isn’t it your job to see that everyone is looked after?”

“Right,” she said with mock seriousness. “It could be dangerous for a man his age to spend the night out on the course. The dew is evil, you know.”

Ward raised an eyebrow.

“Yep. If it settles on you, it can turn you into a mass of slimy toadstools.”

He shuddered.

“Well, it’s definitely our duty to prevent that from happening. Come on. Your brother’s still here. Surely the resort manager can look after your party for a few minutes.”

“You are a silver-tongued devil,” she said with a grin. “I’ll be back in a flash. I’ll just tell Scott where we’re going.”

Scott was chatting with their aunt when she found him.

“Good idea,” he said once she told him she and Ward were going to do a fast tour of the upper two holes to look for Erik. “I don’t like the idea of an impaired guest wandering the course this long. Besides, Sandra’s ready to go home and she can’t find either her husband or one of her daughters. I don’t think she’s too concerned about Tara, but she sent Mario on a mission to the parking lot to see if Erik was maybe taking a nap in their car.”

“Here’s Mario now,” Carol spoke up.

“No sign of him. He wasn’t in the car,” Mario informed them. “Don’t worry, dear. He’ll probably wander in off the course any minute.”

With their blessing, Elly hurried back to Ward. Quelling her doubts about the wisdom of spending any time with the too attractive OPP detective, she assured herself that she'd learned her lesson about the men who had sworn to serve and protect.

Four years ago, her ex-fiancé had been much too interested in the servicing part of his duty, especially for female citizens. However, this was Ward and she was no longer a naïve management trainee from a small town, overwhelmed by the city and more than a little lonely. She'd been easy pickings for a charmer who, she'd discovered, was more interested in her family's resorts than he'd been in her. If he hadn't been careless about covering up his busy love life, she might have married the shallow skunk.

Ward stood at the edge of the raised patio. When she reached him, he made a show of inhaling. "Doesn't this fresh air smell great?"

His grin was so infectious she had to return it.

"Since you recommend breathing that highly, I guess I'll have to try it." She drew in a big breath and with its slow release, she felt much of the heaviness of unpleasant memories and the tensions of the evening flow out of her. "You're right," she agreed. "Breathing is good. And I could use some exercise, too."

"Let's go then." Ward took her hand and tugged her down the wide steps to the lighted cart path that led to the course. She was almost running to keep up by the time they reached the pro shop and members' locker building.

As they flew by, music and laughter poured out of the pro shop's attached sports bar. Judging by the number of golf carts parked outside the bar, quite a few golfers hadn't made it back to their chalets yet after their evening rounds of golf.

Once Elly and Ward left the first tee, the fairway was unlit. The quiet, dark air was heavy with the scent of wet grass. The music from the clubhouse was barely audible. Sprinklers hissed on the green and a night breeze whispered in the trees. She could hear indistinct voices farther down the course. When wisps of cloud occasionally drifted over the full moon, plunging the fairway into darkness, she was glad of Ward's warm hand and solid presence.

If only he'd slow down. Hurling over the grass in heels took too much concentration for conversation. "Ward, you said this was going to be a stroll."

"It is. A fast stroll is good for you. Just keep breathing. Come on, Tiger." Tiger had been his nickname for her when he'd coached girls' slalom. "Breathe in. Out."

She groaned. "You just reminded me how much I hated summer training."

His easy burst of laughter lifted her spirits. Ward had never been one to dawdle. Once he had a destination, he steamed toward it with gusto. He was enjoying himself, and she was finding a perverse kind of pleasure in rushing through the night with him.

“Is this some kind of race?” she asked after the second time her heel caught and she stumbled into him. “These heels were more designed for dancing than speed hiking on turf.”

“Come on, Tiger. You said you wanted exercise,” he teased. “But I can slow down if you’re out of shape.”

*He would have to make it a challenge!* “Never mind. I’m getting my second wind.”

She felt more like an ungainly puppy being tugged along than a powerful tiger. Nevertheless, she’d keep up with him. So much for her hope of looking cool and sophisticated the first time Ward paid any attention to her as a grown woman. The only thing that fit that image was the little black dress and three-inch heels.

*Damn!* She lurched sideways when one heel sank into a freshly watered patch of grass. She would have pitched onto her face if Ward hadn’t caught her and spun her into his arms.

And held her there.

Her breasts pressed against his hard chest. She let herself savor the sensation. It wouldn’t likely last long or be repeated. However, Ward didn’t relinquish his hold on her. He kept one arm firmly around her while he tilted her chin with the fingers of his other hand. His gaze was so intense she felt as if he was trying to read her mind.

“You okay?” he said in a tight voice.

Something electric trembled in the small space between them.

“Oh, yes.” She was more than okay.

His fair hair caught the moonlight as he slowly lowered his head. Although he had never kissed her before, she lifted her lips to meet his as if it was the most natural thing in the world. His lips were firm and soft when they moved lightly against hers. Once. Twice. Then they pressed more firmly, urgently. His tongue prodded gently for entrance and she opened her lips. He tasted slightly of chocolate and something else that was instantly addictive.

He deepened the kiss. Amazing sensations shot from her mouth to her breasts and even began to smolder deep inside her core. Everything she'd imagined about being kissed by Ward was true! She wound her arms around his neck and eagerly matched his tongue's actions with hers. Ward's hands began to trace light circles on her back and up the sides of her breasts.

She was beginning to wish he would never stop when, suddenly, frantic screams and shouts shattered the night.

"Police. Someone. Call the police," a man yelled.



**"Garnet Hills"**  
**by Liz Hunter (Dame Garnet)**  
**Excerpt**

©Liz Hunter

**Chapter 1**

What the devil was wrong with that stallion? He'd been trumpeting his call for the past hour, waking Julianne Harrison from a deep sleep the first time. If he kept up, she'd never have any rest this night.

With a snort of frustration, Julianne forced herself out of bed. She drew a University of Pennsylvania sweatshirt over her shoulders, pulled on jeans and caught her long chestnut hair in a ponytail. Grabbing an apple from the bowl on the kitchen table, she headed across the yard toward the stables.

Spring came to southern Wisconsin well behind the Philadelphia area she was used to, and evenings tended to be chilly here in the Midwest. Not that the week since she'd arrived at Willerton Farm made her a local weather expert. It was still up in the air what she would do with the rundown horse farm her father had bequeathed to her in his will. *Why didn't you think of me when you were still alive?*

Julianne hadn't seen her father since she was six—when her mother took her away to Philadelphia. He'd never been much of a father-figure, never seemed to have the inclination, but once upon a time they'd been close. *Because we both loved horses.* She remembered him as a jolly and jovial drunk, and totally irresponsible. He'd never had the

finances to pay the bills or to buy clothing for his wife and daughter. Somehow, he always found money for drink though. Inheriting a rundown horse farm from the man who'd been a father to Julianne in name only hardly balanced out a lifetime of neglect.

She could guess why the bay stallion was in a state of unrest. A mare was coming into heat in the female horse barn directly across the square. She'd advised Stanley Knott to put the mare on the barn's far end, down wind, but the ornery manager of the farm had laughed at her suggestion. What did he care? He went home every night in town and didn't have to listen to the frantic young stud.

Julianne went straight to the feed bin for a scoop of oats. Food wouldn't distract the bay for long, not with the scent of sex in the air, nor would the apple she'd brought along. She poured the oats into the trap door above the feed box, and the stallion calmed enough to come to the corner of his stall to check the offering. Reaching through the bars, Julianne scratched between his ears while he ate. She wanted to acquaint the skittish young thoroughbred with her touch.

Willerton's Crown Glory was his full name, but the workers called him Will. A stallion spent his first few years frolicking in grassy meadows almost like a pet. But once he showed his speed at the track, he became valuable. Value meant protecting a horse from danger—even the kind that stemmed from normal behavior like mating. At the age of four, the bay had been retired from the track this year. He'd had a stellar career and was Willerton Farm's pride and joy—not to mention its future. The standing stud was aging, though still healthy.

From what Julianne had learned from the locals, Willerton Farm had been profitable under the previous owner, Grace Willerton, prior to her death, but the property went downhill quickly when Julianne's father inherited the farm and all its holdings. He'd sold off all the stallions except for two. Only a fraction of Willerton Farm's once loyal customers sent them their broodmares for impregnation these days.

Will finished his oats and started stamping his hoofs again. Julianne opened the stall door, and the young stallion instantly charged. She looked on him with pride. He was a magnificent animal, alert and curious, his brown eyes burning with determination. His mahogany coat glistened in the overhead light, and his long black mane and tail rippled with every move. Luckily, the sturdy nylon straps of the stall guard prevented him from forcing his powerful bulk past her.

"Take it easy, boy," she said in a soothing voice. Taking out her pocketknife, she cut the apple into quarters, then offered it to him. "Don't worry, Will. I promise you'll meet the little lady nearby first thing tomorrow morning."

Julianne couldn't help chuckling in sympathy. Too bad the stallion would end up even more frustrated after the meeting than before, because his job for now was to be a teaser stud. No sexual relief would be forthcoming for him.

Because Will had been retired from the track, he would spend his time training to stand at stud someday. His use would amount to arousing selected mares to ready them for the big date with the farm's resident stud. Tomorrow's session would be a rehearsal. They'd use the young stud to find out how the mare reacted—whether she'd show interest or protest the attention of a stallion. It was a dangerous job since Will and the handlers could be the recipients of a nasty kick or bite. In turn, the teaser stallion often turned violent when he'd been denied satisfaction.

Will nipped at her breast, and she swatted him, "No bite, no bite." He tried it again. Julianne backed up another step. "Stop being fresh. Would you like a good massage to calm you?" He nickered as if he understood. Maybe he remembered the word 'massage', which she'd used earlier in the day. Who said horses weren't smart? "I'll go get a brush from the tack room."

She took longer getting the brush than she anticipated. Whoever had used it last hadn't put it back in its place. Julianne seethed at the state of the tack room. Recently, she'd spent a full day organizing this room and promptly informed the manager and grooms that she expected them to keep it neat. *So far, so good?* But then she realized that, after years of disorder, two days wasn't truly a reasonable trial. Still, she figured it wouldn't hurt to mention it to Stanley again.

When she returned to the bay, she was surprised to hear the soothing murmur of a man inside the stall. "Hey," she called softly, not wanting to startle man or horse.

"Hey, yourself." Carter Lee, one of the farm's grooms, smiled at her over Will's back. Carter had to be in his early thirties, not too much older than her twenty-five years. "Don't you ever rest, Miz Harrison?"

"I could say the same for you, Mr. Lee. And please call me Julianne."

He winked. "Carter. You got me, ma'am. But working with horses is my recreation."

"Yeah, mine, too." She couldn't help noticing how his too long, blond hair curled under his straw hat. Carter looked like the kind of gorgeous cowboy of old. Tall, muscular, his skin the deep tan of someone who spent most of his days in the sun. Plus he had the most brilliant blue eyes she'd ever seen. Since she got here a week ago, she'd had a hard time ignoring him.

They smiled at each other for a moment, and then Carter took the brush from her and began rubbing down the stallion's coat. Julianne envied the attention the horse was getting. Every flex of Carter's hand and arm, the easy movements of his sinfully sexy body had her forgetting to breathe. She wouldn't mind a rubdown of her own.

Her face flamed when Carter glanced back at her. "You about ready to quit for the day?"

"I guess I should. My mother always said I'd work with the horses night and day if she let me. I guess she was right. For me, it's fun."

"The horses need the rest, too," he said. "Now that this stud's calmed down a bit, I'll walk you home."

Julianne shrugged, though she liked the idea more than she wanted to. "You don't have to. I'll be fine."

"Ah, but my mother brought me up as a gentleman. I'll see you home."

Once the brush was back in its spot in the tack room, they walked leisurely up the long driveway to her house. Whenever their shoulders occasionally touched, Julianne forced herself out of distance. Yet somehow, his warmth pulled her back to him each time.

"What do you do with yourself when you're not at the stable?" he asked. "You must be bored in that big house all alone."

"Not at all. I'm updating the inside, peeling wallpaper, taking up all the carpets. The floors are all hardwood, so they just need sanding and a new coat of shellac."

"I'm pretty handy around the house. I'd enjoy helping you, Miz Julianne."

"Oh, no, I'd never ask that of you."

"You didn't ask. I offered."

She shook her head. "That's very nice of you, but I couldn't allow it."

"Why not?"

All her life, her mother had preached that she shouldn't get too close to any man. Instead of love, they'd use her whenever they felt like it and expect her to put up with their addictions.

Often, Julianne had wondered whether true love was real or even possible. Or had her mother simply turned against it after what happened with Julianne's father? *Am I destined to have the same thing happen to me if I let a man get close?*

By now, she and Carter were approaching her front porch. "I just..." she started to explain to him why she couldn't allow him to help her fix up the house. She couldn't tell him the truth, so she couldn't say anything. "I have to go. It's late." She hurried up the stairs to the porch. "Thanks for walking me home, Carter."

"My pleasure." He glanced toward the horizon, chucking up the brim of his hat as he did so. "Hey, Miz Julianne, there's an old folklore about those hills in the distance." He pointed to the majestic peaks in the west. "You ever hear it?"

"What folklore?" she asked suspiciously.

"The way it goes, when you see the sunrise flame through the hills and dress them in brilliant garnet, you're guaranteed true love."

Was he serious? Julianne studied him until he laughed out loud. "That's very romantic," she said with a veiled smile, her tongue firmly in cheek. "Have you ever seen it, Carter?"

He shook his head, grinning.

"That's what I figured. They don't call 'em folk tales for nothing."

Even when Julianne was inside the house and peeked out the front parlor curtain, Carter remained standing just off the front porch, shaking his head. But he was no longer grinning.



**"The Topaz Guard"**  
**by Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz)**  
**Excerpt**

©Carrie S. Masek

*August 26, 1572*  
*Two days after St. Bartholomew's Day*  
*Petitnemours, France*

"No!"

Lisette Mercer threw all her five-year-old strength and will into keeping free of her traveling cloak. It shook in Mama's hands. Mama was scared and that made Lisette more determined. "I want to stay with Papa!"

"*Tais-toi!* Be quiet!" Mama grabbed her shoulders. Her fingers dug through the thick wool. It hurt. "We *must* go to your uncle."

The sewing room's tall door creaked opened, slammed shut. Papa ran into the room, still wearing his sword and outside boots. Lisette waited for Mama to scold him for getting her carpets dirty, but Papa spoke first. "Let the girl alone, Claire. The mobs from Paris have breached our walls. The streets are no longer safe."

Mama let go. "But she is just a child. Surely—"

"They will slaughter her as surely as any heretic. The streets run red tonight."

"Oh, Jean." Mama sank to her knees and fingered her rosary, making a soothing rattle. Comforted to be with both her parents, Lisette ran to her father. Instead of the familiar scent of leather and horses, he smelled like the butcher's on market day. He scooped her into a hug, but did not smile. "Douse the lamps and mayhap they will pass us by."

Papa held her in the dark while Mama prayed. Though her chin quivered and her insides felt runny, Lisette was *not* afraid. Nothing bad could happen, not when Papa and Mama were with her.

Angry voices drifted through the open windows. Downstairs, someone pounded on the front door. Mama hastened her prayers. Papa swore, set Lisette down and stood.

"Jean, no," Mama breathed. "They may yet pass."

The pounding stopped. A thud shook the floor, then another. *Crash*. "Too late," Papa said, his voice so grim, Lisette began to tremble. "I will hold them as long as I can. Hide yourself and the girl. *Au revoir ma chère*." He sounded sad. Lisette heard him kiss Mama and felt the warm weight of his hand rest briefly on the top of her head. The door opened with a slice of light, and he was gone.

"The *cassone*." Mama's voice was tight and harsh. She grabbed Lisette's hand and dragged her to the chest that had held Mama's dowry. "Burrow deep," she said, opening the lid and lifting Lisette onto lavender scented velvet. "Stay hidden. Stay silent. Do you hear me? Not a sound."

Lisette's throat was so tight, it was hard to answer. "Yes, Mama."

“My poor baby.” Mama’s voice shook. She unwound her rosary from her wrist and thrust the beads into Lisette’s hand. The cross was big and cold against her palm. “Pray to the Virgin Mother that she may keep you safe.”

The angry voices grew louder, closer. “God keep you,” Mama said. She kissed Lisette’s head and lowered the lid.

At first it was too dark to see the beads she clutched, even when Lisette put them right in front of her face. She was *not* afraid of the dark, but it was easier to breathe when a pale chink of light appeared at the corner of the chest. Lisette wiggled between the winter garments. With her eye just so, she could see the door and a piece of the room. Mama had lit a lamp and sat on her stool, holding her sewing. Her needle dipped and rose as if everything was all right until, with a crack of breaking wood, the sewing room door burst open.

Lisette’s heart jammed into her throat. Mama shrieked and jumped up. Her sewing tumbled to the floor. Hand over her lips, Mama backed out of Lisette’s sight.

A man stood in the doorway. He wore a dirty doublet and torn hose. He looked mean. He stepped into the room, but before he crossed out of Lisette’s sight, she heard Papa yell. The man turned. Something silver flashed from the hall. The man fell down, jerked and lay still.

“Fool,” a man said. The velvet around her muffled the voice, but it was not Papa’s.

There was a clang of steel on steel. Papa backed into the room. One hand held his knife, the other his sword. The blades dripped red. “I summoned the Topaz Guard to defend my town against the rabble,” Papa said, his voice hoarse. “How dare you disobey my order?”

“I answer to a higher authority,” the other man said, his words soft and gentle. “And those who defy Him must die.” Another sword slid into view.

Papa’s sword flew, a shining blur in the lamplight, but the other blade moved faster. A cut appeared on Papa’s arm.

Lisette gasped. Her father jumped back and the other man came into view. He was taller than Papa and thinner, with a hooked nose and pock-marked cheek. An ugly smile played across his lips. “Ashes to ashes,” he said in the same gentle tone.

Lisette shivered. She wanted to shut her eyes and hold her hands over her ears, but she had to see what happened to Papa. She kept her gaze locked on the chink of light, even after the ugly man lunged out of her sight.

Mama screamed.

The stranger stepped back into view. His blade was red now, too. He flicked it back and forth. Red sprayed across his right arm, cheek and side. Mama's screams gurgled and stopped. "And dust to dust," said the same, terrible voice.

Lisette crammed her fists into her mouth to keep from crying and waited for the ugly man to open the chest. Instead, he reached down and wiped his blade on Mama's sewing, a red streak on the white linen. He sheathed his sword and turned. Above the scabbard, the red-splattered handguard glittered with tiny stones as yellow as the lamplight.

Then he just walked away, leaving Lisette alone. She listened for her father's voice, her mother's prayers, but all she heard was pounding in her ears. The air grew thick with a chamber pot smell that frightened as well as choked her. Clutching Mama's beads, Lisette pressed against the back of the chest and sobbed into the lavender-scented velvet until Uncle Henri opened the chest two days later.

\* \* \* \*

*April 29, 1585*  
*Orléans, France*

Lisette Mercer clutched her mother's rosary and prayed Father Armand would grant her petition. Pacing to keep warm in the cold, stone corridor, she said another Hail Mary and reminded herself patience was a virtue. How could she convince the priest she would make a good nun if she interrupted his private conversations? Thoughts of where this particular conversation might lead made her heart flip, and it took all her will to resist the urge to press her ear against the priest's door to listen.

The latch creaked. Lisette froze and then composed her features into a calm expression to hide her inner turmoil. The door opened.

Patrice Brunel, the only other eighteen year old still in Father Armand's school for well-bred young ladies, stepped out of the room. Patrice had a big nose and a burn scar on her forehead. Even the kindest soul would call her plain, but not today. Her smile shone with a joy that made her beautiful. Lisette refused to give into the envy she could not help but feel. "Good tidings?" she managed to ask.

"The best!" Patrice's voice glowed with the rest of her. "Claude Dupré spoke to my father last night. You know Claude," she said, suddenly shy. "Monsieur Ravel's journeyman? He brings the flour to market."

Not trusting her voice, Lisette merely nodded. If “spoke to my father” meant what it would for any other young woman...

Patrice took Lisette’s hands in her own. “I am to be married!” The last came out an excited squeal.

Lisette’s tight control shattered into joy. Tears stung her eyes as she pulled her friend into a hug. “Felicitations, Patrice! I am so happy for you.”

The priest’s discreet cough broke the girls apart. A short, thin man with a wide bald pate and an even wider smile, he kept his expression serene while the girls curtsied. Patrice ran home to gather her trousseau. Father Armand nodded to Lisette, and she followed him into his library.

As always, the room smelled of beeswax candles and books. A fire burned cheerfully on the grate, cutting the chill of the late April morning. With the carpet on the flagstones and tapestries on the walls, the room reflected the priest’s own warmth. Lisette gratefully slipped out of her cloak and hung it by the door.

Father Armand stood by his desk and gestured to a pair of chairs before the fire. Though Lisette would have preferred to stand, she dropped obediently into the closest. The priest took the other.

He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and appeared to study Lisette, her carefully composed features, her modest hood and gown. Grateful that she had chosen to wear her gray bodice, the plain one her aunt said made her look as devout as a dove, Lisette strove to meet his gaze without fidgeting. “Patrice told you?” he finally said.

“Yes, Father.”

“And you are resolute in your desire?”

Lisette’s heart pounded in her throat, making it hard to speak. “Yes, Father,” she all but whispered.

The priest sighed and sat back against the wooden chair. Concern clouded his kind eyes. “I worry for you, Lisette. Most of our postulants are girls rich in piety but poor in wealth, beauty or family connection, girls clearly more suited to be Christ’s bride than man’s.” He shifted his gaze to the fire. “I had thought to nominate Patrice this year, but with her happy news...” His voice trailed off. “The Lord gave you a face and form to please a man, and, though an orphan, you are blessed with an aunt and uncle who love you and have the means and will to endow you with a generous dowry.”

Her aunt and uncle, the godparents who had saved her from that chest so many years ago. For an instant Lisette's certainty faltered. She loved and honored them as much as any daughter could and knew they would rejoice to embrace her sons and daughters as beloved grandchildren.

"Can you be certain," Father Armand continued, his tone low as if he spoke to himself, "that you would rather embrace a life of poverty, obedience and chastity than become a happy wife and mother?"

*A happy wife.* The thought of tying herself to one of the dull journeymen who courted her to gain her uncle's favor, or worse, to bind herself to one of the bloody-handed guardsmen now swarming the city, made Lisette's skin grow cold and her stomach churn. No, she might have the face and figure for marriage, but she did not have the heart. "Marriage holds no appeal for me," Lisette said, once more firm in her resolve. "I wish to learn, and at the Abbey of Paraclete, I can pursue my studies to the glory of God. I am a good student," she pleaded, "and will not disgrace you."

"No, of course not." Like a fond uncle, the priest turned and patted her arm. "Disgrace was never my concern. But consider, Lisette, whether the Lord has truly called you to His service. You have good reason to fear the evil in this world, but if you let fear drive you to take the veil, you may come to regret your decision later."

*Regret?* Lisette longed for the sanctuary of the veil so much her throat ached. "How could I regret joining the Abbey, when to study there is all I have ever desired?"

The priest examined her face a long moment and nodded. "I will grant your petition. Have your uncle write me with his permission, and I will nominate you to join the novitiate at Paraclete."

Lisette dropped to her knees on the stones before the fire and kissed the priest's hand. "Thank you, Father. I will make you proud."

"I am proud enough already." Irony laced his tone. Taking her hands, he stood, raising her to her feet as well. "But promise me this," he said, serious once more. "Consider your future carefully before speaking with your uncle. Pray for guidance. And listen."

Abandoning decorum, Lisette threw her arms around Father Armand. "I will."

He returned the hug before stepping back. "I almost forgot. The books you requested arrived yesterday. Take them. They will give you something to read on the road to Paraclete."

He nodded toward his desk and its oaken surface strewn with sheets of vellum. A stack of four volumes rested on one corner.

Understanding her dismissal, Lisette curtsied, scooped up the books and hurried from the room.

She was going to Paraclete, the home of brilliant Héloïse and generations of other learned women! Joy bubbled in her chest and gave her feet wings. She had trod the worn stones so many times, her feet knew the school corridors without needing her eyes to guide them. All she saw was a room full of books and a community of women who loved them as much as she did. Heart soaring as high as her hopes, Lisette raced around a turn and barreled into a large, resilient wall.

The wall rocked back and swore. Her books exploded from her arms. She would have fallen, but strong arms encircled her and held her up. For an instant, the scent of leather and horses surrounded her, and the memory of childhood comfort made her long to lean forward and rub her cheek against the worn leather jerkin.

“You should never run with your eyes closed.” The wall had a voice as well as arms—a man’s voice. Laughter brightened the scolding words, and it took Lisette a moment to realize what he had said.

Lost in her daydream, had she actually closed her eyes while running down the hall? *Mon Dieu*. She had. Mortified, Lisette pulled back.

The arms stopped her for an instant before parting to allow her escape. Unable to meet his gaze, Lisette kept her eyes downcast while she curtsied. “Forgive me, *monsieur*.”

“Charles de Verney, at your service, *mademoiselle*.” He doffed his cap and swept it into a courtly bow, just exaggerated enough to make Lisette giggle. The cap was black felt, with a small feather for style, and matched his short black cape. His doublet and hose were of good cloth, dyed a deep brown. His leather riding boots had no visible holes. Not a rich man, mayhap, but well-enough-to-do.

Lisette risked a glance up. His face was open and fair, with the unlined countenance of youth and good-nature. He had thick, black hair, a well-trimmed beard and a contagious grin.

She smiled in return. “Lisette Mercer.”

He was a younger son, she guessed, born to privilege. No land for him, but wealth enough to buy a place, either in commerce or the church. “Are you to be a priest?” blurted from her lips before she could stop the words. She sounded doubtful, no *horrified*,

at the thought. Cheeks blazing hotter than Father Armand's fire, she longed for the stone floor to open and swallow her.

Her attention fell on the scatter of books around them. There were more than her four. Perhaps he attended the Sorbonne or another center of learning. "Or are you a visiting scholar?" she managed.

To his credit, the young man, Charles, neither drew back in disgust nor laughed. He returned the cap to his head and said, "For today, perhaps a scholar. I have neither the piety nor the patience to be a priest."

"Pardon me, I was clumsy and careless." When in doubt, apologize—one of her aunt's favorite lessons. One Lisette had heard often and rarely heeded. Besides, the accompanying curtsy gave her an excuse to look away from those dark, humor-filled eyes. "Allow me to make amends," she said and knelt to pick up his books.

He knelt beside her and touched one of her borrowed texts. "*Summa Theologica*." He read the title as if it were a prayer, lifted the volume and respectfully thumbed through the pages. "Are you a disciple of St. Thomas?"

"A student, perhaps." Lisette gathered the last of the volumes and stood. "*Meditations*," she read the title of the uppermost volume. Now it was her turn to sound respectful. "And in the original Greek. Are you a disciple of Marcus Aurelius?"

His eyes glinted. "A student, perhaps." They sorted through the books in companionable silence. He handed Lisette hers and heaved a dramatic sigh. "But tomorrow, I leave the world of books behind."

She heard somber truth behind the mock-sorrow in his tone. "Behind?" Lisette looked at the stack of volumes in his arms, a small fortune in wealth as well as knowledge. A generous gift indeed, if he meant to leave them to the Church.

"For the next year, at least." He sounded wistful, as though the books were good friends and he already missed them. "Where I go, such treasures would not be safe."

"How so? Are you the new Cartier bound for savage lands?" She meant to imitate his self-deprecating humor, but excitement filled her voice. The adopted daughter of a merchant, she had grown up on the adventures of Marco Polo and loved tales of far travel and distant shores.

Another sigh lifted his shoulders. "Such dreams are not for redundant sons of impoverished barons." He shook his head and, like a dog flinging off water, shed both his gloomy aspect and tone. "I seek adventure closer to home."

Lisette cocked her head. What adventure could a young man, could anyone, unearth in the provincial town of Orléans, and how could such a quest endanger his books?

He met her unasked questions with another lightning smile. “Army barracks make notoriously poor vaults,” he said. “Tomorrow I accept the King’s sword and become an *aspirant* in the Topaz Guard.”

*The Topaz Guard.* The stone corridor dissolved, leaving only a sliver of light and the image of gold stones splattered with red. Lisette gasped on air grown thick with the reek of blood and lavender.

“Murderer!” she cried and bolted.



**"The Incomparable Miss Scarlet"**  
**by Nancy Pirri (Dame Sapphire)**  
**Excerpt**

©Nancy Pirri

*September 1851*  
*London*

Scarlet stood outside Emma and James’s manor, waiting for James’s livery to come with the carriage to take her home. Six weeks had passed since James had confessed his sin to his wife. Thankfully, they’d mended their marriage. Just a week ago, Emma had delivered their third child, and Scarlet had stayed at the manor for the week to help her sister.

Three sons. *Oh! To have just one.* Scarlet sighed deeply. A sad smile lurked on her lips. On one hand, she was happy for Emma and James, but on the other, she felt sorry for herself—sorry she didn’t have the joy and love they shared.

*I believe in marriage and love despite my outward practical, pragmatic nature. I’m convinced that someday a man will sweep me off my feet and marry me. I just hope I’m not old and gray by the time the joyous occasion arises.*

James’s hackman came around to the front of the manor, stopped the two horses and hopped down to the drive. Gallantly, he swept a bow at Scarlet. She laughed as he opened the black lacquered coach door. She took a seat inside, then looked out the window. Another sigh escaped her.

Fall had arrived, and rain fell every day now. The weather had cooled quite a bit, too. Shivering, she buttoned her wool coat all the way up to her neck. She appreciated the grounds, covered with lushly budded flowers, bushes and well-leafed trees, yet wished that the sun would shine at least occasionally. Once winter arrived, she would miss all the foliage, so she took the time to enjoy the view outdoors every chance she could.

The coach would take the long way to her townhome. Will knew how she enjoyed the scenery. She was looking forward to going home, a mid-sized townhome in a somewhat fashionable area of London, left to her by her deceased paternal grandmother. Scarlet was thankful for the gift, for she loved her independence—just as her grandmother had enjoyed hers.

Her new duties as governess to the Rothman's three children wouldn't begin for two weeks. Scarlet and Anna Rothman had been friends for several years, and, when Anna called asking for her help, Scarlet couldn't turn her down. Yet she appreciated the reprieve before beginning her duties, not only as a governess, but as a spy.

Word had spread about Emma's and James's mended marriage and Scarlet's intervention. Women who found themselves in the same situation as Emma had arrived on her doorstep, begging her for help.

Women admired her and whispered to their dearest friends about Scarlet's skills, leading to a kind of word of mouth among London's matrons. Her sleuthing success was due to the fact that she'd lived within her employer's household each time, affording her the best opportunity to listen in on conversations, casually, carefully and expertly open mail while being ever watchful of the husband accused of infidelity.

The man of the house always had the final say in her being hired. While Scarlet realized he would rather hire another woman, by that time the unruly children had already driven away the other contenders for the governess position. By design, not accident, Scarlet always turned out to be the last choice.

She reasoned that if a man remained faithful to his wife he would have nothing to worry about. Unfortunately, few of the other marriages she'd investigated had remained intact, but, based on her testimony, the women did receive their due—monetary compensation, a home and custody of their children.

Scarlet had the uncanny ability to make a judge see her credibility as a reliable witness. But then, it likely had more to do with the fact that she'd been on a first-named basis with every judge in London since childhood—most of them friends of her deceased maternal grandfather, who'd been a judge himself.

If people only knew how much she hated snooping, they'd be surprised. She'd heard the vicious gossip about her—gossip that falsely blasted her for enjoying the ruin of lives and marriages. Yet she couldn't ignore women's pleas for assistance. Men had to learn they couldn't treat their wives so callously.

The carriage's swaying caused her to grow sleepy, and she closed her eyes. How long she slept she couldn't say, but she awoke to a gunshot. The conveyance slammed to an abrupt stop. More shots sounded and a shout from Will prompted her to open the door and begin her descent. She paused when a loud male voice ordered, "Shut the door and stay inside!"

Scarlet immediately followed orders. She turned in her seat and peered out the back window, thinking about the deep voice that had delivered the order. It hadn't been Will.

A volley of shots sounded again, then all fell quiet. The carriage door opened, nearly ripped from its hinges, just as she touched the handle.

The tall, dark-haired man she recalled seeing at the Drury Lane Theater stood before her. She'd never met him formally, though she knew he was a Duke. Exactly which one, she couldn't recall.

None too gently, he grasped her upper arm and hauled her from the coach. She stumbled along, confused by his hurried manner, until they paused outside another vehicle—his coach, she realized once she recognized the coat of arms. He was Hugh Henry Hamilton, Duke of Danescliffe.

The Duke placed his hands around her waist and lifted her into his coach. "Inside, Miss Warden."

"Now wait just a minute..." she began as she all but fell into the seat. Scrambling to sit up with as much grace as her askew skirt would allow, she gave him a wide-eyed look when he nudged her over and eased in the carriage beside her. After slamming the door shut, he tapped the top of the coach with his cane. "To fourteen-hundred Grove Court, Paul, but first make a stop at..."

*The man knows where I live!* Heavens, why would a stranger—a wealthy, reputable, esteemed Duke—possess that information? Turning away from him, she squirmed to look behind the coach. There, she saw Will sitting on one of the running boards of her brother-in-law's coach. Two men stood beside him. One held a bloody cloth to his temple. Scarlet gasped aloud when she noticed two more figures—these dressed in nondescript, raggedy clothing—lying prone on the ground below.

"Someone tried to ambush me, Your Grace!" she cried.

He nodded and glanced behind at the carriage as well. With their heads close together, she caught the simmering, angry glint in his eyes, and something else, too—*worry? Now why would he worry about me?* He didn't know her, but then apparently he did, for he'd called her by her name.

“Yes, it appears that way. No need to worry. They won't be bothering you again.”

She gasped. “You...you killed them?”

“I had no choice in the matter,” he said, his voice calm and patient. “They wouldn't lay down their pistols. Now sit back like a good girl and you'll be home shortly.”

“Did you just call me a good girl, Your Grace?”

He arched one eyebrow and swept a long, leisurely gaze over her. “I did, but allow me to correct myself. Please sit back like the good, sensible woman I suspect you are. You'll be home shortly.”

She sighed in exasperation but grudgingly offered, “Thank you for your assistance.” She sank back in her seat and remained quiet as she thought about the man beside her. While she didn't care for his patronizing manner one bit, she was grateful for his timely intervention. Both she and Will might be dead now.

Sliding a sideways glance at the Duke, she noticed his formal dress attire, deciding since it was late afternoon he was likely on his way to a soiree, dinner, house party or maybe even one of the popular men's clubs in London. She saw his black trousers that seemed to mold to his muscular thighs, saw the strength in one wrist where his cuff had ridden up. Due to his broad shoulders, he took up more than half of the space on the seat. She found herself inching closer to the window to allow him even more of it. *What a handsome, manly specimen.*

“You're safe with me, Miss Warden,” he chided softly with a dashing grin.

Her eyes widened. She felt her cheeks heat at the long look he gave her.

“Truly,” he added.

*Safe with him! Oh, heavens, there go my wayward thoughts again!* Scarlet recalled the delightful fissure that'd gone up her spine when he placed his hands around her waist and lifted her into his coach. She imagined what it would feel like to have him hold her in his arms and dance her across the floor. *Sharing a meal and laughing together, enjoying a chat in the warmth of the parlor...*

He chuckled, and she yanked herself up straight.

Raising his brow, he said, “We haven’t met before, have we, Miss Warden? With the exception of Drury Theater, of course.”

His comment confused her. Had he overheard the encounter between her and James—and Mrs. Kenton—that night?

He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. While he kissed her most properly, his laughing eyes focused on her face.

Scarlet felt the soft, moist touch of his lips against the back of her hand and nearly swooned. Breathlessly, she met his gentle gaze.

When he released her, she felt positively jolted back to her surroundings. Primly, she folded her hands in her lap. She’d lost all sense of time and place while he’d kissed her hand—something she couldn’t recall ever happening to her before. She’d blocked out her surroundings, and even the fact she was in his coach.

*I must get abhold of myself!* To that end, she began phrasing questions in her mind to ask him. Before she could ask even one, he spoke. “It’s very nice meeting you again, Miss Warden. Allow me to introduce myself officially. Hugh Hamilton at your service.”

“Yes,” she said faintly, “the Duke of Danescliffe. Aren’t you rather far from home? Portsmouth, isn’t it?” At his nod, she offered him a small smile. “You’re derived from the land of kings, Your Grace.”

“Ah, you’re a reader of history then?”

She nodded, thinking all the while that this man could certainly have made a fine king. He was strong and decidedly sure of himself. Those traits were the primary ones she looked for in a male, despite his tendency toward being bossy. He’d been ordering her around since her coach had been accosted.

One of his dark eyebrows lifted. “So, I’m a descendant of kings—are you insinuating that I’m dictatorial, Miss Warden?”

*Heavens! Did the man read my mind?* Scarlet forced herself to shrug casually. “Perhaps a bit.” Changing the topic, she said, “I’ve never been that far west before, to Portsmouth.”

“Haven’t you? Well then, we must rectify that deficiency. Perhaps one day you’ll travel there. Do you like the sea?”

“The only sea I’ve seen is here in London—the Thames.”

“Ah, then you haven’t really seen the sea, nor the channel and all of its beauty and power. ’Tis a beautiful sight to be sure.”

“I’ll take your word for that,” she said. “Are you here on business then?”

Again, he flashed a charming grin. “The social season has begun, Miss Warden. That’s as good a reason as any to be in London.”

“Of course.” She sighed. “How could I have forgotten?”

“Yes, I’m wondering how. I imagine you’ve received invitations’ galore.”

“Oh, yes, *galores* of them.”

She *had* received dozens of invitations...all because she’d been good friends with the women in those households. But not a single man this season had requested the honor of escorting her to a ball or soirée. She knew she was too blunt to be a true lady and wore unfashionable clothing. Men didn’t seem to want a levelheaded, practical woman.

Hugh laughed, picked up her hand from her lap, and kissed it once more. “You are a charming, unusual woman, Miss Warden, but you haven’t answered my question. Have you received many invitations?”

“As I said...”

“I know, galores of them, but that doesn’t tell me anything.”

She couldn’t meet the intense look in his eyes. Turning away, she folded her hands together once more.

“Perhaps,” he suggested, “if you weren’t so good at sleuthing, you’d receive more invitations than you do.”

She gasped. “How had you heard...?” She couldn’t say another word. Humiliation filled her body and soul. For some reason, she didn’t want him—Hugh in particular—to know about that aspect of her life. *But then what did I expect? My reputation has grown far and wide. The men of London were bound to find out what all the women have been whispering about sooner or later.*



**"The Nonesuch Curse"**  
**{North of Nonesuch Series, Book 8}**  
**by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)**  
**Excerpt**

©Jane Toombs

**Prologue**

*Late 1800s*  
*Scotland*

Ian Ruthven could bear the morose faces in the Hall no longer. His father's funeral had been a week ago and the time for mourning the old sod should be over. *Was* over as far as Ian was concerned. Dermott Ruthven had degenerated into senility two years ago—from drink and his profligate ways, according to Ian's mother. Because of this, no one had expected him to slip from the Hall, order his favorite mount saddled, whistle up his old dog and go racing off. But any fool could have predicted what would happen when he drove the horse at a barrier fence with no caution for what might be on the other side. The harrow waiting there had done for mount and man.

If the dog had not come whining back to the Hall, the old man might have lain there dead for days. Still, that had been a better way to go than a lingering death. Death might have made it easier for Ian to forgive his father, but then his mother immediately switched Dermott from sinner to saint in her mind and refused to be consoled for his loss.

Ian could not forget so easily. He knew his father had not deliberately set off to kill himself the day before his only son's twenty-eighth birthday, but Ian resented it anyway. Petty as it was, he felt denied his birthday celebration, part of which would have been his marriage to Margaret.

Annoyed and frustrated, he fled to the woods bordering the Hall, gun over his shoulder. Rabbits were plentiful this year. With luck, he would shoot enough for Cook to make rabbit stew.

When the trees closed around him, he breathed deeply of the mixed odors of leaves and earth and forest mulch, a smell that had always meant freedom to him. The other scent he cherished almost as much was when he held Margaret and breathed in her female smell, mixed with the lemony fragrance she favored.

No birthday celebration, no Margaret, thanks to the old sod. But he had the woods. He tramped on, now among the old trees, the never-cut evergreens belonging to the estate. The aromatic scent mingled with the other wood smells.

He frowned, sniffing. Was not there another odor, spicy and mysterious? One he had never smelled before. He stilled, peering around, determining he was near the creek. Some new, exotic bloom along the banks?

Ian headed toward the slight gurgle of the water while it tumbled over stones. As he came close, he caught a glimpse of something moving by the water. Much too big for a rabbit, and white besides. The fabled white stag that had once called this woods home?

He crept closer. If it were the stag, what a trophy! As the enticing scent grew stronger, he frowned. No stag had ever smelled that good. But maybe it had been drawn by the same scent he had, expecting to feast on the plant.

Now very near the creek, Ian hid behind a large oak bole, making sure his gun was ready. He peered around the trunk and drew in his breath at what he saw standing in the water near the creek bank.

“You have caught me out,” the beautiful creature said, her voice more like music than speech.

He stepped into the open, the better to see her. Not quite naked, she wore a diaphanous gown. She was lovelier than any woman he had ever seen. Her hair tumbled over her shoulders as golden as oak leaves in autumn. When he looked into her eyes, green as new spring leaves, desire overwhelmed him. She reached a hand toward him. His gun fell from his grasp as he stepped forward, his head spinning from her alluring scent, his body aching to possess her.

“Once you touch me,” she murmured, “you are mine.”

Reason told him the words were sinister, but reason could not stop him. What a surprise birthday present!

Once he kissed her, he did not care if he was hers so long as she was willing to be his here and now.

The intoxication of their melding drove every other thought from his mind. When afterwards she murmured that he must bring her home with him, all he thought was that she had read his mind. He did not intend to ever be parted from this beautiful gift of the woods.

\* \* \* \*

Margaret MacLeod met her the next day when she came to call on Ian's mother, hoping, of course, to see Ian. "This is Lana," Agnes Ruthven told her. "She seems to have no other name. Ian brought her home yesterday." The older woman's uncertain voice betrayed her agitation, and no wonder, for it was clear Lana was not a mortal woman.

Margaret tried to disguise her shock. Ian had brought a wood witch to the Hall?

"You must be the bride Ian intended to marry," Lana said, her voice falling on Margaret like chill rain. "I must tell you that will never happen, for he is mine and I do not share." With that, she turned and glided from the room.

"She—she is a wood witch," Margaret whispered to Ian's mother.

"I saw she was," Agnes replied. "I told Ian so, but he ordered me never to repeat such a lie. He said she is his intended and they will wed as soon as it can be arranged."

"Can he not see—" Margaret broke off, aware that Ian did not and never would see the truth because the witch had enchanted him.

Agnes sighed. "I asked when he meant to speak to the priest. He said their marriage had nothing to do with the church." She dropped into a chair and bowed her head into her hands. "I cannot bear this abomination with my beloved Dermott barely in the ground."

Margaret did her best to comfort Ian's grieving mother. Obviously, if there was anything at all to prevent this, the doing would not be by his mother, but by the bride he had set aside for the witch.

While Margaret rode her black gelding toward home, she pondered the matter. What could break the enchantment? The church? She shook her head. Father Hodges was not a fighting priest, but a peacemaker. No peace could be made with sorcery. Her ailing parents would be no help either.

Though determined to banish the witch who had stolen Ian from her, she knew she could not do so unaided. Who could she turn to? No name occurred to her except the one they called Old Nan, the local Wise Woman. Margaret slowed her mount and turned him, hoping she could find the path leading through the woods to Old Nan's cottage, for she had never ventured there before. When the sun cast a swath of light into the trees, she took it as a guiding sign and shortly arrived at a cottage. Dismounting, she tied the black, hurried up to the door and tapped on it.

"Come ye in, and welcome," a woman's voice called.

Margaret did as she was told. Inside, the light was dim. But staring into knowing, dark eyes deep-set in the wrinkled face, Margaret knew she'd found help.

“Ah, something troubles ye hard and strong,” Old Nan said, taking her hand. “A man, is it?” Without giving time for a reply, she went on. “I see 'tis not the usual. Indeed, far from such.”

“You—you know?” the amazed Margaret asked.

“I sense sorcery is involved.”

Margaret gathered her wits and told her about the wood witch's ensorcelment of Ian.

Old Nan nodded. “So the young lad canna see her as she is, even though others can. We must force his inner sight to clear his head. Which has some danger.”

“I do not wish to harm him!”

“The potion is quite harmless. But a wood witch is not. I canna predict what she might do, so ye must provide him with the only weapon that will kill her. For 'tis he who must rid us all of her.”

“But will he, even if his inner sight is freed?”

“Aye, he will, for men resent above all being made fools of. The weapon must be from his land, and ye must cut and shape it for him, to be sure of the stake's effect. After ye have the weapon honed sharp and ready, bring it here for me to anoint. At that time I shall give ye the potion to mix with wine. Then ye will give me my price—whatever ye think 'tis worth. Listen now and do exactly as I tell ye...”

\* \* \* \*

Through Margaret had never before done anything similar, she obeyed Old Nan's words to the letter. When the sharpened ash stake was ready, she gathered two gold coins and rode in the early afternoon to the cottage. After the Wise Woman approved the stake, she dipped its point in a foul-smelling brew and set it outside for the wind to dry. She smiled when Margaret handed her the gold coins.

“Here is the potion,” she said. “The vial is stoppered, but take care not to tip it, for I have given you the exact amount you will need to pour into his wine. Since it has no taste, he will not detect the addition.”

“I must hurry,” Margaret said, “for he plans to marry the witch tomorrow.”

“Ye will be in time to save him, for I have seen that far, but that far only. I canna say all will be well from then on, for events are never certain where a witch is concerned.”

Margaret carried those troublesome last words with her to the Hall. She had, in one saddlebag, a bottle of her father’s finest wine, in the other, the ash stake wrapped in a shawl. She carried the potion vial hidden between her breasts.

As if he had expected her, Ian stood in the foyer when she was let into the Hall. Before he could speak, she held up the bottle and said, “My father has sent his famed plum wine so we may share a toast to celebrate your coming nuptials. May we do so in private?”

Ian inclined his head, told the waiting servant to bring glasses and a corkscrew and led her into what had been his father’s study. The servant entered while Margaret was laying the shawl on a chair. He set a tray with goblets, and a corkscrew on the table, then exited, closing the door behind him.

Seeing Ian was busy uncorking the wine, she retrieved the vial from between her breasts, concealing it in her hand. He poured her a goblet and handed it to her before filling his own. Meanwhile, she tipped the contents of the vial into hers and pushed the empty container behind a cushion.

Moving close to him, she said, “My dear Ian, since this may be the very last time we are alone together, please humor me and drink the wine the way we used to.”

He shrugged, saying, “If you wish.”

She raised her goblet. “To your future happiness.” After each sipped, they exchanged goblets.

He raised his and said, “To your father’s fine wine.”

Instead of sipping hers, this time she downed it all. His eyebrows shot up, but he did the same. “I thought you wanted to play this game of switching the way we used to, back and forth, until we ran out of both wine and toasts.”

“I feared we might be interrupted before we finished.”

As if on cue, the door opened. Lana glided in as Margaret had known she would the minute she was informed who had come calling.

Setting down his goblet, Ian turned to Lana. He smiled. As he looked at her, disbelief, then horror replaced his smile. He took a step back. “You tricked me,” he muttered, still staring.

Margaret picked up her shawl and eased closer to him, watching Lana warily.

“Witch!” Ian shouted. “You are nothing but a bedamned wood witch.”

“You!” Lana cried. She came at Margaret, who dropped the shawl, thrust the sharpened ash stake into Ian’s hand and slipped behind him.

“You will not touch her, evil one,” he said.

“You belong to me. She will die.” Lana tried to push past him.

“Never!” Ian rammed the stake into the wood witch’s chest. She staggered and fell, mortally wounded.

Lana rose on one elbow, her gaze fixed on Ian. “As you once caught me out, now you have done for me. But I will be waiting beyond for you and yours.” Her voice rose in an eerie chant:

“My true name is Falana; I am a fay,  
And your Ruthven blood I curse this day.  
My nonesuch curse is here to stay,  
Unto Eternity, mark ye, I say.  
Ye shall marry the other,  
Think no ill may befall.  
She shall soon be a mother,  
Bear a male heir to the Hall.  
Ever thereafter each male of the line  
Like ye, will beget before his decline.  
He must pass through death’s dark, dismal door  
At thirty years, no less, no more.  
My nonesuch curse ye cannot break  
Unless a stone found by a lake  
Comes with a bear by one awake.”

The curse rang in Margaret’s ears, etching itself into her head permanently even as she watched the body of the witch disintegrate into nothing. The stake also disappeared. As Old Nan had warned, all had not turned out well.

After her wedding to Ian went flawlessly, Margaret began to hope. Ten months later, Angus Ian Ruthven was born, bonny and bright. As she put him to her breast, she did her best to rid herself of fear. All was well, was it not?

When the day of Ian's thirtieth birthday dawned though, Margaret woke with dread. But then he made love to her before they rose, slow and easy and wonderful, and she greeted the day happily. Ian now was a hale and healthy thirty. Why worry?

The day went well. Folk from all around attended his birthday celebration and Angus was made much of by all. Evening fell with no unpleasant surprises. Once they were in bed, Ian made love to her again. She fell asleep happy.

Just before midnight, she woke with a start. Ian was tossing in bed, mumbling, obviously having a bad dream. She tried to rouse him but failed. On the first stroke of midnight, he sat up, screamed and fell back, clutching his chest. Margaret stared in horror at the stake impaling him.

Not a real stake, she understood later. A spectral one, for no one but her had seen it. Nor was there any mark on his body. The doctor told her Ian's heart had failed, but she knew the bitter, horrifying truth. The witch's curse was what had killed him.

\* \* \* \*

Twenty-two years later, Angus married Dorrie Stewart and in due time she was delivered of a baby boy they named Stewart. Margaret, now deprived by death of her parents and her only sister, doted on the baby. She also visited with her two married nieces as much as possible.

Just after her elder niece and husband emigrated to America, Dorrie and Angus announced another baby was expected. By Angus' thirtieth birthday, Dorrie was six months along. But bad news came also. Margaret's younger niece would soon be leaving for the United States to join her sister.

That night, unable to sleep, Margaret saddened by the imminent departure of her niece, but more worried about Angus, prayed her beloved son would live to see the next morn.

At midnight, she heard Dorrie scream and rushed to their bedroom. Angus lay dead, not a mark on his body. Next to him, in a pool of blood, Dorrie miscarried her baby. Before she died, she whispered how she'd heard Angus cry out and then felt a piercing pain deep inside her. "The witch did for us both, and our baby, too," she gasped before she died. "Oh, please take care of little Stewart."

Margaret soon decided the best way to keep Stewart alive was to take him and join her niece and husband. If she traveled with them away from Scotland, in the United States, she hoped, the witch's nonsensical curse would hold no power.



**"The Amber Dragon"**  
**{The Amber Chronicles, Book 3}**  
**by Janet Lane Walters (Dame Amber)**  
**Excerpt**

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*A tale from the days of the onset of the curse on the Riva family and the entrance of the first prince into the world of the amber globe.*

**Chapter 1**

Stephen Riva, crown prince of Rivand, stared at the Witch of the Woods. With her hair the color of spun gold and eyes the brilliant blue of summer skies, her beauty fascinated him. But the words she spoke made him uneasy. He frowned and turned toward his father. The king glared at the woman.

The witch pointed a finger at the king. "You have not won. Fire will not destroy the garden or drive me from the home I have created." She spun and waved her hands. All traces of the fire set by the king and his men vanished. She grasped Stephen's hand and pulled him into the garden. "I love you. Will you love me in return?"

He shook his head. "How can you speak of love? Love does not strike in an instant and set a heart on fire. Love grows like a flower from a seed, planted and carefully tended."

A dreamy expression appeared on her lovely face. "The moment I beheld you I knew you were mine. Your dark hair, your handsome face and your muscular body have enchanted me. I could drown in your moss green eyes."

Stephen shook his head. In all his twenty and one years, he had never heard such nonsense. "You will not have me. I have a duty to Rivand, the land I will one day rule."

"Do you have brothers?"

"Yes."

"Then one of them can take on your duty to the land. You have no reason to reject my love."

Stephen shook his head. "There are three reasons. Duty, honor and love. My duty as crown prince of Rivand is to take the throne. Should I run away from doing this, I would lose honor. I do not love you."

Her eyes narrowed. "So be it. If you will not be mine, you will not be Rivand's king. A curse I lay upon the House of Riva. Every hundred years a prince will be given a chance. Accept my love and give his heart in return for mine, or be taken into the amber orb and spend his life in another world."

Stephen looked at her. "I pray one day you will learn love does not happen in an instant and cannot be given on command."

She smiled. "And you may learn love can occur in an instant and become eternal."

Though there were no clouds, thunder rumbled. A streak of lightning flashed across the sky and struck the ground near Stephen's feet. He saw the sparks coalesce into a sphere imprisoning him behind the walls. Stephen stretched his arms toward his father and the Witch of the Woods. The walls of the orb were too distant to touch. He turned and stared at a mass of trees.

The rustling leaves became voices urging him to walk. His strides lengthened until he ran. Was this a dream? The branches of the trees scratched his face and arms. He groaned. Truly he had been brought to another place.

Stephen had no idea how long he walked. The clusters of trees thinned. Beyond them he saw a road and some distant buildings. Before stepping onto the hard-packed earth he removed his coronet, his sword and most of his jewelry. As a stranger in an unknown land he dare not appear hostile. He wrapped his possessions in his cloak and hid them in a hollow tree. With his boot knife he marked the spot. Then he stepped onto the road and sought his new destiny.

\* \* \* \*

Princess Valia stared at the seventeenth prince who had come to Lanton to court her. Since the day her father had decreed she must marry, every available prince from the neighboring kingdoms had arrived at the palace. This young man was her last possible choice for a spouse.

He was handsome. The way he preened like a peacock meant he knew about his looks. He acted as though his willingness to wed her was a gift and her acceptance a given.

Valia scowled. How dare he think she had no other choice? How dare he ignore her? She was tired of hearing about his skill with a sword and of the many maidens who desired him.

There had been no praise of her eyes, the blue of summer skies. He had sung no odes to her amber-colored hair. No poems had been written about her delicate features or her perfect figure. The entire conversation had centered on him. She had not been able to steer him in her direction.

She rose and flicked away the hand extended to assist her. "Prince Hogen, I refuse your offer of marriage. You are but a third son and your conversation and manners are tedious. Your pale hair and eyes do little to compliment my beauty. Go home, for you have failed the test I set for the man I would wed."

"And that might be?" His voice held a haughty tone.

"To think of me and not of yourself." She turned and saw a fierce scowl on her father's face. The wizard stood at the king's side. He smiled, and his expression caused a chill to slither along her spine. Why was the man pleased by her decision?

The scorned prince halted at the door. "You will go to your grave a spinster. I am the last of the available princes. I will give you another chance to say you will wed me."

Valia laughed. "I have no need of another chance. Be gone."

When the door closed with a bang, Valia saw her father's scowl had deepened. Though he stood at a distance, she sensed his anger. His boots clicked on the marble squares of the floor. At the king's side, the wizard appeared to glide.

"Daughter, what am I going to do with you? Hogen was the last of the princes available for you to wed." The king's gaze sparked with anger.

Valia smiled. "Father, do you think I am beautiful?"

"That has nothing to do with your need for marriage. You must beg one of the princes to return. Surely there is one who is less offensive than the others. I must have time to train my successor to rule when I am gone."

Valia's heart skipped a beat. "Do not think that way. You are only of middle age."

"I must consider the future. Lanton must have a strong ruler. Since you cannot choose, I will."

“Father, no.” Valia’s hands rested on her hips. “I refuse to marry a man who can say nothing about my beauty. I will gladly wed one who adores me. He can take on the boring chores of a king and leave me time to spend maintaining my beauty. I will not wed a man who wants me to worship him.”

The king turned to the wizard. “Do something. Cast a spell to make her change from the vain and selfish woman she has become.”

The wizard smiled slyly. “Sire, I can devise a spell but you might not be willing to pay the price.”

“Gold, silver and jewels will be yours. I will gladly pay you to create a spell.”

Valia stared at them. “Have *I* no say?”

The king shook his head. “You will do what must be done. Wizard, you will have what you desire. I must have a son to rule when I grow old.”

“As you command, Sire.”

Valia tried to scurry toward the door, but her father grasped her arm. “My child, you must wed before another year passes. You have reached your twentieth year.”

She did not trust the wizard and had no idea why she felt this distrust. “Why must you be this way? Am I not your greatest treasure?”

“You are, and there must be a strong man to guard you when I no longer can.”

The wizard stood on her other side. “The spell I will cast would best be done in the garden.”

A chill rolled along her arms. Though Valia wanted to flee, she would not let this man know she feared him. She walked between the men to the garden. A breeze carried the scent of summer flowers. Chimes in the trees produced a sweet song. With a wave of his hand, her father sent the guards and gardeners away.

A strange lethargy stole over Valia. She sank onto a garden bench. Her father sat on another one. The wizard spoke quietly. Her father’s eyes closed. When Valia tried to rise, she could not move. She called to her father, but he failed to answer.

The wizard approached her bench. His midnight blue robe swirled around his ankles. As he raised his arms, the wide sleeves billowed. He held a wand. “Sire, do you agree to the terms I set?”

“I do.” The king’s voice sounded as though he stood at a great distance.

Valia frowned. What were the terms and what did they mean for her? Should not *she* be the one to accept or refuse? She opened her mouth. No sound emerged. Again she tried with the same result. Where once she had dismissed the wizard as a fool, she now knew he was evil. Fear washed through her.

The wizard chanted strange sounding words. He walked three times in a clockwise and three times counter around the bench. The seventh circuit followed the clock.

Valia felt as though the bench formed a cage to keep her in place. Images of becoming a marble statue for the duration of the spell brought fear. How could she fulfill her father’s demand to wed if she remained an unmoving figure seated on a bench?

The wizard faced her. He waved his wand from side to side. Her gaze followed. His gibberish changed to words she understood. They unnerved her:

“For seven weeks this new form will be yours. There is but one chance to escape your fate. If you find a prince and convince him to kiss you, you will return to your own shape. To do this, you will have a single word. The first one you utter to another will be all you can say. If seven weeks pass and you have not found a prince, you will become *my* smiling, silent bride.”

Valia wanted to protest. She had no desire to be the wizard’s wife. She looked at her father. He appeared to be asleep. Had the wizard cast a spell on the king?

The wizard’s wand twirled faster until Valia could no longer see the gem at the tip. The sight transfixed her. “Seven times seven,” the wizard shouted. “The spell is complete.”

The lethargy Valia had felt vanished. She stared at the sky. The sun touched the horizon. Soon darkness would come. She rose and nearly fell. Putting her front paws on the ground, she lumbered to the garden pool.

Valia stared in trepidation at the water. Though the sunlight faded, she could see her image. A scream built and was swallowed when she remembered what the wizard had said. Her first and only word could not be a “No” cried in anguish, anger and despair. She leaned forward for another look. Nothing had changed. She was still a five foot tall amber dragon instead of a beautiful princess.

*Ugly.* Where she had been the most beautiful woman in the kingdom and all the surrounding ones, she was now ugly enough to scare people.

Her father and the wizard were gone. She crept beneath a weeping cherry tree and huddled under the drooping branches. Nothing could change her back. Except a prince. She had to find one, and there were just seven weeks for the search. If she failed, she would become the wizard's bride. His *silent* bride. That fate terrified her. Valia rested her head on her front paws. Where was she going to find a prince?



**"Jordana's Chair"**  
**{Kaleidoscope Series, Book 4}**  
**by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)**  
**Excerpt**

©Karen Wiesner

**Chapter 1**

Dex Everett was just putting the key in his apartment door when he heard the elevator ding. At the end of the hall, his younger sister stepped out, dressed to the nine's—an Everett family custom. She smiled as she walked toward him, but he could see what she was thinking long before she spoke. "I am *so* nervous! I haven't been this nervous since my wedding day."

Pulling her in for a reassuring hug, Dex offered her a soothing grin. "My boss Angela will love you. You've got the job in the bag, Jolie."

"I hope so." She took a deep breath as he pushed open his door and waved her inside.

"Just let me get some work-ups I forgot this morning. Then we'll go to lunch," Dex said, following her and moving through the elegant, open living space to his home office. On the futuristic style desk, he flipped through the disk file, searching for the one he needed.

"Where's the woman who had this job before?" Jolie started from somewhere behind him.

Dex looked over his shoulder at her. "Keri Woods. Keri *Lewis*. She married my boss's cousin last Valentine's Day. They're happily ensconced in Fever, Texas, planning for the birth of their first child."

"So she's definitely not coming back?"

Angela Lewis-Mackenzie owned Kaleidoscope Office Building, a strip mall that contained the two businesses she owned, along with Two Brothers Accounting, which was one of Angela's many investments. Dex and Veronica "Roni" Spencer handled the graphic design done at Lewis Graphics. Aimee Cooper—and Keri, before she resigned last year in preparation for her wedding—worked at Kaleidoscope Office Services. Angela hadn't yet hired Keri's replacement. Dex had suggested to his boss on Monday that his sister might be interested in filling the position. That same day, Angela had called Jolie personally and asked her to come in for an interview today.

"No. Keri won't be coming back," Dex told his sister. "Why?"

"I don't know. I don't want a temporary job like all my modeling gigs. I'd prefer to have something settled for the first time in my life."

Dex understood her concern. At the age of twenty-four—five years younger than Dex himself—she'd spent her adult life thus far attending college in-between modeling jobs. Last year, she'd married Dex's best friend from high school and college...and basically hadn't seen her husband since. Jag was a wildlife photographer for one of the premiere nature magazines in the world. His assignments took him away, sometimes for a year or more at a time. Jolie, like most of the Everetts, was looking for stability and roots.

Tamping down at the instinctive protectiveness he'd always felt for his sister, Dex told himself he wouldn't help anything by letting on how furious he was with Jag. For abandoning her. For looking at Jolie in the first place, especially knowing he wouldn't be sticking around for long once the union was legal. *Not to mention that Jolie's convinced he's having an affair with his assistant. As soon as he comes back, I'm going to kill him.*

Dex put an arm around his sister, looking into her cobalt blue eyes so like his own. "This job is solid, honey. I promise you. Remember I told you Angela sees her employees as family? You already know most everyone who works there—Shayna, Roni and Billy. And you do know Angela—you've met her, remember? At Shayna's?" Billy LaPointe and Rob Channing owned Two Brothers, and Shayna Cavanay served as their secretary/receptionist but moonlighted at both of Angela's businesses when necessary. "Angela already loves you. It's why she called you when I mentioned you might want Keri's job." He gave Jolie a carefree grin that she responded to without resistance. "Now, let's go to lunch and then I'll personally take you to your interview."

Looking much more relaxed, she nodded. Arm and arm, they left his apartment. Dex's gaze focused on the apartment door across from his as it had for the past year whenever he was coming or going. He didn't linger this time.

He and his sister stepped into the elevator, then she asked if she'd dressed all right for the interview. Though Everetts were endowed with a sixth sense when it came to

fashion, Dex knew she trusted his opinion. The heather-gray pantsuit she wore with a rose top, a simple gold chain and hoop earrings, was ideal for a business meeting but also perfectly suited Jolie's soft femininity. "You killed it, honey. You look exactly right. Not that it matters. You've got all the skills for this job."

She smiled. "Still, I hope I won't drop anything on my outfit during lunch."

Dex laughed. Mother Everett had drilled proper form, table manners and etiquette into her two children from birth. He and Jolie were probably the only babies who ever used napkins.

The elevator opened on the ground floor. As they moved toward the apartment exit at the far end of the same hall, Dex saw the person he inadvertently looked for before he left for work each morning and when he got home. His neighbor across the hall, Jordana DeSoto, stood in front of her mailbox wearing one of the few dresses he'd noticed she owned—a simple tea dress with small buttons and a knee length hem. It was the same basic pattern all her dresses shared, except this floral printed one was sleeveless. Bare-legged, she wore a fatigued pair of espadrilles that perfectly suited the July weather. He knew she didn't have a car. She walked to and from the sewing place she worked weekday mornings, came home for lunch, then walked to the diner she worked afternoons and evenings.

Dex swallowed the newly formed lump in his throat, muttering hoarsely to his sister, "I should get my mail."

He got out of his key, barely taking his eyes off Jordana looking through her mail as if she had all the time in the world. Inserting his key in the box next to hers, he glanced at her. "Hello."

She met his smile with one of her own. "Hello, Dex. How are you today?"

Her heavy Latin American accent sent shivers down his spine. His own voice sounded strange to his ears when he offered, "Good. How was work?"

"I love to sew."

He knew she did. He'd often heard her sewing behind her apartment door.

He turned to her, grasping his mail and shutting the small door as he did so. *Cinderella. Without the soot on her face and bossy step sisters. Not that I know anything about Jordana's family.* The only thing he knew about this woman was that she walked everywhere—luckily, not through any bad neighborhoods that he knew of. And that, modest dresser aside, she was

the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen with her fiery mahogany hair braided past her hips, her sultry hazel eyes, pronounced cheekbones and stubbornly proud chin.

When she'd first moved here a year ago, she'd been a mere waif, so thin she might have been anorexic. In the last several months, she'd put on weight that looked so good on her, he'd often wondered what it would be like to run his hands over her sleekly lush curves.

“And you are working today?” she asked.

He nodded, barely aware of the goofy smile he wore. Who cared that he couldn't always understand every word she said? At first, he'd comprehended almost nothing she said, but he caught most of it now. Her accent made her grasp of English clumsy and slow, but he loved to listen to her speak. Her voice was like a husky, lilting song.

She smiled again, her skin like silky caramel, her lips deep coral against it. “You've come home for lunch?”

“Just...um, home...forgot something. And lunch...”

Jolie stepped to his side, and Dex suddenly felt like an idiot who couldn't put two words together. “Jordana, this is Jolie. We're going to lunch.”

Never losing her happy smile, Jordana nodded at his sister. Jolie held out her hand. “Nice to meet you, Jordana.”

“Enjoy your lunch,” Jordana murmured. “It is a beautiful day. I believe I will take my lunch out to the patio.”

Jolie said something polite, and then Jordana was walking away. Dex didn't think about his actions—immediately turning back to watch his neighbor's gorgeous figure—until Jolie chuckled under her breath. Dex's gaze flew to her then followed her focus to Jordana in the elevator, waving to them. Dex lifted his hand, grinning like an idiot again.

“What is the story, Dexter?” Jolie demanded after the doors closed. Only when her hand squeezed his shoulder did he snap out of it.

Dex shook his head, suddenly aware of all that had happened. How foolish he must have looked in the last five minutes. “What? Nothing. No story. She's just my neighbor. Come on. We have reservations in a few minutes.”

Jolie followed him out, chuckling. “No story? I don’t think so. I’ve never heard my brother, Mr. Smooth, stutter before. And you barely introduced me. Instead, we had that big, dopey pause.”

“I didn’t stutter,” he insisted defensively as they arrived at his Miata convertible. He could feel warmth in his cheeks.

Jolie slid inside the roadster next to him. “You did stutter, Dex. You like her.”

“She’s not my type.” Knowing his sister would want to preserve her upswept hair, he left the top up.

“Well, you’re being honest about one thing. She’s nothing like your *usual* type. But seeing as though your usual type is all fashion, no substance...kind of like—”

He scolded her with a look. “Don’t you dare bring up Camille. We’re all allowed to make one mistake in love, aren’t we?”

Jolie arched a silky brown eyebrow at him. “Don’t bring up your rich socialite, bossy ex-wife? Sure, I won’t bring her up...if you confess that Camille dumped you for a rich guy with big career plans and you’ve been dating women like her since you got out of college.”

Dex shook his head as he zipped out of his parking space and roared toward the restaurant on Rose Street. The need for stability and roots had become strong in him at a young age. He’d made the mistake of sleeping with Camille on their first date and she’d decided they needed to get married barely a month later. Truthfully, he’d been happy when she did an about-face and announced they weren’t such a good match after barely a year together. He’d never been satisfied with her, but he’d been taught better than to jump in and out of women’s beds without responsibility.

“Dex, don’t you realize that the fashion plates and socialites you date are only interested in high-powered career guys rolling in money?”

He had plenty of money. He just had no ambition to become a banker, doctor, lawyer or politician. He loved his career in graphic design—he loved working with people who were his closest friends. He made more than enough to live on, combined with a generous trust fund Grandfather Everett had left for him and Jolie.

“Jordana is different,” his sister decided.

He couldn't deny that, didn't have any desire to refute it. And Jordana DeSoto intrigued him the way the women he dated didn't and couldn't, especially not the Camilles he gravitated toward for reasons he couldn't even define.

"She makes her own clothes, doesn't she?" Jolie said without prejudice.

"I think she does. It might be all she can afford. I've heard her sewing inside her apartment, and she works as a seamstress at Kept in Stitches. Her wardrobe consists of tea dress patterns, but, in different seasons, they have sleeves or cardigans that go over them."

"It's a nice pattern. You can't go wrong with a tea dress." His sister's hand covered his arm. "It's a good thing your apartment building is rent controlled. Anyway, she's very sweet, Dex. Why don't you ask her out?"

He turned to her from the road, eyes narrowed to scold. He discarded a sharp reply, which would give away his unwillingness to admit that Jordana intimidated him for the exact opposite reasons his usual type did. She was upbeat and happy every single time he saw her. She loved nature, loved purity. She was optimistic about life without a single expectation for anyone else. She never rushed anywhere, for anyone. *Whatever anyone says or does, whatever happens...she seems good with it all. I don't understand that...but I love it about her. She's not like anyone else I've ever met.*

He lived for the times he could corner her in the hall outside their apartment or near the mailboxes, in the parking lot. Oddly, she didn't seem to have any relatives, none that visited her anyway. The only person he'd ever seen at her apartment was a young woman around her age. *No boyfriends.*

Not knowing what to say, since anything would amount to stuffing his own foot inside his mouth, Dex said nothing more to his sister about the unforgettable Jordana DeSoto. He just drove, imagining his neighbor out on her patio eating lunch, enjoying the blue sky and brilliant sunshine. The goofy smile he seemed to reserve just for her spread across his face.

\* \* \* \*

Although Jordana didn't have the luxury of lingering over lunch on the patio outside her kitchen/dining/living room, she enjoyed the peaceful, warmth of the day. The clouds were as white and fluffy as fat sheep, the sky cerulean blue. *Like Dex's beautiful eyes behind those rectangular eyeglasses that make him impossibly more handsome.*

Jordana shook her head, determined not to fall into another foolish daydream about a man she had no business being drawn to. She quickly finished her peanut butter

sandwich, drained the last of her milk, then carried her dishes inside. She had to be at work before twelve-thirty, and Diego never put up with lateness. Not without endless grouching that made the waitresses want to slip ipecac into the coffee he drank nonstop.

Brightening on that thought, Jordana went to change into her blue waitress uniform, the frilly apron, and comfortable, though ugly, wait staff shoes. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, she tightened up her braid, then rolled and fastened the length at the back of her neck so she could easily pull on a hair net when she arrived at the diner. Then she slipped her inspiration into her pocket.

Considering that the diner was nearly three miles away, she walked briskly, thinking about the chair she had on layaway. Maybe today she would make enough in tips to bring her treasure home. It would be the very first piece of furniture she'd bought herself—not one she'd found in the trash and refurbished into something usable. This chair would mark her second year of survival, as her apartment marked the first.

She'd come to La Crosse from Milwaukee a year ago, with little more than the clothes on her back and her mother's antique sewing machine—her one and only heirloom. At that time, she'd only had enough money to cover the down payment and the first month's rent on this wonderful apartment—plus a huge tub of peanut butter and bread. She'd gotten her two jobs within the first week. For that first month, she'd eaten nothing else when she wasn't at the diner, which provided dinner during her regular shift.

Spending almost no money, she was able to save enough for her second months' rent, a few more groceries, and a second-hand saucepan she did all her cooking in. Furniture hadn't been within her budget, so she'd begun looking for broken down pieces she could repair at home. Her father had taught her all she needed to know about refurbishing. Getting the items home was sometimes an obstacle, but Dex and her friend Shirley had helped out. In the last year, Jordana had managed to turn a trashed bed frame, all sorts of mismatched wooden chairs and tables of various sizes into treasures that had begun to fill her home. After finding a mattress propped up near a dumpster at a local consignment shop, she'd cleaned and aired it thoroughly once she got it home. Then she'd re-covered it, made sheets, a blanket and pillows, along with towels and curtains, out of the inexpensive bolts of material she'd purchased from a local consignment shop. With a few dishes, she was satisfied with her progress. No, she didn't have a television, telephone, let alone a vehicle. But her life was very good. She had everything she would need. And soon she would have her own armchair, where she could relax at night, listen to the classical music that Dex tended to play loud enough for her to hear, and read a library book.

Yes, life was very good. She remembered how often her father said, "We're together. We have love. That's all that matters." What did it matter if sometimes she was so lonely, she

wanted to cry? She had friends...a friend. Shirley. *And Dex. I so enjoy the few minutes I spend with Dex Everett almost every day.*

Truthfully, despite the time they spent together in the halls of the apartment building or the parking lot, she often realized she knew next to nothing about him. She knew he had a lot of girlfriends. Jolie was just one of the new ones he seemed to have every couple months. But she had seen Jolie before. Perhaps she was the one woman Dex couldn't forget. *His destiny.* Jolie was certainly not like Dex's usual girlfriends, though she dressed beautifully, the way he did. Jolie wasn't bleach-blond—shockingly, blindingly so. Also very different from his norm, Jolie had been warm and friendly with her. Dex's other girlfriends seemed to see Jordana as competition and far beneath them.

*Maybe I am. I could never afford to dress in those rich fabrics. I have no jewelry whatsoever. And my two pairs of shoes are badly in need of replacement.*

Jordana checked both ways before crossing the street a few blocks from Diego's Diner. She found herself smiling, even as she told herself she could never be with a man like Dex, a man who didn't seem to hold on to a girlfriend longer than a few weeks.

*He is handsome. Undeniably, breathtakingly so.* He resembled the god Shirley referred to him as the one time she'd seen him. His face looked carved from stone, with just a hint of sexy, well-trimmed moustache and beard around his full lips. Those beautiful blue eyes were so compelling and soft, she sometimes forgot her own name when he turned them on her. He had reddish blond hair, short in back, spiky long in front—hair any woman would want to run her hands through. At about six foot one, he was trim, but she'd seen him in swimming trunks. He was all golden, sleek muscle. He dressed as if he'd just stepped out of some men's fashion magazine. Never had she seen a man who dressed the way he did. He was too attractive for someone as down-to-earth as Jordana was and she knew it.

*And, goodness, does he smell good. Heaven on earth.* She'd never been able to describe even to herself what Dex smelled like, outside of words like spice, leather, intoxicating—words that couldn't capture how badly she wanted to tuck her face into the crook of his neck, snuggle there and just breath him in until she got drunk on him.

Patrons bustled along the streets around her as she neared the diner. She smiled at everyone, her mind foolishly lingering on those few minutes she'd spent with Dex near the mailboxes.

He was a good man. He always helped Mrs. Quigglemire with her groceries—no matter how many trips he had to make back and forth to her sixth floor apartment. He did old Mr. Boland's laundry whenever he was washing his own. *And he goes out of his way to help me carry my broken treasures up to my apartment.*

So Dex was the nicest, sweetest, cutest guy she'd met...ever? She could enjoy knowing him without getting her heart involved. So she felt soft as a marshmallow toward him right now? She could do that because it made her happy to do so. As long as she never had to sleep, hollow from constant, gnawing hungry, in a cardboard box on the freezing streets again, she could be satisfied with what life had given her and not wish for more. Dex was simply a beautiful, foolish dream she couldn't shake.

"You're late!" Diego barked before she'd put two feet into the diner. Behind the cash register, he glowered at her before swigging from the paper cup of coffee in his hand.

Jordana glanced at her watch. "Twenty seconds. I stopped to pick up the clapboard sign with the daily specials. The wind must have pushed it over."

Her boss's dark face tightened. "That's no excuse."

"I will stay twenty seconds longer tonight."

"See that you do."

On the far side of the counter, her friend and fellow waitress, Shirley, stared in shock, though Diego was always irascible and there was no reason to be surprised about his usual state. Jordana smiled and gave her friend's shoulder a squeeze on her way back to punch in and put her hair net on. She knew Diego would watch her like a hawk throughout the shift, but she paid no attention to his little lectures about being too friendly, too accommodating to her customers. After all, her vindication was that her tables always left her large tips. She would have her chair soon. The hope swept her through her shift to her dinner break.

Shirley brought them both the special and Jordana's favorite—a chicken chimichanga. Her friend nodded her head toward the napkin Jordana had wrapped around her finger. "What happened?"

"Paper cut when I pulled off a ticket," Jordana said as Shirley sat down with the plates. She peeked under the napkin again. "Do you think I should go to the doctor? Will it get infected?"

Laughing slightly, Shirley got up and opened the first aid kit attached to the wall nearby. She came back ripping open a small packet. She swiped the antiseptic wipe over Jordana's finger, causing a momentary sting. "There. Now it won't get infected, dear. I promise."

She knew her friend found her worry about getting sick amusing, but Jordana had yet to forget that her parents had contracted pneumonia while they lived on the streets. They literally hadn't been able to afford to get sick...or to get well.

"How are your guys?" Jordana asked after she sprinkled more cheese on top of her chimichanga, then cut into it.

Shirley and Roscoe had gotten married only a few months ago, though they'd lived together for years and had a five-year-old son.

"Everything's good. You don't know what you're missing, girlfriend."

Jordana grinned. "Sure I do. I've met Roscoe and Henry."

Shirley set down her fork. "I'm serious, Jordana. You spent so many years living on the streets, your only focus is not going back. You never take any chances."

"But I'm happy. Do you want something to drink?"

Shirley put her hand on her arm to prevent her from leaving. "You're happy because you never consider what you're missing."

"The love of a good man?"

Her friend's plump face took on a scowl that simply didn't fit her. "Well, yeah, that, and the chance to have children of your own."

"I'm young, Shirley. I'm content...or I will be when I get my chair." Jordana slipped her inspiration from her pocket—the advertisement for the armchair waiting for her on layaway. "Look at this beauty. Turned legs. See all that comfy cushioning on the upholstery? It's long enough that I could sleep on it if I wanted. And the pattern is so pretty—scrolled leaves in amethyst and green. Rolled arms with rattan inserts. It's the prettiest thing you've ever seen. You could sink down into this and understand true comfort for the first time..."

"Jordana?"

Bewildered, she looked up at the strange tone of her friend's voice. "What?"

Shirley's blue-gray eyes expressed both exasperation and love. "You're hopeless. You do know that, don't you?"

Jordana gave her a brilliant smile. “Never. I’m simply a survivor. All I have is hope, my friend.”