

THE SEER'S STONE

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Chapter 1

“Mum, do we have to have her?”

Wearily, Mary sat down with her mug of tea. “For the umpteenth time. Yes.”

Beth sighed, kicking her legs over the arm of the armchair. “Purple nails and lipstick and pierced ears when she was ten! And bubble gum in her hair, where she hadn’t shaved it half off.”

Her mother’s lips quirked at the memory of Beth’s appalled meeting with her cousin Tanya two years before. “Maybe she’s improved,” she consoled.

“What, you mean she’s changed into a handsome toad?”

Mary slapped her mug down on the top of the gas fire. “Oh, for goodness sake, Beth. You’re fourteen - act it, instead of sulking like a child. I’m no happier than you are, but she’s family, so we help her.”

Beth squirmed. “But she’ll be taking up a room. Can we afford it, mum?”

Her mother snorted. “No. That’s why she won’t be taking up a room.”

“What?” Beth sat up suddenly. “You don’t mean she’s got to share with me? No! I won’t have her prying into all my things, and leaving her mucky chewing gum everywhere!” She jumped up and marched for the door.

Despite her plumpness, Mary beat her to it.

“Now, listen to me, Beth! When I had the car crash and couldn’t walk for a year, Liz took you in, even though she had a sickly new baby.” Her round, gentle face was severe. “And now she’s going into hospital, so we take Tanya. That’s only fair. Right?”

In spite of her resentment, Beth had to nod. “I suppose so. Okay!” she snarled. “I’ll share.”

“Politely!” her mother warned her sternly.

“Politely.” Beth sniffed. “Can I go now? To get ready for our visitor! My spare bed’s not made up yet.”

Mary smiled at her daughter. “I think it’s this muggy weather that’s making us all irritable, pet. Feels like a thunderstorm. We’ll all feel better when it breaks. There’s only two couples booked in for dinner tonight. So if you get the messages, I can see to them and you can have some time off.”

Rapidly, Beth abandoned her sulks. “The whole afternoon and evening free? Great! Got the list? Bank - all this to go in? Not bad, eh? Melon, chicken bits... Electric bill - good - er - good grief! Er - see you, mum!” The bill was horrendous, and she knew her mother was worried about money. The guest

house was usually empty from November to March; there was dry rot in one of the bathroom floors - at least one - and the insurance bill was rocketing. Mary spent most of the winter writing children's stories, trying to make ends meet.



Beth was chatting to a friend on one of the supermarket checkouts when Iona peered past her, pointed with her head and rolled her eyes. Beth glanced round.

A skinny little figure at the next till was buying a box of chocolates. The hem of her long black coat drooped unevenly round black skintight ski pants tucked into tatty black boots. In this sticky heat, how could she stand that wide-brimmed black felt hat pulled down over her straggly black hair? The thin hands laying out coins had black-painted nails, bitten right down to the quick, and several heavy silver rings. And that stuffed-nose Lancashire accent! No, oh no, please...

Beth swiftly hurried for the door. But her long fair hair, curling like Alice in Wonderland's down her back, was a giveaway. Behind her came a raucous yell.

“Ey up! Beth! Is you, ain't it? It's me, Tanya. Didn't yer see us?”

Reluctantly, she turned to the awful vision which was perkily trotting after her. She sighed. Yes, it was her cousin. No free evening.

“Hello, Tanya.”

The two stared at each other for a few seconds.

Beth’s heart sank. Tanya couldn’t be even smaller and skinnier, could she? She had four or five pierced earrings in each ear, and some of the holes were disgustingly red and crusted.

And what was that round her neck? A silver chain with an upside-down cross on it? Yuck! Iona was making faces behind Tanya’s back. She’d never live this down!

Tanya’s heart sank. Beth wasn’t so much square, as cubic! All fair and fat and normal. All that platinum blonde hair, natural, of course, never dream of bleaching it, and nice white blouse, and nice grey skirt, and nice white sandals... Stuffy, stuck-up and squeaky clean! Oh, ’eck! She grinned, half rueful, half cheeky. “Didn’t think you’d see us so soon, did yer?”

“No, not till next week. You look just the same.” Worse luck!

“You ain’t changed much neither.” Worse luck!

“What are you doing here?” Beth pulled herself together. “I mean, is Auntie Liz all right?”

Tanya chortled, the rows of silver earrings glinting and jingling. “Off to Majorca for a week, ’fore she goes into hospital. Last chance for a spree, see?”

Beth nearly exploded. So she and her mother had to put up - and put up with - Tanya, to let Aunt Liz have a week’s holiday! What would mum say?



To her surprise, her mum didn’t seem bothered. “You’re very welcome, Tanya. If you’d phoned to let me know you were coming, we could have met you at the station.”

“Weren’t our fault, Aunt Mary.” Tanya’s rings flashed defensively as she waved her hands animatedly. “Called yer four times, but the line were engaged. Every time.” She sensed their disbelief, and started talking even faster, fishing in her black nylon sports bag. “Got a pressie for yer, Aunt Mary. Mam sent it wi’ her love.” It was a pound box of chocolates.

“But you bought that in...” Beth caught her mother’s glare. Tanya was bright red with anger and embarrassment.

“Thank you, lass. It was a kind thought.” Mary smiled. “Right, Beth, take Tanya up

and settle her in. Make up the bed, and clear a space for her clothes.”

Tanya lifted her tatty bag. “This is it, Aunt Mary. Don’t need much. Just T-shirts an’ that. Black, o’ course. A Goff, see!”

“A Goff?” Beth demanded. “What’s a Goff?”

“You taking the mickey?”

“A Goth, you mean, Tanya?” Mary chuckled. “Not with it, Beth!”

“S’right. Goff. G-O-T-H, Goff! All black an’ mysterious, right? See me pixie boots?” She displayed them proudly, not seeming to care that the toes were scuffed and crumpled, and the heels chipped and skinned. “Cracking fancy buckles, eh? One on me hatband, too, see - real silver! Fell off a lorry, or I’d never have afforded ’em.”

Mary stifled a sigh. “Well, go on both of you, I’ve dinners to make.”

Resigned, Beth led Tanya out into the tiny back hall of Firthview House.

“That’s the dining room door, with the front hall and stairs on the far side of it. The lounge is right above. Four bedrooms on that floor. We live up these back stairs.” On the first floor, she pointed to the doors. “That’s the lounge. Room 3, here, has its own bathroom. 4 and 5 are along there.”

A narrow spiral twisted up to two attic bedrooms and a tiny bathroom. Tanya stared round Beth’s room, panting. Yellow bed-spread

and teddies. Oh 'eck! No carpet even, just a rug on the floorboards. And a view of just about the end of the world. To her annoyance, fatso wasn't out of breath at all. She tried to be nice.

“Them gold curtains is right swanky. An' the way the roof slopes down like an Arab tent, full o' Eastern Promise! Black paint an' a purple carpet, an' it'd be magic!”

Black and purple! Yuck! Beth was quite happy with her sunny yellow and white.

“I'm glad you like it.” Stiffly, she dumped sheets and pillowcases on the spare divan under the sloping ceiling opposite her own. “This is yours. How many drawers do you want?”

“One'll do us. Trying to get away from being owned by things.”

“What?” Beth plumped down on her own bed, automatically leaning forwards to avoid the ceiling close above her head. “What do you mean?”

Grinning mischievously, Tanya threw herself flat on her back on her bed. Her black T-shirt was rotted away under the arm, and the smell of stale sweat was spreading through the room. “Things owns yer. Got to look after 'em, an' scared to lose 'em. Ain't got nowt, yer free. See?”

Beth stared. She'd never heard anybody say things like that before. Especially not

somebody two years younger than she was. And in that irritating stuffed-up voice, sounding every ‘th’ as ‘f’, ‘ing’ as ‘ink’, and ‘uh’ like ‘oo’. And swearing, and smelly. Yuck. Huffily she stood up. One drawer? Ridiculous!

“I’ll clear these two drawers for you, while you make the bed.” She opened her top drawer. Disturbing all her tidy arrangements...

Tanya didn’t move.

“Come on, Tanya,” Beth urged. “Get the bed made up, and we’ll go down and give mum a hand.”

“I ain’t no slave.”

“What? You mean - you want me to make up your bed for you?”

Lounging, Tanya shrugged. “Please yerself.”

“But...” Beth was dumbfounded. “You’ll be sleeping in it. You should help make it up.”

Tanya chuckled, smug and superior.

Superior? Smelly, dirty, lazy, disgusting, foul-mouthed...upsetting everybody and swearing and expecting to be waited on hand and foot and then daring to sneer... Hot, sticky, headachey and feeling put-upon, Beth suddenly gave up the struggle with her temper. “Well, I’m not a slave either !” she snarled. “You want food? You help with the cooking! You want clean plates to eat off? You help wash and dry

them! You want to stay here, you help!” As Tanya sat up, Beth slammed the pillow down onto the smaller girl’s chest, knocking her flat again. “Or you can clear right out again and sleep on the beach and die of pneumonia! See if I care!”

She knew she’d lost her temper, but she didn’t care. Her voice rose and rose until she was shouting, leaning over Tanya on the bed. “Now, get up, and get that bed made up, and take a shower. You’re grey and you stink! Wash your filthy, nitty hair and hurry up!” Her head was just bursting.

Insulted and angry, Tanya shoved the pillow off. “Ain’t niffy! Or nitty!”

“Yes, you are! Horrid! And this isn’t a pigsty! Now get a move on! And stop swearing!”

“Swearin’? I don’t swear!”

“Hah! Only every second word! It’s not clever or brave or anything, it just shows you’re stupid and bad-mannered, and don’t know proper, interesting words, and - and your mum didn’t bring you up properly!” Beth was quoting rather confusedly from her mother.

“You leave me mam out o’ this!” Tanya bounced up off the bed, shrieking. “Ain’t nowt wrong wi’ mam! She’s better’n yours!”

Screeching, Beth slapped her. Tanya clawed her back.

At the back of her mind, Beth couldn't believe this; she hadn't behaved like this since nursery school.

Then, suddenly Mary was hauling Beth off, slapping them both to stop the hysteria.

"What's all this about?" she hissed. "I had a family going to take Room 3, but when they heard your carry-on, they decided not to stay! And I don't blame them! But that's a lot of money you've just cost me!"

They all stared at each other in anger and dismay.

"Beth - who started this?"

The girls glowered in silence.

"Tanya?"

"She said I stink."

"Well, she does!"

As Mary's face grew even sterner, Beth tried to excuse herself. It wasn't her fault!

"She won't help at all, not even by making her bed! She expects us to be her slaves!"

Mary drew a deep breath to calm herself. "Is that true, Tanya?" she asked. "Do you really want to stay here, in our house, and do nothing to help?"

Tanya was sniffing sulkily, head hanging, her lank hair hiding her face. "Didn't ask to come."

"We didn't ask to have you!"

"Quiet, Beth!" Mary checked her daughter's temper. After a pause, she