

The Amethyst Curse

The pen is mightier than you think.

For a writer, nothing comes close to the thrill of finishing a novel, of those two magic words THE END centered at the bottom of the last page, of disks ready to mail, the check from the publisher "on receipt of completed manuscript" to look forward to. It's cast-your-hat-in-the-air champagne time, just the way I feel after I type THE END on page 521 of *Victoria Raven* and send in the manuscript—that is, until my editor at E.P. Dutton calls with a title change.

She wonders what I think of *Amethyst*.

I tell her not much. I point out there's nary an amethyst in my book.

"You'll have to write one in then, won't you?" she says, adding that in whatever form my amethyst is realized, it needs to be high-concept.

I try to laugh it off. "You're joking, right?" But this is not even a suggestion; it's definitely a command. The powers-that-be at Dutton want an amethyst. When I ask why, I'm told the art director wants to do something wonderful with a purple cover. Besides, the current title sounds inappropriately gothic for a novel in the contemporary-women's-fiction genre, with all that that phrase implies of sex, adventure, glamour, and glitz.

There's no point in arguing. I return to the word processor, brood awhile, eventually create a family heirloom: an amethyst ring, the huge stone clasped in silver lion's claws. I rewrite here and there, add a scene at the beginning, a twist at the end, and the story ties together more neatly than before. They love it at Dutton, although now, ironically, the story *does* have a distinctly gothic flavor.

And, perhaps appropriately for a gothic tale, my amethyst heirloom brings with it a curse, although it's not apparent right away.

The manuscript returns line-

edited, bristling with multi-colored stickers. It returns again in long, yellow proof sheets. Bound galleys are sent out; the trade reviews are pretty good. A major sale of the book is pending in England; other foreign buyers include Brazil, Japan, and Norway, home to my number-one fans, according to my agent, on account of those endless Arctic nights. Nationally, *Amethyst* sales reach 40,000 in hardcover; the book is climbing regional best-seller charts, picked up by the Doubleday Book Club and the Literary Guild, condensed by Time/Life. Heady business. I'm hot stuff! I fly to New York for a celebratory lunch with my editor and to pitch my new novel.

Despite high-tech communications, writers outside New York City, especially west of the Rockies, often feel left out of the loop. So when I call my editor to ask whether I should meet her at the office or the restaurant and she mutters, "Oh, my God, I forgot all about you," I'm annoyed yet not altogether surprised.

This time, however, distance has nothing to do with it: Everybody is out of the loop. Just yesterday, in a coup of awesome brutality, a takeover was announced, Dutton's entire adult-fiction division given three days to pack up and leave—and nobody knew a thing about it until heads were rolling on the corporate carpet.

Today, the invaders are already at the gates, and I feel like a traitor when I arrive at the Dutton offices (after lunch) to pitch my next book to the new regime. The hallways are cluttered with torn paper and seem darker than usual, as if lights have burned out and not been replaced. It's unnaturally quiet, save for the phones that no one bothers to answer anymore and the occasional muffled sob, except in the rest room,



which fulminates with invective such as "bloodbath" and "assassins." A fiftyish senior editor fumes, "An old lady like me they throw out in the street!" while my own editor, eight months' pregnant and losing her medical benefits along with her job, silently takes her photographs down from her office wall.

Later, the sale of the British rights falls through when my editor's husband is struck by lightning and killed and she takes an extended leave. *Amethyst* is sold to another British publisher—but the company is a Robert Maxwell subsidiary, and when, soon afterward, the great man falls, leaps, or is thrown from his yacht, Macdonald & Co. (Publishers) falls, in its turn, under the hammer.

Of course, it's grotesque to suggest, even for a moment, that the E.P. Dutton art director who only wanted to do something nice with a purple cover was the catalyst for this string of disasters—but I can't help wondering what would have happened if we had stuck with the original title.

Now it's eight years later, and, along with two of my other books, *Amethyst* has been bought by a publishing house in Russia, another cold country where they appreciate a warm plot.

And me, I find myself lighting a candle at the cathedral of St. Peter and St. Paul and praying for that publisher in Moscow.

—Mary-Rose Hayes

"Add a purple jewel to your novel," they said. Rewriting wasn't painful—it was downright dangerous.