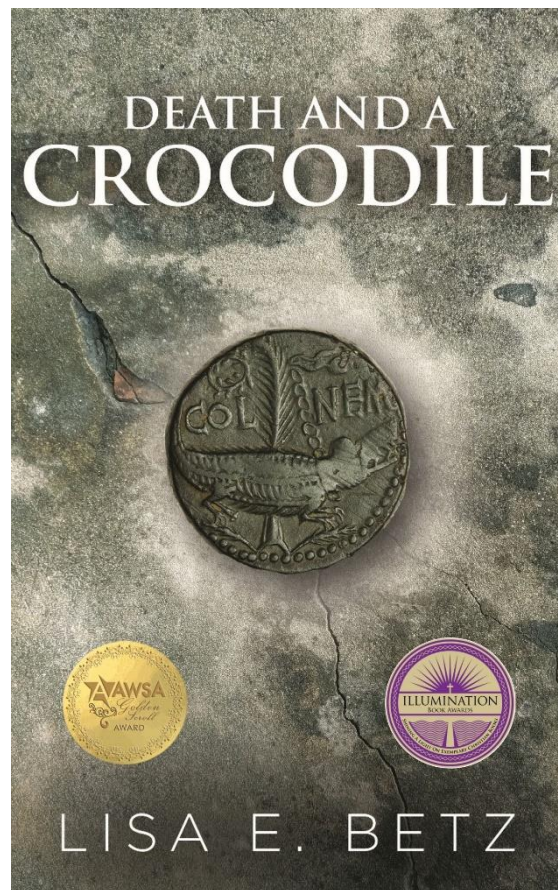


Death and a Crocodile excerpt

by Lisa E. Betz



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Prologue

His regular trips to the stinking underbelly of Rome were becoming tiresome, but revenge required collaboration with the lower elements of society. Where better to meet than a tavern buried among the crumbling tenements of the Subura?

The man gave a hand signal that sent his watchful slave melting into the shadows. Then he ran a hand through his hair to ensure it was suitably unkempt, adjusted his rough tunic so it sagged over his belt, and walked into the warm fug of smoking oil lamps and spilled wine.

At this place he was known as Vulcan. It was not his real name. Everyone in the tavern knew that, but they asked no questions. In return, he occasionally treated them to a pitcher of wine that did not taste like cheap vinegar. Both sides were happy with the arrangement.

The proprietor handed him the latest note from his clever little spy then tilted his head toward a table tucked into an alcove at the far side of the room.

"Got a friend waiting for you tonight."

He had no friends here. Which of the uncouth rabble he occasionally dined with would dare call himself a friend? The man pushed through the crowded room, considering the most effective insults. He was two strides from the table when the seated figure raised his head. Hades! What was he doing here?

"I was told this is where you like to carry out your dirty business."

Bile rose in the man's throat. He spat the acid from his mouth and strode to the table to prove he was not afraid. "What do you want?"

"Take a seat and let's talk like gentlemen—assuming you are capable of behaving like one."

Fury roared in his ears, but he clenched his jaw and dropped onto the open stool.

"A gentleman would face me at my house rather than lurking in Suburan taverns. Only brave enough to insult me where no one will hear?"

The intruder curled his lip. "We are long past insults, you dishonorable corrupt son of a jackal. No wonder you lurk in these dung-infested streets; it's where you belong."

"Careful, or you will give me cause to sue you for insulting my dignitas."

"You have none to insult. You are a murderer and a thief."

"Strong accusations."

"But true. Naso discovered you were cheating him, didn't he? So he had to die. An accident, or so it seemed. Only he told me of his suspicions before he died, so I began to watch the accounts closely. When I had incontrovertible proof that money had gone missing, I confronted the dishonest clerk. He swears the money goes to you."

"A pack of lies."

"I don't think so. I also found this." His enemy held up an old coin.

Rage swirled in the man's gut. He disguised it as indignation.

"Whose word do you trust, mine or my clerk's? The scoundrel is lying. Give me one week and I' will prove it."

The intruder pushed to his feet. "Very well. You have one week before I take this to the authorities and expose you for the dishonorable piece of donkey dung you really are."

The man watched his enemy go, almost blinded by the rage that coursed through his veins. When he could see straight again, he strode from the tavern to seek out an old acquaintance who could solve this problem. For a fee.

Chapter One

Livia intended to make the most of her freedom—before an unwanted husband ruined everything. She reveled in Rome's early-morning bustle: slaves carrying laden baskets, toga-clad men heading to conduct business in the forum, and merchants from every corner of the empire crying their wares with exotic accents and atrocious grammar. She admired a display of colorful woven rugs, poked through a shelf of copper serving spoons, and purchased honey-glazed almond pastries to share with her ever-watchful escort, Tyndareus.

The big slave dipped his head and murmured thanks while Agneta tutted. Livia's maidservant didn't countenance approve of slaves sharing snacks with their mistress. Or impromptu shopping trips. Or fun of any kind.

Her loss. The pastries were delicious. Livia licked the last smudge of honey from her fingers. "Let's head to the other side of the forum."

Agneta's narrow face pinched in disapproval. "The most important day in my lady's life and she sees fit to wander the seven hills."

Meeting a prospective husband was hardly the most important day in a girl's life, especially when the man in question was not remotely acceptable. If only she could find a way to convince her father of that truth.

A fruitless hope. When had Father ever listened to her?

She wandered the market stalls as long as she dared then opted for a roundabout route home, detouring off the main street onto the Quirinal Hill. Near the top of the ridge she spotted a handsome black cat sitting in the mouth of an alley. The cat's intelligent eyes met hers. What a beguiling creature.

The cat turned and sauntered up the alley. Livia felt compelled to follow it. And why not? She started into the alley until a squealed, "Mistress!" from Agneta brought her to a halt.

Roman ladies of good breeding were not supposed to rush headlong into dark alleyways. Roman ladies were expected to live pampered and polite lives devoid of risk, challenge, or excitement. A dull existence Livia dreaded with all her heart.

The cat looked back at her. It clearly wanted her to follow. "Come along, both of you. I want a closer look at that cat."

Tyndareus appeared at her shoulder.

"Are you sure this is wise, Mistress?"

She gestured at the sunlit alley.

"I see no sign of danger. Do you?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh. Tyndareus had been patiently tolerating her impulsiveness since she was a child.

"As you wish, my lady, but send the maid first."

Livia waved Agneta into the alley. The maid shot Tyndareus a spiteful look. Then she gripped the hem of her tunic and picked her way past puddles that reeked of chamber pot and moldering vegetables buzzing with flies. Twenty paces along she stopped. One hand rose, pointing at a blackened pile of rubble. The charred remains of a building.

"See, my lady? We must turn back."

"Nonsense. Keep going."

The ruined building was an all-too-familiar scene in Rome, where multistory apartment buildings often caught fire and crumbled, burying furniture and residents alike. Agneta

inched past it, darting anxious glances at the rubble. Did the woman think desperate criminals lurked under the blackened chunks, watching for unsuspecting victims? What a ninny.

In contrast, the cat sat calmly on a pile of broken roof tiles. When they drew near, it leapt from one chunk of debris to another until it landed on a slab of wall lying askew atop a jumble of charred roof beams. It darted under the slab then reappeared. What secret did it wish to show her? A nest of kittens, perhaps? A shiny trinket the scavengers had missed?

Whatever it was couldn't be worth clambering over soot-covered piles. "I'm sorry, my friend, but—"

A hand appeared. Grabbed the cat. Dragged it out of sight. Agneta jumped back, bleating like a frightened sheep and clutching her chest. The maid had less backbone than a tame dormouse. Hopeless.

In contrast, Livia's heart pounded with excitement. No wonder she felt compelled to follow the cat. Some poor soul had been scavenging and gotten trapped in the rubble, and God had led her here to conduct a rescue.

Not the old gods her parents followed, but the oOne tTrue God and his son, the Lord Jesus, who taught his followers to love their fellow man. The cat reappeared, marched directly to Livia, and stared up at her. Her whole body buzzed with energy. In the two years since her dear friend Placida had introduced her to Jesus and his teachings, she'd never experienced her Lord's direction so clearly.

"We must help."

Tyndareus, who was also a believer in Jesus and his teachings, nodded his assent. He took a cautious step onto the rubble.

Agneta grabbed his arm. "No. Stop."

He teetered for a moment, debris shifting under his feet. He leapt clear, his features hardening into a warrior's scowl. "Watch yourself, girl."

She scowled up at the big slave. "Why must you always encourage her? We have no business rescuing buried strangers. You can report it to the night wWatch after escorting us home."

"Shame on you." Livia's sharp tone brought both heads around. She rarely spoke in anger. Rarely needed to.

Agneta whimpered. "But, my lady, what will your mother say? You must be ready for this evening, and—"

"Enough. Take a look, Tyndareus."

He took his time traversing the unstable wreckage. When he neared the slab, he prodded the various charred beams. Selecting one, he wrapped his arms around it. His muscles bulged. Nothing happened. He adjusted his footing and tried again.

This time the beam creaked. He strained. The slab shifted, causing a cascade of rubble. Tyndareus shouted and leapt clear.

He stumbled a step or two. Dropped to his knees. He pitched forward, his torso disappearing into a cavity, then lay still.

Guilt stabbed Livia. Had her impulsiveness gotten him injured? Please, Lord Christ, don't let him be hurt.

Ten agonizing breaths later he stood, a small figure in his arms. He carried her to the alley. A skinny young woman, covered in soot and pungent with burnt lumber mixed with overtones of sewer. Despite the filth, Livia recognized her.

Why was Aunt Porcia's newest slave hiding under a pile of rubble? Had she run away?

"Thirsty," the slave rasped through cracked lips.

The poor thing was half-dead from lack of water. "We'd better take her to the house."

Agneta drew a sharp breath. Even Tyndareus looked uneasy. Livia's parents would not be pleased to learn their daughter was bringing home a stray slave girl, particularly on the day they entertained her potential husband.

"Trust me. I know what I'm doing."

Actually, know was too strong a word, but she was almost certain, and that was enough. She led them straight home, entering the house through the slave's entrance to avoid her parents' notice. She flitted through the house to her bedroom. As Tyndareus laid the listless girl on the floor, Agneta clicked her tongue.

"Look at the filthy creature on your nice clean floor. Your mother will have a fit."

In moments like this, Livia could slap her maid for being so callous.

"Fetch a basin of water and some towels."

"Yes, miss." Agneta bobbed her head fled the room.

"I hope you know what you're doing, mistress," Tyndareus said. "This is not the best day to test your father's patience."

"Should we have left her to die?"

He shook his head. "But bringing her here"

"Thirsty," the woman said again.

Livia knelt by her patient. "We need to get liquid into her."

Tyndareus nodded. "I will inform Cook. Is there anything else you require?"

"It would be best if Father and Mother don't hear about it until after tonight's dinner."

"Leave that to me, my lady." When he opened the door a black cat raced to the listless slave's side and gave her a lick on the nose. He was the same cat they'd seen in the alley. Or was it a she? Whichever, the cat had to go. Livia couldn't cope with two strays in one day. "Please take the cat outside, TyndareusTyndareus."

He reached for the cat, prompting flattened ears and a low hiss.

"Behave, Nemesis," their patient whispered.

Tyndareus eyed it warily. "Nemesis, eh? Let's hope you aren't as vengeful as the goddess you were named after." He let the cat sniff his fingers than scooped her up and hauled her away.

Moments later, Mintha the housekeeper bustled into the room, her worn face crinkled in concern.

"Look at the poor thing. Trapped under a collapsed building, was she? It's a lucky thing you found her in time."

Luck had nothing to do with it.

"I think I was meant to."

"Maybe you were, dearie. Maybe you were." Mintha proffered a cup. "Cook said you needed some of his tonic."

Ah, Cook's special tonic. Guaranteed to improve digestion, increase stamina, and balance the humors. Surely it was also effective for reviving lethargic slave girls.?

Livia took the cup.

"Thank you."

"I suppose you'll need me to clean her up?"

"Don't you have flowers to arrange? Agneta can do it."

Mintha snorted. "That prissy fool is useless as a blind man in a blacksmith's shop. You'd best let me do it."

"Bless you, Mintha."

Three basins of water later their patient was clean enough to allay any doubts. She was definitely Porcia's new hairdresser. The one Porcia called "'a saucy little vixen with coarse manners and a coarser tongue.'" No sign of sauciness in the woman now. She was limp as a wilted lettuce leaf.

"That's done then." Mintha rose stiffly to her feet. "I'd best be getting back to the flowers. Am I to do anything special for tonight, miss?"

"The usual arrangements, plus some garlands around the door."

"Won't that be lovely. I'll just take these rags and fetch our patient something to eat."

By the time the woman downed two cups of tonic and a bowl of gruel, she'd regained a hint of color in her cheeks. Time to get to the bottom of this mystery. Livia knelt beside her patient.

"Glad to see you haven't crossed the river to the land of the dead. How long were you trapped?"

"Day and a half."

"How did it happen?"

"A man was chasing me. It was night. I thought the ruined building would be a good place to hide, but the pile shifted and trapped my foot."

Why would a lady's maid be running from strangers in the middle of the night in the wrong part of town? Only one answer came to mind. Livia crossed her arms.

"I wonder why that is, Roxana?"

All color vanished from the woman's face.

"You've run away, haven't you?"

The narrow face turned hard.

"I'd rather die than go back to that witch."

More vehemence than Livia expected from one so weak. Interesting. "Porcia said you were a saucy one."

"The mistress hates me because I haven't been trained to slavery since birth. I don't talk proper, or bow pretty, or have the patience to stand still like so much furniture while snooty women loll around complaining about the price of silk and rose water. Gah! Please don't send me back there, miss."

"I must. The law deals harshly with anyone who harbors a fugitive slave."

"I wish I was your slave. I'd rather empty chamber pots in this household than remain a lady's maid to Porcia." She gripped Livia's arm. "I'll do anything you like, only let me stay with you."

Exactly what any frightened slave would say, of course, but something stirred in Livia's heart. Pity, or a whisper from God?

Livia looked Roxana in the eyes. "What makes you think you'll be happier serving me?"

"Porcia would never dirty her hands to tend a slave. And I saw how the others respect you. Even the big one who freed me from the rubble. No one respects Porcia. They only obey because they're afraid of the steward's whip and her husband's temper."

The maid was perceptive as well as saucy. The exact opposite of the obsequious and dimwitted Agneta, although they looked similar enough to mistake one for the other.... Hmm. Might Porcia be convinced to trade slaves?

Livia had no control over her father's selection of a husband, but she could do something about a maidservant.

"Give me a hairstyle that will impress my parents and I'll consider your plea."

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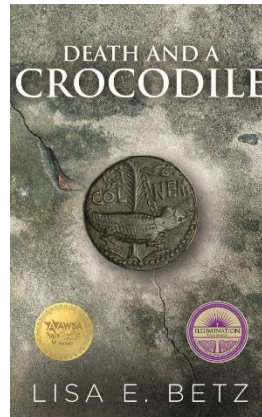
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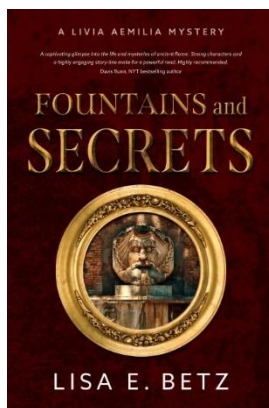
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