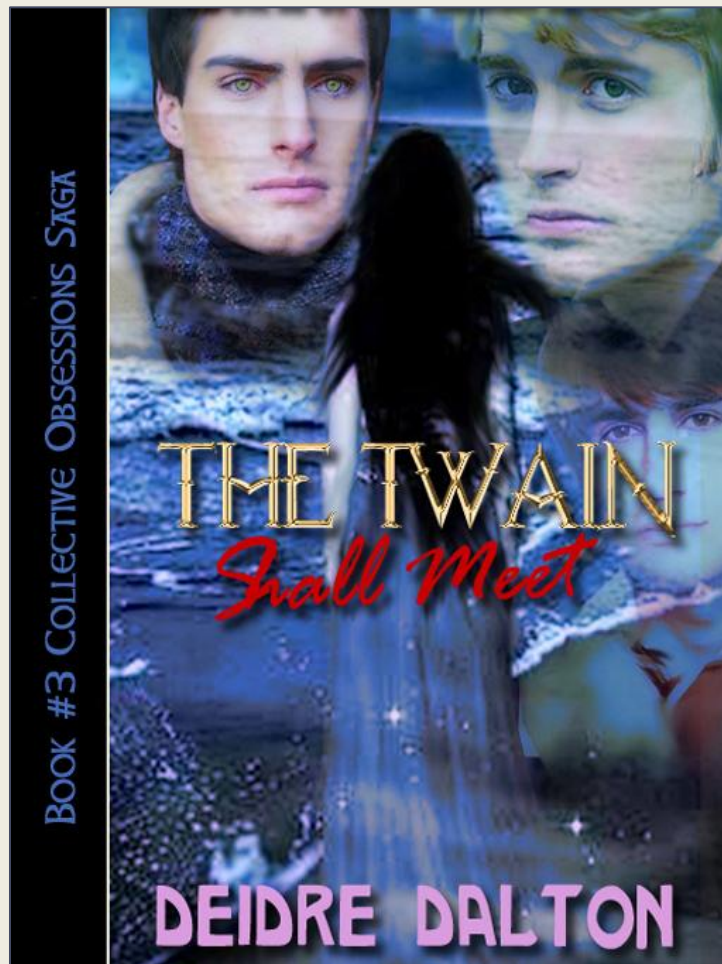


Special Holiday Excerpts from:

The Twain Shall Meet

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #3 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Publishing/Historical Romance Edition

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ABOUT "THE TWAIN SHALL MEET"

The Twain Shall Meet by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the third book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in January 2012.

An innocent meeting as children sparks a fateful yet perilous liaison between Shannon Larkin and Mike Sullivan. Will their romance follow the same tragic path forged by their mutual ancestors Colm and Molly?

Shannon Larkin and Mike Sullivan are presumably unaware of the long connection between their two families. Yet their love affair seems destined to follow the same tragic path as the one forged by their mutual ancestors, Colm Sullivan and Molly Larkin.

Mike, who bears an eerie resemblance to his great-great grandfather Colm, is committed to an insane asylum after he attacks Shannon at the Larkin mansion and savagely kills one of her friends. Even while confined, Mike is still obsessed by Shannon and schemes to escape his mental prison.

Although Shannon finds happiness with newcomer Scott Page and begins a family with him, she cannot erase the memories of Mike from her mind.

Madness has consumed this fourth generation in the guise of Mike Sullivan, and he will stop at nothing to make Shannon his own.

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

Read special holiday excerpts from ***The Twain Shall Meet*** by Deidre Dalton.

Shannon Larkin loves the holidays. Recall the rocky beginnings of her romance with Scott Page during Thanksgiving at the family mansion . . . Experience their first kiss under the mistletoe at Christmas . . . And hear Scott's declarations of love on New Year's Eve . . .



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THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Thanksgiving Excerpts from Chapters 8 & 9

1970

Larkin City, Maine

THANKSGIVING WAS A BIG family affair at the mansion. Two turkeys roasted in the ovens and eleven pumpkin pies were baked, plus there were salads, rolls, jellies, vegetables, cheeses and liqueurs. There was to be nine people at the dinner table this year, including Brian's crew chief, Scott Page, who was scheduled to fly into Larkin City that afternoon.

Shannon loved the smell of food in the house. Fires were lit in all the downstairs hearths, giving the normally gloomy interior a rosy glow. The dining table was set out by Shannon, each place done with the etiquette Phoebe demanded.

"I'll have to exercise for ten hours straight to make up for tonight," Shannon declared as she finished a cup of coffee with her mother in the kitchen that morning. "I must be in shape to catch the eye of some good looking Irishman in January."

Mary smiled at her daughter. "Now you sound like the old Shan. You're too skinny now. Do me a favor - have a lot of mashed potatoes."

"My favourite," Shannon sighed.

Mary spooned sugar into her steaming cup of coffee. "Plus pumpkin pie, don't forget that."

Shannon toyed with the rim of her coffee cup. Taking a sip, she mused: "I still can't sleep at night sometimes. It's better than it was, though." She took another quick sip of her coffee. "Linda Sullivan wrote me the other day."

"Oh?" Mary raised her eyebrows. "What did she have to say?"

"She found an apartment in Bangor, but she's still looking for a teaching job. She wrote that Mike hasn't changed. He still doesn't say much, he just stares at the walls. His doctor has gotten nowhere with him."

Mary shook her head in wonder. "Whatever snapped in that boy ruined him for life."

"That's what bothers me. *What* snapped him? Was it me? What did I do to snap him?"

"You didn't *snap* him," Mary insisted. "He was obviously unstable to begin with."

Shannon looked depressed. "I wish I'd noticed earlier, although I don't think it would have turned out any differently."

Mary rose from the kitchen table. "Can you pick up Scott Page from the airport this afternoon? No one else has free time to go and get him. I'd hate to see him call a cab."

"Doesn't he have his own family?"

Mary shrugged. "Both of his parents are dead. His only living relative is an aunt who lives in a rest home in Vermont."

"He must be an awfully lonely person," Shannon said with genuine sympathy. "Isn't he married?"

"No."

"I'll fetch him," Shannon agreed.

"Thank you, Shan. He's coming in at four-thirty. Flight 368."

"Okay. I'll be there to get him."

CHAPTER NINE

SCOTT PAGE WAS NOT normally an impatient man, but today he was exhausted and irritable. After spending a couple of days in New York City with a rather wild friend, he finally boarded his scheduled flight to Larkin City, Maine. The long hours of work, flying and partying were finally catching up to him. After spending several months in Ireland, working seven days a week, he was looking forward to a slower pace.

Stretching his long legs in front of him, Scott relaxed in a rear seat of the twin-engine airplane headed for Larkin City. Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the head rest. The flight to Larkin City only took an hour, so he had time for a catnap.

Scott was in his early thirties, a considerably handsome man in dark fashion. At times, he had the impression people found him threatening. He assumed it was because he *did* wear a scowl most of the time, which was just his nature. His finely chiseled features were heightened by olive-tinted skin and high cheekbones. His smile was devastatingly brilliant when he chose to shine it on someone, which was rare.

He possessed a master's degree in geophysics from Bangor University. For several years he worked for a mining company in New York, where he met Brian Larkin in 1969. Brian offered Scott a job the following year in May, with a healthy salary and benefits. Scott accepted the job, and was on his way to Ireland a month later to supervise the Larkin Mines survey near Dublin. Scott enjoyed the work in Ireland immensely, keeping in constant contact with Brian by telephone. After a short period, Scott came to genuinely like and respect his employer. Although rather aloof, Brian was a fair and honest man in any situation and did not play favorites.

Scott fastened his seatbelt as the airplane took off. He was looking forward to spending the next few weeks in Larkin City. Brian told Scott he could stay at the family estate until he returned to Ireland in January. The thought warmed Scott. Having no family

of his own to speak of, he had almost forgotten what it was like to celebrate momentous occasions with loved ones.

Raised an only child in Bangor, Scott had enjoyed singular attention from his parents for most of his young life. His father, James Page, had been an English professor at Bangor University. His mother, Italian-born Maria Theresa, was a music teacher. The Page family had lived in a modest suburban area of Bangor, where Scott remembered his childhood as being settled and happy.

Shortly after his sixteenth birthday, Scott's parents were tragically killed in an auto accident. They had been driving home after having dinner at a nearby restaurant when they collided with a transport truck. Scott was left shattered and alone. His only living relative, his father's spinster sister Elaine, took him in following the accident, after which Scott began taking odd jobs to save money for college. Once he arrived at Bangor University as a student, he worked nights at a gas station to continue supporting himself. The feeling of making a life for himself instilled a great deal of confidence in Scott.

In his own way, he was outspoken and blunt. It often earned him the reputation of being rough and unapproachable. In reality, he was a sensitive man who hid his feelings well. He enjoyed the bachelor life, but often felt empty inside. He could not fathom the reason why. It was as if he was searching for something - or *someone* - but he did not know *what* or *who* yet.

Scott frowned as the airplane began its descent into Larkin City. The flight was twenty minutes early. He wondered idly who would meet him at the airport. Brian, he hoped. Suddenly, Scott's frown deepened. Brian informed him that his daughter, Shannon, would also be going to Ireland in January, supposedly to run the computer for data interpretation. Scott had seen a photograph of the girl when Brian came to Ireland earlier that month, where he placed a picture of Shannon on his desk in the office in Dublin. She was very young, and probably a spoiled little brat who had no idea what she was doing. The idea of working with Brian's daughter displeased Scott. He felt it would be awkward at best, knowing he would have to tolerate the glaring nepotism in order to keep the peace. Although he hadn't met Shannon, he assumed the girl was more than likely immature and inexperienced in the mining business.

Scott sighed as the airplane landed. He would make the best of it, he supposed. What else could he do? He would accept the situation and work hard as he had always done.

* * *

SHANNON WAS DISTRACTED AS she drove to Larkin City Airport that afternoon. Her thoughts were revolving around her upcoming trip to Ireland. Her excitement was boundless, as usual, but her emotions were always held in check when, all of a sudden, she would think of Mike Sullivan or David Bonham. Would it never stop, she wondered? It seemed she could go through the motions of daily life for only a few hours before the horror came back to her again. Yet she knew it was getting better. Two weeks ago she thought of nothing else.

Shannon slowed her Gran Torino as she approached the airport. The majority of flights coming in were usually charter planes, or twin-engines from Bangor or New York City. The airport building was painted a powder blue, surrounded by neatly-clipped foliage. As Shannon pulled into a parking stall, she glanced at her wristwatch.

It was four-thirty on the button. She hurried toward the terminal, making a striking picture despite her simple clothes. She wore white slacks and a cream-colored blouse, her long hair shiny and loose. She tried to recall the description her father gave her for Scott Page. She was supposed to look for someone who was tall and slender, with black hair that was rather longish. Brian laughingly told Shannon that Page usually wore a scowl on his face. "He's not a grouch or anything, the scowl is just his way. He can be a bit rough at times, but once you get to know him you'll realize he's a good man."

Shannon smiled as she remembered her father's description. He was trying to create a favorable impression without outright lying, anxious she start out on the right foot with Page since they would be working together in Ireland. For the first time, Shannon wondered what Page was *really* like. She hoped they were compatible. It would be awkward if they were not.

Flight 368 had arrived at Gate 4 early, Shannon learned from the information desk, twenty minutes ago. She hurried along the polished floor of the terminal, down a short hallway, turning a corner that brought her to the right side of Gate 4.

Looking around anxiously, she noticed almost everyone was gone. An older woman was seated in the waiting area, reading a newspaper. Glancing to the other side of the room, Shannon frowned as she saw it was empty. Sighing, she walked up to the check-in desk.

"Excuse me," she asked the bespectacled middle-aged man behind the desk. "I understand Flight 368 from New York City arrived early. I was supposed to meet a man named Scott Page. Do you know if he arrived with the flight?"

The man smiled. "Let me check, miss," he said politely. He picked up a clipboard and glanced at it quickly. He looked back at her. "According to my schedule, he arrived with the flight. He should be in the terminal somewhere. Would you like me to page him?"

Shannon shook her head. "No. I'll go the luggage area. Maybe he went there." Smiling, she said to the man: "Thank you for your help."

She turned toward the hallway again. Suddenly she stopped short, spying a man across the hallway with several suitcases at his feet. He was leaning against one of the pay phones. She glanced at his face. He was staring at her, expressionless. She noticed his hair was as black as her own, falling to his collar. Short, black sideburns went down the forefront of his ears. His eyes were wide-set and sleepy-looking. His nose was slim, slightly flaring at the nostrils, and his mouth was formed in a frown, the full lower lip and thinner upper lip curled unhappily. He looked as if he needed a shave. He wore a light blue jacket that was zipped up part way, the collar flipped up, touching the base of his jaw. He also had on faded blue jeans and white sneakers. Shannon found herself admiring his unusual good looks, even though his scowl was rather intimidating.

She took a step toward him, and then hesitated. He was still staring at her, neither hostile nor friendly. Chiding herself, she walked over to him.

"Are you Scott Page, by any chance?" Shannon asked hopefully, while she cursed herself silently, recognizing the slight tremor in her voice.

He straightened himself up, stepping away from the payphone, his eyes still on her. When his voice came, she was surprised to hear a strongly firm and deep quality she had *not* expected. She assumed he would growl at her by the look on his face.

"I'm Scott Page," he answered her. "And you must be Shannon Larkin."

At her startled look, he was quick to explain. "Your father had a picture of you in Ireland. He kept it on his desk, along with one of your brother. I recognized you from that."

"Oh," she laughed nervously. "Well, yes, I'm Shannon. I'm sorry I've kept you waiting. I didn't realize the flight was early."

"That's okay," he said easily, reaching down to pick up his luggage. "I went ahead and retrieved my bags."

"Can I help with your suitcases?" she asked as they started walking down the hallway.

"I can manage, thanks."

She glanced sideways at him. He had to be at least six foot three inches in height. Compared to her small height of five foot three, he seemed to tower above her. He walked easily with the bags, appearing to be in good physical condition. He was a little on the thin side, but well proportioned otherwise. He looked straight ahead, not saying anything unless she spoke first.

After he deposited his luggage in the trunk of Shannon's car, she slipped behind the wheel of the vehicle. Scott got into the passenger side, still silent. As she pulled out of the airport parking lot, she asked him: "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead. I was about to ask you the same thing."

As she drove, Shannon attempted to start a conversation with Scott.

"Do you plan to stay with us until we go to Ireland in January?"

"Probably," he answered casually. "But I might spend Christmas with some friends in New York City."

"So you'll be working at my father's office in Larkin City until then?"

He nodded. "Yes. I have a lot of data to go over with Brian."

Shannon turned into the one-mile drive that led to the mansion. "I think you'll like it here," she said, trying to sound cheerful. "You'll have plenty of privacy at the house. My mother fixed up a room for you on the fourth floor. Breakfast is from seven to nine o'clock. To save on time and dishes, a buffet is set up in the dining room and kept warm." She paused. "Am I boring you?"

He smiled slightly. "No. Please continue."

"If you're at the mansion during lunchtime, our cook Mae serves a meal at one o'clock. At four-thirty in the afternoon my great-aunt and my mother have tea in the drawing room, and you're welcome to join them if you're around. At six-thirty we gather again in the drawing room, this time for drinks, and we eat dinner at seven-thirty in the dining room."

Scott stubbed his cigarette in the ashtray. "Are there any clubs or bars in Larkin City?"

"There are two," she answered. "One is called the Coven Lounge, which is owned by the family. My cousin Kevin runs the place on weekends. There is also a bar at the other end of town. It's just a beer hall and kind of shabby, but it can be great fun, too."

He glanced at her. "Aren't you too young to go into those places?"

She blushed. "I'm only nineteen, but Kevin lets me into the Coven once in awhile." She looked back at him. "How old are *you*?"

"Thirty three," he replied.

Her eyes widened. "You don't look thirty three. I took you for twenty five at the most."

Scott said nothing, so she continued to drive in silence. Presently, she pulled in front of the mansion. He emerged from the car immediately and retrieved his luggage. Puzzled by his sudden abrupt manner, Shannon said to him: "Go ahead inside. I have to park the car."

He nodded, not looking at her. "Thanks," he said, and started walking toward the front doors of the mansion.

After Shannon parked her car in the garage, she entered the house through the kitchen. Her mother and Aunt Denise were sitting at the table, playing a card game. Mae Jensen stood by the stove, dropping yams into a pot full of boiling water.

Mary glanced up as Shannon shut the door behind her. "Did you find Scott Page?" she asked.

Shannon rolled her eyes. "Oh, yes indeed. I let him off at the front. What a strange man he is."

"What do you mean?"

"He hardly says a word unless you talk to him first," Shannon replied as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "It was almost as if he couldn't wait to get away from me."

"Maybe he is shy around new people," Mary suggested.

"Huh," Shannon snorted, leaning against the counter in front of the sink. "He's thirty-three years old. I thought people got over shyness at that age."

Denise threw back her head and laughed. "What would you know about shyness coming from this family?"

"I'm shy in my own way," Shannon defended herself. "But as I get older, I become less shy." She shrugged. "Oh, well. It's no big deal, I guess." She set her coffee cup on the counter. "I'll go and see if he made it inside okay. Then I'm going to change for dinner."

When Shannon reached the foyer of the house, she noticed Scott's luggage by the front doors. Hearing voices in the drawing room, she walked toward the door and peered inside.

Brian and Scott were sitting on the couch facing the fireplace, each with a drink in their hand. They were laughing and talking together with familiar ease. Shannon frowned. How quickly Scott changed in demeanor. Sullen and stiff in her presence, now he seemed relaxed and jovial. Maybe her mother was right. He must be uneasy around strangers.

As if sensing her presence, Brian looked toward the door. He waved his daughter over. "Come on, kiddo. Pour yourself a glass of wine and join us."

She started to protest. "Thanks, but I have some things I need to do."

"Nonsense," her father insisted. "You can spare a few minutes. Please come in."

Refusing to look at Scott, she walked to the sideboard and poured herself a glass of wine. Turning around, she went to the chair facing the couch. She finally looked up and was distressed to discover Scott staring at her, his eyes unreadable.

Blushing slightly, she sat down and said: "I think it's a bit early to start happy hour."

Brian made a face. "It's a holiday, Shan. Lighten up. I'm making an exception now, and I'll do the same at Christmas." He set his glass down. "Thank you for picking up Scott."

She smiled wanly. "It was nothing," she said casually. "I had nothing else to do this afternoon." Why was she making herself sound so flippant, she wondered? Since she entered the room, Scott had fallen silent, the laughter gone from his face. *What was this guy's problem?* And why did he keep staring at her?

Brian was talking again. "I think it's a good idea that Scott spends some time with us. Especially at the office with you, Shan, since you'll be working together in Dublin. I think it's better you both find out *now* if you can get along, rather than cross horns in Ireland."

Scott finally spoke up. "I'm sure we'll get along," he said quietly, but firmly. "I foresee no problems."

"Good," Brian said good-naturedly, picking up his drink again. He looked at Scott. "I know the thought has probably crossed your mind that my daughter is a bit young, but she has more than proven her worth to me. She knows the computer like the back of her hand and she's not afraid of hard work. In fact," he grinned. "She works *too* much. She hardly ever takes time for herself or goes on dates."

"Oh really," Shannon snapped, embarrassed. "We don't need to discuss that in front of Mr. Page." Feeling foolish, she rose from her chair. "I have some things to do before dinner."

To her surprise, Scott also rose. "Can you show me to my room?" he asked politely, still staring at her.

"I'd be glad to show you to your room," she replied, refusing to meet his eyes. "It's on my way."

Brian's eyes flickered over his daughter and Scott with concern. Scott seemed to become uneasy and non-talkative when Shannon entered the room. Shannon, too, seemed uncomfortable around Scott. For a fleeting moment, Brian wondered if he'd made a mistake by telling his daughter she could go to Ireland. Then he brushed the thought aside. He knew Scott could be a bit crude and rough at times, but he was a good, honest man. Shannon was stubborn and hot tempered, but she was also very honest and a good girl at heart. Brian felt things would work themselves out in the end.

Scott leaned over and shook Brian's hand. "Thank you for everything, sir," he said sincerely. "I'll see you again at dinner."

"At happy hour, I hope," Brian corrected, smiling. "If you care to join us, cocktails are served at six-thirty. Officially, that is."

"I'll be here. Thank you again."

Scott followed Shannon into the foyer and picked up his luggage by the front doors. Wordless, they climbed the many stairs and hallways to the fourth floor. She stopped at a door that was between her bedroom and Liam's. She entered and stepped aside to allow Scott to pass by with his bags.

He set his luggage on the floor and turned to look at Shannon. For the first time she noticed he had bright, hazel eyes. Like the eyes of a cat. The sleepy look he possessed seemed to be a natural one. Aware they had been observing one another longer than usual, she cleared her throat.

"You have your own bathroom," she said stiffly, turning away from him. "There are extra blankets and clean sheets in the closet. You'll most likely need the blankets because we don't have central heating on the upper floors. We don't have any maids, so you're responsible for cleaning up after yourself and doing your own laundry. There are laundry rooms in the basement, and on each floor." She paused. "If you run out of wood for your fireplace, tell my brother Sean. He'll have some extra wood sent up to your room if you need it."

"Thank you," he said quietly, his eyes still on her in a peculiar fashion.

It was on the tip of Shannon's tongue to ask him why he was staring at her so intently, but she refrained. Instead, she said coolly: "Enjoy your stay." She moved toward the door and then stopped. "I'll see you later," she said, and then left, shutting the door behind her.

Shannon continued on to her own room. There was something odd about Scott Page. He made her uncomfortable. Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to forget about him and enjoy the rest of the evening with her family.

* * *

HAPPY HOUR BEGAN ON schedule. Shannon stood with her brother Sean by the sideboard, glancing around the room. Everyone was present, she observed, except for Scott Page.

Shannon wore a floor-length gown, a black silk design she chose from a department store in Larkin City. A wide, purple belt clasped around her tiny waist. The sleeves were long and loose, which she clutched self-consciously with her fingers. She had taken special care with her hair tonight, brushing it until it gleamed and fell like a feather to her waist.

"You look lovely, Shan," Sean commented.

"Thank you, brother."

She was about to walk over and join her father at the other end of the room when Sean grabbed her sleeve. "Who is *that* by the door?"

Shannon looked toward the drawing room door. Her eyes widened in surprise. It was Scott Page, looking very much the gentleman. He wore a black suit and tie, with a white starched shirt. He looked shaven and completely refreshed. From the doorway, his eyes searched the room until they rested on her. Blushing, she turned to her brother and said: "That's Scott Page. He's Dad's crew chief in Dublin, and he'll be staying at the mansion until I go back to Ireland with him in January."

"You lucky girl," Sean exclaimed. "He's damned good-looking for an older guy."

Shannon glanced back toward the doorway of the drawing room. Brian led Scott into the room and introduced him to everyone. She noticed Scott held himself well, being open and friendly to those he was presented to. Shannon was piqued. He wasn't that cordial to *her*.

When Brian brought Scott over to Sean, Shannon stiffened. She quickly turned her back and poured herself another glass of wine from the sideboard. She turned around again and started in surprise. Brian introduced Scott to Sean and, being ever so polite, he shook the younger man's hand vigorously.

"Pleased to meet you Mr. Page," Sean said politely.

"Please call me Scott," he said.

"Of course, Scott," Sean smiled. "Call me Sean."

Brian turned to his daughter. "Shan, will you pour Scott a glass of wine, please?"

"Of course," she replied curtly, turning once again to the sideboard. She refreshed her own drink, and then poured another glass for Scott.

When she turned around, Scott was standing in front of her. Brian walked to the other side of the room, so she dropped all affable pretence. "Here you are," she said icily, thrusting the wine glass into his hand.

Scott took the glass. "Thank you, Miss Larkin."

Forcing herself to be polite, she asked: "Does your room suit you?"

He nodded. "I like it very much, but it's more than I'm accustomed to."

"What are you accustomed to?" Shannon asked more sharply than she meant to.

He seemed not to notice the tone in her voice. "Living in the field in a tent," he answered, sipping his wine. "It's nice to be in a comfortable house for a change."

Sean spoke up. In a teasing tone only his twin recognized, he said: "You two make quite a couple, both dressed in black. I know black is Shan's favourite color, but what about you, Scott?" Sean looked at him, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

"Black is one of my favourite colors, too," Scott replied calmly, sipping his drink again.

"Oh?" Sean's eyebrows rose. "How coincidental." He smiled, winking at Scott. "Shan is such a recluse at times, you know. She never really goes out, except . . . well, she *did* know a few boys, but nothing too serious. Maybe you can be the one to bring her out of her shell."

Shannon reddened to the roots of her hair. *Damn Sean.* "Mind your own affairs, brother," she snapped, glaring at him.

"I'm sorry, Shan," Sean apologized, although contrition did not reach his eyes. "I just get carried away sometimes." He smiled at Scott again. "It was nice meeting you. I'll see you at dinner." With that, Sean glided to the other side of the room.

That left Shannon alone with Scott. Anxious to get away from him, she turned to make her excuses, but he interrupted her.

"Your brother is very friendly," he said in a personable voice, lighting a cigarette. "But I don't believe I could stand a steady diet of him."

Suddenly Shannon's uneasy mood slipped away, and she giggled. "I know what you mean, and I'm related to him. Actually, he's not really a busybody. He loves to give me a hard time, and put me in embarrassing situations."

Scott took a long drink of his wine and glanced at her. "I want to apologize for my behavior earlier," he said in a low tone.

She was taken aback. She hadn't expected an apology from him. "Well, I *was* a bit put off," she admitted. "You seemed to be able to talk to everyone but me."

He laughed nervously. "I'm really sorry. I was dead tired by the time the plane landed in Larkin City. I just . . . I don't know, I was grumpy, I guess. But I did recognize you at once." He paused, looking at her. "Like I told you, I saw the photograph your father had with him in Dublin, but it didn't do you justice. You are much more beautiful than the picture suggests."

She flushed with pleasure. "Thank you," she murmured. "That's very nice of you to say." Then she glanced across the room at her mother and Aunt Phoebe. "I can't really compare with the other women in this family."

"Not so," Scott insisted. She found him staring at her with his sleepy green eyes. "Actually," he continued. "I think you're much more attractive than you realize. Your looks have more substance and character."

Shannon was speechless. *Was he really paying her a compliment?* He was being amiable now, almost *too* solicitous. Her curiosity got the better of her. "Well, you sound experienced at judging women," she said slyly.

He shrugged. "As much as any man my age."

"I don't mean to pry," she began carefully. "But you must have a girlfriend somewhere, or *something*."

"Or something," he said curtly. "I have girls that are friends, but nothing permanent. I come and go as I please. That's the way I like my relationships."

Shannon quickly sipped her wine to hide the expression on her face. So, he was one of *those* - a bloody fancy-free. Her uneasiness returned. She refilled her glass. The wine began to work its way into her bloodstream, making her feel light headed.

Smiling brightly, she said: "You must excuse me. I'm going to see if I can be of some use in the kitchen. Please do mingle with everyone. I enjoyed our enlightening conversation."

She walked away before he could reply. Making her way to the kitchen, she spied Mae seated at the kitchen table. The older woman smiled at the sight of Shannon.

"Hi, little one," Mae said warmly. "Everything is about ready to serve. I'm just resting my feet for a moment."

Shannon sat across from her and drained her glass of wine. "I think I'll rest my feet, too," she said. "Do you have a bottle of booze in here somewhere?"

Mae looked surprised. Then she said: "I have a bottle of wine in the fridge for cooking purposes. Why?"

"It's all mine now," Shannon said firmly. She got up and found the bottle, pouring a generous amount in her glass. She gulped it down and poured another.

"What devils are you trying to chase away tonight?" Mae asked in concern. "Since when do you guzzle wine?"

Shannon drained the glass again and refilled it. She looked at Mae, her eyes glazed. "I'm fine, Mae. I'm trying to acquire the holiday spirit, you could say. Besides, I'm here to help you serve dinner."

"Are you sure?"

"Really, I'm fine." She drank the glass of wine and giggled. "Let's get this over with. After I help you do the dishes, I'll take this fine bottle of cooking wine to my room, if you please."

* * *

SHANNON AWOKE WITH A start. Then she groaned, rolling over onto her back. Good God, what had she done last night? She had a splitting headache, her mouth was dry and she felt sick to her stomach. Sitting up in bed slowly, she looked at her night stand clock. It was high noon.

Then it came back to her. She helped Mae serve dinner the night before. After the meal (which Shannon ate little of, she mainly drank), she helped Mae with the dishes, all the while still drinking wine. After the clean up, Shannon snuck upstairs. As she walked down the fourth floor corridor - with a new bottle of wine clutched in her hand - she looked up in dismay as Scott came out of his room.

"Hello," she said casually, thrusting the bottle behind her back. "What are you doing up here?"

"I ran out of cigarettes," he said coolly, his eyes traveling over her slowly. "Don't tell me you're going to bed already?"

She nodded. "Why, yes I am. I'm suddenly very tired."

"Or very drunk," Scott said flatly. He reached behind her and grabbed the wine bottle. Glancing at the label, he shook his head. "You really should try a more expensive brand of wine. This rotgut will give you a terrible hangover."

She glared at him. "Who asked you?" she hissed. Crossing her arms, she asked coldly: "Can I please have the bottle back?"

He stared at her for a long moment, the expression on his face one of amusement.

"Quit staring at me," Shannon snapped, snatching the bottle back from him. "God, I hate it when people stare at me. If you will please excuse me," she started to make her way past him, but he took her by the arm.

"Aren't you going to ask me if I want a drink?" he asked softly, staring at her again. This time his eyes were warm and friendly.

Annoyed, she pulled away from him. "I told you, I'm tired. I would like to be alone, if you don't mind."

He started to say something, but then paused. The amusement was gone from his eyes. Stepping away from her, he shrugged. "Have it your way," he said in a hard voice. "I was just trying to be friendly."

Still glaring at him, she nodded. "Thank you, but as I told you I'm very tired. I'm sorry. I just want to be alone."

"Fair enough, Shannon," he said. "I hope you enjoy your lonely evening."

"Thank you, Scott, I will," she responded. "Good night." She walked away without looking back at him. She quickly went into her room and shut the door firmly.

Scott stood there for several minutes, staring at Shannon's closed door. Then, with a slight smile on his lips, he made his way back downstairs.

* * *

SHANNON SHOWERED AND DRESSED within thirty minutes. She gulped down two aspirin and then decided to find something to eat. Maybe Mae would make her a turkey sandwich. She felt a bit better after the shower and the aspirin, but she was ravenous.

The house seemed to be deserted. She encountered no one on her way to the kitchen. Sighing, she looked through the refrigerator and located the leftover turkey. She made herself a sandwich and poured a cup of coffee. Putting the food on a tray, she took it to the drawing room and set it on the coffee table. She then walked out into the foyer to check the mail. She found nothing addressed to her, but a letter made out to Scott caught her eye. It was postmarked from New York City two days before. The writing on the envelope was flowing but readable. According to the return address, it was from "A. Howard" on Sixth Avenue.

Shrugging, Shannon dropped the letter back onto the foyer table and returned to the drawing room with the local newspaper. Picking up her sandwich, she began to eat and read about all the recent happenings in Larkin City.

She was still engrossed in the paper ten minutes later when Sean entered the room. His hair was windblown, his face flushed.

She glanced at him. "Have you been out riding?"

Sean nodded, sitting next to her. "Yeah. Kevin and I took Scott for a ride on the motor bikes. It was really invigorating. You should try it."

She grimaced, sipping her coffee. "Not today, thank you. I'm still in the early stages of wine recovery."

Sean laughed. "I noticed you went off to your room early. It must have been awful boring."

"Actually, it wasn't, no thanks to your ridiculous machinations. I drank and watched a late movie on television. This morning was another story, though."

"Too bad," he said, grabbing the other half of his twin's sandwich. "Scott and I are going to the Coven tonight. I guess you're in no shape to go."

"No thank you, brother dear. I'm going to the gym this afternoon, and I may visit Dana."

"Come on," Sean pleaded. "We aren't going to the Coven until nine o'clock tonight. That way you can still exercise *and* see Dana."

"What are you trying to pull?" Shannon asked suspiciously. "First you try to force Scott's attentions on me, and now you're trying to bring us together at the Coven. Did it ever occur to you that he might not be interested in someone my age?"

Sean glanced sideways at her, a look of surprise on his face. "On the contrary." Leaning toward her, he lowered his voice. "Don't tell him I told you, but Scott is the one who wants you to come."

She stiffened, trying to ignore the rush that flooded her stomach. "Oh? What else did he say?"

"Well," Sean said, warming to the subject. "He said he thought you were very pretty, but a bit reserved."

"When did he say *that*?"

"Today, while we were out riding. He thinks you dislike him and he wants to make a different impression on you. He was real cool about the whole thing, but I know how guys are - even if they *are* in their thirties. He likes you."

"Oh, Sean," she exclaimed. "That doesn't mean a damn thing. He told me he likes the kind of relationships where he can come and go as he pleases, with no ties. Yeah, sure, he *really* sounds like my type," she finished sarcastically.

"That's no problem," Sean insisted. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, and neither does he. It will just be a casual night out on the town for all of us, and that way you can get to know him better. You *will* be working with him, so you'd better know what he's like."

"For God's sake," Shannon said in resignation. "Okay. I'll go. I'll take my own car and meet you at the Coven at nine o'clock, but I'm bloody well leaving before eleven."

Sean winked at her. "Good girl," he teased, standing up. "I'm meeting a girl there, too. A real beauty. She's the new waitress at Bruno's. I think you'll like her."

"Like all the other girls you've introduced me to?"

"Ah, this one is different," Sean promised his sister. "You'll see."

After her twin left the room, Shannon settled down with the newspaper again. Half-smiling, she wondered what Sean was planning. Was he playing at being a matchmaker? To sway her into agreeing to a date with the scowling Scott Page?

Stubbornly, she vowed he would not succeed in his efforts.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Christmas Excerpt from Chapter 10

1970

Larkin City, Maine

THE NEXT FEW WEEKS seem to fly by with record speed. Shannon spent long hours at the office, scrambling to get everything ready for the trip to Ireland. She obtained a passport and a working visa for the Republic of Ireland. She was unable to get an international driver's license because the age requirement was twenty-one. She took Dana with her to shop for new clothes, visiting Phoebe's Boutique and other department stores in Larkin City and Bangor.

Snow blanketed the harbor town at the end of November. The roads became icy and treacherous, so Shannon rode to the office with her father and Scott every day.

Scott turned out to be a diligent and extremely intelligent geophysicist in Shannon's eyes. He and Brian closeted themselves in the drafting room most days, working closely on data maps and reports from the Keel project in Dublin. Shannon usually brought them lunch from Bruno's, and then ate at her desk alone, attempting to lessen the work load before she left the following month. She hired a middle-aged local named Evelyn Keyes to take her place in January, and was trying to train her in the short time allowed. A day at the office did not end until six or seven at night.

Shannon's only free day, Sunday, was spent preparing for her trip and trying to get Christmas presents for her family and friends in order. Dana often came over to the mansion to help her and stay for dinner. With the winds of winter beating against the old estate, almost every fireplace on the main floor was kept burning constantly. There was a warm feeling in every room, a welcome relief from the cold outside.

Early in December, Scott asked Brian if he could stay on at the mansion for Christmas. Brian told him he was more than welcome to stay. Shannon wondered what happened to Scott's friends in New York City, but she said nothing. Since he was staying for the holiday, she decided to buy Scott a present. "What if I get him a gold-lined black book?" Shannon asked Dana sarcastically, and then laughed it off.

Shannon had come to the conclusion that Scott was not such a forbidding man after all. Having been nothing but pleasant to her in the last few weeks, she realized he could be friendly when he wanted to be. She still caught him staring at her quite often, but she brushed it off. Obviously he was a healthy male, and he had to have *something* to look at while he spent time in Larkin. Since he worked around her all day and didn't go anywhere at night, she assumed she was convenient for him. He was a good conversationalist and

very well read. He usually sat next to her during meals at the house. At times, he would discuss different books he read, or they would talk about the project in Ireland.

In the evenings, the family would gather in the living room to watch television. The living room was opposite the drawing room across the foyer. Sean was often absent at night these days, spending most of his free time with Marianne Chamberlain. Shannon smiled at the thought. It appeared her errant twin brother had finally found a girl worth seeing for more than one night.

One evening in mid-December, Scott and Shannon watched a movie titled *The Assassination Bureau* with Brian and Mary in the living room. Everyone was quiet as the thriller played, kept in suspense as the plot unfolded.

When the telephone rang all of a sudden, it startled everyone. Someone in another part of the house answered the call. Presently, Denise Larkin came to the doorway of the living room.

"The call is for you, Scott," Denise said. "It's long distance from New York City. There is a phone on the foyer table if you want to take it there."

Scott thanked Denise and excused himself to the group in the living room. He then walked into the foyer and picked up the telephone.

It was Anita Howard, and she was furious. "I got your post card the other day," she said angrily. "What is all this shit about you spending Christmas with happy families in Larkin City, of all god damned places? We *always* spend the holiday together."

Keeping his voice quiet, Scott told her: "I explained in the post card. I'm busy and I just can't get away. Not even for one day. I'll try to see you before I head for Ireland next month."

"Wonderful," Anita said sarcastically. "So I get to see you for a few hours before you take off for Ireland for months on end. Damn you, Scott." Then she calmed slightly. "I'll just take my vacation in Ireland, then. In February."

"We'll have to talk about that," he said evenly. "If you come, I won't be able to spend much time with you. My only day off is Sunday."

She became angry again. "Are you trying to brush me off, Scott? If so, come out and tell me right now."

"Calm down, Anita," he snapped, annoyed by her possessive attitude. "If you can't talk in a civil tone, I've better things to do."

"I'll bet you do," she sneered.

"Anita, I'm warning you."

She was instantly contrite, recognizing the finality of his tone. "I'm sorry, Scott, honest," she pleaded. "I'm just disappointed I won't be seeing you. What if I come to Larkin City to be with you?"

Scott sighed. *What did it take for her to get the message?* "That's not a very good idea, Anita," he told her firmly. "The Larkin's are rather private people. They are just *barely* getting used to me. I don't want to impose on them."

"Then I could get a motel room in Larkin City and you . . ."

"No, Anita," Scott broke in impatiently. "I said no. If you can't accept that, I apologize."

Anita was silent for a moment. Finally her angry voice spat out at him again: "You've met someone else, haven't you?" she accused.

"No," he replied, tired of the conversation. "I'm not seeing anyone else. I haven't been on a date since I've been here, or met anyone interesting in the local bar. Nor, may I add, have I gotten laid since I saw you last."

She laughed. "No wonder you're so grouchy. Okay, okay, Scott, I won't pressure you, but I'd like to wish you a lonely and chaste Merry Christmas. I'll be waiting anxiously for you next month. I'll save my present for you until then."

"Thanks, Anita," he said with relief. "Have a happy holiday yourself. I'll see you next month. Bye for now."

"Take care of yourself," the woman said in parting. "I'll keep in touch." And she hung up.

Scott stood in the foyer after hanging up the telephone. *What was the matter with him?* He always enjoyed holidays with Anita in the past. She was great fun to be with and a good friend, but this year he felt like staying in Larkin City. He had warmed to the Larkin family. He was looking forward to spending Christmas with them, a *real* family for a change. With Anita, it would only be a round of parties and dances. He took great pleasure in that, too, but he wanted something different this year. *Family*.

Smiling, Scott returned to the living room.

* * *

CHRISTMAS DAY DAWNED BRIGHT and clear. Snow covered the grounds of the Larkin estate. The exterior of the house resembled a painting from a different age, with long icicles hanging over windows and doorways, and smoke billowing from the many chimneys. The air was bitter cold, but the sun was shining without a cloud in the sky.

Shannon stretched drowsily in her bed, burrowing deeper under the covers. She wondered idly what kind of fashionable outfit Aunt Phoebe decided to give her this year. Every Christmas, Phoebe gave Shannon a chic outfit from her old boutique or from a trendy store in New York City, trying to convince her that one must dress and act with the times. Convention and fashion were important factors to Phoebe, but Shannon wasn't inclined to be a devotee of high style.

She finally rose from her bed and hurriedly dressed in dark blue slacks and a gray turtle-neck sweater. Running a brush through her hair and scrubbing her teeth, she donned a pair of snug fitting Japanese slippers and went downstairs.

No one was up and about yet, so Shannon started a pot of coffee and built a fire in the hearth in the drawing room. Rubbing her hands together, she stood before the blaze seeking warmth. She gazed at the Christmas tree that stood twelve feet high in the opposite corner of the room. Presents were crammed underneath. Curiously, she walked over to the tree and began examining the gifts carefully. Each package had a to-and-from tag taped on it. She glanced at several of them and then stopped short. A medium-sized package, gaily wrapped in green and red paper, was addressed to her. It was from Scott. She picked it up and shook it gently, trying to determine the contents. It must be something solid, she thought, feeling the slow movement inside as she shook it.

"You are as curious as a cat," a voice said teasingly from the doorway of the drawing room.

Shannon turned, blushing profusely as she looked at Scott. He was casually dressed in blue jeans and a turquoise flannel shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was particularly handsome this morning, and clean-shaven. His green eyes were sparkling at her.

"I confess I'm a curious person," she admitted sheepishly, walking back to the fireplace. "When we were little kids, Sean and I used to sneak downstairs in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve. We'd open every gift addressed to us, then re-wrap them before going back to bed."

Scott laughed as he joined her at the fireplace. "Didn't your mother ever find out?" he wanted to know.

"She knew all along," Shannon grinned. "Here Sean and I thought we were so clever, but Mum never let on she knew. I grew out of it about six years ago."

He chuckled. "I keep forgetting you're still a teenager."

"And I keep forgetting you're over the hill," she retorted in return, but with a smile on her face.

Presently, they were joined by the rest of the family. Irish coffee was freely distributed, as well as eggnog laced with rum. The gift opening began.

Predictably, Phoebe's gift to Shannon was a designer gown. It was a maxi-skirt, deep burgundy color with a plunging neckline.

"I bought it from a designer in New York," Phoebe said. "The line is simply called *Chic by Anita*."

Shannon laughed, thanking her for the present. She glanced at Scott, who was staring at her with a puzzled look on his face. The expression vanished as he retrieved her gift to him from underneath the tree.

She grabbed the package addressed to her from Scott. Grinning, she said to him: "Now my curiosity will be appeased." Un-wrapping the gift, she was careful to preserve the paper. (This was a trick taught to her by Phoebe - "*If you save the paper you can use it again next year*," she once said, "*no use in wasting perfectly good wrapping paper*").

Shannon gasped in surprise when she viewed the gift from Scott. It was a small figurine of a Japanese woman in a kimono, fanning herself. It was exquisite. The kimono was black with a red dragon embroidered on the sleeve. "It's lovely, Scott," she exclaimed. "Thank you very much."

"My pleasure," he smiled at her. "Now it's my turn."

From her chair by the Christmas tree, Phoebe winced as Scott ripped wrapping paper carelessly. "Oh, well," she sighed. "That paper has seen three seasons, so I guess it doesn't matter."

Shannon flashed a smile at her great-aunt, and then returned her attention to Scott. He was gazing in wonder at the gift she had given him. It was a black turtle-neck sweater with a red dragon silk embroidered above the right breast.

He looked at her, his eyes warm. "Thank you," he said softly. "It seems we both had the same thing in mind - red dragons."

She flushed with pleasure. "It will look great with your coloring." She then continued watching the rest of the family open their presents. The morning progressed swiftly. Soon, the coffee and eggnog ran out. Shannon offered to make more in the kitchen. Mae Jensen was always given Christmas off so she could spend time with her daughter and grandchildren in Larkin City, leaving kitchen duty to members of the Larkin family.

Scott insisted on helping Shannon, so he followed her to the kitchen. He put on another pot of coffee while Shannon started to mix an eggnog recipe in the blender. She had already consumed three Irish coffees, which made her feel warm and content inside.

"Who put these all over the house?" he asked, pointing to the mistletoe above the back door.

She laughed. "Denise, who is a romantic at heart. She sneaks around the house on Christmas Eve and puts mistletoe above doorways. Isn't that crazy?"

Scott chuckled. "No, it's quite sane. Come over here."

She walked to the door. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Is the mistletoe falling down?"

She stood in front of Scott, hands on her hips. She smiled brightly.

Suddenly, his eyes darkened. "No, the mistletoe is not falling down. I just want to try it out."

Before she could speak, Scott took hold of her arms. Gazing directly into her eyes, he pulled her close. She felt the hard leanness of him and gasped involuntarily. Lowering his head, his mouth covered her lips. He began to kiss her, his tongue entering her mouth, caressing her with its touch.

Shannon felt weak. Was it Irish coffee making her feel weak at the knees? Strangely, she had no reservations about Scott's kiss. He pulled her tightly to him, placing his hand behind her head as he continued kissing her. Her body seemed to take on a will of its own. She wrapped her arms around his neck and welcomed his probing tongue and hard body. For that moment, she felt secure and warm in his embrace, and suddenly very aroused.

When he finally released her, Shannon was breathless. He was smiling at her in a strange way. She was struck by the look that passed between them. It was lust, certainly, but she sensed he was feeling something else. They were staring at one another as if there were an energy charge between them. She felt it to her very soul, as did Scott. He could not take his eyes from her face.

"What in the hell is taking so bloody long?" Sean demanded as he strode into the kitchen. He set his coffee cup on the kitchen table with a thud. "Isn't the coffee ready yet?"

Sean noticed Scott and Shannon blushing as they quickly moved away from one another. She smiled sweetly at her twin. "What am I? The maid of Larkin House?"

"No," Sean quipped, reaching over to tickle her on the ribs. "You're the Madwoman of Chailiot - *La Folle de Chailiot* - or rather, the madwoman of Larkin House."

"Thanks a lot," she retorted teasingly. She glanced at Scott and asked: "Do you think me the madwoman of Larkin House?"

"No, no," he said gently, his eyes still warm. "You just have the amazing ability to drive certain people *around you* mad."

Sean threw back his head and roared with laughter. "My thoughts exactly," he declared. "Now, come on, where is the brew? The whole family is grumbling for it."

Shannon placed the eggnog and coffee on a large tray. "It's done, you punky kid," she ribbed. "Just don't drink it all on the way."

Scott walked over to Shannon and took the tray away from her. "I'll carry it," he said. "It's a bit heavy." His eyes sought hers, and she met them. She was still flushed, a smile playing around her lips. She simply could not bring herself to look away from him.

Sean watched them, his eyebrows raised in question. *What was going on?* Both his sister and Scott were so subdued, so thoughtful. Something was definitely happening here, he decided. Shrugging, Sean picked up his coffee cup from the kitchen table, and led the way back to the drawing room.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET:
New Year's Eve Excerpts from Chapters 10 & 11*1970**Larkin City, Maine*

NEW YEAR'S EVE IN Larkin City proved, year after year, to be a well celebrated affair. The Coven bulged beyond capacity, and every motel, hotel and bed-and-breakfast were booked well in advance. Over the years, Larkin City gained the reputation of a party town on the last day of the year, with added benefits. Brian Larkin paid all local cab fares for the night, so drunken driving accidents were kept to a minimum. Police were also out in full force to insure no one went beyond their limit behind the wheel. Because of the combined efforts, car accidents due to drinking were rare, and very few people provoked an arrest by erratic behavior or violence.

Since Christmas day, Shannon grew flustered when Scott was near her. He was polite, not pushing himself at her or making suggestive remarks. It was as if he were waiting for her to make a move, no less. They were getting along very well, which seemed to please Brian tremendously. His respect for Scott's professional skills, combined with a personal liking for the man, made him ideal in Brian's eyes. He kept his thoughts to himself, however, preferring that his stubborn daughter make her own decisions.

Shannon threw herself into preparations for the New Year's party. Friends of the family were being invited, as well as working associates of the two Larkin brothers from the lumber yard and the mining company. Several guest rooms were made up on the second and third floors. Shannon helped her mother and Aunt Denise prepare snacks and hot dishes for the gathering. The cabinets were well stocked with liquor and other beverages, and the house was cleaned from top to bottom: polished, dusted, scrubbed, swept and vacuumed. Shannon persuaded Dana to spend the night, giving her a room on the fourth floor.

Early in the afternoon before the party, Scott approached Shannon in the kitchen as she arranged a tray of cheese and crackers. She looked up at him, an expectant smile on her face. "Hi," she said. "Want a cracker?"

Scott accepted the snack and sat down next to her at the kitchen table. "Do you have any free time this afternoon?" he wanted to know.

"I'm just about done. Why? What do you have in mind?"

"Sean told me he took a couple of the snowmobiles out of the garage this morning," he replied, meeting her gaze. "Would you like to go for a ride with me?"

She brightened. "I'd love to, what a marvelous idea." Wiping her hands on a tea towel, she said: "In fact, I'm ready now. I'll put on some warmer clothes and meet you outside."

"If I'd known you'd be so eager for my company, I'd have asked sooner," Scott teased her, his sleepy eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Don't be so sure of yourself, Mr. Page." Shannon said lightly, standing up. "I'm just going along for the ride, nothing more."

His face fell. "Really?"

She laughed at his expression. "I'm kidding, honest. I really *do* enjoy your company, being that you're so mature and all. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

Scott watched her leave the room hurriedly. He continued to sit at the table, a warm smile on his face.

Shannon donned a pair of ski pants and a sweater, on top of which she put a heavy coat. She swept her hair up under a wool ski cap, tucking the strands inside. Inspecting herself in the bathroom mirror, she decided to add a touch of make-up to her eyes, but not *too* much. Satisfied, she went downstairs to meet Scott.

"You look like a polar bear," Scott exclaimed as they climbed onto the snowmobile, which was parked in front of the garages. "How many layers of clothes do you have on?"

"Just three," she giggled, sitting behind him.

Looking over his shoulder at her, he asked: "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then hang on to me," he warned. "I like to go fast."

She wrapped her arms around his middle section and pulled closer. "Please don't go *too* fast," she pleaded. "It scares me."

He chuckled. "If I go fast, you might hang onto me that much tighter." He started the motor of the snowmobile, revving the engine loudly to emphasize his words.

She blushed behind him, not missing the meaning of his statement. As he took off, she did indeed hang on tighter. She rested her cheek on the side of his arm and watched the direction he was taking.

He propelled the snowmobile behind the mansion and started climbing a hill behind the house. He revved the motor again and picked up speed. Shannon squealed and hung on closer to him. She felt the vibration of laughter in his body.

She was exhilarated, the clean, fresh air overwhelming her senses. The sky was blue and clear, the sun shining brightly over the entire estate. Despite the cold, Shannon felt warm inside. *Warm and content*. It seemed whenever she was around Scott she felt secure. He was self-assured and confident, so he made her feel that way, too. His consideration and

kindness toward her made her heart flutter. Whenever he stared at her with his sleepy hazel eyes, her knees went weak, almost like jelly.

Her thoughts continued to wander as the snowmobile labored up the hill. She had to be cautious about her burgeoning feelings, she warned herself. She once felt the same way about Michael Sullivan *and* David Bonham. And look where *they* were now. The thought chilled Shannon to the bone. Was that to be the pattern of all her relationships with men? One goes insane and kills the other one? What could befall the next person she cared for? Would the next one be Scott Page? The prospect did not displease Shannon, much to her surprise but she was not being fair to herself or Scott. He *was* different. He was nothing like Mike or David. He was stronger than either of them, perhaps because he was older or maybe because he was such a perfectionist in so many ways. He had a certain magic about him. He was dedicated to his work, often so absorbed in his profession that nothing else existed in his mind. Shannon smiled wryly. She knew she was much the same way.

However, when work was over, Scott completely changed. It was then Shannon noticed he focused most of his attention on *her*. She wondered if it was indeed because he never went out and saw other women. Was she just a convenience for the time being? The thought nagged her. What right did she have to expect anything else? She had no claim on him, although he fascinated her. Putting such complex issues from her mind for the moment, she decided to enjoy each day as it came, no more and no less.

Scott parked the snowmobile on the hill overlooking the estate. He shut the motor off and stepped to the ground. He turned to her. "It's beautiful up here," he told her.

Shannon, her cheeks a rosy red from the cold, agreed. "It seems farther away than it actually is." She stood up and stepped onto the crunchy snow. Rubbing her nose, she laughed. "But my face is numb."

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered one to her. They stood together, looking at the view from the hill. She saw smoke billowing out of the many chimneys at the mansion. Beyond that, to the right and much farther away and harder to view was the city of Larkin.

She tossed her half-smoked cigarette to the ground. Glancing at Scott, she asked: "Are you ready for some exercise?"

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Grinning, she reached over and snatched the wool hat from his head. With a gleeful shriek, she took off running toward the opposite end of the hill.

With a good natured oath, Scott started after her. "Come back kitten," he shouted without thinking. "I'll make you regret this."

"Kitten?" he thought to himself. *"Where did that come from? I must have been thinking it all along, because it fits her: my little, sweet, sometimes viscous kitten."*

Shannon laughed over her shoulder and continued running. All of a sudden, she was grabbed from behind and whirled around. The movement caught her off guard and she fell back, landing in the snow. Scott fell on top of her with a thud, taking her breath away.

Both of them were laughing uncontrollably. Scott jerked Shannon's ski hat from her head. Her ebony tresses fell about her in the snow. He grabbed a handful of the mass and brought it to his face, inhaling deeply, his eyes on her.

"Your hair smells wonderful," he said in a low tone. The laughter left both of them. Now they were serious, staring at one another intently, as if frozen in time. She was acutely aware of him on top of her, although with all the clothes between them it was impossible to feel the hard leanness of his body. Her breathing became shallow as she stared at him. She simply could not will herself to move away.

"I've wanted to hold your hair to my face for a long time," he said hoarsely, his eyes unflinchingly on her.

"Have you really?" she whispered, watching him inhale the fragrance of her hair.

Scott nodded gravely. Then he dropped her hair back into the snow. Reaching up, he ran his hand gently over her mouth and chin, tracing his finger to her cheeks, nose and eyes. She remained still, unable to move. She felt an incredible burning in the pit of her stomach, like a dozen butterflies were fluttering around inside her. It was pleasurable and painful at the same time. Her heart started to beat faster, making her light-headed and weak.

"You know I'm going to kiss you, don't you?" he asked softly.

She nodded slowly, unable to reply. Her mouth felt leaden, almost frozen in anticipation.

He bent his head down and began kissing her, very gently at first, almost as if he were testing her reaction to him. Feeling her acceptance, he pulled her closer, his hands in her hair. His mouth seared her, burning hotly as his tongue met hers. She closed her eyes and abandoned her will. She wrapped her arms around his neck, responding with all the passion she felt for him. She had a sense of being lost, of floating in a misty place, but Scott was holding her tight. The security he provoked in her was warm and overpowering. He was there, and so strong. She could smell his male scent, clean and appealing, and entirely his own. She ran her hands through his hair, wanting to touch him, wanting to know how he felt

Scott was gradually losing his self-control. Shannon's eager response took him aback at first. He didn't expect her to welcome him so passionately. Her mouth was warm, her

tongue soft and caressing. He sensed all his energy draining away. This was too incredible, even for him . . . he heard a roaring in his ears. Annoyed, he reluctantly pulled his face away from Shannon's, her kiss branded on his mouth. He stared down at her, his sleepy eyes glazed alight with bright flames. Her mouth was red and swollen from their kissing. She returned his gaze steadily, without reservation.

"I think someone is about to join us," she said at length, her voice trembling.

Scott groaned. "Damn them to hell, whoever it is!"

She giggled. "We'd better get up. It could be my father or brother, or worse, my cousins Kevin and Liam."

Slowly, Scott pulled himself up, not able to tear his eyes away from her. Offering her his hand, Shannon took hold and stood up, brushing the snow from her backside.

"Don't hide your hair under the hat," he said urgently.

"Okay," she replied uncertainly, pulling the cap over her head but leaving the black tresses falling to her waist. Taking her hand, Scott led her back to the snowmobile.

Peering down the hill, she said: "I think it's Sean."

Scott growled. "He has a habit of interrupting us, doesn't he?"

She looked at him, but he was smiling. He still had a hold of her hand. Now he pulled her toward him until her face was only an inch away from his. "You're beautiful, Shannon," he said huskily. "You're a witch who has cast a spell on me." He kissed her quickly but gently on the lips.

She laughed nervously, moving away from him. He was *too* intent on her, and it was beginning to scare her. Trying to adopt a light tone, she quipped: "Witch, am I? I thought I heard you call me kitten. So, which is it, Page? Witch or kitten?"

He lightened. "You're both, I think," he teased her. "You've been sent to test my masculine control."

"Is that so?" she retorted, eyes twinkling. "Masculine control, is it?"

He nodded. "Yes, kitten, *very* masculine."

Shannon blushed at his suggested meaning. "Well," she said, looking at him innocently. "I'm just a poor little kitten teenager being pursued by a dirty old man. I haven't done a darn thing."

He rolled his eyes comically. "You haven't done anything intentionally, no." He paused, his eyes holding a far away, almost sad expression. "I have to admit it's *my* fault. You've crept up on me, woman."

He sounded so serious. "*How* have I crept up on you?" she wanted to know.

Scott tried to evade her question. "It's nothing, really. I think the cold air has gone to my head."

Shannon had no chance to pursue the subject as Sean roared over the top of the hill and came to a stop next to them. After he turned off the snowmobile, he removed his leather gloves and ski shades.

"Sorry if I'm butting in," he said cheerfully, looking at his sister.

"You're not," she said quickly.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Sean said with a hint of amusement in his voice. "I drove all the way up here to tell you I'm going into Larkin City to get Marianne for the party. Would you like me to pick up Dana while I'm in town?"

"Oh, would you, Sean? I'd really appreciate it," Shannon said, trying to make her voice sound casual.

Apparently, her attempt to sound normal failed. Sean looked at her with a gleam in his eyes. "Okay, I'll pick her up," he said. "I should be back home around five o'clock. Hold the drinks for me." He started the snowmobile. Winking at his twin, he shouted over the motor: "Carry on!"

Shannon watched him roar off down the hill. Turning to Scott, she noticed he was again staring at her in his intent fashion but was also looking sheepish.

"I'm sorry," he said with difficulty. "If I offended you earlier by kissing you . . ."

"Is that what you think? That I was offended?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Whether you realize it or not, you're a very hard person to read."

She walked over to him and took his hand. "I was *not* offended," she assured him softly. "I kissed you back, didn't I? I'm not sorry in the least."

Scott smiled, slightly embarrassed. "I'm glad. I'm not really sorry, either. See what you've done to me?" Inside, he was a quivering mass although he did well to hide it from her. Her affect on him was astounding. He made her feel like a clumsy school boy on his first date. Strangely, the thought did not irritate him in the least.

"Oh bother," she said. "I'm just a punk kid. A kitten, you said. I don't do anything to you." Tugging at his hands, she suggested: "Let's go back to the house and get something warm to drink."

"Okay, okay," he replied, light-hearted again. "But *you* do the fixing."

She smiled broadly. "I'll be glad to."

The ride down the hill was uneventful. Scott maneuvered the snowmobile into the garage. He parked alongside Sean's snow vehicle, which rested between the estate pick-up truck and the wall of the garage. After Scott shut off the motor, she stepped gingerly to the ground. She flattened herself against the truck to make room for him to pass by. Instead of

going past her, he sandwiched himself between Shannon and the snowmobile. His body was against hers, his knees pinned to her thighs.

She drew in her breath, looking at him. He appeared to be serious, his face like granite stone, his eyes wide and staring into hers. Suddenly, a moan escaped his lips, and he buried his face into her hair, his hands grasping her hips.

She wrapped her arms around him. He raised his head, looking at her in wonder. He started kissing her again, this time roughly. She reveled in it, but in the back of her mind she was becoming frightened. "Oh, Shannon, Shannon," he mumbled into her lips, pulling her hard against him, his mouth penetrating hers savagely.

Suddenly, she pushed away from him. In a breathless voice, she pleaded: "Enough, Scott. I can't handle . . . I mean, it's too much for me to take in at the moment. I've never felt anyone desire me the way you do. It's so . . . *overwhelming*."

He apologized at once. "I know, Shannon. I lost my head for a minute." He straightened himself. "It's just . . . you have to realize I find you very desirable. I'm a man, and it's not easy." Faltering, he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

She touched his face with her hand. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Scott. I'm just not ready for all of this. *You* overwhelm me. I'm trying very hard to understand what's happening, but it hasn't come to me yet. I'm a bit confused. I honestly don't have the slightest notion how to go about this . . ."

He smiled softly. "Don't worry, Shannon. I'm a very patient man. I'm not some kid out for a bit of fun, I'm a *man*. Just do what you have to do until you're comfortable. That's all that matters."

She sighed with relief. He was so understanding, so mature, so unlike anyone she had ever met. Putting a cheerful smile back on her face, she said: "How about that hot drink?"

"That sound good," he said warmly. "Let's go."

She followed him out of the garage. As they started walking toward the house, Shannon noticed he was keeping a safe distance from her. With a playful smile, she reached over and grabbed his hand.

"Hand holding isn't so mind-boggling," she told him teasingly. "Do you mind?"

He gazed at her softly. "Not at all, kitten, *not at all*."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SHANNON DRESSED WITH SPECIAL care that night. She wore her best pair of black slacks, and donned a black silk shirt she had recently bought in Larkin City. She left her hair

long and flowing, with a bright yellow carnation tucked behind her left ear. Abandoning the idea of wearing high-heeled shoes, she chose instead a pair of flat-soled Japanese dress slippers with red dragons embroidered on each big toe.

"*I must have a fetish with red dragons,*" she thought to herself as she finished putting the finishing touches on her make-up. She rarely wore cosmetics, but tonight she used eyeliner and blush. With a smile at herself in the mirror, she added a touch of rust-colored lipstick to her mouth.

She went to Dana's room, which was two doors down on the same side of the corridor. Dana had on a pair of cream-colored pants and a beige sweater, her black hair pinned behind her head and a small amount of silver shadow applied to her eyes. Shannon was surprised by how lovely Dana looked when she made the effort.

Grinning, Dana said: "Since your foxy brother found himself someone worth keeping, I decided to make a play for your cousin Liam instead. Or maybe Kevin will be open to suggestions."

Shannon laughed. "You're impossible. Why do you want a Larkin male? They're a lot of trouble, I warn you."

Dana snorted. "I'm not out to tag one permanently, make no mistake about *that*. However, Liam - *or* Kevin - are more than likely good in bed. Rumors *do* float in Larkin City about their individual prowess, you know."

Shannon reddened at her friend's remark. "Dana," she reprimanded. "You're shameless. Is that all you think about?"

"It sure is," Dana replied bluntly. "When you don't get it very often, you *do* tend to think about it a lot."

"Well, I don't"

"I know, you're weird," Dana teased. "I've said it before. You have to be the only virgin left in Larkin City, but from what you've told me about Scott Page, your purity will end soon."

"It's not like that," Shannon protested. "I really like him a lot, but I just can't . . . well, you know. *Not yet.*"

Dana shook her head. "You baffle me. I got a good look at Scott when Sean brought me to the mansion this afternoon. Sean introduced us. Scott is absolutely gorgeous, Shan. He's *great*, in fact. Are you crazy? Don't you know older men know all sorts of erotic things? He looks like a man of experience to me. I don't imagine you'd be too disappointed with him, even for your first time."

"Don't you dare tell anyone what I've told you about him," Shannon pleaded. "You know, that I think he's cute and how well he kisses." She leaned her head back. "He thrills

me to my toes." She righted herself again, the frantic tone in her voice returning. "Promise me you won't say anything."

Dana looked hurt. "You know me better than that."

Shannon put her arm around her friend and apologized. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just so awfully confused by Scott. One minute I'm positive he's showing me attention because there are no other women around to catch his eye. Then the next minute I'm thinking he really *does* like me because of the way he stares at me all the time. I don't know . . ." She shook her head. "Oh, Dana, I *do* know that his embrace is so warm I could melt away in it."

Dana grabbed her friend by the arm. "I'll tell you what. Since I'm the outsider, I'll play the role of observer. I'll watch how he acts and talks with you as compared to others in the room. I may look like a dumb country maid, but I'm pretty damned accurate when I observe someone close enough. I can tell if he's putting on an act, or if he's serious."

Shannon's eyes brightened. "You'd do that for me?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course I would," Dana said. "After all the crap you've been through the last little while, part of which is my fault, I owe you one."

"Don't start on that," Shannon said. "You are not to blame for Mike's behavior. If you hadn't introduced us, he would have found some other way to meet me. Let's just forget about him tonight. I want to put *that* episode of my life to rest for good. Okay?"

"You've got it," Dana replied, her eyes watering. Composing herself, she said: "Come on, let's go downstairs. I don't want to miss anything, especially Liam and Kevin."

Laughing, the two girls left the room.

* * *

BRIAN LARKIN TURNED OVER the drawing room to the younger crowd for New Year's Eve. The elder party-goers chose the living room as their designation. Gleefully, Liam placed a rock and roll record on the stereo in the drawing room, turning the volume loud. The house was decorated gaily with party favors, and every fireplace downstairs in the mansion was lit, casting a warm glow over the festive crowd. Liquor flowed freely, and boisterous laughter and talk echoed throughout the corridors.

Shannon noticed with pleasure that Scott chose to wear the black sweater she gave him for Christmas. He also wore dark dress pants and comfortable shoes. He was clean-shaven, looking completely refreshed. She giggled as she walked up to him. "People probably think we're both in mourning," she whispered in his ear. "We're the only ones wearing black."

Scott flashed a wide smile at her. "As long as people think we're together, I don't care. At least our minds are on the same wavelength regarding clothes." Leaning toward her, he added in a quiet voice: "Actually, I hid in your closet earlier and watched you dress, so I'd know what to wear to match you."

Her eyes widened. "You did?"

"No, silly," he scoffed at her, laughing. "I'm just kidding. If I'd seen you dressing, you wouldn't have gotten very far, kitten."

Blushing to the roots of her hair, she scolded him. "You're just like Sean and Dana. They only have *one thing* on their minds."

"With you around, what else could I possibly be thinking of?" he countered.

Deciding to ignore his remark, Shannon led Scott to the sideboard and made him a whisky sour. He accepted it gratefully, winking at her.

Dana approached them. "You ought to see who just arrived," she said in wonder. "I've never seen her before. She looks like a model."

Shannon glanced toward the drawing room doorway and drew in her breath. There stood one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. She was tall and slender, with feathery blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. She had high cheekbones and an aristocratic manner about her. She was wearing a blue mini-skirt with knee-high black boots, a white mink coat draped over her arm.

Scott went pale. Shannon noticed he was suddenly uneasy. She looked at him. He was staring at the strange woman, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Do you know her, Scott?" Shannon asked him.

He nodded stiffly. "Yes, I do. She's an old friend of mine from New York, but I certainly didn't invite her to the party."

The woman walked across the room, her eyes on Scott. She glided with style and elegance, not hurrying her steps for anyone. Her gaze flickered to Shannon, but then returned her attention to Scott.

"Hello dear," the woman said enthusiastically as she came to stand in front of him. "Are you surprised to see me?" With one step she leaned forward, hugging him and planting kisses on his face.

He disengaged himself from the woman's arms with one quick movement. The woman stepped back, her mouth open in dramatic shock.

"Scott," she said hesitantly. "Aren't you glad to see me? I thought you would be, since you missed Christmas. I brought a present for you."

"Did I invite you?" Scott asked the woman through clenched teeth.

She looked confused. "Well, no, but I thought . . ."

"You thought wrong this time," he broke in abruptly. "If I'd wanted you here, I would have asked you."

Shannon stepped forward. "Please, Scott, it's okay," she said. "We have plenty of extra rooms. It won't be a problem if she stays."

Scott looked at Shannon in surprise. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Why don't you introduce us?"

Shaking his head, Scott said politely: "Shan, this is Anita Howard. Anita, this is Shannon Larkin."

Shannon froze. Was this the "A. Howard" who wrote Scott from New York several weeks ago? Meeting the woman's eyes, she was shocked to see resentment lurking there - directed at *her*. Shannon looked closer at Anita. She was obviously much older than Scott, although the age lines around her mouth did little to detract from her stunning beauty.

Forcing herself to smile, Shannon said civilly: "How do you do, Miss Howard?"

"I'm just fine, thank you," she replied coldly. "I imagine you've been keeping Scott occupied, but you don't have to worry about that now. I'll be taking good care of him tonight."

Shannon felt like she had been slapped in the face. Scott turned red with rage. "Anita," he barked. "I'm not your property. I've gotten along quite well without you."

"I'll bet you have," Anita said with a hint of sarcasm. Her spiteful gaze fell upon Shannon. "I'm sure you've been quite entertained by this child. She's much too young for you, Scott. I thought you'd like to have a real woman for a change."

Scott was so angry he looked ready to explode. Shannon was stunned by the woman's verbal assaults. She felt as if her insides were being torn out. Anita must be Scott's girlfriend. Shannon was furious. Scott *had* merely been playing with her. Since his flashy girlfriend lived so far away, he whiled his time with her to ease the boredom, hoping she would fall into bed with him, another easy conquest.

Shannon was humiliated. She had to get out of the room, away from Scott and the hateful woman. She wanted to hide. Swallowing hard, she mumbled: "Excuse me, I have to leave for a minute. Please enjoy yourselves." She brushed past Scott and hurried out of the room, ignoring his calls after her.

She made her way directly to her room, avoiding the other guests. Once inside, she shut the door behind her and leaned against the frame. Tears streamed down her face, unchecked. How could she have been so stupid? She fell for Scott's charm like the eager virgin she was. He was probably laughing at her right now. Her only consolation was that she had *not* gone to bed with him.

Sniffing, Shannon walked over to the couch, sinking down on the cushions. She wiped the tears out of her eyes, smearing mascara all over her cheeks. She could never face him again. *Never*. He had shamed her – betrayed her, hurt her. *How could he do this to her?*

Then she sat up straight. *What was the matter with her?* She was acting like a child. She had no claim on Scott Page. She had thought there was something special between them, but she was wrong. It was all in her imagination. She almost laughed out loud. She was feeling hurt and betrayed by something she *wished* happened. Scott had not committed himself to her, said nothing of love in her ears. She was hurt because of *that*, she reasoned. She had developed a teenage crush on him, nothing more.

Feeling a bit better, Shannon went into her bathroom and fixed her make-up. She would go back downstairs and join the party. It was a night to celebrate the New Year, not a night for depressing recriminations.

She heard her sitting room door open and close. She walked out into the bedroom. It was Dana.

"Are you okay, Shan?" Dana asked in a concerned voice, walking toward her friend.

Shannon nodded. "I'm fine. I was just on my way back downstairs. I had to fix my make-up."

Dana sat on Shannon's bed, rolling her eyes. "You missed quite a scene in the drawing room."

"What happened?" Shannon asked quickly.

"After you left the room, Scott tried to follow you," Dana began. "He was really agitated, but that woman - Anita - grabbed him and started shouting. She demanded to know if Scott was sleeping with you. She was absolutely livid. Scott tried to get free of her, but she kept yelling at him. She said if he valued their relationship he'd go back to New York with her. He told her to go to hell, and tried to leave the room again. That's when Anita stood right in front of him and shrieked: 'You're in love with that little bitch, aren't you?' Scott was dead silent for a long time. Then he said, in a real quiet voice: 'I believe I am. I think it took seeing you again to make me realize her feelings are more important to me than yours.' Well, Anita went wild. She was red in the face, in a real rage. She started slapping Scott, screaming that he was a heartless bastard. Scott grabbed her by the arms and flung her back into a chair."

Dana paused, out of breath.

"This is like a scene out of a soap opera," Shannon snapped. "Are you sure you're not making the whole scenario up in your head?"

"I swear it, Shannon," Dana insisted. "I'd never lie to you."

Shannon looked sheepish. "I know. I'm sorry. Well? Then what happened?"

"By this time your father came into the room to see what all the shouting was about," Dana started.

Shannon grabbed her head. "Oh my God, not Daddy. Oh, Jesus."

"Let me finish," Dana said. "Scott was very embarrassed. He apologized to your father and introduced Anita to him. Then he said he was taking Anita back to the airport, that he was sorry for the entire disturbance. Your father accepted that, and even offered to take Anita to the airport himself. Scott declined the offer and said he would do it himself, that he had some things to discuss with Anita. Your father said fine and left the room. Then Scott turned to me and said: 'Please tell Shannon not to go anywhere. I have to talk to her when I get back.' I said okay.

"He then took Anita by the wrist, half-dragging her out of the house. She was crying and pleading with him to forgive her. He told her to shut up, that he was sending her back to New York. I heard him say, 'If you've driven that girl from me, I'll find you and strangle you with my bare hands!' That's when they went out the front door and were gone."

Shannon sat on the bed with Dana, her face thoughtful. How easy it would be to believe Scott was in love with her. She shook her head. *No*. She refused to accept it. She would never let him betray her again.

She rose. "I've heard enough," she said quietly. "Let's go back downstairs and get drunk."

Dana touched her friend's arm. "Remember I said I'd watch you and Scott together? Well, I *was* watching you until that crazy bitch showed up. Do you want my opinion on the entire matter?" Before Shannon could protest, Dana held up her hand and continued. "I think Scott Page is crazy about you. When that woman arrived, he didn't exactly welcome her with open arms. He totally rejected her and is even sending her back home as we speak. Do you think he loves her?" Dana shook her head. "I don't think so. If he did, he wouldn't have treated her that way. Just look at the way he treats *you*, Shan. He is warm and gentle and considerate. His eyes never left your face for two seconds if he could help it. I'm telling you, Virgin Mary, the man is in love with you. And it ain't a *wham-bam* kind of love, either."

Shannon squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't want to hear anymore," she said firmly. "I refuse to believe it, Dana. So let's just drop it, okay?"

"But, Shan . . ."

"Drop it, Dana," Shannon snapped. "I don't want to listen to any more. I'm going back to the drawing room to get completely bombed. Are you coming with me?"

Dana nodded agreement, a sad look on her face. She felt it wiser not to talk about Scott Page with Shannon anymore, at least not tonight. She stood up. "Let's go, then," she tried to sound cheerful. "I still have to corner Liam - *or* Kevin - tonight."

Shannon smiled faintly at her friend. "Maybe someone will get lucky in this house tonight."

* * *

SCOTT WAS ANGRIER THAN he had ever been before. He simply could not believe Anita had done such a thing to him. It was out of character for her. After leaving the mansion, he practically shoved her into the rental car she had driven from the airport. She was sobbing, pleading with him to listen to her. Instead, he got into the driver's seat and started the engine. In a rage, he rammed his fist onto the dashboard, cursing her. "God damn you. What right did you have coming here uninvited? I told you not to come, for Christ's sake. Are you just plain *stupid*?"

"Scott, listen to me," Anita begged. "Remember all the times I visited you on job sites in the states? You never seemed to mind then. Why should I think any differently now? Why are you so upset?"

"All those other times I invited you to come and see me, didn't I?" he asked coldly.

"Yes," she stammered. "But I . . ."

"Did I invite you this time?"

"No."

"Why in the hell are you here then?"

When Anita did not answer him, he shoved the car in drive and pulled away from the house. He had not bothered to grab a coat in his haste, and he was cold. He flipped on the car heater.

Anita started sniffing. In a timid voice, she finally asked him: "Don't you want to see me anymore?"

Scott glared at her. "No, I don't, Anita. Not in the way you want."

She gasped, taken off guard by his response. She wasn't expecting him to reject her. True to her nature, she recovered quickly. "If I ask you something, will you answer me honestly?"

"I'll try," he replied curtly.

"Are you in love with Shannon Larkin?"

"Yes, I am. Like I told you, I finally realized it tonight."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"No," Scott snapped. "And thanks to your performance, she may never let me talk to her again." He hit his hand on the steering wheel. "Damn it, she has to listen to me."

Anita hung her head. "I'm sorry, Scott. I really am. I didn't realize what was going on at first, but when I walked into that room tonight and saw you with her I could tell right away she was different for you. I was jealous, Scott."

He sighed, glancing at her. "Why in the hell were you jealous? We've had an open relationship for years. Why the jealousy *now*?"

Anita shook her head. "It's not the kind of jealousy you think it is. What caused my envy was the way you were *looking* at her, Scott. You've never looked at me like that, or anyone else I've seen you with. It wrenched my heart. I knew anything you felt for me was nothing compared to her . . ." Pausing, she bit her lip, her voice cracking. "It's the kind of look I haven't seen too many times in my life. It was a look of . . . absolute devotion. It was like nothing else existed for you except *her*. And she was looking at you the same way. I just cracked up. I saw everything I ever had with you dissolving before my eyes."

He grimaced. "Look, Anita, I'm sorry," he said uneasily, not really caring about her feelings at the moment. "I didn't plan any of this. I didn't leave you in New York last November with it in my head to come here and fall hard on my ass for a nineteen-year-old. It happened, that's all I can say. And I'm sorry if it hurts you."

She was smiling now, despite her tears. "Somehow, I'm elated you've found her. At least I know you'll be happy. I was just hoping for a little more time with you."

Scott groaned. "You say I'll be happy? I just pray Shannon will listen to what I have to say without throwing something at me."

Anita looked lovingly at him. "If she doesn't listen to you, she's crazy. I'd give anything to hear you tell me you were in love with *me*. I think she'll listen, Scott. She's probably going to be angry for awhile, but she'll listen. What is so ironic about this situation is that you are the only man I've ever really loved. You're a stud in bed and you have a wonderful personality to go along with that. Plus you're a good friend. I've always valued you above anyone else. I'm going to miss you."

Scott was silent as he parked the car at the Larkin City Airport. He helped Anita with her baggage, and walked her through the airport. "There's a flight to New York City in one hour," he told her. "That's not too long for you to wait by yourself, so I'm going back to the mansion."

Anita touched his arm as they walked into the waiting area at Gate 3. "Thank you, Scott," she said, her eyes misting. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused. Please tell Shannon that, too. If you ever feel like talking, you know my number."

Scott hugged her lightly. "I'll see you. Take care." He turned on his heel and walked away from her.

Anita watched him go, her face sad. He was walking out of her life and she knew it. She sat down wearily in the waiting lounge. Setting her own feelings aside for a moment, she had a hunch that the depth of emotion running between Scott and Shannon was bigger than both of them put together, and neither of them realized it yet.

* * *

SHANNON WAS GETTING PLEASANTLY drunk with Dana, Kevin, Liam, Sean and Marianne Chamberlain. They were sitting around the fireplace in the drawing room. Kevin persuaded a friend to manage the Coven for the night so he could celebrate the New Year with his family.

When Shannon and Dana returned downstairs, everyone was studiously tactful in not mentioning the scene between Scott and Anita Howard. Shannon said nothing of the matter, and threw herself into the party with vigor. However, every time she heard the front doors open and close she jumped. So far Scott had not returned. *What did she care anyway?* She asked herself angrily. But she *did* care, and that angered her further.

At ten-forty-five, the front doors opened and shut again. Shannon stiffened. She glanced at the doorway of the drawing room and felt a rush flow through her stomach. *There he was!* And he was staring directly at *her*. Scott looked cold, rubbing his hands together for warmth and then blowing into them. Without a word, he strode to the sideboard and poured himself a generous helping of brandy. He walked over to the group and stood with his back to the fire. He took a large gulp of brandy and looked at the silent faces in front of him, who were watching him warily.

"Don't stop talking on my account," Scott said mockingly. "I'm freezing to death. As soon as I warm up, I'll be more sociable." He turned to Sean. "Can you follow me to the airport tomorrow in your truck? I need to return the rental car I drove back up here."

Sean nodded. "I'll be glad to. Just say the word."

Awkwardly, the group started talking again, except for Shannon. She kept her eyes riveted on Scott. He was looking right back at her over the rim of his brandy glass, his eyes expressionless. He drained the rest of the brandy and set his glass down on the mantle.

"Shannon," he said gruffly.

She raised her eyebrows. "Yes?" she replied, her voice leaden with sarcasm. "I'm right here as you can plainly see."

Scott's eyes darkened. "I have to talk to you privately. *Right now.*"

"I'm sorry," she said, with exaggerated politeness. "As you can see, I'm rather busy at the moment . . ."

"Now!" he growled, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Shannon glared at him. The group fell silent again, their attention focused on the couple. For once, neither Sean nor her cousins were coming to her defense. They refused to meet her eyes.

"Do you need your brother or your cousins to talk for you?" Scott snapped, sensing her thoughts. "I'm not a monster, Shannon. I have something I would like to explain to you."

Her eyes squinted in anger. "I told you, I'm busy. Now leave me alone."

Without a word, Scott strode over to her swiftly. He grabbed her by the wrists and dragged her to her feet. He then proceeded to pick her up in his arms.

"Let me down at once," she hissed into his face.

"My kitten has her claws out," Scott stated flatly. "You're going to hear what I have to say, whether you like it or not. If I have to force you to listen, I will."

Shannon ground her teeth together in annoyance. Because of the way he was holding her, his face was barely an inch away from hers. His sleepy hazel eyes never left her for a second. It was a struggle of two very strong wills, she realized. Finally, she spat at him: "Put me down and I'll listen to you. We don't need another scene tonight. Let me down, I tell you. I'll listen to what you have to say."

Scott set her down promptly. She grabbed her drink off of the coffee table, her eyes defiant. "Well? *Talk*," she demanded.

"I want to talk to you in private," he grated. "Let's go upstairs."

She started to protest, but thought better of it. Turning to her twin and her cousins, she said scathingly: "Thanks a lot, guys. You'll have to excuse me for a minute."

Liam looked sheepish, while Kevin refused to meet her angry gaze. Sean dared to look at his twin sister. He shrugged his shoulders. "Scott is a bit too intimidating for us," he told her frankly. "Besides, he's not going to harm you."

With a look of disgust on her face, Shannon tuned back to Scott. "Where would you like to go?" she asked.

"Upstairs," he said curtly, taking her by the hand and dragging her behind him. She was growing more furious by the moment. Scott did not stop until he was on the fourth floor. He went into her sitting room, slamming the door shut behind them. He let go of her hand.

"Sit down," he commanded.

"I don't . . ."

"I said sit down," he fairly shouted at her.

Shannon decided to obey him. She sat down on the couch, watching him with a frown on her face. He stood in front of her, hands on hips. He looked so angry . . . *what right*

did he have to be angry? She had done *nothing* to him. *He* was the one at fault for the evening's mess.

"Are you ready to listen to me?" he asked her.

"All ears," she quipped.

"Don't be a god damned smart ass," he warned her. "You're still young enough and little enough for me to take you over my knee and give you a good belting."

Her eyes grew large. She did not doubt he would do just that if she antagonized him further. She leaned back into the couch and propped her feet on the coffee table. "Sorry. Go ahead," she said quietly.

Scott started to pace in front of her, occasionally glancing at her. "I want to tell you about Anita."

"Oh Christ," Shannon swore. "Is that what you want to talk to me about?"

"No, it isn't. She is only a small part of it. For chrissakes, just *listen to me.*"

She crossed her arms in front of her, a bored expression on her face. "Whatever you say," she said wearily.

"I've known Anita for about four years," he told Shannon, beginning to pace again. "I'll be honest and tell you we *have* slept together. I'm a man of thirty-three, and you won't find many chaste men around my age, unless they're priests. But it's not what you think with Anita. The only time I saw her was when I passed through New York. A few times she visited me on job sites in the states. Shannon, I have never been in love with her. We have more of a friendship than anything else."

Taking another deep breath, he continued: "Lately, however, she's been hinting toward a more permanent relationship with me. I told her I wasn't interested in making any changes to our arrangement. This sort of drove her to desperate measures. When I didn't go to New York to be with her for Christmas she really panicked, and that's why she came here tonight. When I drove her back to the airport a little while ago, she told me to tell you she apologized for her behavior in your home. She said she realized when she walked in here tonight that it was over for her."

Shannon raised a questioning eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Scott groaned, halting his pacing. He stood in front of her again. "Why do you think I didn't go to New York for Christmas?" he asked her impatiently.

"I'll be damned if I know. Why?"

"Because of you, kitten."

She was still puzzled. "Because of me?" she asked, amazed. "I still don't understand."

With a weary sigh, Scott came over to the couch and sat next to her. He positioned himself so that his hand held fast against the back of the couch, his knees touching her

thigh. She did not move her feet from the coffee table, steeling herself against the tingling sensations in the pit of her stomach. *What was he going to say?*

Scott leaned toward her. The look in his eyes frightened her. The hazel color had darkened. His expression was serious. She began to tremble slightly.

"Shannon," he said softly. "I'm new at this. I've never done it before, so if I screw it up, be patient with me." He paused. "Can't you tell that I'm crazy about you? Can't you sense how much in love with you I am?"

Her mouth dropped open. *In love with her?* Her mind simply could not soak it in. She wasn't certain if he was being honest, or if he was playing some sort of cruel game with her. She wanted so much to believe him, but his words terrified her into speechlessness. His declaration also made her question her own feelings. How did she feel about *him*? Was it a passing fancy, or was it real? Would she forget about him in a month? She had her doubts. He was much too impressive to forget. She closed her eyes to escape his intent gaze. Was he really in love with her? She could not understand what he saw in her. He was older and much more experienced. Surely he preferred more mature women - like Anita - and not some nineteen-year-old girl. The notion was crazy.

"Shannon," Scott said. "I can see you analyzing this, like you do everything else. Why can't you just accept it?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Are you okay?" he asked in concern.

She looked at him, her eyes now filled with fear. "I don't know," she stammered. "I can't really believe . . ."

"Don't you believe what I just told you?" he asked sternly.

"I'm not sure."

He grabbed her gently by the shoulders. She dropped her feet to the floor from the coffee table. "Please believe me," he pleaded. "I meant every word I said. *I'm in love with you*. I didn't realize it until tonight. I've been nervous around you for weeks. I find myself thinking about you constantly, even when I try to work. That's never happened to me before, never in my life. Tonight I discovered what my feelings are all about. When Anita walked into the house, my mind was completely on *you*, not her. I could have cared less she was even here. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Shannon looked at him again, confusion in her eyes.

Scott drew back from her. "I think I've frightened you. You look like you've seen a ghost. Have I done all this too fast for you?" Peering at her, he added softly: "How do you feel about *me*, kitten?"

She moistened her lips nervously, her eyes darting around the room. "I'm not sure I can explain it to you so you'll understand . . ."

"Try me," he prodded her.

She glanced at him. "Okay. Do you promise you won't laugh at me?"

"I promise."

She began softly, as if she were afraid to speak. "Every time you kiss me, I feel so funny inside. Like . . . Like . . ." she groped for the words she wanted to use. "Like a warm rush. It leaves me feeling so weak. But that's not it. I really enjoy talking with you, and I think you're funny and smart. I really admire the way you work. You take it so seriously, but then afterward you're so much fun. I love your smile, I love the way you look. I can't wait to see you every day, and I think about you constantly, too. How do I say this? *You really matter to me.* I can't imagine not having you in my life." She giggled. "Plus, you've got a great butt. I love your chest, too. One time you had your shirt on, but you'd forgotten to button the first button. Your chest is *spectacular*. I love hairy chests" She stopped, blushing. "Sorry, it must be the wine talking. I'm getting silly."

Scott was silent for a moment, his eyes seeming to size her up. Finally, he asked: "Do those feelings tell you anything?"

"I don't know," she said desperately. "It's all so crazy. I have no idea what it means. Honestly, if I did, I'd tell you."

He reached out a hand and caressed her jaw bone. "I think what you need is time," he told her. "You need to think about things and decide for yourself what they mean. Only you can decide what you want, but at least you know how I feel about it. Do you believe me?"

"I do believe you," she said slowly. "I really do, but I can't understand why."

Scott put his finger to her lips. Smiling, he said: "I'll tell you why someday, but not right now. I'm not crazy enough to expose my feelings to you entirely – not just yet, anyway."

"Thank you, Scott. I'm sorry I acted so stupidly."

"I probably would have reacted the same way if an old boyfriend of yours did what Anita did tonight," he admitted. He took hold of her hand and looked at her wristwatch. "It's two minutes after twelve," he said. "Can I kiss the new year in with you? I promise to behave."

Shannon smiled shyly. "Yes, you can kiss me."

With tenderness, he drew her into his arms and pulled her close. He lowered his lips onto hers, kissing her gently and slowly. She responded in kind, closing her eyes. True to his promise to behave, Scott moved away from after a moment.

"Thank you, Shannon," he said, his voice husky. "Why don't we go downstairs and join the others?"

She smiled. "Sean probably thinks you've dishonored me. He may be lurking out in the corridor waiting for us right now."

Scott laughed. "I'll have to have a serious talk with your twin brother one of these days," he declared, helping her stand up. "He's like a mother hen around you."

She grabbed his hand. "Let's go down before they drink all the liquor."

Scott allowed Shannon to precede him out of the room. He sighed as he walked along the corridor. He felt so much better, having told Shannon how he felt about her. With a frown, he realized it was up to her to make the next move.

"THE TWAIN SHALL MEET" INFORMATION

The Twain Shall Meet by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon (Kindle), Barnes & Noble (Nook) and the Club Lighthouse Publishing web site.

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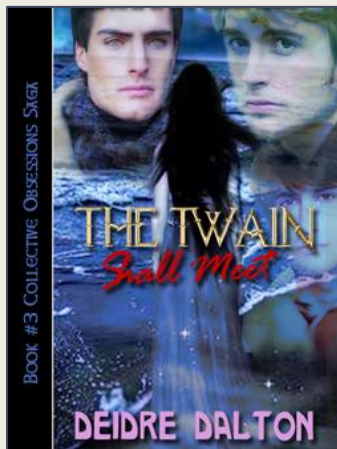
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<http://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Twain-Shall-Meet/206916392738771>

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The *Collective Obsessions Saga* chronicles the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Deborah O'Toole is the author of *Celtic Remnants*, a novel of enduring yet impossible love and betrayal set in the turbulence of Ireland, glamour of London and the wilds of Scotland. She is also author of *Mind Sweeper*, a mystery/suspense novel available in Kindle and Nook-Book editions.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

Also writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Bloodline Trilogy," which follows the uniquely magical journey of one family through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*. All titles will be released through 2013-17.

Deborah writes short-story Juvenile Fiction and darkly abstract Poetry, and is the author of a series of articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, she also writes for the cooking/recipe web site Food Fare. She is writer and co-editor of the *Ambrosia Cookbook*, *Community Garden Cookbook*, *Food Fare Cookbook*, *Furry Friends Cookbook*, *Larkin Community Cookbook*, *Recipes-on-a-Budget Cookbook* and the *Soups & Stews Cookbook*, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.