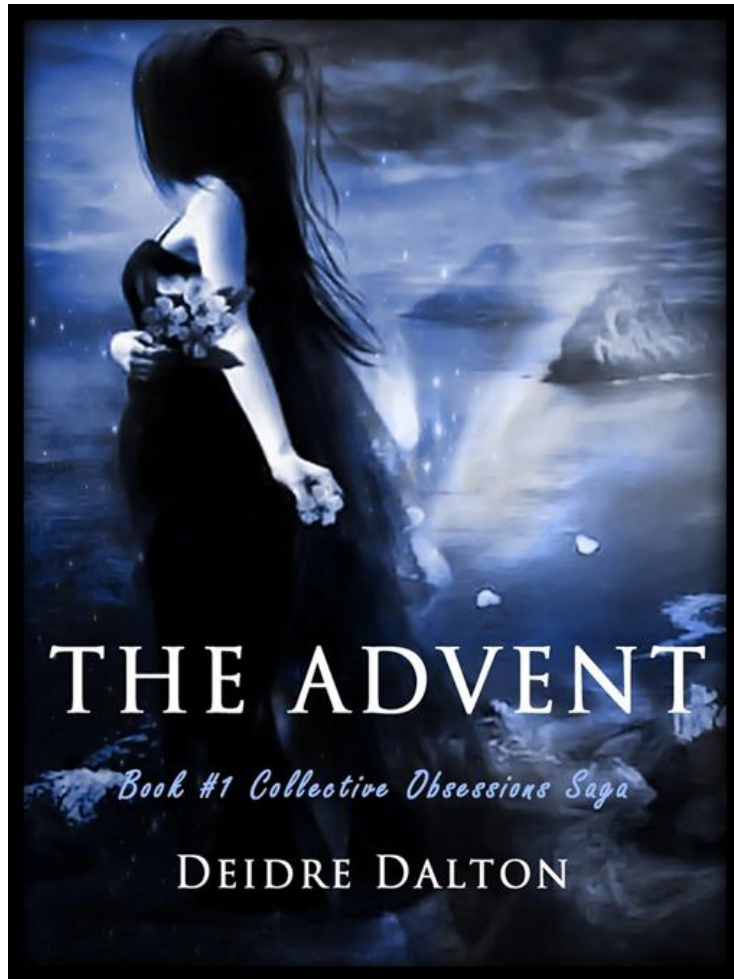


Excerpts from:

The Advent

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #1 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Publishing/Historical Romance Edition

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ABOUT "THE ADVENT"

The Advent by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the first book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel (then known as *Passion Forsaken*) was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in February 2011. The paperback edition followed in June 2016.

Forbidden love and dark secrets haunt two Irish families hacking out a new life in 19th-century America. When Molly Larkin's father discovers her affair with lighthouse keeper Colm Sullivan, his reaction pitches her into madness. Yet the legacy forges a bond of blood that will endure for generations...

The Advent marks the beginning of the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, when John Larkin emigrates from Ireland to America in 1865 and settles a self-named township in Maine. John soon builds a wealthy empire and grand estate, becoming one of the richest men on the Eastern Seaboard.

Hiding behind the wealth and social position are quirky English servants, the effervescent family chef Claude Mondoux, John's alcoholic wife Anne, their steadfast son Roderick and their mercurial daughter Mary Margaret, also affectionately known as Molly.

In ***The Advent***, Molly falls in love with lighthouse keeper Colm Sullivan, bringing shame and tragedy upon her family. Although cloaked in secrecy and madness, the love affair establishes a connection between their families that would endure for generations.

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter One

*October 1865-September 1866
Castletownbere, County Cork, Ireland*

"ANNIE! WE'RE GOING TO America!" John O'Larkin burst into the kitchen waving an envelope.

"What?" Whirling around from the wood-burning cook stove, Anne gaped at her husband. "What did you say?"

John grinned. He pulled out a chair, sat at the rough-hewn wooden table, crossed his legs and waved the envelope. "This is our way to America." He slapped the envelope down on the table.

"Whatever do you mean?" Anne sank into a chair across from him.

"My Auntie Grace in Tralee left me an inheritance." He slid the envelope across the table. "She died a fortnight ago, may God assoil her soul, and she left me everything she had."

"Everything? What in the world did she have to leave you? She was a spinster of very modest means."

"That's what she let everyone believe, including me. I'm shocked, too. Gracie left me her cottage in Tralee, plus her savings in the bank."

"Savings? What savings?"

John leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on her face, smiling. "This letter is from her solicitor in Tralee. It says Grace O'Larkin named me her sole beneficiary in the event of her death." He paused. "Can you live with two hundred thousand pounds, my dear?"

Anne went ashen, and then exhaled slowly. "Where, for the love of God, did Grace O'Larkin get that kind of money?"

John shrugged. "I have my own ideas, but I can't be sure. Grace was older than my Daddy by nine years, and she did a lot of different things in her lifetime. She lived in Dublin for several years. Mixed with an odd crowd there . . . literary types, pagans, actors, and the like. A very modern lady, my Auntie Grace."

"Do you think she came by the money improperly?"

"Possibly, but I don't care. I've wanted to go to America for as long as I can remember, and now we can go. America is where I can make a fortune."

Still numb, Anne regarded John thoughtfully. His eyes were dancing. She watched him as he stood and went to the sideboard to pour a dram of poteen into a small glass. She smiled as he returned to the table. "You've wanted to go to America since I met you."

"Even before that. You said when we wed in 1855 that you'd go with me."

"I know, Johnny, and I will. But, my God, Grace left you so much money. What will you do with it all? We couldn't even spend a fraction of it getting to America."

John tossed back the poteen and leaned his forearms on the table. "Exactly. I've got some grand ideas, my dear. A lot of ideas that won't do here, but they will work in America. Now that their civil war is over, there's nothing to hold us back."

"When do we go?" Anne whispered, her excitement growing.

"Next year." John leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. "I'll need to sell Gracie's house in Tralee, which will mean even more money. We have to sell our cottage, and all of our furniture. We won't need it in America. I want to start all new. We need to go to Dublin to get new clothes, and luggage to put them in. I want fancy leather luggage for you, me and the kids." He paused. "Where are the little snappers, by the way?"

"They're out in the byre," Anne smiled. "I'll call them in." She rose and went to the door to call six-year-old Roderick and their toddler Mary Margaret: "Roddy, Molly, inside."

As she walked past John, he stood and put his arms around her, his eyes electric with excitement. "We'll have a good life in America, Annie. You'll see. We'll be very happy."

Anne smiled back at him. With John, she knew anything was possible. Just as he filled her life, he would make their dreams come true. He would make them all happy.

* * *

CASTLETOWNBERE, ON THE SOUTHWEST tip of Ireland, was the main village on the Beara Peninsula in County Cork. Surrounded by the Caha and Miskish Mountains, it had a savage beauty created by the rocky shore and fierce winds. The village's sheltered port was filled with fishing trawlers. It was also a haven for smugglers, a fact no one talked about for obvious reasons.

Locals made their livelihoods on the trawlers, in the copper mine in nearby Allihies, or by smuggling. John inherited the family cottage from his late father Kevin, as well as the mussel farming business, which had prospered. He bypassed local markets and sold his plentiful harvests directly to grocers in Kilkenny, Bantry, Waterford, Killarney, Limerick and Dublin. The profit was comfortable, enabling him to employ four other men. Unknown to Anne, he also made a tidy sum every month dabbling in moonshine production in the Caha mountains.

The O'Larkin cottage had been in John's family for several generations. He and Annie whitewashed their home every spring, providing a gleaming contrast with the green-trimmed doorways and windows. The thatched roof was well tended, and the small yard was fenced with oak slats painted white. Behind the cottage was the lofty byre, where they kept dozens of chickens for eggs and meat, a rooster, two cows, three goats, a duck and six pigs. In spring and summer, Anne planted and kept a large vegetable garden that supplied her family through autumn and winter.

The cottage was small and tidy. Just inside the front door was the living area, and beyond that the kitchen and two bedrooms. The big bedroom was John and Anne's, with an attached porch seen through curtained French doors. The two children shared the second bedroom, where their two small beds were covered with quilts made by Anne. The fireplace was unusual in that it opened into both the large bedroom and the living area, where John built a deep hearth with seats. The arrangement warmed both rooms in the winter months, while the cook stove heated the kitchen.

Supper that evening consisted of boiled cabbage, potatoes, diced sausages with tomatoes, and warm bread and butter. The children drank milk, while Anne sipped watered wine and John drank ale. They didn't tell their children about the move to America. Not yet.

Roddy was the image of his father, but with lighter hair and pale skin. Molly was pale, too, with black hair and dark eyes. They were beautiful children and their parents were justifiably proud of them.

After supper, Anne put the children to bed and joined John by the turf fire for a last cup of tea. John usually stayed up later than everyone, his mind running and dreaming. Anne knew he would be full of ideas tonight, excited beyond belief by their good fortune and eager to get started on his dreams.

"Will you be up long?" she asked.

"I shouldn't be. I have a lot to do tomorrow, so I'd best get my rest."

Watching him, she finished her tea. "Even I'm getting excited about going to America," she said. "I never thought I'd see the day. It's remarkable, too, knowing we will be starting all over again in a new world."

"We won't be like other Irish who go to America," John leaned forward eagerly, elbows on his knees, eyes shining. "We have more than most. A lot more. We can book passage on a decent ship, not like the majority of our lot who go to America on death ships. We have a good life here, Annie, and we've been luckier than most, but I know we can have a better life in America. Thanks mostly to my Aunt Gracie, God rest her soul."

Anne set down her tea cup. "I know Grace adored you, never having had children of her own. But why did she leave you everything?"

"She had no one else. Not family, anyway."

"I'd still like to know where she came by so much money. I hope we're not going to get into any trouble."

"Why should we?" John scoffed. "I don't know where she got such a stash, so what's our trouble? I'm not going to question our good fortune, Annie. I'm going to relish it."

Smiling at his enthusiasm, she leaned down and kissed his cheek. "You're right. I'll say no more about it. I promise."

"There's a good girl. You'll see, Annie. *You'll see*. I'll build you a home in America. It's a big country and we can go anywhere. Anywhere at all."

"Mind, don't stay up too late," Anne said gently, leaving him to retreat to their bedroom.

John sat by the fire, staring into the flames, his eyes bright with excitement and anticipation for the life ahead. Absently, he picked up his cup, sipped the cold brew, made a face and set the cup down, while his mind repeated: "In America, the possibilities are limitless. *Absolutely limitless*."

* * *

SLIPPING HER LONG, WHITE cotton nightgown over her head, Anne sat at her dressing table. She looked at herself between the candles on either side of the mirror. John built the dressing table, as well as the bed, for which she made a light blue coverlet. She felt the warmth from the turf fire, and wiggled her bare toes on the soft wool carpet. The harsh October wind keened around the cottage, but John had insulated their home so well that they felt neither the cold nor the rare heat of the Peninsula.

Enjoying the comfort, Anne thought about John's uncanny knack for doing everything exceptionally well. His unique combination of fervor and patience always resulted in success. *He has a golden touch*. It didn't cross her mind to give herself credit for the work and support which gave John the freedom to indulge his enthusiasms. Sighing with a comfortable happiness, she unbound her gold-brushed brown hair and began to brush it one hundred strokes to keep it thick and wavy.

She looked at her image in the candlelight. While she wasn't beautiful, her face was arrestingly serene and self-possessed. She was tall, almost five-foot-nine, with a long and narrow face, thin lips, and a rather elongated nose. Her skin was naturally pale, the darkness of her eyes like distinct coals set amongst translucent ash. At thirty-one, she managed to look younger than her years. She noticed her hands and grimaced. Big, like her feet, she thought, and red from kitchen work, with large knuckles and short nails. John always said he adored her looks, that he had no use for small, frail women. He loved that she was tall, strong and healthy. Beneath the details, visible only to discerning eyes, were poise, a slight reserve, a natural nobleness and a touch of melancholy.

Anne married John O'Larkin in 1855 when she was twenty-one. Before that, John was betrothed to Anne's younger sister, Maeve. Anne grew to know John from his visits to the O'Quinn home in Bantry, twenty miles from Castletownbere.

The O'Quinn's were a comfortable middle-class family. Anne's father, Dary, was a blacksmith with a shop in Bantry. He met John when the younger man came to buy forging tools. The two became friends, which led to John's introduction to Dary's two daughters.

The sisters were different as land and air. Anne was tall and robust; Maeve was petite and frail. Anne had light hair and dark eyes; Maeve had red hair and green eyes. Anne was reserved and plain spoken; Maeve was smiling, mercurial and mysterious. John and Maeve were immediately and mutually smitten, but a few weeks before their wedding Maeve was struck down by the pox and died within three days.

John was devastated. When Dary O'Quinn offered Anne's hand in marriage as a consolation in his grief, John accepted. Since they were nearly strangers, the first year of John and Anne's marriage was a tad formal, but gradually they grew comfortable with one another and developed a warm mutual affection. However, Anne knew from the beginning that John still held the memory of Maeve close to his heart.

After a stillbirth and a miscarriage, Anne gave birth to Roderick in 1859. After two more miscarriages, Molly was born in late summer 1864. While Molly was healthy, she was small-boned and dainty, unlike her parents, but much like Maeve.

Anne watched in the mirror as the brush moved rhythmically through her hair. She acknowledged privately that she enjoyed the intimate parts of marriage. John became aware of that fact slowly, and they eventually developed an active sexual relationship. As a Catholic, Anne knew it was a sin to enjoy sex. Marital coupling was only supposed to be a means to produce children. To that end, she avoided confessing her sins to the priest at St. Mary's Church in Castletownbere, even though she attended Mass every Sunday with Roddy and Molly. John rarely went to church unless it was Christmas or Easter, or if there was a funeral to attend.

Relaxed and sleepy, she put down her brush. She blew out the candles and climbed into the large bed, pulling the covers to her chin. Turning her head, she looked through the fireplace into the living room where she saw John's wavering image through the flames. He was lost in his exciting dreams for their future.

She smiled contentedly as her eyelids grew heavy. Their life had always been comfortable. They never suffered like most of the Irish, generation after generation. Combined with the O'Quinn's stability before their marriage, and John's success since, Anne had never known deprivation. She worked hard, but had never starved. She had never been evicted from her home by the British Crown rent collectors, nor punished for her religious beliefs. Their home on the Beara Peninsula was too far south and remote for the British to

practice their high-handedness. The English influence was weak in Castletownbere, and rarely felt even as far as Bantry. However, they knew if the British government ever discovered the smuggling practices in Castletownbere port, the distance would no longer isolate them.

Her eyes were closed only a few minutes when John slipped into bed beside her. He startled her awake by snuggling close, putting his arm around her waist and kissing her cheek. She exclaimed: "Why, John O'Larkin, you haven't a stitch of clothes on!"

"Aye, Annie," he chuckled. "I'm fully aware of that. I can't sleep. I'm too wound up about the money we'll be getting, and all the things we can do with that money."

"And would you like to talk then?" she teased.

"Talk? Are you mad, woman?" He pulled her tight to his body. "Take off your gown. The kids are asleep, and it's late. Come on and give us a kiss, love."

She sat up, pulled off her nightgown and turned to him.

At thirty-six years old in 1865, John Kevin O'Larkin was a strikingly handsome man. He had raven-black hair with sideburns, a distinguished cleft in chin, and intense azure blue eyes. Well over six feet tall, he was toned but not overly muscular from regular physical activity. He was strong in mind and body, and possessed an iron will that refused to bend once he identified his goals. Tucked away in Castletownbere, he had never known the fear of British persecution, for which he often felt guilty. How could he honestly call himself an Irishman without knowing the suffering that was an organic part of Irishness? At times, when the guilt became heavy, he renewed his conviction that he didn't have to live in poverty or resentful acceptance in order to be validated as an Irishman. He had more than earned his comfortable life and rebuffed the notion that suffering became martyrdom, another standard badge of Irishness. Besides, he had dreams and ambitions to fulfill in America. Yet guilt still plagued him on occasion.

He hoped the guilt would dissipate once he moved to America. That hope, and the endless opportunities America offered especially now that he had more than enough money, were the driving forces of his determination. John was the only surviving child of Kevin and Rachel O'Larkin. Other children born to the couple died in infancy, or were stillborn, but John came into the world big, strong and healthy. He was never sick, other than an occasional sniffle, and his extraordinary health, strength and quick intelligence made his parents proud. He excelled in school in Castletownbere, and at age fourteen was sent to a private school in Kilkenny. His health, good looks and education merged with his strength of character and drive, creating an intense, charming man accustomed to getting his own way and not above manipulating others to accomplish his goals.

When his mother died in childbirth in 1836, John's father vowed to raise his son alone. Father and son shared the family cottage in Castletownbere, content with their daily work and their nightly pint. John adored his father, and they never had a cross word. The only other remaining family was his father's sister, Aunt Grace, who lived in Tralee and visited several times a year.

When his father died in 1847, John was severely crushed by the loss but went on alone, working and living in Castletownbere, making improvements to the cottage and dreaming of the day when he could finally go to America. In a sense, his dream was frightening because it meant leaving the security of his home and the familiarity of the village. But fear of the unknown also made it more exciting.

He was still haunted by Maeve's death, although he hid it from Anne. He felt a great affection for Anne. She was a good wife and mother, her temperament so genial that she made his home a peaceful haven. She was also a willing participant in his dreams of America, making it clear she would follow him anywhere.

He was grateful to her for their stable and calm marriage and their two healthy children, but he felt no great, heart-wrenching love for her. He loved her, he supposed, affectionately and comfortably. She was a perfect wife in almost every sense, but he had never felt a stirring in his soul for her. He felt guilty about that, too. He felt that stirring only once, for Maeve, but not since, and he never expected to experience such a great love again.

His greater passion was his dream of America and becoming someone of consequence, someone important that no one could shake a stick at. His single-minded determination had yet to fail him, and he prayed those instincts would not fail him now.

* * *

OVER THE NEXT SEVERAL months, the O'Larkin's prepared for their trip to America. When they told the children about the move, Roddy was excited. Molly, too young to understand, saw her brother's excitement and clapped her hands. It was a trait that would follow her for many years to come: watching Roddy to monitor his reaction and to pattern her own response after it. She adored him, and he treated her with a consideration unusual in a child his age. He was protective of Molly, and concerned about her feelings and thoughts. When she didn't understand what going to America meant, he volunteered to explain it to her when she was old enough.

John and Anne went to Dublin in May 1866 to purchase clothes and luggage, leaving Roddy and Molly in Bantry with Dary O'Quinn while they were gone. John convinced Anne to buy a dozen new gowns. She chose durable and attractive petticoats, stockings, chemises and shoes. John bought practical items such as trousers, white shirts, work boots and suspenders. Anne also selected several outfits for the children, as well as brushes, combs, and decorative accessories for Molly's hair. John purchased four leather suitcases, one each for the adults, one for the children, and one for extras.

John sold Aunt Grace's cottage in Tralee to a local businessman for five thousand pounds, along with the acre and a half around it. A few months later, he sold the cottage in Castletownbere to a sheep farmer from Ballylickey for seven thousand pounds. Of the money from Aunt Grace, they spent only two thousand pounds in Dublin, which gave John more than a tidy profit margin after the sale of the two cottages.

Dary O'Quinn decided there was nothing to keep him in Ireland. Since Anne was his only family, and Roddy and Molly his only grandchildren, he sold his property and blacksmith business in Bantry and made plans to go to America with them.

John bought passage on the steamer ship *SS Tobercurry* for 2,500 punts, paying extra so they could sail in comfort. He and Anne would have their own cabin with a private water closet, while the children would share a larger cabin with their grandfather. Meals were not included, so he bought several months worth of supplies to feed them: salted and dried beef, cheese, some eggs, their own water, three wooden crates of vegetables, sacks of flour and sugar, coffee, tea, cured bacon, and tubs of lard and butter. Anne bought crockery and utensils from a local haberdashery in Castletownbere, small packets of soap and large jugs of fresh Beara water on the Peninsula.

The *Tobercurry* was due to set sail from Dún Laoghaire Harbor. Since Dún Laoghaire was more than two hundred miles north of Castletownbere, John booked passage on a stagecoach. They would stay at an old inn called Na Mara the night before sailing, which overlooked the city's harbor and departure site of the *Tobercurry*.

* * *

GONE WAS THEIR VIEW of the wild coast of the Beara Peninsula, which John did not mind. Instead, he felt a sense of renewal, of hope and promise for the future. He loved Castletownbere, of course, but there was no going back. Not now. Maybe when he was an old man he would sit and think about Ireland and what it meant to him. After all, being from Ireland made him what he was: the man who had strength and conviction to uproot his family and begin a new life in a new land, with no assurances and certainly no guarantees.

The *Tobercurry* set sail from Dún Laoghaire Harbor shortly after seven on the morning of 1st September 1866. Aboard were one hundred passengers, some in cabins, most in steerage, as well as spices and other supplies bound for New York City. The length of the voyage was scheduled to take two weeks, and then those on the ship would disembark in the United States of America.

America was the land of opportunity, where vast fortunes could be made by the lucky and ingenious few. It was also the land where important dynasties were created, and where John O'Larkin's dreams would come to fruition.

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Three

*June 1880
Larkin City, Maine*

WHEN TWENTY-YEAR-OLD Colm Sullivan stepped off the boat from Ireland in June 1880, the sun glinted off his blond hair. Electric enthusiasm shown from his eyes, which were set in a strong, sun tanned face and white teeth behind full lips. All who saw him agreed that he was wonderful to behold. Tall at six-foot-four, he was blessed with such an abundance of physical beauty that when contemplated by himself or others, he became embarrassed. Men teased him by calling him "pretty boy" or the lad who was "easy on the eyes." His mellow temperament and integrity, supported by an innate and moderately educated intelligence, gave him a presence that others trusted instinctively. He was alone in the world and determined to make a life for himself in America, even if he had to begin with menial labor.

Young as he was, his lower back ached from sitting in the flat bed of the carriage careening toward Larkin Village. Mr. Larkin, sitting up on the carriage's only seat with the driver, hired the four of them on the dock a few days ago in New York. Once on the road, Colm heard Mr. Larkin tell the carriage driver to go as fast as he could because he was eager to get home to his family. So the four of them were having their backsides pounded all across the terrains of New York, Massachusetts and now finally Maine. The closer they got to their destination, the more he looked forward to the relief of being on solid ground.

The weather, sunny and warm with a salty breeze, was a blessing after being closeted in the ship's steerage from Ireland to New York. He turned to look at the passing scenery as they went deeper and deeper into the wilds of Eastern Maine. He suddenly wished they were still in Bangor, where they had stopped to rest and eat two days ago. Surely they were getting closer to their final destination now. How much farther could it be?

"What are you thinking, pretty boy?" Seamus Flaherty asked, his head bobbing up and down from ruts in the road.

He turned to look at the sturdy, red haired, freckled young man. Seamus was from Belfast, and hired by Mr. Larkin to be a grounds worker. "I'm thinking it's time we stopped. Me arse and back is killin' me."

Seamus laughed. "Don't you know it. I don't think we have far to go, though."

"How would *you* know?" demanded Barry O'Toole, an eighteen-year-old from Kerry.

"Just a feeling. Mr. Larkin said it was two days or so from Bangor, and we've been riding for two days now."

"I'm starved, and I need a good drink by God," said Patrick O'Connor, a tall, thin, Dublin native in his early twenties with russet hair and dark eyes.

O'Toole nudged him. "Watch your blessed tongue. Larkin isn't deaf, man."

O'Connor snorted. "If we can't even hear ourselves over the din of the horses, how can he?"

"How come Larkin chose you to work in his new lighthouse?" Flaherty asked Colm. Colm shrugged. "I worked in one in Malahide."

"It'll be a good deal for you, I'm thinking," Flaherty nodded. "Larkin told me I'd be working on the estate grounds, as he calls them, but if I don't like it I can go into the village and get work at the forge. That's what I'm really good at, that's what I did in Belfast. Larkin said his father-in-law owns the forge in the village, but he's too old to run it now. I'll be seeing what happens, I guess."

"I'm good with the land," O'Connor declared. "Me own Daddy had his farm outside Dublin, but he gave it to me older brother and I was sort of shoved out. I think we'll all do good in America."

"Me, too," O'Toole agreed. "I'm good with livestock. My uncle has the biggest dairy farm in Kerry, but he had six sons and I was a bit in the way, I think. Besides, the Irish girls are all quiet-like and they don't give out. I'll bet the lasses in America give out, them being so liberated and all."

"Don't count on dipping your wick into a Yankee candlestick," O'Connor snickered. "I hear tell they're more snobbish than the limeys - that they put on airs here."

"We'll see," O'Toole said. "I'd love to have an American wife someday."

"I imagine we'll all marry Americans," Colm mused. "We're here now and we don't have much of a choice, unless we don't marry at all."

Flaherty laughed. "You'll marry, pretty boy. Some lass will get a good look at you and go for your jugular. You'll have no problems with the ladies, I'm thinking."

Colm flushed. "Can't help my looks, lads. I was born this way."

They fell silent, gaping as the carriage approached the mansion. Mr. Larkin told them his house was big, but they were in no way prepared for the reality of it, not even in their wildest imaginations. The mansion was bigger than the Irish castles Colm had seen in his lifetime, even the ruined ones. The pines surrounding the house lent a dark, forbidding air to the estate as did the trailing ivy that snaked around the entire structure.

"*Good . . . God . . . Almighty.*" O'Connor's eyes were wide. "I have never seen the like in all of my life. It has to be bigger than the shagging Pope's house, don't you think? Jaysus! Are we all going to stay in this fortress?"

"We're servants, man," Flaherty said patiently. "Why would the good Mr. Larkin put us up in his own home? I'm thinking our lot will be in the stable. Mark my words."

"Not Sullivan. The lighthouse has its own cottage. I heard Larkin say so."

Flaherty looked at Colm. "Is that true, then?"

"So Mr. Larkin told me. But it wasn't my doing, you know. I asked for no special place. Honest. Besides, how big can the cottage be? I'm a servant, like the rest of you."

"Your looks will take you far, Sullivan," Flaherty predicted. "And you ain't just like the rest of us. You'll be somebody with that face, there's no mistaking it. You may just be off the boat, and you may be poor like the rest of us, but with looks like yours, it will take you places. I'm doubting any lass, whether she's a peasant or a lady, could ignore the likes of you."

The carriage slowed as it came closer to the mansion, giving Colm some relief from Flaherty's talk. Colm spied a massive awning over what appeared to be the double entry doors, but the carriage did not stop there. It veered left and went around the back of the mansion. O'Toole laughed harshly. "That's typical. We're being taken to the tradesmen's entrance. Not good enough to trip through the front door."

"Shut yer yap!" Flaherty snapped. "Larkin can hear us now for sure."

They were quiet as the carriage stopped at the rear of the house. They watched Larkin jump out of the carriage before it stopped. He looked up at the house and turned to face them, happy to be home. They did not guess he was in his fifty-first year because he showed little sign of his age. He stood tall and erect, with a mere dusting of silver at his temples. He motioned them out of the carriage. After they gathered their meager luggage, the driver moved the carriage off toward the stables.

"This is my home," John stated flatly. "It is here you will live and work. Someday you may want to work in the village, but for now you will earn your wages on my estate. Except for Colm, all of you will be housed on the fourth floor of the house, which I built for those who work for me. You three will share a room, a very large room with a fireplace and a sitting room. Colm, as you all seem to know, will reside in the lighthouse keeper's cottage, as that will be in line with his job here."

The men stood listening and watching him.

"I'll give all of you a few days of rest. I'm sure you're all tired from your long journey and these days on the road. We're back in time so I can have tea with my family, whom you will meet shortly. Meanwhile, I'll leave you in the care of my cook in the kitchen, where he will give you tea and something to eat. After a short while, I'll return to collect you and introduce you to my family. It's important that you know who they are, because when I'm not here, you will answer to my son Roderick. He's a fair-minded and patient lad, and not in the least bit abusive."

John paused, looking at his new servants, checking his mental agenda of things he wanted to say to them. "After meeting my family, a boy will see the three of you to your room on the fourth floor to clean up." He pointed to Flaherty, O'Connor and O'Toole. "Please take baths. A supply of clean clothes will be provided for you while your own are washed. The servants eat in a room adjacent to the kitchen, and this is there you will be fed breakfast, lunch, tea and supper. Any other eating will be of your own wherewithal from supplies you can purchase in the village. My driver goes there once a week, on Saturdays, and you are welcome to go with him if you wish."

John looked at Colm. "I'll take you to the keeper's cottage after you meet my family. After you've been to the village, you can prepare your own meals at the cottage, if you so desire. If you can't cook, you are certainly welcome to eat all your meals here at the mansion with the other staff."

Colm nodded slightly. "Thank you, sir. I can cook some. I'll be all right on my own, once I get some supplies."

"As you wish." John swept his gaze over them again. "I'll give all of you limited credit at the grocery in Larkin until you get on your feet, but you will be expected to pay me back."

With one hearty nod for emphasis, he rubbed his palms together. "Let's get out of the sun and into the kitchen. I'm sure you're as famished and thirsty as I am." The relief on their faces was so transparent that he laughed aloud, a happy sound that made the men smile. Patrick O'Connor, particularly, looked so pleased at the prospect of food and drink that John decided to add one more thing.

"I don't mind if you take a drink. There's a pub in Larkin called the Amber Whale that you might come to frequent soon enough. But know this: I will not tolerate drunkenness on the job. I will simply not abide it. I don't subscribe to the quaint notion that all Irishmen are drunkards and good-for-nothings. I have proven otherwise. If you are discovered drinking while working for me, you will be dismissed at once, and you can find

your own way off my estate. What you do on your time is your own business, as long as you break no laws, nor hurt anyone else in my employ or in the village. My wife, Mrs. Larkin, is particularly moral and will not have indecent frolicking with any of the maids. Do I make myself clear?"

John looked at each man individually until he received their nods of compliance, then he smiled. "Good! Good! Now let's go inside and relax. You've earned a good rest."

They followed him inside, with Colm Sullivan taking the lead.

* * *

THE KITCHEN WAS LARGE, spotless and looked like a place familiar with constant bustle. Outside light poured in from large windows, showing the work tables, a mammoth butcher's block, four wood-burning stoves, three ovens, cupboards and a huge icebox, which attested to the regular feeding of many mouths. Cupboard shelves were stocked with dry foods and spices, imparting a scent that made the men's stomachs rumble. Colm was told by the effervescent chef Claude Mondoux, who loved showing off his kitchen, that one door opened into the servant's dining hall, and another led to the main foyer of the mansion.

After John left his new workers in Claude's hands so he could join his family for tea, Claude clucked around them happily. He insisted they sit at the large pine table next to his work area. "For today, you will eat here," he insisted. "The servant's hall is full at the moment. Most of them are English, and they do love their tea. Today you will sit here and eat. Tomorrow you can join the others in the common area."

Leaving their luggage by the back door, the four men sat at the table in the kitchen, grateful for the quiet and lack of motion. Soon Claude had a young servant boy handing them bowls full of Irish lamb stew.

"Little do they know," Claude said, pointing to the door which led to the foyer of the house, "that this is what I will serve them tonight for supper. I cook the same for everyone, all the time, but no one realizes it. Why bother cooking different food?"

Claude liked the new servants. They were real men, and very tired men. Claude was naturally friendly, and it never occurred to him that his gestures and speech seemed effeminate. It was just his way. He was French and he enjoyed pleasing people by preparing exceptionally palatable food for them. He stood over a large pot at the stove as the men ate, maintaining a one-way conversation with them.

"The maids are off limits here," Claude said cheerfully, ladling more stew into their bowls. "I should know - I've been here a long time. The best way to stay out of trouble is to work hard, and on your free day, go into Larkin Village and visit the Amber Whale. Wonderful tavern, that place. You will stay out of trouble there, I'm sure, as long as you don't like to fight. But you are all Irish, *non*? Perhaps it is in your blood to fight?"

O'Connor slurped down his second cup of tea and belched.

Claude chuckled. "My stew must be good today. Everyone belches once they have eaten it, which is good. That means it is superb. You must have more. Please, help yourselves. And have more tea."

Colm watched the chef with amusement, finding him interesting. Claude caught his eye and grinned. "You are the *beau garçon* of the bunch, *non*? You will be noticed here, I can

promise you that. I can just hear the ladies in the village. *Mon dieu!* You will break many hearts before you are through, won't you?"

"That's what I keep telling him," Flaherty chortled. "With a face like that, Sullivan will never have a cold bed, even in this isolated place."

"Isolated, yes. Boring, *non*. You will see." Claude brought a loaf of warm bread on a wooden bread server to the table and sliced it for them. "Mr. Larkin is a very fair man," he continued as he buttered the slices. "But do not cross him, or you will find yourself booted out into the cold. I've seen it. A year ago, a stable hand drank too much at lunchtime and tried to go back to work. The *Monsieur* caught him, and fired him on the spot. The man had to walk the seven miles to the village. I think he works on a blueberry farm in Searsport now. Terrible mistake he made. This is a good place to work, and the living conditions are above par."

"Where do you sleep?" O'Toole asked, biting into his second slice of bread.

"All servants sleep on the fourth floor. I have my own room, but then I have been here longer than most. I came not long after the butler, Nigel. The longer you work here, the more privileges you receive. Nigel and his wife, the head maid Clea, also have their own room, and they have a baby daughter named Layla. Such a sweet, sweet, child. Other maids share rooms, sometimes five to a room. So you three won't have it so bad. The rooms are so big, the three of you won't mind to share. You, however," he turned to Colm, "have a whole cottage to yourself. I have seen it. The *Monsieur* had it built to look like his home in Ireland, or so he told me. It's not very big, but it is private and very clean. It is next to the lighthouse, and overlooks the beach. You will be happy there, I think, beauty of the bunch."

Colm flushed. "I just hope I'm up to the job of running the lighthouse. I don't want to disappoint Mr. Larkin, or have him lose his faith in me."

"You won't," Claude assured him. "The *Monsieur* has an eye for people. How do I say it? He has a natural instinct about people, seeming to know what they can do even before they know themselves. You'll see. He is a good teacher, a good man, as long as you do not cross him."

"I won't cross him," Colm said softly. "I have come a long way to be in America, and Mr. Larkin was kind enough to hire me, to give me a chance. I will not let him down."

"Good. You will do well here, then. Now finish your meal, your tea." He clapped his hands lightly to hurry the men along. "The *Monsieur* does not take long at his tea, and he will be in here soon to show you his family. Then you will all be taken to your rooms."

"Does Larkin introduce all the servants to his family?" Flaherty asked, pushing away his empty bowl.

Claude nodded. "*Oui*. You need to know who is who here. He has all new servants meet his family. It is not unusual, I assure you."

"Thank you for the wonderful stew," Colm said, pushing back from the table. "I haven't felt this well fed since I left Malahide."

"You are welcome," Claude said, pleased by the compliment. "Someday you will tell me about yourself, *non?* From where you came and what brought you here?"

"If you'd like," Colm answered, puzzled by his interest. "There's nothing extraordinary about my life, I promise you."

Claude studied Colm for a moment, reflecting, and then he chuckled. "Perhaps you think so," he said mildly. "But you are here in America now. I predict your life will become

extraordinaire very soon. I have a sense about these things, *Beauty*. You will be someone here."

Colm shrugged, deciding Claude's words were simple melodrama. Right now he wanted rest, and to think about his future with John Larkin. Colm was so tired he was not even mildly curious if he would eventually become "someone" in the New World.

Not then, but later.

* * *

CLAUDE MONDOUX WAS A man of passion in work and leisure, and he easily recognized instant attraction between two people. It was a talent he possessed all of his life. He had seen many examples of high passion and intense love, and he was always moved by it because it was a rare and spectacular emotion. To be real, it had to be honest. But, in all his years, he had never seen a rolling passion ignite instantly as it did on that June day in his kitchen. He would tell of it for years. He could not have imagined that the daughter of the *Monsieur* would be so taken with an immigrant Irishman, even though later he knew he should have guessed because of Colm's bewitching physical beauty.

When the Larkin family came into the kitchen, Claude offered them tea and *zucchini loaf*, but John saw the new servants and led his family over to the table where they still sat. The men stood to greet them, wiping their mouths self-consciously. Colm towered over the others, but was the same height as Claude, John and Roddy.

Then Colm saw Molly, and their eyes locked. Suddenly there was electricity in the room that all felt, but only Claude identified.

"Lads, meet my family," John said. "This is my wife, Anne; our son Roderick, whom we call Roddy, and my little lass Mary Margaret, who we call Molly." He looked at the men and began introducing his family to them. "This is Seamus Flaherty, Patrick O'Connor, Barry O'Toole, and the tall drink of water is Colm Sullivan. Colm is to be our new lighthouse keeper at Banshee Point."

Molly would never doubt her father again. He was right. Colm Sullivan had been given his looks by the angels. She stood dumfounded, gazing at Colm, with a weakness in her knees she had never known. She could not speak - she could only stare.

Colm gazed at Molly, stunned and bewildered. She, too, was perfection: so small, so slender, eyes as dark as her hair, her alabaster skin creamy and clear. They were connected by an invisible line of tension that only Claude saw, and he felt a tingling run along his spine. He felt sorry for them. For all the power of their attraction, it was doomed. She was high-born, and he a servant. Their eyes were consuming each other, curious, gentle, ferocious, amazed and hungry. They were suspended, unaware, in time. Without realizing he had been holding his breath, Claude exhaled loudly. John looked at him in surprise.

"Are you tired, my frog?" John used his pet name for Claude. "Are you ill?"

"*Non, non,*" Claude assured him, pulling himself together. "I'm French, *Monsieur*. We express ourselves fully; we breathe loudly. Have you not noticed after all these years?"

"I suppose I haven't," John smiled. "I only seem to notice your broken English, and how you put words backwards when you speak."

Claude pretended a pout. "It is not *I* who has the accent, sir, but you, with your funny Irish way. You are the one to speak backward, not I. Not Claude."

John laughed and took Anne's arm. "We will leave you to your domain. Please have the three men shown to their room upstairs, and I will take Colm to the keeper's cottage."

"*Oui*," Claude wiped his hands on his apron. "My pleasure. They will be most happy here. I am sure of it."

Molly found her voice, although the croak betrayed her tension as she turned to her father. "Would . . . would you like me to go to the cottage with you and the . . . new keeper?"

"No, lass," he said absently. "I have some things I need to talk to Colm about that would only bore you. I'll be back in time for supper."

Molly looked at Colm. He was regarding her, his eyes warm and smiling. He shrugged the smallest motion, as if to say that he was disappointed too. Molly blushed, and could not stop her mouth from forming a smile. There was no rush, she knew. He was there to stay, and somehow she would get to know him better. The thought settled her, and relieved her momentary tension.

Colm, too, appeared to relax. As Anne, Roddy and Molly left the kitchen, he picked up his battered suitcase. "I'm ready whenever you are, Mr. Larkin."

Claude watched them all leave, still captivated by what he had seen. It was over and he was alone again. How long before Molly Larkin found her way down to the cottage by herself? He must watch. Or would Colm find Molly? Then sparks would fly. Passion would overcome, destroy, or come to full fruition. Certainly it could not be the latter, Claude was sure, because of their different stations in life. It was a damned pity, and there would be much pain.

Claude went over to a corner cupboard and brought out a half-full bottle of white French wine, pulled out the cork and swigged straight from the bottle. It was unusual for him, but he needed a drink, and fast. "*Tragedy*," he thought as the wine warmed his belly. "*That is all that will come of this attraction between the Monsieur's daughter and the beauty man from Ireland. Tragedy.*"

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Four

EVERY SATURDAY, EXCEPT DURING the harsh winter months, a large flat-bed carriage took the estate servants into Larkin Village where they could shop at the grocery store, post and receive mail, visit friends, or merely get away from the mansion for the day. Many of the men frequented the Amber Whale, a combination tavern and lodging house founded in 1870, three years after the village was settled by John Larkin. An English immigrant, Edward Bisiker, and his wife, Lizbeth, built the Amber Whale. When Edward died five years later, Lizbeth took over and made it a favorite spot for locals and travelers.

John went into the village, separate from the servants, at least twice a week to check on the progress, health and happiness of the residents. On Saturdays he hitched up his carriage and left at the crack of dawn, usually taking Claude with him. Claude went into the village to buy supplies for the mansion, but he liked to visit the Amber Whale after lunch and catch up on the local gossip before returning home with John.

It was eight o'clock in the morning when the servants gathered at the back entrance of the mansion, waiting for the driver to bring the carriage around to take them into the village. Colm Sullivan was among them, curious to see the village, and needing to buy food supplies for the cottage. He liked eating meals at the mansion and seeing his co-workers, but he wanted to be able to cook for himself on the days when he did not feel like making the trip to the big house.

Colm stood with Seamus Flaherty by the back door, waiting for the carriage driver. Several other servants, some maids included, waited with the men, set apart in a different group. The weather was still warm, but it had dawned cloudy and windy, hinting at rain later in the day.

"Just our luck to be caught in the rain in an open carriage," Flaherty grumbled.

"But it's warm," Colm pointed out. "Back in Ireland, we'd be freezing our arses off in this kind of weather. At least here, when it's summer, it stays warm when it clouds up and rains."

"You're right. It's just my way to complain." Flaherty turned to look at him. "How do you like your job at the lighthouse, pretty boy?"

Colm smiled at the name, knowing it was just Flaherty's way of being friendly. "The job is a dream. Mr. Larkin has shown me how to run the tower, and it's not as hard as I thought it would be. It's just time consuming, and there is a lot of paperwork. The most tedious task is shining the prisms in the beacon, but it has to be done."

"I saw the beacon going across the estate last night," Flaherty said, impressed by his friend's complicated job. "It was amazing bright. You were the one who set the light off?"

Colm nodded. "It's easy. The light operates with kerosene and a wick, and all I have to do is extinguish the light just after dawn. The only hard part is climbing those blasted steps to the tower several times a day, but I think my body is getting used to it."

"Here comes the carriage," Flaherty interrupted him. "Time to look lively now. I've been waiting for days to get off this estate and take a peek at the Amber Whale." The flat-bed carriage stopped in front of them, and the driver sat with his back to the group. "Bloody stuck-up bastard," Flaherty muttered as they climbed into the flat-bed. "He's got to be English, all right. God-cursed limeys, noses always in the air. Even though we're all living

in America, where everyone is supposed to be equal, the Brits still act like they're better than us."

Colm grinned. He settled in the corner behind the passenger side of the driver's seat. Flaherty was next to him, and the other servants sat on blankets provided. There were eight servants in all.

The driver clicked at the horses, and raised the reins as a signal to move. Suddenly, the mansion's back door burst open. Molly rushed to the carriage, her skirts billowing out behind her. "Hold on, Nichols! I'm coming along today."

Nichols reined in the horses and the carriage lurched to a stop. He jumped down to help Molly into the passenger seat beside him, but she waved him off. "I'm perfectly capable of getting up on my own, thank you." And she did. Nichols returned to his place and took up the reins again.

Colm noticed that Molly wore a simple, light brown gown, and her black hair was pulled up into a tight bun on top of her head. Since he sat directly behind her, he smelled the flowery scent of her cologne. He heard Molly say to the driver: "My father gave me permission to come along with you today. I need fabric to make a new dress."

Nichols nodded. "Very well, miss."

The carriage began to move and picked up speed as it left the estate. Colm wondered if Molly knew he was behind her. She had not looked around, but she hung on as the carriage bounced down the dirt road that led to Larkin Highway.

"Jaysus, but she is a looker," Flaherty whispered into Colm's ear. "I've noticed her about the place when I'm working. She rides her horse a lot, by herself. She's never spoken a word to me personally, but all of us lads like to look at her when she's out. Imagine her going to the village with the servants, would you! She could just as easily have gone with her father earlier this morning, you know. Maybe she fancies peasants. Do you think?"

"Shut up," Colm hissed. "You shouldn't be speaking about her like that. She's Larkin's daughter, and don't forget it. Remember what Claude told us."

"That powder puff!" Flaherty snorted. "I don't think he'd know a lass if she bit him on his French backside."

"He's not like that," Colm defended Claude without knowing why. "All the French talk with their hands, just like the Italians. Claude is only interested in girls, Seamus. He's not a powder puff, or whatever you call it."

Before Flaherty could respond, Molly turned around. She gazed at Flaherty coldly. Clearly she heard what he said. Then her glance turned to Colm, and became warmer. "Going into the village to visit the Amber Whale, Colm?"

Colm met her eyes. "No, Miss Larkin. I'm going to the grocery to get supplies."

"Still determined to do your own cooking?" she teased.

"Maybe. I like Claude's cooking, but some nights I'd rather stay in the cottage and not have to walk to the mansion to eat."

"I understand. You should get a good look at the village. I'm sure you'll like it."

"I will," he said softly, watching her face. "After I visit the grocery, maybe I'll walk around."

Molly smiled at him, and then turned to face the front.

As the carriage turned onto Larkin Highway, and rumbled along another six miles to the village, Colm relaxed. He looked at Molly's hair, her shoulders, and the movement of her body as it adjusted to the bumpy road and shaking carriage. She was a total vision. A pretty

colleen, he would call her back in Ireland. She had haunted his dreams since he saw her that first day on the estate. The lunch at the lighthouse two days earlier only fueled his desire for her, but he tried to temper it with the reality that she was a lady, the daughter of his employer, and there could be no changing that, no matter what his fortunes were. He watched her as Maine's countryside flew by.

But he was not interested in his surroundings, not then, and not for a long time to come.

* * *

LARKIN VILLAGE WAS HOME to just under one thousand people in 1880. Most of them were Irish immigrants, but there was also a scattering of Italians, French, English, and a few Germans. The main street was the hub of activity, with cottages and larger houses spread out on side streets. Nichols slowed the horses at the edge of town.

Those who saw the village for the first time were startled by the settlement. It was similar to a village in Ireland, which of course was the way John Larkin designed it. In the spring of 1867, John razed an entire section of dense pines to begin building his village. He had small pebbles collected from the beaches and laid the stones into the soil to create a main street that looked similar to cobblestone. The result was what he hoped for. It gave the impression of entering a quaint old village, complete with gas lamps high on poles above the streets. John hired German men to keep the boardwalks and streets clean, sweeping them free of dirt and debris, and washed when it rained. It was a full time job, but John paid them well for it.

The main part of the village was comprised of Larkin Grocery, Quinn's Forge, the red-bricked city hall, and a small cottage that was the sheriff's office. Larkin City Hall housed the jail, although the small courtroom had yet to be used. John made a sign for the government building, carved into a huge rock and painted green.

LARKIN CITY HALL

Founded 1867

The Amber Whale was a block from the grocery on Main Street, between a haberdashery and the Sea Wharf Café, which specialized in fresh seafood and hearty fare such as beef and potatoes. On warm summer days, wooden tables sheltered from the sun by large parasols were set out on the boardwalk in front of the café so that patrons could dine outside, or "al fresco" as Claude called it. Claude was a frequent diner at the café, before his weekly Saturday visit to the local tavern.

The flat-bed carriage stopped in front of the grocery, where passengers jumped to the ground gratefully. Molly stepped onto the boardwalk and looked around for Colm, then smiled when she saw him. Her heart began to beat faster, and she felt a warm blush creeping up her neck to her face. She asked him: "Would you like me to show you around the grocery?"

Colm walked over to her, smiling down into her face. "I'd like that, Molly." With head slightly bent, he spoke low so bystanders could not hear them.

Her blush deepened. "Rascal," she whispered. "That wasn't fair."

"Why?"

"I wasn't expecting you to call me Molly," she said. "I'd already forgotten I told you to do so when my mother wasn't around."

"Or other servants."

"Well, that, too," Molly admitted, embarrassed. "Now, would you care to see the grocery? I wager you haven't seen one like it, not even in Ireland."

"I'm ready, Molly." Colm took her lightly by the elbow. "Lead this poor Irish peasant on," he teased her, noticing the flush in her cheeks. The feel of her slender arm through the dress sleeve warmed him considerably, and he could sense her pulse beating a little faster. "*At least she isn't completely immune to me or my touch,*" he thought with male satisfaction.

"You're no peasant to me," Molly said, letting Colm hold her the elbow, pretending not to notice his firm, yet gentle, touch. "We're all supposed to be equal here in America, remember?" She ended her sentence with the same sentiments of Seamus Flaherty, without knowing it.

"We're supposed to be, but we aren't. Are you ready to shop, Mistress Larkin?"

"Of course! I was raised to spend my father's money."

Colm chuckled at her comment as they entered the Larkin Grocery through the open double doors, which were shut only at night or in bad weather. Inside the doors, Colm stopped to stare in amazement at the biggest store he had ever seen, offering a dizzying array of items. To the left was a stationary area, with paper, pens, pencils and candles, and beside that, behind a sign, was a station of the United States Postal Service.

Molly proudly led Colm to where the shopping aisles began, to show him the breadth of her father's planning. "We sell everything here. Clothing, postage stamps, rifles and hunting and fishing supplies, ladies make-up and perfume, soaps shampoos spices, flour, sugar, beans, coffee, tea, canned milk, vegetables and meat. A butcher has a shop at the back of the store where he sells only fresh meat, fish and poultry. Over there is the area for spirits. They have kegs of ale and beer, bottles of wine, tobacco, whiskey, and fruit drinks, like lemonade and orange juice. They also sell fresh milk, cheese and butter, and freshly baked breads and cakes."

Colm shook his head "It's a wonder, and I need a little bit of almost everything. I have no soap, or flour, or meat. I need to stock the cottage."

"What do you plan to cook?" Molly asked as they started down one of the aisles, marveling at how tall and handsome he was. She was delighted to be seen with him, thrilled how he kept physical contact with her by holding her elbow. She noticed other women in the store eyeing him. The townsfolk were used to her forays into town, but they were intrigued by this gorgeous man apparently attached to her.

"Irish lamb stew," Colm's mind was still on food. "That was the first meal I had when I came here, and Claude's was so good that I wanted to try my own version."

"You have your own recipe?" *How unusual.*

"Yes, my mother's recipe. I think it's similar to Claude's, but I want to try it anyway."

"Let's go to the butcher, then. He has fresh meat every day, but it sells quickly. Claude also places a weekly order here, and sometimes he cleans the butcher out on Saturday's."

They walked to the rear of the store, where Colm relaxed his hold on her elbow. As they neared the butcher counter, he saw several people waiting for their meat orders. The smell of fresh sawdust rose from the floor as Molly walked to the meat counter and rapped on the surface with her fingernails. Within moments, a short, heavy man with a large

moustache came to the counter, wiping his hands on a white towel. "Ah, Miss Larkin. How are you this fine day?"

"Very well, Basil. And you?"

Basil Tunstall had brought his trade from Manchester, England six years earlier. "Right as rain," he said, smoothing his moustache. "If you're here to pick up meat, Claude placed his order hours ago and the lads are loading Mr. Larkin's wagon now."

"I'm here for material for a dress, but I'm also helping one of my father's new servants. He's looking for lamb to make stew. Do you have any left today?"

"Yes, quite a bit." He liked Molly. The lass never put on airs, and seemed comfortable amid the common folk. "How much do you need?"

Molly looked back to where Colm stood patiently. He shrugged. "A pound or two. And I'd also like some bacon and pork side, if that's possible."

"I have plenty of bacon and pork side," Basil said. "Just give me time to wrap it up. There are a few orders ahead of you. Do you have other shopping to do?"

"Yes, we do. First, I want to introduce you to Colm Sullivan, the new lighthouse keeper at Banshee Point. He arrived from Ireland barely a week ago. Colm, this is Basil Tunstall."

Colm reached over the counter and shook Basil's hand. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," Basil rasped. "The lighthouse out on Banshee Point has created a lot of talk here in the village, all of it good. Most of us have never seen it, but I hear it's very tall. What's it like working up in the tower, lad?"

Colm liked Basil, even if he was English. "The view is like nothing I've ever seen. Breathtaking. I'm just happy to be here in America and working for Mr. Larkin."

A line of people had formed behind Colm. "We'd better let the others in and do the rest of our shopping," Molly said.

"Sure, you go ahead," Basil said with a genial wave. "I'll have your order ready in less than an hour. Nice meeting you, Sullivan."

As they walked away from the butcher counter, Colm held Molly's elbow again. "Do you know everyone in the village?"

"Almost," she said, looking up at him. "I was a child when my father settled the village, so one might say I was brought up with these people."

"That's how I felt about Malahide," Colm admitted as they strolled to the dry goods aisle. "I knew all the people, and it made me feel very comfortable."

"I like it, too." Molly pointed to sacks of flour and sugar on the shelf in front of them. "Do you want some basic staples for the cottage?"

"I need just about everything," he grinned. "How much credit does your father allow the new servants?"

"Twenty dollars, I think. But don't worry about it. You'll pay him back, and the clerks here won't refuse you extended credit because you're here with me. Besides, I think they're all curious about you."

"Why?"

"Haven't you noticed people looking at you?" Molly chuckled.

"No," Colm said slowly, realizing he had been watching Molly and no one else. Had she noticed?

"Well, they have. Especially the ladies. I'm sure they're dying of curiosity. They probably think you're my beau."

Colm smiled, his eyes laughing. "And that would be a terrible thing, wouldn't it?"

Caught off guard, but true to her usual candor, she said: "No, Colm, it *wouldn't* be a terrible thing." She looked up at him. Her breath stilled as she saw his blue eyes become serious. Her skin was tingling again. She felt her face grow hot. She battled confusion for the bearing of dignity that befit her station. "Of course, some might not agree." Her voice trailed off.

"I'm sure they would," Colm said thoughtfully, fascinated by the montage of expressions that crossed her face within a few seconds. He was aware she had to keep catching her emotional balance when she was with him. It warmed him to know that he was significant to her in some way. To ease her disquiet, he changed the subject. "I need vegetables for my stew."

"They have a selection here, but it's not great." She was relieved at the escape he offered. "Most villagers grow their own. We have a big garden at the estate, out behind the house. Why don't you wait until we get back? I'll raid Claude's larder and get you the vegetables you need."

"Claude won't mind?"

"I didn't say that, did I?" She grinned. "He won't know. What do you need?"

"Potatoes, onions, carrots, garlic. Whatever you can get, I'll be glad to have."

"Ask and it shall be given unto thee," Molly quoted. "Remind me on the ride back and I'll get the vegetables to you somehow."

They continued to shop. It occurred to Colm that Molly seemed right at home in the grocery. Also, she was being helpful, and not at all ashamed to be seen walking and talking with him in public. In fact, she seemed pleased to be seen with him. And no one else seemed to find it odd that John Larkin's daughter was in the store, shopping with a paid servant. Molly treated everyone the same, and with a great deal of respect. He admired such a personality trait. It pleased him immensely, and he was not sure why. His grip on her elbow tightened as they continued to shop.

* * *

THE SERVANT'S CARRIAGE jounced as they raced the rain. Storm clouds streaked across the sky, trying to beat them home. Nichols pushed the horses harder despite the lather fly-ing from their mouths.

Molly sat in the flat-bed pressed tight to Colm. The other passengers did not appear to care, if they noticed. Even Seamus kept his mouth shut.

Molly and Colm's purchases filled several burlap sacks beside them. Molly bought silky blue fabric for a dress, and Colm stocked up on supplies for his cottage, coming in just under the twenty dollar limit. He was excited to get home and put his supplies away and begin making the cottage feel like home. He relished thoughts of his day with Molly in Larkin Village. They had strolled along the boardwalk on Main Street, had eaten lunch at the Sea Wharf Café, then sat at an outdoor table talking and laughing. She asked him about Malahide, so he told her about his village, and how his parents and sister were killed.

She turned to him and asked over the noise of the race down the road: "Have you ever been married?"

"No, never!" he laughed. *Now what brought that on?*

"Any special lasses back in Ireland?"

"Nary a one."

"How old are you? Don't you like girls?"

"I'm twenty, and, yes, I like girls. I just had a wonderful day with one, didn't I?"

"Touché," she smiled. She turned to notice they were entering the mile-long road to the estate, and then looked up into his face. "You're the perfect age, you know."

"The perfect age for what?"

Molly's merry laugh was carried away on the wind, but she did not answer him.

As they neared the kitchen door, Molly turned to him, her eyes dancing. "I'll get those vegetables to you tomorrow. Now you'd better run to beat the storm."

"I'll wait in suspended animation," he teased, knowing his words would amuse her.

She giggled. As the carriage stopped at the door, she touched his arm and whispered: "It's tea time, and we beat the rain." She paused. "I loved our day together."

Colm lowered his voice to match hers. "We'll do it again soon."

"Yes."

Colm jumped down and held up his hand to Molly, who, instead of making a nimble leap to the ground, gave him her hand and stepped down like a lady, then, with one last glance into his face, hurried indoors with her bag of blue fabric. Colm gathered his purchases and began walking back to the cottage, where he would make a supper for himself of bacon and eggs. He was pleasantly tired, and wanted to be alone to remember every detail of the day.

As he walked toward the path to his cottage, leaning into the wind, he felt the first few drops of rain. He had to hurry or he would get soaked. A feeling told him to look back. He turned and saw Molly standing in the front doorway, waving. He felt, rather than saw her happy glow, and waved back, then turned and ran into the dark. As the path descended sharply, he slowed. Then the thought came: "*I have to draw Molly. I have to paint her. I want to put her image down permanently, so that it will always be alive.*"

As he opened the cottage door, the sky pealed rain. He closed the door behind him, glad to be home and filled with an overwhelming sense of happiness.

THE ADVENT: Excerpts from Chapter Five

THE DAY AFTER THE trip to Larkin Village, just after lunch, Colm answered a knock on his kitchen door and was surprised to see Molly. She was accompanied by a young maid and a boy from the mansion, each carrying supplies. "Miss Larkin! What are you doing here?"

Molly smiled brightly. "I'm here to help you make Irish stew, Colm. I've brought some vegetables, and a few other things." She walked past him, followed by the servants. The boy set the box he was carrying on the kitchen table, and then fled out the back door. Molly introduced Colm to the maid. "This is Maureen Kelly, my personal maid. Daddy let me come down here only if I was properly chaperoned, so I brought Maureen with me. She can stay in the living area while we cook."

Colm looked at the maid then, noticing her youth and timidity. She was small and delicate; fair skinned, sweetly pretty, with auburn hair and green eyes, and dressed in the requisite blue uniform and white cap. She kept her eyes on her shoes and spoke in a whisper. She slipped into the living area as soon as possible.

Colm was delighted to see Molly, who began unloading the bounty onto the kitchen table. He stood in the kitchen doorway, watching her.

She noticed him watching her and stopped. "Am I intruding? I apologize for not checking with you before barging in. Do you have to work in the tower this afternoon? Do you even have time to cook your stew?"

Colm smiled. "No, no, and yes. I don't have to go back up in the tower until dusk, to light the beacon. I spent all morning polishing the prisms and all the brass, and recording information in the keeper's logbook. That leaves me quite free this afternoon."

"Good, I'm glad." She pointed to the table. "Come over here and see what I brought from the house for you. Claude even helped me, after I told him who it was for. He must like you, because he never lets anyone have things out of his kitchen."

He walked over to the table and looked down. There were two pots, a cast-iron frying pan, an old blue teapot, several chipped plates, three tea cups with saucers, flatware, and four wooden spoons and a spatula for cooking. The sack contained red potatoes, celery, carrots, garlic, onions, and tucked in a small pouch among the vegetables, salt, pepper, parsley, basil, bay leaf and nutmeg. He was impressed and eager to begin stew preparations. "How did you manage all this? Especially the crockery?"

"I told Claude that you had no cooking pots or plates in your kitchen," she smiled, her eyes bright. "He said he gave you an old frying pan the other day."

Colm nodded. "I used that frying pan to make bacon and eggs last night, but I had to eat out of the pan because I had no plates."

"Claude thought of one more thing and then another this morning, and I suspect he's still thinking of things you can use from his kitchen. He said he's sorry some of it is old and chipped, but it was all he could spare at the moment."

Colm smiled and shook his head. "It looks fine to me. As long as it works, I don't care how it looks."

"Good. I'll put on some tea and then we can get started. I'll help you cook. Just show me what to do."

"You want to cook? Chopping, stirring, cleaning up?"

Molly giggled. "Yes, I do. I'm not completely inept amongst pots and pans and cutlery. As protective as Claude is about his kitchen, he has let me in and showed me how to make some things. Mainly foods for tea, though, like cucumber sandwiches and cookies. But, I want to learn how to make a *real* meal, like Irish stew. Will you show me?"

"Gladly."

So they worked together, chopping vegetables, seasoning the bite-size pieces of lamb and browning them in butter. When the tea was ready, Molly brought a cup to Maureen, and returned to the kitchen to mince a purple onion.

"What's that?" Colm picked up a piece of onion to taste it. "It's mild and sweet. What kind is it?"

"Claude planted them in the garden out behind the kitchen. He calls it a purple onion, and says they are best for everything. He uses a lot of garlic, too. He says it makes the food better, and it's good for us."

When the stew was finally simmering on the stove, they tidied the kitchen and then sat down for a cup of tea.

"Whew!" Molly said, pushing up her sleeves and blotting her face with a napkin.

"Yes, we warmed the kitchen, didn't we?" Colm stood and went over to open the back door, allowing in the breeze off the water. When he sat down and picked up his cup, he looked around, inhaled deeply of the mingled aromas in the kitchen, and leaned back, content and sure he was about the luckiest man in the world.

Molly noticed it too. "That smells so good," she said, inhaling. "Your mother's recipe must be similar to Claude's."

"I don't think there are many variations of Irish stew," Colm's eyes twinkled. "It's not a real fancy dish."

Molly fanned herself more slowly, smiling languidly. "I like being friends with you, Colm," she said, her voice low.

"I feel the same way. For a lass, you're easy to talk to. I'd rather be with you than with the lads."

"Do you know what I like best about our being friends?"

"What?"

"The way you treat me - with respect and dignity - not like the servants at the house treat me, like I'm a porcelain statue on a rotating stand and not a real person." She drew a spiral in the air with her finger, groping for words to explain feelings that had been a source of frustration for a long time, but she'd never had anyone to share them with. "I get so tired of the bowing and scraping. It feels superficial, but not respectful, like I'm a valuable thing, not a valuable person." She looked up to see if he understood. "With you I feel real."

Colm watched her, his face showing sympathy for her feelings, but puzzlement, too, not knowing the experience. "You won't find me bowing and scraping to anyone."

"I know. That's what I like the most. I can be myself around you." She went silent, thinking her own thoughts, looking out the open door.

He sipped his tea, watching her through the steam. "*God! She's beautiful,*" he thought. "*I'm starting to like her more than I should, considering my position here.*"

"You should plant your own garden," Molly noted. "I can help you. Claude always has so many seeds and bulbs left after he's planted his kitchen garden. You could have peas,

beans, carrots, turnips, cabbage and lettuce. And then we could plant potatoes and garlic in the autumn. Would you like that?"

"Mmmm, yes. That would be nice," Colm agreed. "I tended our garden in Malahide." He shook his head. "That seems so long ago."

"I'm sure it does." Molly set her cup down and glanced around the room. "Did you buy art supplies yesterday?"

"I forgot. I was distracted," Colm said, and smiled at her.

"Daddy is going to the village again on Tuesday. I'll go with him and get you some supplies. What shall I get? What do you need?"

"I already have some supplies. Paper and a couple pieces of charcoal."

"That's all?" Then she frowned. "What is charcoal?"

"Black chalk for sketching. I could use the burned end of a stick of wood from the fireplace, but the blackened burned part wears off the wood too fast. Even the chalk wears down fast." Suddenly, he was strongly conscious of Molly's open-handed generosity. He wondered what Mr. Larkin would think about it. He did not want to appear as a beggar or a leech. "Molly, I can get my own supplies. I don't want to put you out, and I don't want your father thinking I'm some kind of freeloader."

Laughing too quickly, Molly covered her mouth, and then giggled again. "Oh, Daddy would never think that." She thought: *"He's delightful. He's afraid I'll think he's trying to take advantage of me, when it's been me pushing myself at him."* She took a deep breath. "Daddy thinks highly of you. Honestly. He keeps telling me how quick you are, that you're learning how to operate the lighthouse so well that he'll hardly have to check on you. You've been here only a little over a week, do you realize that? Who else would absorb the details of tending the lighthouse so fast? Daddy's very impressed. Trust me, you aren't doing anything wrong."

"What about you and me?" Colm pressed. "Does he mind that you're spending time with me? Does your mother mind?"

"Daddy thinks you're good company for me," she said, getting up to get the teapot from the stove. "Who else do I have? My tutor is an old man. My brother is busy learning to run the estate, so he's always out with the gardener, or the groundsmen. I can't be chummy with the maids, although I do adore Maureen. My mother is in a world of her own, and we barely speak." She paused briefly. "So you see, we aren't doing anything wrong. Daddy thinks it's all right for us to be friends as long as we're chaperoned, which we always are. We're not alone now. We weren't alone at the grocery store or the Sea Wharf Café yesterday. So, we've been nothing but proper." She sat down again and poured steaming tea in their cups.

Colm thought about it. She was right. They had done nothing wrong, even if he knew he wished they had. Lightening his tone, he said: "I agree. What does your father expect from you? You're educated and brought up to be a lady. What does he want you to do with your life?"

"The same thing he wants Roddy to do," she answered quietly. "To marry into a family of wealth and position. That's my fate."

"That doesn't please you?"

"Honestly? No." She was surprised that she confided in Colm so easily. True, he was kind and understanding and handsome, but she had only known him a week, and here she was telling him things she would not tell her father. "I don't want to be married to a

stranger, spending my youth bearing babies and pretending to be happy because I'm at the top of the social ladder. I'd rather be single and live my life right here, on the estate."

Her face softened. "Until you moved into this cottage, I used to come down here to be alone and enjoy the peace and quiet. I thought it would be perfect to live here, rather than in the mansion. To live on my own, ride my horse, read books, swim in the ocean with no clothes on, and to answer to no one but myself. That would be a perfect life for me.

"But it can never be. I have my privileges, and for that I must be dutiful and loyal for the good of the family. I must marry a man who has money and social acceptance, and I must have his children. God! I can't think of anything more boring, or unsatisfying. Maybe if I had more of my mother in me it would be easier. She's so serene and calm. She believes in duty and loyalty above all else. So much so that she submerges her own personality into it. I don't want to lose myself in a lifetime of duty and loyalty and boredom. I want to live, and I want more than anything to be happy." Her last words came out as a cry.

"I wish I could help you," Colm said softly. He reached over and touched her hands where they lay on the table. She closed her hands around his firmly in return.

"You *have* helped me," she said plaintively. "Just by listening and being a friend. Thank you for that." Tears formed in her eyes.

Deciding that she needed to laugh a bit, Colm teased: "How much will I owe you for the art supplies?"

"I'll let you know." With a deep breath, she shook off her sadness. She moved her hands away to pick up her cup of tea. "What's the first thing you'll draw?"

Not for the first time, he thought: "*I'd like to draw you.*" Out loud, he said: "Probably a landscape or a seascape. Maybe the lighthouse."

Molly sipped her tea, looking at him over the rim. "You said you drew your sister once, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Was she the only person you drew?"

"Yes. The rest were scenes. You know, of Malahide, the trees, some animals."

"Would you like to draw me?" Molly asked shyly, setting down her cup. She glanced up at him. Then she was excited, as if she had an idea. "Yes, draw me! Daddy's birthday is in October. Wouldn't that make a great gift for him?"

Colm was stunned. She couldn't know he wanted to draw her since he saw her wave from the door yesterday, and as they ate lunch in front of the lighthouse. He wanted to draw her, paint her, to record her beautiful image permanently. "Are you sure?"

"Of course. How long do you think it would take? It's June now, and Daddy's birthday is in October. That's four months. Between your duties at the lighthouse and elsewhere on the estate, can you fit me in?"

He nodded slowly, a smile spreading across his face. "That would be plenty of time. You'd have to pose, although I could do a bit from memory. I used to draw that way, too. I'd start a piece in the daylight, of a tree or an animal, and at night in my house in Malahide I'd sit there and continue, sketching from memory. I know I can do it, so you wouldn't have to spend all of your time posing."

"That would be perfect," she exclaimed happily. "I'll go with Daddy next week to get your supplies." She pursed her lips. "Where should I pose? What do you think would please Daddy?"

Colm had an answer ready. "There's a boulder under a pine tree in the front yard of the cottage."

"Yes, I know the one. I've seen it."

"If you sit just so, and I draw it just right, we can get the lighthouse in the background." Colm was catching her excitement. "That would be perfect for Mr. Larkin. He's so proud of the lighthouse, and to have a painting with you and the lighthouse, well, I think he would be thrilled with it."

Molly clapped her hands. "You're brilliant. Daddy will absolutely love it. We can get started as soon as I get the supplies? Oh, I can't wait to see his expression when he receives it. I'm not sure I can wait until October."

Colm shared her glee, but spoke calmly. "Yes, you can wait. He will treasure your gift and hold it priceless."

"Which our gift will be," she declared. She reached over and took his hand. "Thank you. How can I ever repay you? You have given me great happiness in such a short time."

Colm looked at her, feeling the pressure of her hand. It felt good. *Just right*. So he decided to ask her a question he had been pondering since yesterday as they made their way back from the village. "I have a question." He looked at her quietly. "What did you mean yesterday in the carriage, when you told me I was the perfect age? The perfect age for what?"

Quietly she held his hand and returned his gaze with eyes as dark as onyx pools. He held his breath as she smiled at him.

In a voice touched with both sadness and wonder she spoke: "You are the perfect age for me," she said softly, barely heard over the sounds of the bubbling stew on the stove, waves on the shore, and the shrieking seagulls.

Then she lowered her eyes. "I've had a few daydreams about us. When we were coming back to the estate together from the village, I saw us together in my mind, with me as a maidservant and you a manservant. Stupid of me, and silly of me to tell you. You must think me utterly infantile, dreaming of things that can never be."

"You're not infantile," Colm said, holding her hand tighter. "I've been thinking the same things over the last several days. Ever since I saw you in the kitchen that first time."

"But you didn't tell me," Molly said, relieved he did not think she was foolish.

"My tongue was stuck," he admitted. "The sight of you struck me dumb."

"Me too," she agreed, laughing as she remembered the day. "Daddy told me you were given your looks by the angels. I thought he was making it up, but he wasn't. You *are* blessed. I couldn't speak, either, the first time we met. I simply couldn't open my mouth."

"You're perfect for me, too," Colm breathed, his eyes devouring her, drinking in her beauty, her smile, her soul.

Molly grew still, her eyes taking in all of him. Something passed between them in that moment, something strong and passionate, and she knew she could not stay away from him, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how wrong and pointless it was. Even though it could never be more than friendship. Or could it?

Eyes locked, the silence lengthened as both of them were lost in thoughts of the unattainable. Colm blinked, a slow shuttering of his eyes. "*I can't let my life go by without knowing what it would be like to kiss Molly, to feel her, to know her. I think of her every waking moment, and my thoughts are not all pure ones. She looks at me as if she wants the*

same thing. But where will it lead us? This can't go anywhere. Mr. Larkin would never accept me as his daughter's husband."

Molly watched Colm's emotions slip across his face, saw his shuttered blinking, and then saw unreadable pain in his eyes. First her heart beat faster, and then dread closed over her like suffocating darkness. "*Why must we be held prisoner by accident of birth?*" she thought. "*Why can't we choose one another out of love, rather than duty? Why is happiness so elusive?*" Her sigh was deep. "*How will this end, I wonder? Should we stop before it's too late? No. I want to know happiness before I marry a man I don't know, or love. I will have that one bit of joy with Colm. One time in a life filled with predictable tedium and personal misery. I must have him. I will have him.*" Decision made, she smiled tremulously at Colm.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, still holding onto her hand.

"About you," she said simply. "And me."

Their course was set. They looked at one another with clarity. For good or ill, whether their union ended in happiness or tragedy, they had started their particular destiny and both of them were instinctively aware of the fact.

A sea gull screamed over the waves like a lost soul, and Colm shivered.

* * *

MOLLY DID NOT COME to Colm that night, or the next. He was frantic and helpless. He could not inquire about her around the estate. As a paid servant, it was not his place to ask the Larkin family personal questions. Finally, desperate, three days after he last saw Molly, he took tea in the servant's hall.

Claude was surprised to see Colm. Since getting supplies from the village, Colm kept to himself at the keeper's cottage, making his own meals, rarely venturing to the mansion.

"Irish beauty!" Claude exclaimed. "You are here for tea? I wondered about you. All is well with you?"

Colm stood in the back door. Claude was busy at the stove.

"I missed having tea here," Colm offered with what felt like a plausible reason.

"*Oui*," Claude replied, noticing the distress Colm was trying to hide. "It's nice to be alone, but it is good to be with others, too?"

"Yes, something like that."

Claude shrugged. "The servants are having tea."

"Thank you," Colm said, turning to the servant's hall.

"*Thank you for what?*" Claude wondered, puzzled by Colm's behavior.

Colm saw Maureen Kelly sitting alone at one of the tables. He smiled and waved to some of the other male servants he knew, but it was Maureen he wanted to speak with. He walked over and sat next to her.

"Why are you sitting here?" she wanted to know, alarmed by his presence. "Your friends seem anxious to talk with you."

"I need to speak with you," Colm spoke quietly. "What's wrong with Molly? Why hasn't she come to the cottage to pose? Is she ill?"

Maureen frowned. "You must not be so familiar with her name, Mr. Sullivan. It is not seemly."

"Yes, fine. What's wrong with Miss Larkin? Tell me what's going on."

"Mistress Mary is ill," she answered, surprised by his urgent tone. "Both she and Mrs. Larkin have influenza. Mistress Mary has been confined to her bed these last few days."

"Why didn't you let me know?" Colm demanded.

Maureen regarded him coolly. "How was I to do that, pray tell? Come alone to your cottage? I think not, Mr. Sullivan."

He let go of some of his tension. "Is Molly . . . will Miss Larkin be well soon?"

"Yes. She is much better already." Maureen paused, glancing around to be sure no one was listening. "She thought you might come up here to ask about her. She wanted me to give you a message."

"Yes?"

Maureen took a piece of paper from her pocket and gave it to him. "She said it was for your eyes only." She returned her attention to her tea.

"Thank you, Maureen." Colm said, trying to sound grateful. He rose to leave, and leaned down to whisper: "Tell your mistress I miss her presence at the cottage, and that I wish her good health soon."

"I will tell her."

It took Colm twenty minutes to escape questions from Seamus Flaherty and Barry O'Toole about the lighthouse and his work there, and they telling him about their jobs on the estate. Finally, he promised to join them next Saturday at the Amber Whale, having no intention of doing so, and left the hall and the mansion.

Once Colm was on the path to the lighthouse, he stopped to read Molly's note, standing motionless in view of the mansion.

Colm,

I'm sorry I was unable to meet you at the cottage. I have been very ill with the flu, thanks to my mother who contracted it from the head maid of the house, Clea Barton-Brooks. God knows where she got it. This illness is taking its run through everyone.

I will try and see you soon. I miss you; I miss talking with you and just seeing you. You are so fine to look at. Maybe I should write you more often like this. I do not feel as shy! Interesting, isn't it?

Remember, I adore you, and I cannot wait to see you again.

Love, Molly

He smiled. She wrote as she spoke, only more open. She used the word "love" in her signature, and that made Colm's heart sing. He folded the note and started to whistle. It was almost time to light the beacon, and later he would cook pork side and eggs for his dinner.

Just a little while longer, and Molly will be mine.

* * *

SHE STAYED UNTIL DAWN. The hearth was cold and the rain had stopped. She and Colm joined together more than once before the sun began to rise on Banshee Point. Molly felt deliciously tired, satisfied and warmly content, but knew she had to get back to the mansion. The servants rose early, too, and she did not want to be seen sneaking into the house like a common trollop.

She got out of bed, retrieved her robe from where it lay in a heap on the floor, and slipped it over her shoulders. He watched her, knowing she had to go, but hating it. She had no choice. Besides, he knew he was too weak from their time together to stop her.

She bent down and kissed his lips. "I'll come back tonight, but I have to go now."

"I know, and I don't like it. I feel like I'm a man now, Molly. Thanks to you."

"And I'm now a woman, Colm. Thanks to *you*." Molly kissed him again, and then slipped out the open French doors and disappeared into the early morning darkness.

"Back to her rightful place at the mansion," Colm's thought came, unbidden. He sat up, pulling the coverlet over his lower body. He was not used to sleeping naked, his mother would never allow it, but it felt good to him. His heart was bursting with so much love for Molly that he could die a happy man. He smiled at the rising sun, and discovered he was hungry. He wanted coffee and eggs. He put his feet on the floor, stood, and indulged in a leisurely stretch.

As he dressed, he had to convince himself that last night had not been just a dream.

"Molly and I are meant to be together," he mused as he made his bed, smoothed the coverlet, and imagined Molly naked beneath his hands. "Our night of love was proof enough for me that we need to be as one. The result of our special love would be the issue from our bodies of another human being, a child made from the bits and pieces of both of us, and from the love between us. She has gone back to her proper place at the mansion, soon to be my rightful place as her husband."

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Six

*August 1880
Larkin City, Maine*

MOLLY ENDURED HER BIRTHDAY party for several hours. She was sixteen, an adult. *A woman.* Her father gave a lavish celebration, including a feast of lobster, shrimp, steak, cakes and cookies, wine, whiskey and lager. And there were the guests, of course.

It was late afternoon when the party moved into the drawing room, where shortly Nigel would serve tea and Molly would open her gifts. All the guests were also invited to dinner, so Molly knew there would be several more hours of forced politeness to endure.

While she appreciated the party, she was eager to go to Colm. She was on fire for him every day, her desire to be in his bed stronger than her need for food and drink. So she smiled at her guests and let her mind wander to Colm and their treasured time together.

She helped him plant a garden in the back yard of the keeper's cottage three days earlier, in the late afternoon, when the clouds were heavy with rain but the ground was still dry. Colm lined the rows with a small hoe, and Molly dropped the seeds. In the autumn they would plant potatoes and garlic. Maureen sat in the kitchen that day, watching them from the window, still reading a book. Afterward, they had their tea, and Molly snuck to Colm again that night.

Molly tried to go to Colm every night now. They spent most of their time in bed, but not always making love. Sometimes they cooked, or talked, or walked on the beach in the dark. More often than not, they made love in the sand.

Suddenly she was aware that her mother was standing in front of her. "Yes, mother?"

Anne smiled faintly. "Your father wants you to move to the divan by the fireplace. It's time to open your gifts."

"Oh," Molly stood. "It's that time already?" She followed her mother to the fireplace, where her father stood beaming at her. She felt a twinge of guilt. What would he think if he knew she was sleeping with Colm? He would be heartbroken, shamed, and so disappointed in her. She could not bear hurting him, so she thrust the thought from her mind. It was her birthday; she would not think about her guilty pleasure today. Besides, she was convinced he would never find out. And if he did, it was not as though Colm was a peasant, even though he was a paid servant.

Suddenly, she was confused. "*What have I gotten myself into?*"

* * *

SHE MET COLM AT the cottage a little after two o'clock in the morning, a few hours after her party ended. Colm was waiting for her, like he always was. He had a birthday present for her: an arrangement of wild flowers wrapped with a necklace made of clam shells and sea weed. She marveled at it, mainly because Colm made it for her. He was pleased that she liked it.

"What other presents did you receive?" He asked as they sat on his bed, partially clothed.

Smiling, she leaned back against the pillows. "Roddy gave me a new bridle for Tempus, which he knew I wanted. Daddy and Mother gave me a diamond necklace with a matching bracelet. The McShane's gave me a silver comb and brush, with little clusters of roses carved on the handles. Then we had dinner and drinks, we talked for while, and I went to bed." She giggled. "Then I came here."

"Has Roddy decided which sister he wants to marry, if any?"

Molly shook her head. "I don't know. He hasn't let on."

"Poor lad, I don't envy him."

"He won't have it so bad. He'll receive a dowry for marrying one of them, and the father is very rich."

"Is that important to Roddy?"

She shrugged. "Duty is important to Roddy. He wants to do well by the family, and he wants to make Daddy happy. Roddy knows Daddy sacrificed a great deal to make us comfortable, and it's the least he can do in return."

Colm watched her, suddenly frightened by her words. Was that how *she* felt? About duty, and doing right by her father, repaying him for the life she had? He did not really want to know the answer, so he kept quiet. Instead, he began stroking Molly's thigh and kissing her neck. Molly leaned into him, closing her eyes. She let the feelings of desire wash over her. Colm made her forget everything. Her family, her position, her father . . . Yes, *even her father*.

Nigel stood outside the open French doors. A single candle by the bed illuminated Molly and Colm in their passion, unaware they were being watched. Nigel waited several minutes to confirm that the couple was fornicating, as Mr. Larkin suspected, and then slipped away into the dark. Next, he would go to the master of the house and confirm his worst fears.

* * *

MOLLY RETURNED TO THE house, went up the back stairs, and entered her bedroom as the clock struck four in the morning. She lit a candle, turned, and gasped to see her father sitting on the divan, his cold eyes staring at her out of a grim, drawn face. "Daddy! What are you doing sitting here?"

"What are you doing, sneaking around in the dead of the night? Where have you been?"

Thinking fast, she bent to put the candle on the table. "I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk down on the beach. It helped. I think I can sleep now. Do you mind, Daddy?"

"You're lying!" he roared.

Terrified, Molly jumped and began to tremble. Her father had never raised his voice to her. She was caught, and could not deny it.

Quaking, she said: "W-w-what do you want to know?"

"The truth. Have you just come from Colm Sullivan?"

Chin on her chest, she whispered: "Yes."

"What is going on with you two? And tell me the truth, lass. I know most of it already."

She took a shuddering breath. "I've been sharing his bed since the early part of July."

His dangerous rumble was worse than a shout, "You have been fornicating with my lighthouse keeper for well over a month? Right under my nose? I trusted you to see him because I thought it was doing you good." He ground his teeth together. His working jaws were terrible to see, so Molly shifted her gaze to the floor. "I'll skin that son of a bitch alive! I'll have his goddamned head!"

"Daddy, please." She looked at him and reached for his arm. "Colm is not entirely to blame. I encouraged him. I let it happen. I couldn't help it, and neither could he. It's not a terrible thing, Daddy, honestly. I care about him. I'm not a harlot. Daddy, please . . ."

Stepping back so she could not touch him, he held up a hand for silence. He was glad she had not blamed it all on Colm, but he would not tell her that yet. First she had to suffer for her sins, *for sins they were*, and unworthy of her. "You were not raised to sleep with a man before marrying him, much less a servant. Jaysus Christ! Do you realize what you have done? You have given away your virginity to a common man who will never be more than my lighthouse keeper, and you know it. What can you offer a husband now? What decent man would take another man's leavings? You have shamed me, Molly, and I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"Please don't fire Colm, Daddy," Molly begged, tears streaming down her face. "He has nowhere else to go. It wasn't his fault, I swear it. I went to *him* - he didn't seek me out. You know he's a good worker, and he just made a mistake with me. That's all. Please, please, Daddy, don't let him go."

"You can't think I'll allow you to continue seeing him, do you? Are you out of your mind?"

"Daddy, that's not what I meant. Just don't let him go. Don't fire him. I promise I'll stay away from him. I won't go anywhere near the beach anymore. I swear it."

"That's not good enough. I'm going to send you away."

Molly paled. "Where?"

John's plan snapped into place immediately. "Today Roddy proposed to Sascha McShane, and she accepted. Roddy and the McShane's are returning to New York the day after tomorrow, where Sascha is going to plan her wedding and her wardrobe. You will go with them, and you will not come back until Roddy does, which will be in October."

Molly was panic stricken. "Why do you want me to go with Roddy and Sascha?"

"To get you away from here, and from Colm." His anger was subsiding. "I know Roddy will keep an eye on you, and maybe you can learn some manners from Sascha. I suggest you think about what you have done while you're gone, and consider your future. I'm not cruel enough to cast you out, lass, but you have to atone for what you have done. What will you do with your life now? What man would want you? You're sullied almost beyond repair, Mary Margaret. To make amends, you have to change. You have to re-learn all the things you knew as you grew up. Your mother and I taught you simple, Irish-Catholic values. It seems you have forgotten all of that in your lust for my lighthouse keeper. Your duty to this family comes first, and then your loyalty. You have destroyed both with your actions."

Molly fell to her knees, sobbing, covering her face with her hands. Her humiliation was complete. She realized that the fear, love and devotion she had for her father far outweighed her lust for Colm. Her father seemed willing to give her another chance to prove herself worthy of being his daughter, to redeem herself in his eyes.

Yet she could not completely relinquish thoughts about her lover. "*What about Colm and what we have shared together? It was more than a mere affair.*"

On the other hand, what could Colm offer her? A place in his bed at the cottage? Or worse, John could fire Colm, throw her out, and she would live the rest of her life in poverty with Colm, God knows where, doing God knows what. Her choice was simple. It was right in front of her face, but she still hesitated.

"Well, Molly?" John asked, his voice calmer. "What will it be? Do you want to throw your life away on a poor man, a poor servant? If you do, I *will* get rid of him, and I'll throw you out. *Forever*. Then you can go with your lighthouse keeper to live in some slum, where you'll both work for pennies. Is that what you want?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Will you repent? Will you stop this madness and make amends for your actions?"

She hesitated again. Finally, she raised a tear stained face. "If I promise to go away with Roddy and Sascha, and promise to never see Colm again, will you swear to me you'll let him keep his job here? To not turn him out on his own?"

"You have my word," John said firmly. "If you forget him, and do your duty by this family, I will never turn Colm Sullivan out for as long as he lives. He can be the Banshee Point Lighthouse keeper until his dying day."

Molly sighed. She dared not ask for more. "I agree then," she said, her voice catching on a sob. "I will never see Colm again. I swear it. And I will repair myself and place my duty and my loyalty to you first and foremost. I promise."

John held out his arms to his daughter. With a cry, she rose and stumbled into his warm embrace, sliding her arms around his waist. As she shed bitter tears, John felt his eyes watering momentarily. He had averted a certain scandal, not to mention a tragedy, and he had won. Not only had he reached his goal for Roddy of marrying for wealth and position, he had saved his daughter from a hellish and unimaginable life. His family name had almost been ruined in one stroke.

Colm would stay, and Molly would go - temporarily - and all would work itself out. He was certain of it, just as he was sure Molly would forget Colm in time, and Colm being the peasant he was, would certainly forget Molly and move on with his life.

John Larkin could not envision that *nothing would be forgotten*, or that his troubles were just beginning.

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Eight

COLM SULLIVAN AND MAUREEN Kelly were married on November 1, 1880 at the lighthouse keeper's cottage. John Larkin brought in a Catholic priest from nearby Searsport to perform the ceremony, rather than have word of the union spread by the local clergy. Witnesses to the wedding were John, his new coachman Daniel Borelli, the butler Nigel Barton-Brooks, family chef Claude Mondoux (*at Colm's request*), and Nigel's wife and head maid at the mansion, Clea Barton-Brooks (*at Maureen's request*). No one else from the mansion was present.

Colm tried to make the occasion a bit special by lighting a fire in the hearth and leaving candles burning on the mantle and on various tables. Maureen wore a simple gown of brown cotton with a white-laced shawl. She seemed terrified, refusing to meet Colm's eyes. Colm himself wore gray trousers and a white shirt, his long blond hair pulled back in a club. He stood next to Maureen as Father Martin Neeson married them in the living area of the cottage, with the witnesses behind them. The ceremony was brief. Colm seemed to repeat the wedding vows as if in a trance. Maureen spoke so softly that it was almost impossible to hear her. When the rites were over, Colm brushed his closed lips against Maureen's cheek. He felt her shudder.

Colm offered the priest and witnesses tea when it was all over. Everyone politely refused, and soon the newly married couple was left standing alone in the living area of the cottage. The wedding seemed like a dream, but it was true. Colm was now a married man and an expectant father. He and Maureen signed legal documents that would later be recorded at Larkin City Hall. The formal document stated that "Colm Michael Sullivan, age 20, bachelor," had married "Maureen Katherine Kelly, age 15, spinster," on November 1st by Father Martin Neeson in Larkin Village, Maine, in front of the witnesses. It was legal and binding, and a *fait accompli*, as Claude would say.

Maureen stood quietly in the living area after everyone left. Colm did not know what to say to her. They'd had no time to speak to one another before the ceremony, or in the days preceding it. Colm did not blame poor Maureen for being ill-at-ease, and even a bit frightened.

He tried to lighten the mood. "I'm glad that's over, aren't you? Are you hungry? Thirsty? Can I do anything for you?"

She looked at him, and he noticed for the first time how translucent her pale skin was. He could almost see the veins along the column of her throat and temple, and in the small hands she held together in front of her. She moistened her lips. Avoiding direct eye contact, she said: "I'm not very hungry, nor am I thirsty. I was wondering . . ." She hesitated, looking away.

"You were wondering what?" Colm prompted her gently.

"Where do you want me to sleep? I have to live here now, you know, for appearances sake."

Colm was at a loss. He had not thought of the sleeping arrangements with his new wife. "Well, there's only one bed in the cottage, so I suppose we'll have to share it." He saw a flash of dismay in her face. "I will not act the proper husband with you until the time is

appropriate. I'm just being practical. There is but one bed, and I cannot sleep on the floor for the next several months, nor can you."

She nodded and whispered. "I understand. I'll do my best to make you a good wife, Colm, and a mother to your child when it comes."

Uncomfortable with the awkward situation, Colm said: "I'll go and make us tea, and I'll warm up some beef stew that I made last night. Why don't you go and get settled in the bedroom, put your things away." He looked around the room. "You did bring some other clothes with you, didn't you?"

"Only a nightgown and robe." She blushed. "I'll have to send for my other clothes and my books tomorrow. I didn't bring anything else with me, I'm afraid. Mr. Larkin was in a rush to get me here on time."

"Oh. That's fine. After tonight, you can cook and make tea. Do you know how to cook?"

"Yes. I can sew, cook and read and write. I suppose I'll be here much of the time, since Mr. Larkin told me I can't be Miss Molly's maid any more. I hope I won't be too much of a burden. I'll do as much as I can for you in the cottage, if that is agreeable?"

"It is. I hate cleaning up the crockery, to be honest."

"I'll be happy to do that tonight, if you wish."

"No. You settle yourself in, and I'll take care of supper tonight."

Maureen nodded and went into the bedroom, while Colm went to the kitchen. He put the leftover stew into a pot and lit the stove. Then he put the water on to boil for tea. Shaking his head, he began to lay out crockery on the table so that he and his wife - *he still couldn't believe that the timid Maureen was his legal wife* - could eat supper together later. He might as well speak to himself, he thought, because Maureen was not much of a talker.

As he fussed in the kitchen, he realized he hadn't heard one word about Molly's welfare since he and John had agreed upon the marriage. Did Molly know he was marrying her maid today? Did she even care? His child was in Molly, and the baby was due in late May or June. Did Molly care about *that*? He knew the answer, however painful it was to admit. Her hateful words, the look of disgust in her eyes had made it quite clear. He still could not believe she turned on him, not caring how much she had hurt him. He was alone, more alone than he had ever been in his life. He may have a wife now, to help him raise his child, but he still felt alone. Colm's heart had been stolen, so how could he ever entertain loving or cherishing another woman?

"*Will there ever be a time when I can look upon Maureen with tenderness?*" he thought. "*With love? I cannot foresee it now.*" He was weary and ready for his bed, although he knew Maureen would also rest there now. He needed to put his mind at ease, at least for one night. He prayed the next dawn would bring him hope for the future. He wanted to keep his sanity for the child, and for the life they would have together.

Then he paused, thinking about Maureen, his wife. She was very small in stature, like Molly, but she had auburn hair and green eyes. Her skin was the color of fresh Irish cream, and she was pretty in her own way. Her waist and breasts were very small, and her hands were delicately boned. She was shy and hard to talk to. He needed to assure her that he was a good person who would not mistreat her. Maybe one day they would have a child, or children, but how could he make love to anyone but Molly?

Maureen, alone in the bedroom, looked around with interest. Even though she had been in the cottage before while chaperoning Molly, she had never paid attention to the

bedroom. It was nice, she observed, very comfortable and airy. While it was cold outside, it felt warm inside, with a two-sided hearth. Maureen set her nightgown and robe, both a drab green, on the bed. The quilt covering on the bed looked well used, but white and clean.

She took a deep breath, and then walked over to the French doors to look out. It was too dark to see anything, but she heard the waves crashing on the shore below. Suddenly, she was sad. She missed Molly, because she loved her former mistress dearly. Maureen had worshiped Molly for so long that she had often wished she was more like her in some ways, but she simply did not have the same character within her. Yet Maureen would do anything for Molly, even taking part in this marital subterfuge to preserve Molly's reputation.

However, secretly, Maureen was curious about Colm. He had been Molly's lover, and now he was her husband. "*Life is so strange,*" she reflected. She thought he was the most handsome man she had ever seen. In truth, Maureen had a bit envious of Molly when she was seeing Colm. She smiled as she gazed out the window. She was scared, true, but she was also exhilarated at the same time. She was no longer a personal maid at the mansion. She was now Mrs. Colm Sullivan. She tested the name on her lips silently, and then another one, *Maureen Sullivan*. She liked it. She liked it very much.

All she had to do now was wait for Molly to give birth to her bastard, and then maybe Colm would pay attention to his legal wife. She was anxious for the day when she and Colm could finally become intimate, when they could make their own child. And surely that day would come.

Colm was in the doorway of the bedroom. "Are you ready to eat, Maureen? It's ready."

Maureen looked at him, smiling her small smile. "Yes, Colm. I'm ready."

* * *

IN LATE JANUARY 1881, Molly sat by her bedroom window watching the red beacon from the lighthouse flash rhythmically through the cold fog. Colm would be up there now, she knew, doing his job - doing the job she had saved for him, had suffered for. She shifted uncomfortably. Her back ached. She was now five months along, though it was not easily discernible through the loose gowns and long shawls she wore. No one save Clea and her family saw her anyway.

Clea came in carrying a tray. "Are you ready for some tea, miss?"

"I suppose so."

"Yes, miss." Clea set the tray on a small table and poured the tea into a delicate cup.

"Why won't you tell me about Maureen's wedding?" Molly prodded.

"Because Mr. Larkin instructed me not to speak of it to you."

"Do you always do as you're told?"

"Yes, Miss." Clea handed Molly the tea. "It is my duty. Your mother told me you would do well to learn that."

Molly grunted. Of course, her mother was behind Clea's carefully worded barbs, so very polite and correct. "Will you tell me just a little bit about the wedding? A little bit won't hurt," she pleaded.

"There's no point in being curious, miss. It's done. Your lighthouse keeper is married."

"He's not *my* lighthouse keeper," Molly snapped.

Clea raised her eyebrows and glanced pointedly at Molly's swollen belly. At that moment, Anne Larkin entered the bedroom without knocking. Molly did not bother to hide her surliness, which was not stemmed by Anne's pretty cream chiffon gown and flushed cheeks.

"Stop baiting Clea, Mary Margaret. She is just doing as she's told."

"Go away, mother. I didn't ask for your company."

Anne stood in front of her daughter, eyes cold. "If you had sought my company more often in recent months, perhaps you wouldn't be carrying a servant's bastard."

"True, because, if I had spent my time with you, I'd be a drunk by now. Did you drink your lunch today, mother? Your color is unusually high."

Anne blushed. *Molly never considers her words, even in front of the servants.* She turned to Clea. "You may leave us now. Return in half an hour."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why did you bother sending Clea away? She knows you're a drunk. You can't hide your weakness for the bottle from the servants."

Anne closed her eyes briefly, ashamed of her daughter and mortified by her waspish tongue. Being with child seemed to make her more obstinate. "You're not behaving as your father wants you to," Anne finally said, overcoming her distaste for her daughter. "He wants you to learn some humility while you're confined. Instead, you seem to be getting worse. Did your time fornicating with the lighthouse keeper affect your brain, as well as your morals?"

Molly's eyes glittered dangerously with hate. While Molly's pregnancy had nothing to do with Anne, it fueled her obsessive hatred and made Anne's quiet watchfulness unendurable. "Go to hell," Molly hissed. "You're nothing but a mindless, addlepated, weak-willed bitch. Daddy must have been possessed by the fairies when he married you. You were never his choice, you know. Grandfather O'Quinn told me as much. You were a piss poor replacement for the real love of his life, your sister Maeve. How dare you stand there like a cow with a stick up her arse and judge me? Get out of my sight, you dirty old dried up excuse for a woman!"

Anne was aghast. She had never heard John in his blackest moods use such language. "I believe you're going mad. If I tell your father that you're becoming unbalanced, he'll have you committed. Make no mistake about it." But her doubts showed on her face.

Molly's voice came like ice. "Go ahead, tell him. Tattle. *Do it!* But remember, if I'm crazy, no one will be surprised when I slit your throat. If I have to be locked up, it might as well be for a good reason."

"You don't mean that."

"Try me," Molly snarled. "Try me and find out the hard way, bitch."

"Calm down, Molly, I didn't mean to . . ."

"Get out!" Molly shrieked, the sound of her voice echoing in the room. "Get your stinking face out of here and leave me in peace."

Rooted with shock, Anne stared at her daughter.

Molly glared at her again. "Are you deaf, old woman? I don't ever want to see you in here again. You're upsetting me, and it's not good for the baby. I'll tell Daddy that, too. Now *get out!*"

Anne backed away. *Was Molly going mad?* Whirling around, Anne ran from the room, closed the door behind her and leaned against it. What was the matter with her

daughter? She had never been an easy child, but now she seemed demented. Was she really losing her mind? Suddenly, as though Molly heard her thoughts, Anne heard her daughter's laughter, an eerie, cadescent sound that made the dim hallway feel more isolated. Then, accompanied by Molly's rising shriek, something smashed against the door and shattered.

Anne ran.

THE ADVENT: Excerpts from Chapter Nine

*October 1886
Larkin City, Maine*

MAUREEN SULLIVAN GAVE BIRTH to a healthy son on October 21, 1886 in the lighthouse keeper's cottage at Banshee Point. Clea assisted in the birth, which was an easy task because the baby came quickly. There was no need to send for Dr. McGarren. The wind was brisk, the day was clear, and Colm rejoiced in the birth of his new son.

After the birth, Maureen lay in bed while Clea tended to the baby in the crib. Colm looked at his son and smiled. He had Maureen's auburn hair and Colm's blue eyes, crying with all the vigor he could muster.

"What do you want to name him, M'reen?" The pet name bothered her a little, since Molly had used it, but she said nothing as Colm spoke it with such affection.

Propped up on several pillows, tired but happy, Maureen pulled herself to a sitting position. "I like the name Aidan," she said softly. "That was my late father's name. And I'd like him to have two middle names."

"Two? One isn't enough?"

"Not this time, Colm, love. I'd like our son to be baptized as Aidan Jack Kelly Sullivan. The Jack is for my uncle who runs Quinn's Forge in the village."

"Aye, I know. Don't I get a say in the lad's name?"

"Not this time. He has your surname by rote," Maureen pointed out.

Colm chuckled. "You win. Aidan Sullivan it is. Excuse me - *Aidan Jack Kelly Sullivan*. Are you happy now?"

Maureen simply nodded, smiling at his silliness.

Colm was struck by how beautiful, *truly beautiful*, she looked at that moment, glowing with an inner happiness that softened her face and brightened her eyes. He realized he had come to love her in his own way. Not like the violent and extreme passion he experienced with Molly, which left him anxious and distraught, but a calm, steady fondness that made him feel secure and warm. There had been no fireworks with Maureen when they had begun having marital relations five years ago, but an affectionate coupling they both enjoyed at least twice a week. His mind-shattering passion for Molly had been one-sided.

"*Colm is remembering Molly again*," Maureen thought, familiar with his distant, sad expression. "*Why doesn't she just disappear from our lives forever?*"

Little Michael, nicknamed "Mick" by his parents, almost four months past his fifth birthday, stood in the bedroom doorway. Mick looked startlingly like Colm, except his eyes were coal black. He glanced askance at his parents. "Do Johnny and I have a little brother now? Do we Daddy?"

Colm smiled at his oldest son. "Indeed you do, Mick. Would you like to see him?"

Mick nodded vigorously.

"Go get Johnny, and you can both meet your new brother," Maureen said. "Where is Johnny?"

"He's in the kitchen with Claude," Clea said.

"*Non*," Claude said as he led Johnny by the hand into the room. "He's right here." Colm and Claude had become close friends over the years. There was not much the two men did not talk about anymore.

Mick ran over to his twin brother. Johnny was obviously startled by the fast movement, his shoulders cringing in fear and his eyes going wide. Mick apologized by rubbing his brother's arm. "Sorry, Johnny. I forgot. Come on, let's meet our new baby brother."

Shy Johnny, a much smaller version of robust Mick, was very pale with red-blond hair and protruding blue eyes. Looking up at Claude, he raised a thin hand to his mouth and coughed.

Claude nodded. "*Oui*, petite monsieur. Go and see your new brother. I will wait here."

Johnny smiled timidly, and said in a tiny voice: "*Oui*, Claude. I mean, *yes*." Mick grabbed Johnny's hand and led him slowly to the crib.

Claude watched the twins, but caught Colm's flash of despair that was quickly hidden with a smile. "*Something is amiss with Beauty*," Claude thought.

While Mick and Johnny gazed at their new brother under Clea's watchful eye, and Maureen rested in the bed, Claude walked over to Colm. "Join me in your kitchen, *Beauty*?" he asked softly. Colm nodded and followed him out of the bedroom. Once in the kitchen, Claude came to the point. "Why do you look so sad when you look at *le petite Jean*?"

Colm sighed and wandered over to the back door. "Johnny gets sick so easily. That's nothing new, I know, but now he has a cough that won't go away. I took him to see Dr. McGarren yesterday. He said if Johnny doesn't get over this chest cough it could go into pneumonia, and it could kill him. He says Johnny's little body can't take much more, that his natural immunity to illness has weakened because he gets sick so often. That means it's harder and harder for him to fight the awful colds he gets."

"Keep him warm and inside the cottage," Claude said simply. "He may not like it, but he will stay alive."

"I worry about Johnny. He started out with a disability, and now he has to contend with constant sickness. How can it be that Mick is so strong and never sick, while Johnny seems to have never had a healthy day in his short life?"

Claude shrugged. "This is Mother Nature, *non*? If you take extra care with *le petite Jean*, he will be fine. Keep him close and warm, *Beauty*, and the child will do good. You'll see."

"I hope you're right." Colm smiled for his friend, wanting to lighten the mood. "Enough of my dire doom, aye? How would you like it if you were little Aidan's godfather?"

"This is the new babe's name? Aidan?"

"*Oui*," Colm teased. "Aidan Jack Kelly Sullivan. Will you stand in as his godfather?"

"*Oui*, naturally," Claude said, excited. "I would love that, Colm. I will be honored to be his godfather."

"It's settled then. Now we'll see what Maureen has to say about it."

Claude snorted with humor. "She gave your new son a mouthful of a name, *non*? Certainly she will not protest *moi* as the sainted godfather!"

They laughed as they left the kitchen together.

* * *

MOLLY HAD NOT FARED well. Despite her desire to rejoin society after bearing the twins in 1881, she could not shake her extreme depression. She rarely left her rooms, and when she did, it was to go up to the vast attic in the mansion. There she was alone in the dim albeit large stuffy room, reviewing her life, her failures, her shameful acts, and her conscience.

The attic was the last addition John Larkin made to the mansion in 1879. The only way to reach it was through the fourth floor, where the servants were housed. The small doorway leading to the attic was at the end of the long carpeted corridor, just past a massive mullioned window.

The first level beyond the door was a storage place for supplies, unused furniture, and the normal detritus of households. But then there was another landing, more stairs, and a vast space, endless in both directions, holding more cast-offs and little light.

A rounded carpet on the landing held a solitary antique chair with a high back and thick armrests. Above was a window that went across the breadth of the ceiling, revealing sunlight in good weather and clouds, rain and snow in bad. The design of the ceiling window was ingenious, sprung from the mind of John Larkin for the top and final level of his extraordinary home. This is where Molly sat, shuttered in the dim grayness of a stormy day.

Molly was annoyed. Much as she disliked being cared for by Clea, she missed her when she was away. It had become a daily game for Molly to see how far she could push Clea with her foul language and her impatient demands, but Clea usually maintained her stiff reserve. Molly quite enjoyed their *tête a tête's*, as Claude called them, but she would never admit to such a thing.

Once in the attic, Molly sat in the chair. It was dark in the autumn months, although it was barely past five o'clock in the afternoon. Clea had been gone for most of the day. When Claude brought lunch to her room, he claimed to know nothing of Clea's whereabouts when Molly asked him. In a huff, Molly had eaten only part of her lunch. Thereafter, she refused to speak with Claude, or anyone else, including her brother, Roddy and his wife Sascha, who paid her a visit after the noon hour.

Molly felt fortified by the isolation. It was self-imposed, of course, but what else was there to do? She whiled away her days in the attic, reading books on the Orient, thanks to Sascha, eating sparsely, returning to her bedroom to bathe every evening and then going to bed. It was not much of an existence, but she simply could not compel herself to do anything else.

John sent for several top doctors over the years to try and determine the cause of her worsening six-year-long depression and unwillingness to leave the security of her rooms or the attic. But each doctor said much the same thing: Molly was suffering from some sort of incurable mental affliction. They essentially advised more of the same: isolation, understanding and patience. They gave her laudanum to soothe her nerves and keep her calm, but the drug only seemed to dull her senses and make her more verbally abusive. The doctors may as well have prescribed pure untreated opium to her, she thought bitterly, as good as the laudanum was doing. It seemed to worsen her depression, if that were possible.

Molly lit a candle and set it on the floor by the chair. She wore dark colors, and always a cap, because she wanted to hide the two grey streaks in her hair. With no interest

in food, she was painfully thin. She had deep lines near her eyes ("crow's feet," Anne called them), and more grooves at the sides of her mouth. Although she was only twenty-two, she looked twice her age.

She still blamed Colm Sullivan for her problems. If it weren't for him, she would have been married to a proper gentleman by now, with a family of her own. Colm was the root of all evil as far as she was concerned, and no one could convince her otherwise. She would not admit to herself that she had been the initiator and a willing participant in the frolics with Colm. He lured her into his bed, with his evil and ruthless charm, and he held her there with his breathtaking good looks and silver tongue. She escaped him eventually, yes, but she birthed his bastards and her life was in ruins because of it. The stigma of the twins' birth, their virtual bastardy, did not concern Molly. In fact, there was nothing about the whelps that bothered her now. She refused to think about them, because they were part of Colm Sullivan, the trickster, the demon lover, the son of Satan. She had a whole library of names for him, none of them complimentary.

She did not understand why she could not apply her strong will to her own mental weakness and make herself snap out of the awful grayness. She had wanted a new life after the twins were born, she wanted to start over and prove herself to her father, to show him she could be a lady befitting her station and behave with the proper decorum and grace. But it had not happened as she planned, and Molly felt like she could no longer fight it. So she accepted her life as it was, living day by day in the dismal mansion filled with expensive furniture and expansive people. She hid in her room or in the attic, not facing reality, but floating on a narcotic sea of laudanum.

She heard footsteps and tensed. *Who would dare bother her here?*

It was Clea, and she looked tired. Clea was only thirty-one, but the passing of time had not been kind to her, either. Having to look after Molly had sapped her strength and normal resilience. She rarely saw her seven-year-old daughter Layla because of her work load in the mansion. Layla was tended by a kitchen maid, and Nigel helped when he could, but he was kept busy, too, with the demands made by John and Anne Larkin. But Clea was grateful that she and Nigel and Layla had a splendid roof over their heads, plenty to eat, and steady salaries. Sometimes, however, the pressure was just too much.

"Where the Christ have you been all blasted day?" Molly snarled at Clea.

Clea sighed. "Birthing a babe."

Molly groaned. "Jesus God, not another one? Is that what my father pays his servants to do? To screw themselves senseless? To pop out horrible little trolls, year after year?"

Clea closed her eyes to blot out Molly's obscenities. She should be used to them by now, but she was not. And she was not in the mood for it today.

"Who whelped today?" Molly demanded.

Clea opened her eyes and looked at Molly coldly. Clea was weary of her foul mouth and her vicious tongue. With uncharacteristic cruelty, Clea replied smoothly: "I'm sure you know them. Cute little couple. They live down on the beach."

Molly was instantly alert. "The only couple living on the beach is that good for nothing former maid of mine, Maureen Kelly, and her son of a bitch of a husband, the *Beelzebub* Colm Sullivan."

"Exactly."

Molly was silent, eyeing Clea. She was lying. She had to be. *Maureen and Colm having a baby?* Impossible! Colm would never sleep with another woman after having Molly the

way he had, she was sure of it. His marriage to Maureen was supposed to be in name only. What happened between Molly and Colm had been sacred, albeit evil and atrocious, but it had been between them alone. How could he ever think of being with another woman in the same way?

"You're lying. Father must have hired an assistant lighthouse keeper to help Colm. Is that the cute little couple you're talking about?"

"No. Colm is the sole lighthouse keeper."

Molly bit her lip, refusing to accept the truth. "It was that be-damned bitch mother of mine, wasn't it? She put you up to spreading lies to make me think I'm crazy. The old crone hasn't come to see me in five years, and she's still trying to undermine me with my father. The old whore will never learn, will she? The bitch."

Clea looked at Molly with loathing. "No, your sweet mother has nothing to do with this, and you know it." Her voice was cool. "I helped deliver Maureen Sullivan of a healthy baby boy this afternoon, and now the twin lads have a new brother. Maureen and Colm named their new babe Aidan. That's an Irish name, isn't it Miss Larkin?" Clea feigned innocence although she knew her words had driven home.

Molly covered her ears with her hands, squeezing her eyes shut. She did not want to hear anymore, shocked by Clea's unusual generosity with information. Before now, Clea tried to keep things from Molly, making sure she never heard a wisp of anything to upset her further, to add to her depression.

Molly's eyes flew open. "I'll tell my mother you're lying to me, Clea, and we'll see how you fare."

Clea smiled thinly. "Oh, will you? I thought your be-damned mother never came to see you? You could always tell Mr. Larkin, though, but I don't think he'll believe you now. You've been sedated for too many years, Miss Molly. There's no telling what you've dreamed up in your head."

"Take me to my room at once," Molly demanded, trying to take control of the situation. "It's your job here to look after me, and I want my supper. *Now*. I don't wish to talk anymore."

Clea smiled triumphantly and took Molly gently by the arm to help her out of the chair. "*I finally shut the bitch up,*" Clea thought with glee. "*Now I know what buttons to push to get her to be quiet in the future.*" Clea doused the candle by the chair, and led Molly out of the attic back down to her room.

Molly made a decision as Clea took her back to her room. An accomplishment, given her state of mind. "*Why should Colm have a new life and be happy? Why should he be allowed to carry on, while I sit here and rot? It's because of him that I'm in such misery.*"

She would find a way out of the mansion and go to Colm. She would confront him with her misery and get the answers she deserved. He had to pay for what he had done to her, one way or another.

"THE ADVENT" INFORMATION

The Advent by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon (*paperback and Kindle*), Barnes & Noble (*Nook*) and Kobo Books.

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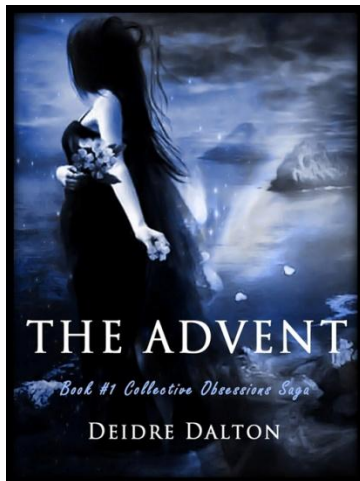
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ABOUT THE COLLECTIVE OBSESSIONS SAGA:

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

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Deidre Dalton is author of the COLLECTIVE OBSESSIONS SAGA, which chronicles the extraordinary loves and dark obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than 140 hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a magnificent seaside mansion in Maine. Books in the eight-part family saga include *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*. All titles in the eight-part family saga were released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

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