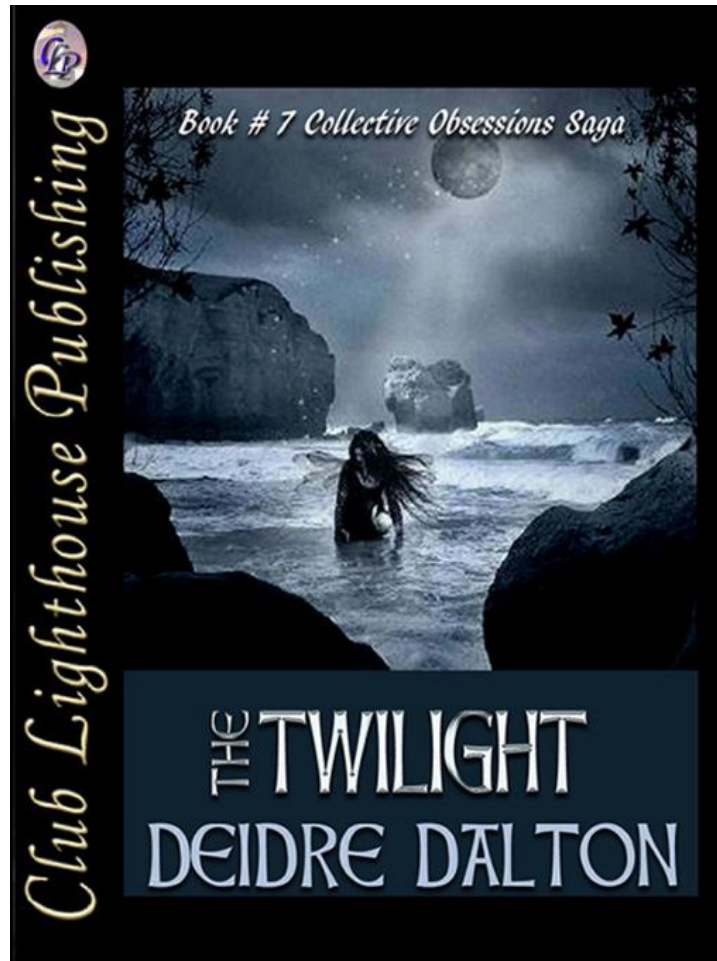


Excerpts from:

The Twilight

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #7 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Historical Romance /Family Epic Edition

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ABOUT "THE TWILIGHT"

The Twilight by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the seventh book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in August 2013. The paperback edition followed in October 2017.

Shannon Larkin and Scott Page are happy in their long marriage, but a tragic loss forces her to delve into the past in order to face some ugly truths about her husband. Devastated, she retreats into her own solitary world. A stranger brings her out of self-imposed exile and shows her the beauty of unconditional love exists after all...

Although hurt and disillusioned by Scott's secret life, Angie Page finds surprising happiness as a result of her father's duplicity.

Her brother Jamie finds unlikely harmony in his marriage of convenience to Désirée Sansovino. In despair over his father's deception, Jamie turns to his flamboyant wife for comfort with life-altering consequences.

The brash and grumbling Kevin Larkin finally marries his long-suffering girlfriend Mariko Woods, bringing a much-needed jolt of love and happiness to the family. But will it last?

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter One

April 2001

Castletownbere, Ireland

SCOTT AND SHANNON PAGE hurried along the stone path to the cottage, dashing to escape the downpour. She held an umbrella over their heads, while he carried two paisley suitcases. The weather was typical for the time of year on Ireland's Beara Peninsula. Though it was only mid-afternoon, angry black clouds darkened the sky as it churned heavy rain showers.

The couple reached the covered front porch, where Shannon drew in the umbrella and shook water from the panels. Scott set down the luggage and fished around in his pants pocket for a key.

"I hope Mrs. Feeny stocked the cottage like we asked," he grumbled. "I'm starving and I could use a stiff drink to warm my bones."

Shannon leaned the umbrella against the house. "I called her from Dublin before we left yesterday. She assured me the cottage was well-supplied with food, liquor, magazines and movies for us to watch." She peered at him. "Did you find the key yet?"

Scott produced the key, holding it in front of him to show her. As he unlocked the front door, Shannon turned and looked toward the Beara Peninsula, marveling as she always did at its wild beauty. The cottage afforded a lofty view over the fishing port of Castletownbere, which rested in the spectacular setting with a picturesque tranquility.

Every year since their marriage, Scott and Shannon vacationed in Ireland for fourteen days. They spent one week in Dublin, taking in the theatre, dining in elegant restaurants and staying at their small house on Pembroke Lane in Ballsbridge. The second week was spent in Castletownbere, where they rented the Larkin ancestral cottage for the duration of their stay.

The home had been restored by the Irish Historical Society some years ago and was now leased to tourists. Scott and Shannon reserved the last week in April every year, also hiring local woman Erin Feeny to stock the shelves with essentials.

"Are you coming in, Shan?" Scott asked from the doorway.

Shannon turned to him, smiling. "I was just admiring the view. I never grow tired of the sight, no matter how many times I see it."

He put his arms around her. "I know. This has to be the most beautiful place on earth. I always feel renewed when we leave, as if my batteries have been recharged."

"It's a wonder John Larkin ever wanted to leave," she murmured.

He kissed her on the temple. "If he hadn't, Larkin City wouldn't be on the map. And more than likely, we wouldn't have met."

She glanced at her husband, regarding him warmly. "You're right. Things happen the way they do for a reason, I suppose."

"Are you ready for some warming refreshment?" he asked, winking at her.

"A cup of hot tea would hit the spot."

"You have the tea," Scott declared flatly. "I'm going for something stronger."

Every time she entered the Larkin ancestral cottage Shannon felt right at home.

Most of its design and architectural features could also to be found in the lighthouse keeper's cottage at Banshee Point on the family estate in Maine. While the layouts were similar, the furnishings were very different.

The living room of the cottage contained a long, sage-colored sofa with a rounded coffee table. The double-sided fireplace faced the couch, and an oaken entertainment center in the corner held a large television set and a DVD player.

Scott went to the hearth to build a fire, while Shannon entered the kitchen to put on a kettle of water for tea. The room was square and roomy, with long granite counters and a smooth red-brick floor. She peered in the refrigerator, noting with satisfaction that Erin Feeny stocked them with all the basics, along with steaks, salmon and sausages.

Shannon found a bottle of Jameson whiskey in a cupboard, and poured a healthy amount into a glass tumbler for her husband. Next, she took white teapot decorated with small green shamrocks and warmed the insides with hot water from the sink. She measured loose tea into a silver tea ball and poured boiling water from the singing kettle into the pot. She let the brew steep for a few minutes while she assembled a wooden tray with Scott's drink and her cup and saucer, and a small jug of Irish cream.

She glanced out the kitchen window and watched the steady rain pelt from the sky, secure in the warm and cozy cottage. She was looking forward to the next week of peace and solitude with her husband. Being at the cottage was her favorite part of their yearly trip because it gave them a wealth of privacy that was sometimes sorely lacking back home in Maine.

The vacation had not come at a better time as Shannon was restless of late. Since both of their children were grown with lives of their own, Shannon felt at loose ends. Scott went to work each day, while she often filled her hours with baking, handling the family accounts, reading, participating in local charitable events, cooking meals for the family, taking walks on the beach and generally becoming what she described as "idle and rich." She felt there was no purpose, no direction, in her daily life.

Shannon carried the tray to the living room, where Scott was sitting on the couch with his head back and eyes closed. She set the tray on the coffee table, feeling the warmth of the fire against her back.

Scott opened his eyes. He stared at his wife, a smile forming on his lips. "You look lovely in this light," he said. "You always do."

She smiled in return, handing him the tumbler full of whiskey. Taking her tea cup and saucer, she sat next to him on the couch. "You mean my ancient age doesn't reflect as well here as it does in the light of Maine?" she quipped, sipping her tea.

"Ah, you know what I mean."

She took another sip of tea, her eyes gazing into the fire absently. She became quiet, almost introspective. Scott knew his wife had something on her mind. He noticed her distracted state upon their arrival at the cottage earlier, when she shrugged out of her jacket, missed the peg on the wall and walked away without noticing.

"What's bothering you, kitten?" He asked her gently. "You've had something on your mind for quite awhile, even before we left Larkin City."

She looked at him, startled out of her own thoughts. "I'm just at loose ends," she began. "What do I do, Scott? I don't have a career to speak of. I haven't had a real job in years. I feel useless, like I'm just going through the motions."

Scott was surprised. "Are you kidding? You run the mansion almost single-handedly.

You keep the books, do the taxes, and take care of all arrangements to do with the house. In case you haven't noticed, it's a big place and there's a lot of folks living there who rely on you. You should get a salary for that alone, but you don't. Last year, you raised almost half a million dollars for new equipment at Larkin Hospice with the silent auctions and benefit dinners. How can you think that you're useless, that you do nothing?"

"I have no personal accomplishments," she argued. "No individual achievement. You have the mining company, Angie is a writer, and Jamie is a veterinarian. I have no real direction, no vocation."

He scrutinized his wife. "What do you have in mind? Is there something in particular you want to do?"

"That's just it, I don't know," she replied in frustration. "There are so many different things I like to do. You know I love computers. Maybe I'll take some classes at LCU. I like cooking. Should I open a restaurant? Write a cookbook? But then I'd be going up against Dana, which I don't want. I've been doing the family books as you said for years, but I don't have an accounting degree. I learned by rote. But should I go for a degree? Or not?"

He laughed. "Try them all, Shan. You can do whatever you want. There's nothing holding you back, is there?"

She stared at him open-mouthed for a moment, and then smiled broadly. "You're right," she conceded. "I have money to do as I please, and I don't have a nine-to-five job pulling me down."

"Exactly."

"Why do I always feel better after I talk to you?" Shannon asked, reaching over to take his hand.

"Because I'm your husband," he answered her simply. "I know and love you well, and I can be objective when you're bogged down. You do the same for me, kitten."

"We complement each other," she murmured, squeezing his hand. "It's so hard to believe nearly thirty-one years have passed since we got married. Why does time go by so quickly?"

"I wish I could put a hold on time," he agreed. "I want to stay just like we are, now." He sipped his whiskey. "But, the future beckons. Do you know what you want to do?"

"Computers, I think," she said with a smile. "I know a lot on my own, but there is so much more to learn. When we get back to Larkin City, I'll enroll in some computer classes."

He grinned. "That's what I thought you'd say," he teased her. "It's bad enough we have a computer in our bedroom, in the drawing room, in the kitchen . . ."

"Having a PC in the kitchen is brilliant," she interrupted him. "I can cook and do the books at the same time."

"You might ask Derek or Diana which classes are the most beneficial," Scott suggested. "I'm sure they'll have a good idea who the best instructors are."

"Wonderful. I'll do it." She placed her hand on his knee. "Enough about that. We're here to relax and enjoy our time alone. What would you like for dinner?"

He snickered. "How about a serving of sweet kitten in the bedroom?"

Even after all their years together, Scott still had the power to make her blush and go weak in the knees. "Behave yourself," she chastised him half-heartedly. "We've just arrived, and you said you were starving."

Scott grinned. "You can't say I didn't try. Okay. I'd love an Irish omelet. Are you game?"

"That sounds perfect."

"I'll help," he offered. "I want lots of pepper in mine."

She touched his face. "Yes I know, darling. I'm well aware of your likes and dislikes."

"As I'm aware of yours. I know and love you well, kitten."

"We complement each other," she reiterated gently.

"We always have."

* * *

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, SCOTT and Shannon walked into Castletownbere Village to have lunch at the landmark MacCarthy's Pub on the square. Half the pub was a grocery store, while the other half contained a bar with dart boards and billiard tables. Scott and Shannon tried to eat there at least once during their stay, enjoying the comfortable and genuinely Irish atmosphere. They both ordered pints of Guinness along with salmon steaks, jacket potatoes and hot-buttered scones.

"Would you like to take a walk around the harbor?" Scott asked as they finished their meal.

Shannon reached across the table to touch her husband's hand. "I have a better idea," she whispered, lowering her eyes. "Let's spend the rest of the day at the cottage, warm in our bed."

He chuckled, squeezing her hand. "My, my," he teased her. "My wife is insatiable this fine day. Didn't last night and this morning quench your thirst for me?"

"Not nearly enough."

"So we've come all this way to spend our time in bed?"

"Exactly," she replied in a husky tone.

His eyes darkened with desire. "We're not waiting on me, kitten," he said softly.

* * *

SCOTT MADE LOVE TO Shannon as if he could not get enough of her. Once they returned to the cottage from MacCarthy's, he led her to the bedroom, removing pieces of her clothing in quick succession. When she tried to do the same to him, he brushed her hands aside and began kissing her. He started at her lips, and then made his way down to her neck, shoulders, breasts, stomach and finally to the dark triangle between her legs.

She moaned, touching the top of Scott's head. She dug her fingers into his hair as he continued to pleasure her with maddening slowness. She thrilled to his touch now just as she had when they made love for the first time thirty-one years ago. Scott set her ablaze with passion, making her almost mindless in the process.

He laid her on the bed and then stood, removing his own clothes. She felt his weight dip the bed as he joined her, locking her into an embrace and entering her quickly. She met his exhilaration, holding tight to his shoulders as he thrust into her, over and over.

Afterward, they lay sated in each other's arms. Both of them were pleasantly exhausted, lethargic yet fully awake. It began to rain again, the clouds casting long shadows in the room.

"I wish we could stay here forever," Scott said in the darkness.

"So do I."

He rolled on his side to face her, resting his chin on the palm of his hand. "I really mean it, kitten," he said strongly. "Let's buy this place once and for all, pack up our things in Larkin City and move to Castletownbere."

She reached up and brushed a stray lock of hair from his forehead. "Are you serious?"

"We could always go back to Larkin City during holidays," he spoke urgently. "We could even spend time there in the summer, during Larkin Fair Days."

She laughed. "Now I know you're teasing me. You'd never leave the mining company, or Angie and Jamie."

Scott felt his enthusiasm slowly dissolve. He was serious, but Shannon did not recognize his momentum. He wanted to get away from Larkin City, to live with his wife in the peace and solitude of Castletownbere. They deserved the time alone as they grew older. They earned the right to do as they pleased.

But he knew Shannon would never allow herself to be uprooted from her home. She might be fond of Castletownbere and the cottage of her ancestors, but it would never replace the love she felt for Larkin City and the family estate.

Scott relaxed next to his wife. "I love you, Shannon," he whispered against her lips. "More than you'll ever know. Please don't ever forget it."

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter Three

*June 2002
Larkin City, Maine*

EVERY SATURDAY, JAMIE BOUGHT lunch for staff and volunteers working at the Animal Life Centre. He felt it was the least he could do, especially for the volunteers who donated their time on weekends to caring for the various residents of the shelter. His kindness was just one more reason for Désirée to admire and fall deeper in love with her husband.

She helped Jamie at the shelter on weekends, and often made the lunch run. The midday meal was a democratic selection process, whereby Jamie allowed staff and volunteers to choose what they wanted for lunch. Some days it was pizza, others it was Chinese takeout or burgers and fries. Majority ruled one Saturday in early June, so Désirée piled into Jamie's Datsun and drove into Larkin to pick up a large order of fish and chips from Bruno's Café on Main Street.

The weather was warm and sunny, bringing residents out in force. Next to city hall and the courthouse, Colleen Larkin Memorial Park was full of joggers, picnickers and dog-walkers. People strolled the boardwalk on Main Street, window shopping or dining in one of the many restaurants.

Désirée had trouble finding a parking spot in front of Bruno's, so she drove a few doors down and pulled in front of Larkin Mines. She left the Datsun unlocked after she alighted, still amazed such a thing was possible. She would never dream of leaving a door unlocked back in Little Italy, but Larkin was different. Life went along at a much slower and safer pace in the harbor town, almost as if it existed in an alternate realm from the rest of the world.

She walked the short distance to Bruno's and entered the café. The eatery was packed with the typical lunch crowd, but Berty waited at the counter with several large takeout bags.

Désirée flashed a smile at the waitress. They had been on friendly terms since first meeting five years ago. It was during Désirée's first impromptu visit to Larkin City that she wandered into Bruno's, trying to find out where Jamie lived. She wanted to surprise Jamie and her brother Jack with a visit, which was the story she told Berty at the time, but in reality Désirée was already in love with Jamie. Aside from being the long-time senior waitress at Bruno's, Berty was well-known as the fount of local information and gossip. Désirée liked her anyway.

Berty's eyes widened as she regarded Désirée. "What in blue blazes happened to you?"

Désirée laughed, looking down at herself. The white shorts and pink tank top she wore while working at the shelter were damp and soiled, and her bare feet were streaked with dirt as they rested in pink flip-flops. Worse, her usually coiffed bump hairdo was flat and stringy, the long tendrils curly and wet.

"I've been hosing down kennels all morning," Désirée replied. "That's my job on Saturdays, cleaning out dog runs and washing the food bowls."

Berty shook her head. "I can think of many other things I'd rather do."

"Me, too, but I like helping Jamie at the shelter." Désirée plunked her large purse on the counter. "I know it sounds funny, but I think the dogs enjoy having their kennels cleaned. It's like they can tell the difference."

Berty pushed the takeout bags toward her. "That's twelve orders of fish and chips, with extra tartar sauce and a bowl of clam chowder for Jamie."

"How much do I owe you?"

"Forty-one dollars and seven cents."

Désirée counted the cash from her purse, giving Berty an extra five dollars as a tip. She was just about to gather the takeout bags and leave when she noticed two young women sitting at the counter. They were looking at her and leaning their heads together, whispering.

She felt a stab of annoyance. Whether in Little Italy or Larkin City, some things never changed. Larkin might be a haven of peaceful tranquility, but it was still full of cliques and vicious-minded women who liked to pass uninformed judgment on their female counterparts. It irked Désirée, especially since deep down she felt women should stick together and not attack each other over trifles. It was one of the many traits she shared with her mother-in-law Shannon, who detested petty jealousies and had very few female friends as a result. Blatant or subtle public displays of small-minded behavior often provoked Désirée to unapologetic outbursts of temper.

"Don't the two of you have anything better to do?" she snapped at the young women, her eyes flashing with anger. "If you're bored, I have a suggestion. Why not take your fat asses over to the animal shelter and volunteer your time? It beats holding court over the rest of us when you know damn well your shit stinks just like everyone else's."

Berty snickered as the two women got up from the counter abruptly and hurried from the cafe, red-faced with embarrassment.

Désirée retrieved the takeout bags from the counter, annoyance still written on her face. "There's nothing worse than having a great day and then running into such bitchy assholes like those two. Is it any wonder my best friend is my mother-in-law?"

Berty grinned. "You can't go wrong with Shannon, anyway. She'd never dream of behaving like those two local gits."

"Have a nice day, Berty. I'll see you next time."

"Righto, dear."

Désirée made her way to the Datsun parked in front of Larkin Mines, her arms laden with takeout bags and her purse. She had just set the food inside the cab when she noticed the front door of the mining office open. Thinking it might be her father-in-law Scott, she turned to greet him but was instead surprised to see a woman emerge onto the boardwalk.

Looking left to right, the woman paid no heed to Désirée before walking in the direction of Bruno's Café. Désirée stared, a sense of recognition assailing her. *Where had she seen the woman before?* Then it dawned on her. The first time she met Scott Page at his office, he was speaking with a woman in the reception area. That same woman was now walking towards the café, head down. There was no mistaking it was the same person, Désirée felt. She was older, perhaps in her forties, with short, blonde hair and long, skinny legs.

Désirée glanced towards the mining office, fully expecting to see Scott emerge. When he didn't, she got into the Datsun and started the engine. Maybe the woman worked

for Scott, Désirée reasoned, but she didn't recall ever seeing her at company Christmas parties or during Larkin Fair Days at the beach. Désirée's imagination and curiosity went into overdrive. *Who was she, and why was she visiting Scott?*

"It's really none of my business," Désirée thought to herself. "I'm acting just like the local busybodies, and I won't have that."

Without another thought to her father-in-law, she pulled out onto Main Street to return to the animal shelter.

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter Four

SPOILER ALERT

October 2002

Larkin City, Maine

IT WAS RAINING IN earnest by the time Shannon reached Larkin City. The lunch traffic had dwindled somewhat, but she still had to wait through three traffic lights before finally parking in front of Larkin Mines on Main Street. She glanced at the large picture window of the office, noticing the lights were on inside as normal.

Alighting from her car, she stepped onto the sidewalk and smiled in greeting to several people hurrying by under their umbrellas. Because her family founded Larkin City more than a century earlier, most of the community knew her and other members of the family on sight. There was also the added notoriety of Angie's best-selling novel *Unrequited Love in Maine*, which seemed to fill locals with a strange pride. Shannon didn't always remember the names of Larkin City's citizens, but did try to be friendly whenever she went out in public.

"You look lovely today, Mrs. Page," said Claudia Millicent as she paused on the sidewalk, carefully holding her umbrella aloft. Shannon recognized the woman with some relief, knowing her from the bank.

"Thank you, Claudia," Shannon replied. "How have you been?"

As the woman continued to talk, Shannon let her eyes wander to the mining office window again. Where was Scott? She was uncharacteristically late, and she assumed he was waiting for her - watching from the window, pacing back and forth.

Shannon touched Claudia Millicent on the shoulder. "It was nice seeing you, Claudia," she said politely. "I'm dreadfully late. I was supposed to meet Scott for lunch at one o'clock, but I was detained at the mansion. He's probably worried sick."

Claudia smiled. "You mustn't keep your husband waiting, dear. Give Scott my best."

Shannon ducked into the mining office, closing the door behind her. "Scott?" she called out. "Darling, are you here?"

There was no reply. The silence was deafening to her ears. She set her purse on the floor, and flung her coat onto a chair in the reception area. The office had not changed much over the years, and in fact looked much the same as when she worked there thirty-two years ago. Before she and Scott were married, before the birth of their children.

She stood in the middle of the reception area for a moment. The silence stretched her nerves like elastic, threatening to snap.

"Scott?" Shannon called out again. "Scott, where are you?"

Nothing.

She was vaguely aware of the muffled sounds coming from Main Street as she walked toward Scott's open office door. His office was off the reception area, built out from the corner of the building so it was not viewable unless one was looking in from the doorway.

It was her father's old office. When Brian Larkin retired years before his death, Scott had taken over the mining company. He did quite well, establishing surveys and ore bodies

in the United States as well as South America, Ireland and other parts of Europe. Shannon took a great deal of pride in her husband and his accomplishments.

She stopped short before reaching the office door. She could hear the faint purring sounds of Scott's computer, and the methodical ticking of his nautical wall clock. But where was *he*?

She stood rooted to the spot. *What was she waiting for?*

Biting her lower lip, she moved forward. She stopped again, this time framed in the doorway of her husband's office.

Scott was there, at his desk. His hands were to the sides of the computer keyboard, his head on the desk, as if he had just settled down for a nap.

"Scott *never* naps at his desk," Shannon scoffed aloud.

Her feet felt like lead, but she walked toward the desk with measured steps. She cut a wide path until she came up behind Scott's chair, where her eyes lighted on the computer screen. On the desk, Scott's head was turned in the opposite direction so she couldn't see his face.

Shannon stared at the computer screen, scarcely breathing:

I love you the most, kitten. See you soon.

It was his reply to her earlier message, but he never sent it. She reached out and touched his shoulder. "Scott, it's me. Darling, wake up."

Nothing.

She stood there for another minute, her eyes still on the computer screen, almost as if she were afraid to look at anything else in the room. She felt the fabric of Scott's cotton shirt as her hand rested on his shoulder. She remembered watching him dress that morning in their bedroom at the mansion. After taking a quick shower, he donned faded blue jeans and a white cotton polo shirt.

"No dress-up today?" Shannon teased him. He usually wore dress slacks to the office.

"Peg has the day off," Scott told her, naming his part-time secretary. "I have no appointments, so why bother dressing up?"

Shannon came back from her morning memory, averting her eyes from the computer screen and looking at the back of Scott's head. She could still smell the fresh scent of his hair shampoo and after-shave.

Tears started to well-up in her eyes. She shook Scott's shoulder with her hand. "Come on, darling, wake up. I'm starved." She shook him again. She heard rather than saw him slump to the floor, which sent the chair skewing to the opposite side of the desk. It happened so fast, almost like a blur.

She looked down at her husband in suspended alarm. He laid on his side now, his head looking forward and facing her. His eyes were open and staring, but there was no life there. She dropped to her knees, bringing her face close to him. His mouth was slightly open, and she saw a slight trickle of blood at one corner. She took his face in her hands, looking him over closely, noticing more blood seeping from his ears.

"No, no, no," Shannon whispered. She set his head down gently, the carpet scraping her knuckles. She wrapped her fingers around one of his wrists, feeling for a pulse. After a moment in suspended expectation, her stomach sank when she realized there was nothing.

She laid her head on his chest, hoping for the sound of his loving, beating heart. Nothing.

"Talk to me," she pleaded softly. She felt hot tears squeezing from under her eyelids,

and the accumulation of salty saliva forming a sticky sheen on her lips. "Can't you hear me?" She shook him gently. "We're supposed to grow old together, remember? Just you and me. We're going to spend our summer nights on the porch at the keeper's cottage, watching the ocean."

She grabbed one of his limp hands, holding it against her wet cheek. "We didn't have enough time," she said, the increasing violence of her sobs forcing her to take great gulps of air. "Not nearly long enough. Please Scott, touch me. Say my name."

She raised her head to look at his face. "Please God," she moaned. "Give Scott back to me. If it can't be forever, let me have long enough to say goodbye. I need to hear his voice. Please, just one more time."

She forced herself to sit up, looking down at her husband again. She reached out and touched his eyes, bringing them to a close with her fingertips. He seemed so peaceful. There was no pain written on his face, no fear of the unknown, no revelation of his last minute on earth.

Bending over from her crouched position, Shannon kissed him on the lips. "I'll call for help," she sobbed against him.

She reached out and grabbed the corner of the desk to help her up. Wiping her nose on her forearm, she took the telephone receiver. As she punched the numbers on the keypad, she felt wet stickiness on her fingers.

Sean answered the telephone at the mansion. "Larkin House."

"Sean?" She gasped. "Scott needs help. We're at the mining office. He won't move. I came in and he was slumped on the desk. I thought he was asleep, but his eyes were open. When I touched his eyes, they closed. I don't know what to do . . ."

"Shan, I'm calling an ambulance," Sean told her. "Stay where you are. I'm on my way."

"Please hurry," she cried. "My husband needs help."

She dropped the telephone, hearing it clatter on Scott's desk. She stared at the computer screen again, her eyes burning as she read Scott's brief message to her. Sniffling loudly, with desperate moans of grief forming in her throat, she leaned forward and pushed the "send" button, propelling the e-mail to her address at the mansion.

"His last message," she whispered, her voice breaking.

* * *

SHANNON STOOD IN THE doorway of the drawing room, her form in such a state of immobility that human breathing seemed illusory. Her hair fell to her waist, unkempt. Her bare feet were numb to the cold touch of the floor. Her black robe was unfastened, under which she wore one of Scott's old tee-shirts.

The mantle clock struck three o'clock, shaking Shannon from her dreamlike state. She reached up and tucked a length of hair behind her ear, moistening her lips. Her mouth felt dry, but she sensed the bitter aftertaste of the brandy she consumed only hours before.

She stared at the dark oak casket in the center of the drawing room. Settees, chairs and tables had been set to the sides of the room to accommodate the coffin for viewing. One light burned overhead, casting a shadow on the shiny oak of the casket. It was closed now, of course, as everyone had long-since dispersed.

Friends, colleagues and members of the Larkin family attended the viewing the

night before, including Mario and Adelina Sansovino and Vito Cimarelli, who arrived together from Larkin Airport. The mansion was full of people. Shannon remembered shaking hands, murmuring appreciation to offers of condolence. All the while, she kept her unswerving eyes on her husband as he lay in repose. Jamie and Angie stood on either side of her with Tom and Désirée, subtly holding her arms. She knew without their support she would have fallen to the ground. As it was, she wanted to shout to all of the people present: "My husband is not dead. This is some sort of grisly nightmare, but it will soon end."

As the coldness of the room permeated her black robe, Shannon walked slowly to the casket, placing her hands on top. The words from Scott's doctor repeated in her ears, sounding trite and hollow as she recalled them:

"Scott suffered a massive heart attack and his brain also hemorrhaged. He was a healthy man, Shannon. His last physical six months ago was very nearly perfect. However, there was a serious blockage in one of the arteries of his heart that never manifested itself with symptoms. He may have felt slightly ill just before the attack, but when it came death was almost instantaneous. There was nothing anyone could have done to save him."

She smoothed her hands over the coffin. Scott was alone in there, and she could not bear the thought of it. He must be so cold, so irritated by the confinement. Being the man he was, Scott would be brave and tough it through with no complaints. But she wanted him back. She wanted him beside her in their bed, holding her and making her feel safe. She needed to hear his voice, to hear him call her "kitten."

Choking back a sob, she opened the coffin. The overhead light illuminated Scott's face, so peaceful in sleep. His hands rested across his chest, his wedding ring intact. He was dressed in his favorite clothes: a pair of indigo corduroys and a silky blue shirt with a brown short-vest.

She touched a tendril of his hair at the temple, running her finger down his sideburn and lower jaw. "You are so beautiful to me," she said softly. "I remember the first time I laid eyes on you as if it were yesterday, waiting for me at the Larkin Airport. You were a damned grouch, but I noticed your sideburns and black hair." She stroked his mouth. "If only you could open your eyes and smile at me."

She leaned over and kissed her husband on the mouth. She raised herself again, standing over him and staring at his face, almost as if she was waiting for him to awaken. She wanted to climb into the coffin with him, to keep him warm and hold him close to her.

She was not sure how long she had been standing there when her brother Sean spoke from the doorway:

"Shan, are you okay?"

She did not turn around.

"Shan?"

"I want him back," she said simply.

Sean came to her, putting his arms around her shoulders. "I know you do, sis," he said in a low tone. "So do I."

She wiped a tear from her eye. "How did you know I was down here?"

"I came to check on you in your bedroom, and you were gone. I knew you'd be here."

Her voice began to crack as she spoke. "You are forever looking after me. Do you remember? . . ." She paused, trying to steady her voice by taking a deep breath. "When Scott first came here years ago, you were so protective over me. Remember? You had a man-to-man with Scott, asking him what his intentions were toward me."

Sean nodded. "I remember. Scott was a good man, sis. He loved you more than anything. You were his life."

"But where did the time go?" She asked in bewilderment, turning to face her brother. "We didn't have enough of it. His life was snatched away too soon. We weren't finished."

Sean saw the naked pain on his sister's face. He wanted so much to make it better for her, but there was nothing he could do this time. He also mourned Scott. He loved the man like a brother, admired and respected him beyond measure.

"You heard the doctor," Sean reminded her gently. "There was nothing anyone could have done."

"That's the hell of it," Shannon said shakily, turning back around to look at her husband again. "If only there had been warning signs, the doctor could have fixed it. We could have grown old together then, and completed our lives as they were meant to be."

Sean listened to her, not knowing what to say.

"I realize everyone is devastated," she whispered, her voice ragged. "Angie is beside herself, and I don't think Jamie will ever get over the loss of his father. Yet I don't have room for anyone else's grief but my own right now. It might make me a terrible mother, daughter, sister, cousin or aunt, but I don't care. With Scott gone, my life is essentially over."

Sean reached for her but she shrugged him away.

"Please let me finish," she pleaded. "Don't worry. I'm not going to kill myself. Scott would be damned furious if I did that, anyway, and refuse to speak to me again. No, I'll continue to live and maybe even grow very old, but my life means absolutely nothing anymore. Not without him."

"I understand," he said simply.

Shannon bowed her head, the tears coming freely now. "He was my life, my breath, my mind, my eyes, my heartbeat. Our love never died, Sean. Not one whit. It only grew stronger and deeper. I was consumed by him, and he by me, sometimes to the exclusion of our own children. Is it any wonder I'm bereft, lost without him?"

Sean held his sister close, letting her cry until she became exhausted, sagging against him.

"You need to rest," he told her firmly. "Let me take you back to your room."

She nodded slowly, bracing herself against him as she turned to look at Scott again.

"Give me a minute," she said.

Freeing herself from Sean, Shannon bent over and kissed her husband one last time on the lips. A salty tear fell from her eye and onto Scott's cheek. She left it there as she righted herself and turned away.

Sean closed the casket carefully, also taking one last look at his brother-in-law and thanking him silently. *"God bless you Scott for making Shannon so happy for so many years. Please watch over her now, and don't let her come to any harm. Someday in the distant future she will come to you, and the two of you can be together again."*

Sean took Shannon's hand, and she gripped him tightly.

"Are you ready?" Sean asked her.

"Never ready," Shannon said softly. "Just forever waiting."

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter Six

November 2002
Larkin City, Maine

THE LIGHTHOUSE KEEPER'S COTTAGE was one of Shannon's favorite spots on the Larkin estate. She found solace in the cottage, especially on the long porch overlooking the beach and the Atlantic Ocean. The porch was accessible from the footpath as well as the master bedroom in the cottage, and it was here Shannon found herself with the picnic basket.

Leaving the basket on the table, she sat down on one of the chairs and started eating the chicken salad. She poured wine in a paper cup, and then continued to eat as she stared into the ocean.

The air was cool, but the sun was bright and the white sand on the beach was brilliant. The water was blue and clear, crashing on the rocks underneath the lighthouse and on the shore. So many times she and Scott sat on the porch, eating lunch, drinking wine and talking - or not. Sometimes they sat in silence, content in each other's company and happy to be alone together.

Shannon finished the chicken salad and poured herself more wine. She nibbled on a piece of provolone cheese, fighting the urge to have a cigarette. She knew there was a pack hidden in the desk in the cottage, but so far she resisted the temptation. Although she gave up smoking several years ago, she always craved a cigarette after eating.

There were times she thought about moving to the keeper's cottage permanently, but she was hampered by her desire to remain in the room she shared with Scott in the mansion. All of his clothes were still in the closet, his toiletries still on a shelf in their bathroom.

Scott had been reading *Notes from Underground* by Feodor Dostoyevsky when he died, and Shannon left the slim volume on his bedside table with the bookmark in the same place as he left it. His reading glasses lay atop the book, his thumbprint still visible on one of the lens.

She drained her wine and refilled the paper cup again. Despite her hurt and anger at realizing Scott wasn't the man she thought him to be, she was unable to do away with the little "shrines" she left scattered for him. Part of her still clung to the hope there was a reasonable explanation for the notes and letters from Andrea St. John, and that her lawsuit was nothing more than a money-grubbing scam. She didn't want to admit their happy life together was a lie, but in the next instant her brewing rage made her want to quit mourning him. At the moment, she was able to cope with his loss and apparent duplicity by blocking bits of reality and unpleasantness. She was holding onto her daily processes and common sense by a thin thread.

She was forced from her thoughts by the figure of a man coming down the beach toward her. He was walking from the direction of the Banshee Point dock a quarter mile away. She did not recognize him. She stood from her chair, shading her eyes with her hand as the man drew closer. He was short of stature and stocky, with a head full of thick dark hair. He wore a pair of khaki slacks and a bright windbreaker. She tensed, wondering who

the man was and what he was doing on the private beach.

She stepped up to the railing of the porch. The man was now standing in front of her in the sand. "Excuse me," Shannon spoke up, a trifle irritated by the man's trespass. "Did you know this is a privately-owned beach?"

The man appeared abashed. "I'm sorry, Ma'am. I was sailing up the beach a ways, and I came too close to land. My boat is aground, and I'm afraid I haven't a clue where I am or what to do about it. I saw the lighthouse and hoped there might be someone here who could help me out of this mess or lend me a telephone so I can call for assistance."

Shannon stared at the stranger. He spoke with an English accent, looking at her with startling blue eyes. His nose was full and strong, and he had thinly-formed lips with a wide mouth and a slight paunch around the middle. His hair was a dark russet brown, short but thick, with hints of gray. She assumed he was middle-aged, but she wasn't sure.

"Are you a sailing novice?" she asked him.

The man blushed. "Sorry to say, yes I am. My boat is new, and this was my first trip out."

Shannon hid a smile as he continued to talk. "My name is Leonard Gunther. I just moved to Larkin City last month, where I teach at the university."

"I'm Shannon Page," she said politely. "Why don't you come up onto the porch, Leonard? I'll let you use my cell phone to call for help."

He looked relieved. "Thank you, Miss Page. And please call me Lee."

"It's Mrs. Page. And you're welcome."

Lee took the small path to the cottage and soon joined Shannon on the porch. She noticed his skin was beginning to show signs of sunburn, and his blue eyes were red-rimmed and crinkled at the corners.

She reached into the picnic basket and drew out her silver cellular telephone. She handed it to Lee.

He looked sheepish. "I'm sorry to impose, but do you have any idea who I should call for help with this sort of thing?"

She smiled. "Yes, I do. There's a place in town called Nautical Tows that specializes in retrieving beached vessels and the like, much like a car-towing service. You can dial information to get their number."

"Where am I?" Lee asked helplessly. "How do I give them directions?"

"Tell them you're on the beach at Banshee Point," she replied. "They'll find you. Believe it or not, yours is not the first boat to get stuck on this stretch of sand."

Lee began dialing, so Shannon returned to the table and sat down. She sipped her wine absently, half-listening to the stranger and watching the ocean waves.

Lee stared at Shannon as he made his telephone call. She was a beautiful woman, without question, but her beauty was unusual, almost with a savage element. She was obviously reserved, well-spoken and perturbed by his presence on the beach. He glanced down at the table, seeing the remnants of food and wine. He had interrupted her private lunch as well.

Lee returned the cell phone to Shannon. "Nautical Tows is running behind schedule today," he informed her. "They can't come out until six o'clock."

She took the telephone. "That's a shame," she sympathized. "If you'd like, I can get someone to drive you back into town, or you can wait at the house until the towing crew arrives."

Lee was puzzled. "Wait at the house? Isn't *this* your house?"

She paused as she took another sip of wine. "This is the old lighthouse keeper's cottage. No one really lives here anymore. My house is up on the hill. Would you like to go there now? Perhaps to freshen up?" She gestured to the bottle of wine. "Or would you like a drink?"

Lee laughed. "Yes to all."

She found another paper cup in the picnic basket and poured him some wine. He tasted it slowly at first, and then drank it down. "Very nice. Thank you, Mrs. Page. That was right on the spot."

"Please, call me Shannon," she said as she stood up. She placed her plate and cup into the basket. She glanced at Lee, noticing her was staring at her.

"Can I help you carry the basket?" he asked quickly.

"No thank you, I can manage."

"I appreciate your help," Lee said as they walked off the porch and onto the footpath. "I apologize for interrupting your day, but you surely saved mine."

"No problem," she murmured.

As they made their way along the path, she became curious. "Tell me, what are you teaching at LCU?"

"English," Lee responded. "I also teach an elective course on creative writing. Before coming here, I taught at Oxford, and most recently New York University."

"What brings you to Larkin?"

"I vacationed at The Byre several times with my wife over the last decade," he admitted. "When she died I lost interest in vacations, but I remembered Larkin. It's a remarkable place, quite beautiful. I grew tired of New York and had no desire to return to England, so when a teaching position became available at LCU, I applied for the job."

"I'm sorry to hear about your wife."

"Thank you. May I ask how long you've lived in Larkin? What are the winters like around here?"

Shannon had to laugh at his questions, failing to catch herself. She hadn't laughed in such a long time, and the sound was strange to her ears.

"What's so funny?" Lee asked.

"The irony of your questions," she explained. "I've lived in Larkin my entire life. Winters can be rough, but I love the season. I'm sure you'll manage just fine." She asked another question of her own: "Do you have a house in town?"

"At the moment, I'm renting an apartment at the Ivy Gardens."

"I know the place," she said. "It's one of the nicest apartment buildings in Larkin." Unknown to Lee, Shannon owned Ivy Gardens. Technically, she was his landlord but she wasn't about to tell him that.

"Do you work in town?" he wanted to know.

"No, I work from home."

"Oh? What do you do?"

"Various and sundry," Shannon replied.

At that moment they came to the crest of the footpath, atop Banshee Point. The mansion was now in full view.

"God Almighty," Lee exclaimed. "Is that your house?"

"The estate belongs to my family," Shannon said, enjoying his reaction to the

mansion. It was rare to meet someone in Larkin City who didn't already know about the Larkin family, who didn't recognize them on sight and knew their history, their wealth and their place in Larkin City's social sphere.

"Wait a minute," Lee said. "I've heard a bit of history about this place from my students, and from a waitress working at Bruno's Café. You said your name is Shannon Page. How are you related to the Larkin's?"

"Page is my husband's name. My birth name is Shannon Larkin."

Lee reddened. "I'm sorry to appear so ill-informed. Being new here, I had no idea."

"I'm sure you'll hear more about us the longer you live in Larkin City," she said lightly. "We're favorites with the gossip-mongers. Whatever the case, don't believe everything you hear."

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter Eleven

May 2003

Larkin City, Maine

LEE GUNTHER HADN'T FORGOTTEN about Shannon Larkin, which is how he thought of her rather than as *Shannon Page*. Perhaps it was jealous underscore which made him disregard her late husband's name, but he did not often admit it to himself.

After meeting Shannon on the beach at Banshee Point in November, Lee made a point of sailing every weekend. His boat was back in tip-top shape after the accident, and he always routed himself near the lighthouse and the keeper's cottage. No matter what time of day he sailed, he never caught sight of Shannon again.

Since meeting her, Lee boned up on local history, especially well-known facts about Shannon's life. Her living journey to date was as unique as she was, giving him cause to understand her natural intensity and wary reaction to strangers.

Short of being rudely forward and knocking on the front doors of the Larkin mansion, Lee could think of no other way to meet with Shannon again. He was in a quandary.

Better to forget about her. As if he could.

* * *

LEE'S OFFICE AT LARKIN City University was large and airy with tall windows, which overlooked the campus courtyard. He often gazed at the cluster of trees that shaded the windows. They were green and lush, with squirrels flying between branches. Whenever he found himself contemplative, he usually made his way to the windows to look out over the beauty.

The office walls were off-white and bare when Lee moved in. He added several portraits of his own – a painting of a sailboat, another of a tree-lined lane – and several literary depictions. His favorite was a reproduction of the book cover *Ulysses* by James Joyce, which was framed in soft blond wood.

Lee's desk was orderly, his in-and-out baskets usually clutter-free. Student papers were well organized and placed in folders labeled "to do" or "finished." The bookshelf was also neat with titles lined evenly and in alphabetical order by author. Lee could not imagine living and working any other way. He felt organization was one of the keys to a successful life.

He was surprised when Megan Larkin walked into his office in mid-May, carrying with her a few textbooks and a leather-bound day planner. The girl was lovely and fresh, the definite brand of her family etched on her features and evident in her manner. Lee was not sure how he deduced such a notion, but there was a definite wild-fringe characteristic about the entire Larkin family.

Since Megan was not in any of his classes, Lee was momentarily puzzled by her presence. Perhaps she remembered him from his one and only stint at the mansion last year. After exchanging pleasantries, Megan sat in the chair in front of Lee's desk.

"How can I help you, Megan?" Lee asked her.

"I have a favor to ask you," Megan admitted. "Dana is hosting a Tea for Charity benefit at the mansion over Memorial Day. She wanted to know if you'd like to attend."

Lee's first thought was to wonder why Dana Larkin hadn't called and invited him to the event herself, but instead he asked: "Which charity is involved?"

"The tea actually benefits a group of charities," Megan said. "The event has been held twice a year since 1942, over Memorial Day and near Halloween. It was initiated by my great-grandmother Colleen Larkin."

"Is this the same Colleen Larkin that the city park is named after?"

"Yes," Megan replied. "Nowadays, either Dana or Shannon hosts the tea. Usually local politicians and their wives come to the event, along with other influential people in Larkin who pay one thousand dollars per plate. The funds are dispersed between three different charities: The Larkin Chapter of the ASPCA, the Fishermen's Benefit Fund and the Larkin Medical Relief Association, which helps people without medical insurance."

"That's very admirable," Lee said. "But tell me, why does Dana want me there? I'm not a politician, and I'm certainly not an influential person in Larkin."

Megan paused. Lee sensed she was holding something back, uncomfortable about being deceptive. But he said nothing, curious to hear what she had to say.

She recovered quickly. "Being a teacher at LCU, your position in the community is respected. I'm sure others in Larkin City would enjoy meeting you, and perhaps you might benefit from the contact as well."

Lee pretended he was thinking it over, fully aware there was more to Megan's invitation but unsure what it entailed. At length he replied: "Well since you put it that way, how can I refuse? I'll be glad to attend the event. You say it's scheduled for Memorial Day?"

"The day before," Megan replied, obviously relieved by his agreeable response. "It falls on a Saturday. I'll let you know the exact time later."

"That's fair advance warning," Lee said. "I'm sure I can set aside a thousand dollars by then."

Megan blushed. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean you had to come up with the money. Dana made that quite clear. You're to come as a guest of the family, not as a patron."

"Somehow that doesn't seem right," Lee stated. "If I come, I insist on paying the thousand dollars."

Megan appeared disconcerted. "Very well, I'll let Dana know."

The room fell silent for a moment, stretching into an interminable awkwardness. Megan seemed occupied with her own thoughts, leafing through her day planner, unaware Lee was waiting for her to continue.

Lee cleared his throat. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Megan?"

She looked at him, startled. "Sorry?"

"Is there anything else?"

"Yes," Megan began, regaining her composure. "Dana also asked me to tell you about Larkin Fair Days, which occurs in August. It's fast approaching, and Dana wanted to invite you to that event, too. As a guest of the family, of course."

Lee smiled. "Of course. I've heard about Larkin Fair Days from some of my students. It sounds like a wonderfully big party on the beach. I definitely plan to attend."

"Very good then," Megan said, snapping her day planner closed. "Thank you for your time, Professor Gunther."

"No - thank *you*," Lee interjected.

After Megan left his office, Lee pondered the real reasons behind the pair of invitations from Dana Larkin. He wasn't callow enough to believe Dana was interested in introducing him to the community. No, there was another reason and he was almost certain he knew what it was.

Dana was concerned about Shannon's rather tumultuous life in recent months. The loss of her husband, combined with a paternity lawsuit and her daughter's subsequent adoption of Scott Page's illegitimate child, had probably taken its emotional toll. Dana probably felt it was time Shannon carried on with her life, to get back into the swing of things. Shannon was likely unwilling to do so, and the invitations were Dana's way of forcing the issue.

Lee was not comfortable about being used as a pawn in the scheme of things. Had it been anyone else but Shannon, he might have refused both invitations. Yet he was anxious to know Shannon better, to spend time in her company - even if the interest was one-sided.

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter Twelve

June 2003
Larkin City, Maine

DÉSIRÉE ENJOYED A RELATIVELY easy pregnancy. Her body seemed to be in tune with the life growing inside of her. She had none of the adverse symptoms associated with carrying a child, such as nausea, but did experience frequent cravings for corned beef and cabbage. She found it odd, considering her favorite dish was pasta, yet she indulged her passions. Jamie was only too happy to dine on Irish fare several times a week, or in the middle of the night, his wife's health and happiness being his paramount concern.

In an uncharacteristic show of independence, Adelina Sansovino left the family deli in Little Italy for a month in order to spend time with her daughter in Larkin City. Excited by the prospect of becoming a grandmother for the first time, she was eager to be on hand when Désirée went into labor.

Shannon also spent more time at the A-frame cottage as Désirée's delivery date grew closer, enjoying quiet evenings with her son, his wife and Adelina. Other times they gathered at the mansion, usually for tea or the occasional family dinner.

One Sunday afternoon after a lunch of corned beef sandwiches on Irish soda bread and green pea soup, Adelina helped Shannon with the dishes in the A-frame. The more time the two older women spent together, the more they liked each other. In Adelina, Shannon saw a proud woman full of old world charm with adherence to tradition, which included deferring to her husband in most matters. In Shannon, Adelina saw a strong and still beautiful woman who refused to allow anyone to dictate the terms of her life. Each admired the qualities of the other.

As Shannon rinsed and stacked plates in the dishwasher, Adelina wiped down the counter and put away leftovers in plastic containers.

"Our children seem so very happy together," Adelina ventured.

"I agree. I've never seen Jamie so content."

Adelina grabbed a broom from the utility closet and began sweeping the kitchen floor. "I understand my daughter," she said. "Even though she thinks I don't know about her. Before Jamie, she made many poor choices in men. She was very unhappy despite the smile she put on her face. When she met Jamie, everything changed."

When Shannon didn't respond, Adelina continued: "I may seem old-fashioned, or what the young people call 'not with it,' but I see things and understand them. I might enjoy my wine a bit much, but it doesn't cloud my perception. *Capisci?*"

"I think so," Shannon said slowly. "I understand the part about seeing things and knowing what they are, even though youngsters assume we're doddering old fools."

"Not so doddering. I know Jamie is gay."

Shannon drew in her breath sharply. "How?"

Adelina shrugged. "Men don't see things clearly, but women do. I knew Jamie was gay the first time Jacopo brought him to us in Little Italy. I was surprised. Jacopo may be many things, but I know he is not gay. When Jamie and Désirée married, I was even more astonished. Happy for them, but very surprised. I thought perhaps Jamie had changed, had

decided he liked women, that he loved my Désirée." She paused in her sweeping. "But I sense nothing has changed for him. How can it be? A gay man and a straight woman, happily married? I won't even fathom a guess as to how they made a child together. Your son may not be in love with my Désirée, but I can tell he cares for her a great deal."

"You're right on all accounts," Shannon admitted frankly. "My son is gay, and he did have a relationship with Jack. I'd rather not go into that, but Jamie's affinity for Désirée is unusual and quite rare for a gay man, I should think. While he may not be in love with Désirée, Jamie is closer to her than anyone, aside from his sister. There is a strange bond between them, an intense love that has nothing to do with romance or sex. It's like a steadfast loyalty that is purely unconditional on almost every level."

"But how did my Désirée become pregnant?" Adelina asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"If I were to guess, I think Désirée conceived the night of my husband's viewing last October. Jamie got very drunk, remember? He and Désirée shared a room, a bed, probably for the first time since they married."

Adelina was thoughtful for a minute. Then her face broke into a grin. "Whatever the reasons and whatever the cause, I'm glad our children found each other. We're both about to become grandmothers, and I'm grateful to be alive to witness it."

"Amen," Shannon smiled. "I'm glad Désirée came into my son's life. Being gay has its own load of baggage, the least of which is personal guilt and anguish. Your daughter accepts Jamie for what he is and loves him anyway, without reservation. She will always have my respect and my undying gratitude for that."

She stepped toward Adelina, taking the woman's hand. "Whatever happens in the future, please know that Désirée will never want for anything. You have my personal guarantee."

Adelina's eyes welled with tears, touched by Shannon's sincerity. "Thank you, *mia cara signora*."

* * *

DÉSIRÉE INSISTED HER CHILD be born at St. Patrick's Hospital, not at the mansion as was family tradition. "I'm not a spring chicken anymore," she declared. "I want my baby born surrounded by doctors and nurses in case the unthinkable should happen."

She went into labor shortly after lunch on Sunday, 15th June 2003. Her water broke as she stood alone in the kitchen at the A-frame cottage. She telephoned Jamie at the Animal Life Centre.

"It's time," she told him, relaying everything he needed to know in two words.

"I'm on my way," he said excitedly.

Next, Désirée called the mansion. Shannon and Adelina had just finished lunch in the rose garden.

"We're coming," Shannon said calmly. "Don't move, Désirée. We'll be right there."

While painfully intense, Désirée's labor was miniscule for a first-time birth. With Jamie by her side, she brought forth a son just before seven o'clock that same evening. The child was healthy and perfectly formed, weighing seven pounds and showing a tuft of black hair.

"He's perfect," Jamie declared as he placed the swaddled infant in Désirée's arms in the delivery room.

She lay with hair matted and not a stitch of make-up, but Désirée didn't care. She gazed at her son in wonder. His eyes squinted as he returned her look with mild curiosity.

"He looks just like you," she told her husband. "He's perfect indeed."

"You never did decide on a name," Jamie pointed out. "Any ideas now?"

"Something new and fresh," she replied in a small voice, exhausted but exhilarated by the birth of her son. "Yet with a nod to history."

"Well? Are you going to tell me?"

"Gabriel John Page."

Jamie stared at her, surprised. "I get John and I'm honored you'd include my great-great-great grandfather, but where does Gabriel come from?"

"I did a bit of research on the internet in the last few weeks," Désirée admitted. "I simply couldn't think of anything on my own. I started looking at religious names, you know, from the bible. One day I came across the name Gabriel, and I just loved the sound of it. Do you know what it means?"

"No, but please . . ."

"Gabriel is an archangel who served as a messenger from God. He first appeared in the *Book of Daniel*. I looked at other names, too, but I kept coming back to Gabriel. What do you think?"

"I like it," he said. "It's new and fresh, just like you said. No one in my family ever had the name, and it doesn't sound like something the Sansovino's would dub one of their offspring." Then he grinned. "You're sure getting an education on the world wide web, aren't you?"

Jamie and Désirée were enchanted by their newborn son, whom they were already calling Gabe, as was the rest of the family. The waiting room in the maternity ward at St. Patrick's Hospital was filled with Larkin's, along with Mary, Mariko and Bridget. Adelina beamed with pride, placing a long-distance telephone call to her husband and eldest son in Little Italy to break the good news.

As soon as he was able, Jamie slipped away to make his own call. He went to the waiting room with his cell phone in hand, standing in front of the picture window which overlooked the front of the hospital. After a few rings, he reached Angie at her apartment in Greenwich Village.

"I'm a daddy," he told his sister gleefully. "I have a healthy son."

"Oh Jamie!" Angie exclaimed. "I'm so happy for you. Is Désirée okay?"

"She's tired but doing great. Are you and Tom coming home for the christening? We just started talking about it, but we'd like to hold it in about two weeks."

Angie demurred. "I'm not sure . . ."

Despite his euphoria at being a father, Jamie quickly lost patience with his sister. "This is probably the happiest day of my life, Angie. Don't spoil it with the stubborn vendetta you have going against our mother, *please*. Frankly, I'm sick to death of it."

"Jamie, I . . ."

"Maybe it's best if you *don't* come," Jamie cut in, changing his mind. "Look, I've got to go. Désirée is waiting for me."

Jamie pasted a smile on his face as he made his way back to Désirée's room. He meant what he said. He was weary of Angie's continued antagonism toward Shannon and wasn't about to allow her selfish behavior to interfere with his happiness. Not today, and not ever again.

THE TWILIGHT: Excerpt from Chapter Fifteen

*December 2003
Larkin City, Maine*

MARIKO AND HER PARENTS spent the night before the wedding at the mansion. Dana and Shannon prepared John Larkin's old room for Leo and Sachiko Woods, while Mariko occupied another room down the hall on the second floor. Shannon relegated a grumbling Kevin to the keeper's cottage until the ceremony.

"You shouldn't see the bride," she told him. "It's bad luck."

"For chrissakes, Shan. I've been dating the woman for eight years. What could I possibly see that I haven't already seen before?"

"Go on with you," Shannon shooed him, grateful Leo and Sachiko were out of earshot.

Kevin and Mariko planned to honeymoon in New York City, staying at Shannon's apartment on Central Park South, returning to Larkin City just before Christmas. In a surprise decision, Kevin already agreed to live with Mariko in her house on Barter Road after the honeymoon. It was closer to work, he reasoned, and he could always drag her back to the mansion for frequent visits.

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Saturday, 6th December 2003

SHANNON HELPED MARIKO GET ready the afternoon of the wedding, with Sachiko at their sides. Mariko's guest room on the second floor had a full bathroom and king-sized bed, with a small sitting area and large mullioned window that faced the direction of the beach footpath and ocean. Shannon asked Sean to bring an old cheval mirror from the attic to Mariko's room so she could observe herself full-length. The mirror, once the property of Molly Larkin, tilted from top to bottom and was framed in cherry wood finish.

Shannon was amazed by Mariko's serenity in the face of her long-awaited wedding to Kevin.

"I was a nervous wreck the day I got married," Shannon said as she helped Mariko slip into her pure white kimono. "How are you managing to stay so calm? I know what a grouchy curmudgeon Kevin is. If I were you, I'd be shaking in my boots."

Mariko laughed. "Kevin is tetchy, yes, but he also has a very tender and soft side."

"I think you're the only one who brings it out in him," Shannon observed.

"We're good for each other despite appearances to the contrary," Mariko replied as she sat down on a small chair in front of the mirror. "Kevin is the only one who can get me to relax, to stop and smell the roses and let my hair down, as he says. I also bring out the little boy in him."

Sachiko clucked her tongue, a slight smile on her face. "*Kare wa henda*. Kevin is strange, but I like him."

"Yes, he's a *very* strange Irishman," Shannon agreed, her eyes twinkling.

Sachiko chuckled. "*Airisshu*."

"Pardon?"

"*Airisshu* - the Japanese word for Irish." She pointed to her daughter. "Never mind that. I'm just happy Mariko and Kevin are finally getting married. I worried it might never happen. Leo and I are getting old, and we want grandchildren. Mariko is forty years old, so she needs to hurry and have a baby."

"Mother, please!" Mariko remonstrated. "Let's get through the wedding first, shall we?"

Laughing together, Shannon and Sachiko helped Mariko don her *tabi* and *zori*, which were short white stockings and clogs, along with an *obi*, a belt that encircled her tiny waist and cinched the kimono together. Next, they assisted her with the elaborate *wataboshi* white headdress, also known as *tsunokakushi* or "demon horns." The accessory draped over her face, signifying the bride's concealment of jealousy and submission to her mother-in-law. It was a moot point since Denise Larkin passed away in 1995, but Shannon found the custom enchanting anyway. It was as if Mariko was giving a nod to Kevin's mother in a show of respect.

After she looked in the cheval mirror one final time, Mariko gave a small smile and spoke softly: "Perfect. I'm ready now."

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EARLIER IN THE DAY, Liam snuck Kevin into the mansion, coordinating their entry with Shannon when Mariko was safely ensconced in her own room. The two brothers made a beeline for Kevin's bedroom on the fourth floor to prepare for the wedding. Shannon left them a tray with a decanter of cognac and two snifters in a thoughtful gesture, hoping it would help keep Kevin calm on his special day.

But Kevin declined a drink. "I had enough hooch last night, thanks. I want to be clear-headed when I lumber across the foyer in my twinkly get-up."

"It wasn't much of a bachelor party," Liam complained. "Twenty men crammed into the keeper's cottage, taking shots of whiskey and playing poker. The Coven would have been better."

"Yeah, but it would have been much harder to pry me out of The Coven," Kevin grinned. "This way we're close at hand and semi-sober." He pointed to the garment bag draped over his bed. "Grab my clothes, will you? Let's get this over with. I'm warning you, though, if you laugh at me in my get-up, I'll hurt you *really* bad. I'd like to see *your* bony little ass in one of these outfits."

Liam tried to keep a straight face as he helped his brother slip into the black *montsuki haori* full-length kimono, split between the legs, and baggy pants known as *hakama*. Kevin tucked a white sash into the pants, and then admired the Larkin family crest embroidered on the breast pocket of the kimono.

"Look at me, will you?" Kevin snorted. "I waited fifty-eight years to get married, and it's come to this. I'm going to face Father Hunter and all our guests looking like an Irish samurai. All I need is a sword swinging at my side to appear the part."

Liam couldn't hold back his laughter. After he regained a semblance of control, in part spurred on by Kevin's fierce glare, he offered a positive note: "At least Mariko made the outfit large enough to cover your frame comfortably."

"She *is* something, isn't she?"

Liam sobered, catching the solemn tone of his brother's voice. Clearing his throat, Liam stood behind Kevin at the bedroom mirror and looked at his reflection. "I know I've said this before, but I'm glad you found Mariko. She's the best. She's understated and serene, yet so funny and wise. I love her to bits, and she'll make a wonderful addition to our family. However, if you asked me ten years ago . . . I never thought you'd give up tall blondes and bleary bar flies for a tiny Japanese lady who brooks very little nonsense. It took you long enough, but you deserve all the happiness in the world. You've earned it, and then some."

"For once I agree with you, *neddy*."

"Just be happy," Liam insisted.

"I'm very happy, and thank you."

The brothers were uncomfortable with frilly sentiment, unused to sibling displays of deep affection, so they let their personal comments rest there.

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SHANNON WAS MAID OF honor, while Liam stood in as best man. She wore a black evening gown with her hair in a French braid, while Liam dressed in an ivory-white suit and tails. The finery was designed to contrast Mariko and Kevin, who wore white and black respectively.

Leo Woods brought his daughter to Kevin, who waited at the bottom steps of the staircase in the foyer with Liam and Father Hunter. Despite his uncharacteristic attire, Kevin managed to retain his masculine dignity. His eyes misted over as he regarded Mariko, a vision in white. He loved every inch of her tiny frame. He was suddenly eager to get started on their life together, bring what it may.

Father Hunter began: "We have been invited here today to share a very important moment in the lives of Kevin and Mariko. In the years they have spent together, their love and understanding of one another has grown and matured beyond measure, and now they wish to live their lives together as husband and wife."

Mariko rested her hand on Kevin's arm, glancing up at him through her veil.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the presence of witnesses to join Kevin John Larkin and Mariko Fujiwara Woods in holy matrimony, which is commended to be an honorable state and therefore not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, discreetly and solemnly. Into this holy estate these two persons present now come to be joined, and share with you their own written vows."

Mariko spoke clearly, her diminutive voice now laced with a resolute firmness. "To you Kevin I give my love, my life and my heart. Long in the making, our union has arrived at this sweet place of matrimony. I value your mind, your spirit, your loyalty and your loving devotion to me. This devotion is returned wholeheartedly on this day and for as long as we breathe on this earth together and forever afterward as we dwell in paradise."

Clearing his throat, Kevin responded in kind: "To you Mariko I give my love, my life and my heart. You have enthralled me from the first day we met and through the many years between then and now. Our love has come to its rightful fruition on this our day of marriage. I will love and devote myself unto you in mind, body and spirit for as long as we breathe on this earth together and forever afterward as we dwell in paradise."

The couple exchanged matching wedding rings brought to them by Alexandra on a hunter-green felt pillow. The yellow gold and sterling silver rings were specially made by Azoulay Gems, featuring an etched *mokume gane* design interlaced with a Celtic knot. After slipping the bands on their fingers, Kevin and Mariko turned to Father Hunter, who now held a tray containing three different-sized Saki cups. The *sansankudo* ritual began, whereby the couple took a sip from each cup to symbolize their union as husband and wife.

Father Hunter intoned his conclusion: "Oh Lord, be appeased by our humble prayers. In your kindness, assist the institution of marriage so that the union made here, joined by your authority, may be preserved with your help. In the name of the Father, the son and the holy spirit. Amen."

"Amen," the guests murmured.

"Vested in me by the state of Maine, I now pronounce you husband and wife." Father Hunter glanced to Kevin. "You may kiss the bride."

Kevin lifted Mariko's veil and kissed her. Instead of a brief peck on the lips, he lifted her up so that her feet swung in the air, branding her fiercely with his mouth.

"Cripes Kevin, can't you wait for the honeymoon?" Liam asked loud enough for everyone to hear.

The foyer erupted in laughter as Kevin released his wife, her feet touching the floor again. Mariko looked flustered, but obviously elated.

He turned to face the guests. "Let's party," he said, a happy grin on his face.

"THE TWILIGHT" INFORMATION

The Twilight by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Club Lighthouse Publishing.

Amazon (paperback):

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/1979181365/>

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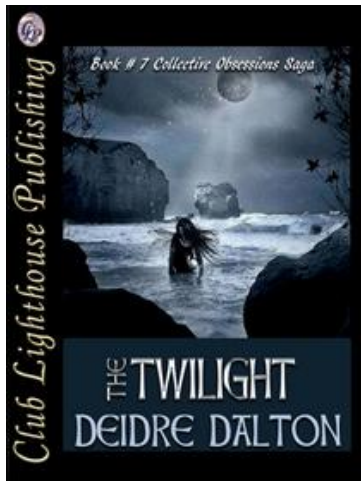
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Barnes & Noble (Nook):

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***The Twilight* @ Facebook:**

<https://www.facebook.com/twilightcos>

"Collective Obsessions Saga" website:

<http://deborahotoole.com/collective/index.htm>

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.

Follow the twists and turns of the Larkin and Sullivan families, who settle in America in the mid-1800s. John Larkin builds his vast business empire while daughter Molly and lighthouse keeper Colm Sullivan establish a connection that will endure for generations.

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The eight-part family saga includes *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*.

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.

Deidre is also author of the BLOODLINE TRILOGY, which follows the uniquely magical journey of one family through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*.

Deidre also writes under the literary pseudonyms Deborah O'Toole and Shenanchie O'Toole.

As Deborah O'Toole, she is author of fiction novels *Celtic Remnants* and *Mind Sweeper*, along with short-story juvenile fiction (*Short Tales Collection*) and darkly abstract poetry (*Torn Bits & Pieces*), and is the author of a series of historical essays, articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

As Shenanchie O'Toole, she writes for Food Fare. She is author and editor of ten cookbooks, along with various food articles and more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.