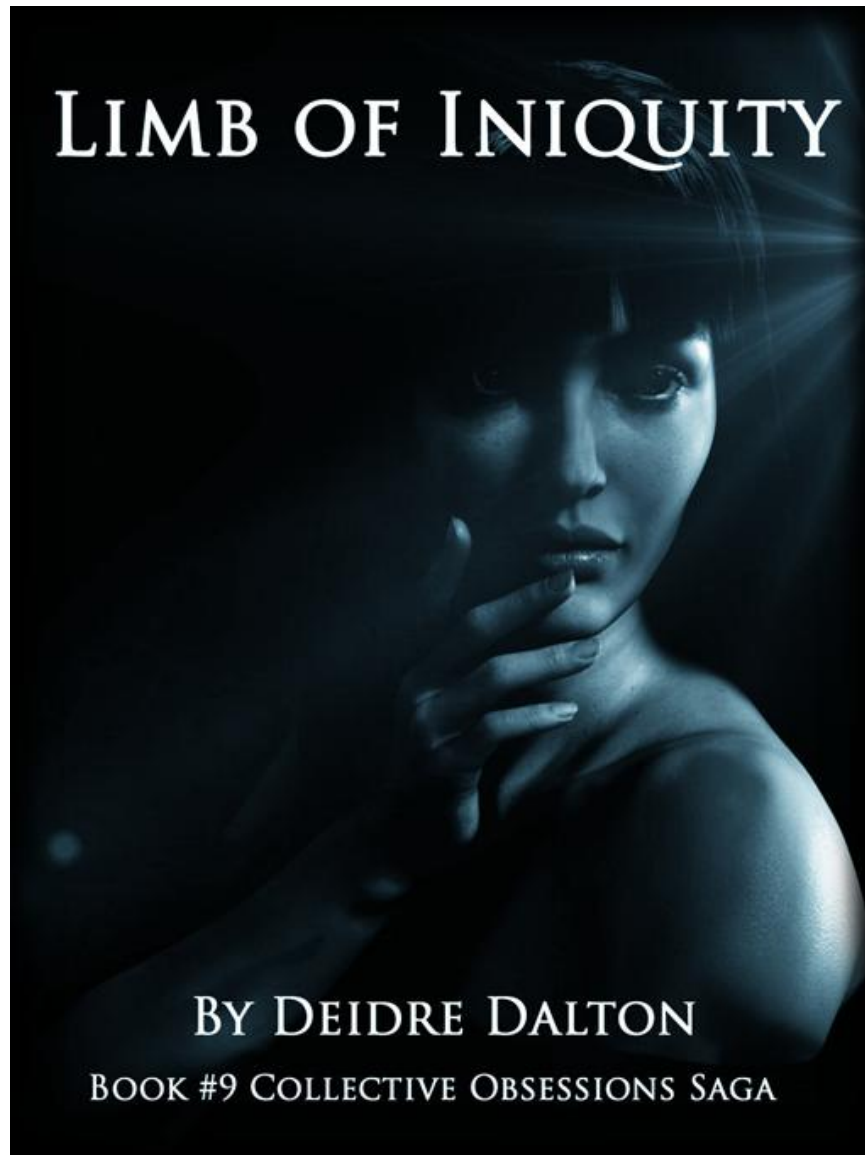


****EXCERPTS ONLY****

Limb of Iniquity

Book #10 Collective Obsessions Saga
By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



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The text in this book was set in *Lora* (body), *Merriweather* (headings) and *Trahan Pro* (book cover).

ABOUT "LIMB OF INIQUITY"

Limb of Iniquity will be released in 2025, part of the Collective Obsessions Saga by Deborah O'Toole writing as Deidre Dalton. The ten novels in the saga chronicle the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than 165 years, most of which are set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

Alexandra Cimarelli wreaks havoc on the Larkin estate, luring her young twin cousins, Dary and Kaito Larkin, into a web of lust and revenge.

Limb of Iniquity brings to light the deadly antics of Alexandra Cimarelli, who made her debut in *The Twilight*, Book #7 in the Collective Obsessions Saga.

Alex was the illegitimate daughter of Scott Page, who was the longtime beloved husband of Shannon Larkin. Alex was abandoned as a child by her biological mother Andrea St. John, only to be adopted by Angela Page, Scott's oldest daughter, and her husband, Tom Cimarelli.

Alex and Shannon have a difficult relationship. Shannon has little use for her late husband's bastard, barely civil to the child even as she grows into an adult. The hostility also creates tension between Shannon and Angela, a friction that endures for years and creates a breakdown of the mother-daughter bond.

Alex wreaks havoc on the Larkin estate, luring her young twin cousins, Dary and Kaito Larkin, into a web of lust and deceit. The grisly death of a prominent member of the Larkin family seems to cement the St. John vow of revenge, and leads the local police chief to investigate Alex's background and the sudden reappearance of her birth mother.

Will Alex be the downfall of the Larkin family, once and for all?

Limb of Iniquity is scheduled for release in 2025.

For more, go to:

<https://deborahotoole.com/deidredalton/>

LIMB OF INIQUITY: Excerpt from Chapter One

Greenwich Village, New York
March 7, 2020

ALEXANDRA CIMARELLI SLOWLY came awake to the strains of *The Addams Family* theme on her cell phone, which rested flat on her bedside table. Eyes still closed, she reached over and began slapping the surface of the table with the palm of her hand, vaguely anxious to silence the annoying interruption to her slumber. Her hand finally made contact with the phone. She slid it toward her, and then placed it to her ear.

"Hello?" She mumbled.

"Alex?" A female voice asked her breathlessly.

"Who's this?" She grouched.

There was a slight pause before the woman continued. "This is your mother."

Alex's eyes flew open. She struggled to sit up in the bed, the phone still to her ear. As she came into a sitting position, the strap of her pink negligee dipped from her left shoulder.

"Who is this, really?" Alex demanded irritably. "Is this some kind of sick joke?"

"No joke," the woman replied firmly. "I'm your natural mother, Andrea Hogan. Or, as I was once known, Andrea St. John."

Alex sucked in her breath. Never, not in a thousand years, had she expected to hear from her birth mother again. The woman had abandoned her when she was seven years old in January 2003, just over seventeen years ago. Andrea had simply walked out of the home she had shared with Alex in Larkin City, Maine, without care or concern of what might become of her. Alex's drunken grandmother, Cora Ann Hogan, wanted nothing to do with the child, either, and fled the scene shortly afterward. As luck would have it, Alex was legally adopted by her half-sister, Angela Page and her husband, Tom Cimarelli, whom she had lived with since. Angie and Alex shared a father, Scott Page, who had an affair with Andrea while married to Shannon Larkin, Angie's mother. While she sometimes wondered what became of her birth mother, Alex had stifled the bitterness and anger at being discarded by her own flesh and blood, almost succeeding in wiping the woman from her mind.

Alex's mouth formed into a stubborn, grim line. "If you truly are who you say you are, why are you calling me *now*, after all these years? And what makes you think I'd be interested in anything you might have to say?"

"I deserve that," Andrea responded frankly. "And more, I'm sure, in your mind. I just wanted to see how you are, and maybe convince you to meet me for coffee so I can see for myself."

"I'll ask you again - *why now?*"

"Whether you believe it or not, you haven't been very far from my mind since I left Larkin City all those years ago. I've kept loose tabs on you as best I could without being discovered, but it's not the same as seeing you in person . . ."

"Why did you dump me in the first place?" Alex broke in, her tone angrily blunt.

"I want to explain all of it to you," Andrea told her quickly. "There was a reason for it, I assure you. If you'd just meet me somewhere, I can tell you everything. It might change your opinion about me, and my past actions."

"I have no opinion about you one way or another," Alex said coldly. "You are nothing to me, and haven't been for a very long time." She paused, wanting to hurt the faceless voice speaking to her on the phone. "I have a *real* family now, so in truth you did me a great favor by abandoning me. If I'd stayed with you, I'm sure my life would have taken the same sordid direction yours likely did."

Andrea sighed. "We all make difficult choices in life, Alex, but sometimes those choices are the wrong ones. I'm not proud of my past life, and the things I had to do in order to survive, yet I'm a completely different person now. I would like to make amends to you in any way I can." She paused. "If you'll let me."

"How did you get my phone number?" Alex wanted to know, disregarding Andrea's statement.

"I found it on the website of your employer," Andrea replied promptly. "You've made quite a name for yourself with the exclusive perfumes you've created for the famous fashion designer, Suki Sutton Shimada. I can't help but be proud of you."

Alex snorted. "So, *that's* it! You're sniffing around because you think I have money to burn. If it's a loan you're after, you called the wrong number."

"I don't want anything from you," Andrea was quick to defend herself. "Except for one meeting so I can see how you are for myself. If you don't want to see me again after that, I'll never bother you again."

"I don't want to see you," Alex said flatly. "And please, lose my phone number."

"Alex, *please*. I'm begging you." Alex could hear the desperate break in Andrea's voice. "Just one meeting, that's all I ask."

Alex was silent as she pondered the woman's words. She admitted to herself that she was curious to see how Andrea had fared over time, and it might be

enjoyable to lord her success in her birth mother's face. Rub her nose in it, as it were. Perhaps rationally explaining her cold-blooded abandonment might shed Andrea less of an ogre in Alex's eyes, and it couldn't hurt to hear the story. Besides, she had the day off and had nothing else to do. Why not kill a half-hour with her birth mother, just for kicks?

Angie and Tom would be horrified if she told them, but they need never know.

Before she could change her mind, Alex found herself agreeing to Andrea's request. "The Amano Cafe on 172 West 4th Street," she directed crisply. "In one hour. I'll give you thirty minutes, no more."

"Thank you," Andrea said happily. "I'll be there. You won't regret it, Alex."

"That remains to be seen," Alex snapped, ending the call.

She tossed her cell phone to the foot of her double bed, drawing her knees to her chin. She was a strikingly beautiful young woman of twenty-four, and she knew it. She was tall - reaching five-foot-ten - and her olive-tinted skin and green eyes, framed by a pageboy mop of shiny black hair, bespoke her kinship with Angie and their father, the late Scott Page. Her physical resemblance to her half-sister and father was unmistakable. Mixed in with the stunning beauty was an outwardly sparkling personality, socially coquettish when the need arose, and a buoyant sense of humor when the mood struck her. There were other times, however, when she became brooding and viscous-minded, traits she had managed to conceal from both Tom and Angie, along with Tom's father, Vito Cimarelli, who also lived with them in the their three-bedroom apartment on West Fourth Street in Greenwich Village. Alex felt the old man, as she liked to refer to Vito in her mind although she openly addressed him as Gramps, was wise to her true persona, although he never acknowledged it. He was always civil when interacting with her, so she considered him to be rather harmless.

Alex was shaken from her personal reverie by the sounds of a loud crash. Leaping from the bed, she donned her blue cotton robe and dashed from her room. She skidded to a halt when she reached the kitchen, seeing Vito seated at the table, his gaze on a cast iron skillet resting upside down on the floor.

"What happened?" She demanded, clutching the robe to her. "Are you okay?"

Vito glanced at her sheepishly. "I was setting the pan on the stove when it slipped from my hands. I'm okay, just mad at myself for being so clumsy."

Alex bent over to retrieve the skillet from the floor, placing it gently on the stove. Rain or shine, Vito always had scrambled eggs and toast for breakfast with a large cup of black coffee. She noticed the coffeemaker brewing in a corner on the

counter, it's pungent yet welcome aroma filling the room. There was also a carton of eggs on the counter, along with two slices of white cottage bread.

"I'll make your breakfast," she told him kindly.

"Thank you, Alex. You know how I like it."

She chuckled. "Indeed I do, Gramps." She began heating butter in the skillet, and then whisked two eggs in a bowl with milk, salt and black pepper. She set the table with a plate, knife and fork, after which she popped the bread into a toaster.

The kitchen was galley-style with dark red walls and cherry wood cabinets, with a counter partition. It was small but modern and included a breakfast nook and closet pantry. A sliding glass door led to a small balcony overlooking West Fourth Street. It was a cozy location inside the apartment she shared with Angie, Tom and Vito, all she had ever really known since she was a child. It filled her with a soothing comfort she rarely found anywhere else.

"Aren't you eating?" Vito asked her after she poured him a cup of coffee.

Alex shook her head. "I'm meeting a friend at the Amano Cafe in about forty minutes. I'll eat something when I get there." She glanced at the older man. "Where are Tom and Angie? Surely they're not working on a Saturday."

Vito shrugged. "They high-tailed it out of here about an hour ago. Something about a break in the story they've been following about the Corona virus."

Alex shuddered as she stirred the eggs in the skillet. "I hope it never comes to pass, but at least Tom and Angie are trying to get at the truth." Tom, owner of the long-standing and respected *Manhattan Daily Journal*, was as devoted to his work as was Angie. They were dogged reporters, always attempting to bring the truth to light on any story they were working on. The offices of the paper were located in Tribeca, which was about two miles away from the apartment.

She deftly slid the eggs onto Vito's plate, along with two slices of buttered toast. She smiled at him. "Enjoy, Gramps. I'm going to go and get dressed."

"Thanks, Alex," he replied appreciatively. "It looks delicious."

She returned to her bedroom and flung open the closet door. What to wear for her meeting with Andrea St John? Deciding not to fuss about it - what did it matter what Andrea thought of her, anyway? - Alex donned a pair of snug-fitting black jeans and a dark red sweater pullover, with knee-length shiny, black leather boots. She sat at her light blonde dressing table and applied a touch of sienna eye shadow and the barest hint of black eyeliner. Her dark coloring called for little else, and her brilliant green eyes spoke for themselves. She took a small, silver wristwatch - a gift to her from Tom and Angie - and slipped it over her left wrist. Running a comb through her shiny hair, she rose and went to the living room of the

apartment. By now, Vito was seated on the couch, reading the latest copy of the *Manhattan Daily Journal*.

At the front door, Alex slipped into her black, waist-length coat striped with grey on the sleeves. She put on a dark red knit cap, tucking strands of hair behind her ears. "I won't be gone long," she said as she reached for the doorknob.

Vito nodded vaguely, his eyes still engrossed in the newspaper. "See you later."

When Alex reached the street after stepping from the fire-engine red apartment building on West Fourth Street, she noticed the day was overcast and cold. Dipping her chin into the front of her coat, she began walking the half-mile to the Amano Cafe. She followed the curve to Greenwich Avenue, which in turn joined with 6th Avenue in Greenwich Village. It was still fairly early, just past nine o'clock, so the sidewalks weren't as littered with people as they typically were on a Saturday.

The cafe was small, but light and airy with tall windows, white floors and leafy greenery positioned in corners. In all, there were only about a dozen tables for seating. Alex drew in a deep breath as she entered the establishment, her highly-tuned sense of smell appreciating the aromas of coffee and baking bread, which deftly provided a cozy ambience to the space. She removed her hat and ran her hand through her hair as she gazed about, looking for the presence of her birth mother. Would she recognize Andrea St. John after more than seventeen years?

Then she saw the woman sitting at a small table in a corner. Even seated, it was obvious she was tall, as her long legs stretched out under the table. Short, dirty blonde hair was now streaked with copious amounts of grey, the brown eyes surrounded with wrinkled folds of skin and black eyeliner. The long, wide nose was as pronounced as ever, bulbous in appearance. The woman wore a khaki-colored raincoat, a small beige purse resting on her lap. Alex noticed her thinness in long, tapering fingers that, even from a distance, seemed red and chapped.

There was no doubt, even after the passage of so many years, that the woman was her birth mother. Perhaps a little worse for wear, but definitely the woman who had given her life.

Then the woman met her gaze, a smile instantly coming to her lips. She half-rose from her chair as Alex quickly walked toward the table. She slid into a seat across from Andrea, placing her hands on the table. She regarded the woman with anything but affection.

"You have thirty minutes," Alex told her coldly, her face expressionless.

"Alex," Andrea began softly. "May I say how beautiful you have turned out? You are simply stunning."

"You can say what you like," Alex returned sharply. "Again, you have a half-hour. I'd get to the heart of the matter if I were you. I'm walking back out the door in exactly thirty minutes."

"There is so much to tell you, things you never knew before, but I'll try to squeeze it into thirty minutes . . . "

"I suggest you get started."

Andrea glanced down at her hands nervously. "The cause for all our misery back then was the Larkin family. I don't know how you feel about them now, having lived amongst them all these years, but the family - Shannon Larkin in particular - made my life a living hell. When I tried to sue Scott's estate on your behalf, they bested me in court and then proceeded to make it impossible for me to survive in Larkin City. Unbeknownst to me, Shannon owned the cottage we were living in on Ash Lane. She raised the rent so high . . . I simply couldn't manage it, not even working as a nurse. In essence, her intent was to run me out of town, and she succeeded. She probably wished I had taken you with me, but I learned later that Angie stepped in and took care of you. I had a feeling she would do something like that, her and Tom, which was one of the reasons I didn't hesitate in leaving you behind. I knew you would be cared for as a blood relative to Angie and her brother, Jamie. They would never let you come to harm. Shannon, on the other hand . . . " A flush of anger flooded Andrea's face as she dared to glance across the table at Alex. "Shannon didn't want you around as a reminder that her husband strayed from her, into my arms. She was bitter, and probably still is. She refused to accept the reality of it."

If there was a clink in Alex's armor, it was her intense loathing of Shannon Larkin. "Shannon is a bitch," Alex finally spoke-up harshly before she could stop herself, her green eyes flashing. "I hate the woman with a passion." She shook her head. "She's civil to me, for sure, but she is as cold as ice. She has no regard for anyone but herself. Her behavior has all but destroyed her relationship with Angie."

Andrea studied her daughter for a brief moment, as if realizing she had just acquired a way into Alex's life. Could their mutual hatred of Shannon Larkin be a catalyst?

"Do you spend much time at the family estate?"

Alex shrugged. "We spend Thanksgiving and Christmas through New Years there, and part of the summer months. I love Larkin, it's where I was born after all, but I don't like being around Shannon and her sanctimonious kin."

"I don't blame you," Andrea said sympathetically. "The whole family is in a world unto themselves. They think they're above everyone else." She paused, studying Alex again. "Angie is different, though. She's a decent person, despite the

fact that Shannon is her mother. Jamie is okay, too. He and Angie made sure to do right by you, for which I'm eternally grateful."

"I love Tom and Angie," Alex told her empathically. "And I adore Jamie. They have been wonderful to me." Her eyes darkened. "They stepped-up when you ran off and failed me. I get your reasons, sure, but I was your flesh and blood. How was it so easy to leave me behind like you did?"

"It *wasn't* easy," Andrea replied firmly. "You'll never know how difficult it was, but I couldn't stay in Larkin City, and I had no money to support you. I didn't want you to live in poverty by being with me, which is exactly what happened. It took me years to get back on my feet again, but by then you were nearing college age. I was afraid to contact you then, feeling you'd reject me on sight."

"I probably would have," Alex murmured. Her eyes went to her wristwatch. "You have fifteen minutes left, Andrea."

"Your grandmother is still alive."

Alex snorted. "She abandoned me, too. It must be a family trait."

Andrea stared at her. "You don't know, do you?"

"Know what?"

Andrea sighed. "Angie paid my mother to leave Larkin City so she could adopt you."

Alex's eyes narrowed. "I don't believe you."

"Talk to Angie. She'll tell you if you ask her outright." She folded her hands on the table. "Angie went to see my mother at her apartment in Larkin City. She offered Cora one hundred and fifty thousand dollars to leave, on top of which she threw in a new car. It was right after Cora fled that you were legally adopted by Tom and Angie."

Alex pondered Andrea, her face still expressionless. "So where is the old hag now?"

Andrea drummed her fingers on the table. "She has dementia, the poor thing. I placed her in a rest home in Larkin City a few years ago. She's eighty-one years old, and in surprisingly good health despite her affliction."

"Why did you put her in Larkin City, of all places?"

"She always liked it," Andrea replied. "Even though she was basically run out of town by Shannon Larkin, same as I was, she loved living there. There's little harm she can do to anyone now."

"How did she find you after you left Larkin City?" Alex wanted to know.

"It was about five years before she looked me up in New Jersey," Andrea answered her. "I was living in Newark, working at St. Michael's Medical Center, when she found me. We've been connected off and on ever since. When she started

having trouble with her mind a few years ago, she came to me and asked for help. I couldn't turn her down, even though she wasn't the best of mother's to have. I found an opening at the Harbor Springs rest home in Larkin, which is located near the university. She's been there ever since." She sighed. "I go and see her a few times a year, but each time it's worse. She barely recognized me the last time I was there around Christmas."

"You were in Larkin City around Christmas?" Alex queried in surprise. "I went into the village a few times just to get away from that God-awful Larkin clan. And to think you were just a short distance away."

"I was there on Christmas Eve for a few hours," Andrea was quick to reply. "I had to be back in Newark to work the next day."

Alex stared at her mother for a moment. "Let's cut to the case, shall we? What do you want from me now?"

Andrea shook her head. "I don't want anything, Alex. I swear it." Her eyes watered suddenly. "I'm grateful you agreed to meet with me. I couldn't ask for more."

Alex pursed her lips. "You're not going to try and see me again?"

"I'd love to see you again, but I would never push you for that."

"Why?"

Andrea's tone became firm. "Whether you believe me or not, you are my daughter and I love you. I always have and always will. I realize I didn't demonstrate it too well when you were a little girl. In truth, I failed you miserably. Yet I'm also very human and, like most people, I've made mistakes in my life, errors in judgment that I bitterly regret. I would give everything I have to make it right with you, but I also understand your reluctance and will honor your wishes in the matter."

On impulse, Alex took her cell phone from her coat pocket. "Give me your contact information, and I'll think about it."

Andrea's face brightened. "Really?"

Alex nodded. "Yes, but be quick about it before I change my mind."

Andrea rattled off her phone number and address. "I work afternoons and evenings at St. Mike's, but other than that, I'm basically always home."

After inputting her mother's details in her telephone contacts, Alex returned the cell to her coat pocket. "I have to go," she said, standing from the table abruptly.

Andrea rose as well. "Again, thank you for meeting with me, Alex. Please take care of yourself."

"Yeah," Alex replied dismissively as she turned away. "You, too."

Andrea watched her daughter walk away, her eyes hopeful and smugly satisfied at the same time. The first hurdle had been crossed, and she was confident it was the kernel of a new beginning for them both.

LIMB OF INIQUITY:

Excerpt from Chapter Two

AFTER LUNCHING WITH Suki at the nearby Nerai eatery - where they both opted for *Lavraki* (Greek-roasted sea bass) with wild mushroom risotto - Alex returned home to West Fourth Street. Tom and Angie were still absent, while Vito was taking a nap on the couch.

Shrugging her shoulders, Alex retreated to her room. She sat on the bed as she removed her boots, laying them in a careless heap on the floor. Leaning back against her pillows, she flipped through her cell phone to see if she had missed any messages. She noticed a text from Suki, sent just a few minutes ago.

Feel like coming back to my house tonight for a spot of dinner? I'm making Yakisoba, your favorite. Let me know.

Alex stared at the text screen, a faint smile playing around her lips. Aside from being friends, she and Suki had been intimate on many occasions, although they were not exclusive. Alex considered herself to be heterosexual for the most part, but enjoyed the infrequent sensual forays with the bisexual Suki.

Alex replied to Suki's text:

I'd love to come for dinner. Can I bring anything?

Suki was quick to answer her.

No, just bring yourself. See you around 7pm. :)

Next, Alex called Angie's cell phone, curious as to what was keeping her and Tom so late. Angie answered after the second ring.

"Alex! What's up?"

"I was wondering the same thing about you and Tom. Everything okay?"

Angie snorted. "We can't get straight answers from higher-ups about the virus, but they've assured us they will have an announcement soon."

"It sounds serious," Alex replied, worry in her tone.

"It could be, so we need to take extra steps to protect ourselves in the meantime. I suggest we wear face masks when we leave the house from now on."

"I'm going to Suki's for dinner tonight. Is it safe?"

"It should be. Just try not to interact with too many people, Alex, until we know all the details about the virus. If we don't get home before you leave for your dinner, then we'll just see you tonight."

"All right. Be careful the two of you."

"Likewise to you."

Alex set her cell on the bedside table, staring up at the ceiling as she continued to lounge in bed. Angie was more like her best friend than a mother,

which suited her fine. They were half-sisters, after all. Angie had saved her from going into the foster system when she stepped in to adopt her years ago, after Andrea deserted her.

And Tom was perhaps the perfect father. He never snooped or intruded into her life, although he made it clear he cared for her as he would a daughter. The man was so deeply involved in his business, he likely found it a relief that she didn't require constant emotional maintenance.

Alex had learned to be self-sufficient and resilient with Angie's pragmatic yet loving guidance, enabling her to obtain a BA in chemical engineering from New York University in 2017. She had always been fascinated with science, most specifically in the composition of chemicals to produce a variety of subtle aromas found in perfumes and soaps. Suki had hired her almost at once when Alex applied for a chemist position at her company.

Suki had spared no expense when she had the fragrance lab built on her business premises, assembling shelves, storage areas, gleaming white tables, refrigeration units, glass beakers, flasks, funnels, steel scales, herbs, spices and other chemicals to assist in scent-making. Alex always wore a white lab coat, rubber gloves to prevent contamination and clear goggles to protect her eyes in case of spillage.

She became invaluable to Suki as time went on. She raised Alex's wages whenever she produced a new perfume, soap or body splash. In just two years, Alex had created the perfumes *Calamity Untamed* (wildflower scent in a black-pink bottle), *Calico Breeze* (coconut and vanilla in beige packaging), *Nocturnal Lunacy* (sage and sea salt mixed with patchouli, blue-green packaging with black lettering), *Onyx Jade* (black violets in a black/emerald bottle with gold lettering), *Purrvescence* (cream and sugar cookie scent for children, brass/white packaging), and *Waterfall Bay* (lemon and lime scents mixed with wild cherries and rum, dark red and deep yellow packaging). The body splash line included *Almond Cream*, *Cherry Dreamscape*, *Cinnamon Sticks*, *Earthy Musk*, *Mint Reflections*, *Poppy & Pears* and *Vanilla Pearl*. She was currently trying to render two more body splashes, *Haunted Kiss* (pumpkin and vanilla oils mixed with sweet almond in orange packaging), and *Honey & Cream* (honey and milky cream scents mixed with sweet jasmine and green tea oils, in light beige packaging).

In essence, Alex was happy with her perfect life and fulfilling career. She loved residing in the busy yet glamorous New York City, and could not envision living anywhere else. She was financially secure, thanks to the posthumous largesse of Scott Page. While he was her father, she had no tangible memories of him as she had been all of seven years old when he died nearly two decades ago.

Alex grew drowsy as she mused on her good fortune, closing her eyes with a smile on her face.

* * *

ALEX AWOKE REFRESHED a few hours later. She took a long, hot shower and then donned a pair of shiny black leather pants with a silky white poet blouse tucked in at the waistband. She placed her bare feet into a pair of Bergdorf Goodman high-heeled black pumps with red soles, which gave her height an added boost.

She went to the living room, where Vito was watching the WNBC newscast on television. "I talked to Angie on the phone a few hours ago. She and Tom will probably be home late."

He shrugged. "I'm used to it by now."

"I'm going to Suki's for dinner," Alex told him. "Can I get you anything before I leave?"

"I'm good, but thanks. I might heat up some leftover lasagna for supper, or better yet, order CBGB pizza from *Two Boots*."

Alex sighed. The CBGB pizza from the *Two Boots Restaurant* was one of her favorites, which included chicken, broccoli, garlic and basil pesto. "Save me a slice, will you?" She requested wistfully.

Vito grinned. "You bet, kid."

"Thanks. See you later."

Alex hailed a cab outside of the apartment building, giving the driver Suki's address on 70th Street. She did not like walking the streets during evening hours, so a taxi was the best solution in her mind.

Suki answered the door quickly, a wide smile adorning her lips when she set her glance on Alex. "Let's go into the living room and have some wine," she suggested. "Dinner is still cooking."

A fire was burning in the white marble grate in the living room, surrounded by shiny hardwood floors and red-tinted throw rugs. After the two women settled into chairs with goblets of sparkling wine, Alex broached the subject of the virus rumors. "Tom and Angie were meeting with one of their contacts to hopefully get more information about the corona virus."

Suki pursed her lips. "It seems to be getting more serious by the day, yes?"

Alex shrugged. "Tom and Angie will get to the bottom of it, never fear."

Suki took a sip of her wine, worry lines creasing her brow. "I have a strong feeling it's not going away so easily. I'm left to wonder how to conduct business if the situation worsens."

"We can deal with it as the need arises," Alex told her. "If worse comes to worse, we can always work from home temporarily."

"That would be difficult in your case," Suki pointed out. "You need the lab at your disposal in order to work, although I'm sure we can think of something to make it feasible."

Alex sighed. "Let's not worry about it yet. It may come to nothing."

The two women took their meal in the small dining room adjacent to the galley kitchen. Alex savored the delicious *Yakisoba*, eagerly consuming the tender pieces of pork loin covered with Udon noodles. The entire dish was richly flavored with soy sauce, rice wine, fresh ginger, cabbage, carrots and scallions.

"I could eat this every day," Alex declared after polishing off her portion.

Suki smiled. "I know. That's why I made it tonight."

Alex peered at her. "Is there something special about tonight?"

"Any time you're in my home is special to me," Suki replied quietly.

Alex became alert. Whenever Suki became somewhat sentimental and complimentary, it signaled she wanted to be intimate with her. While Alex considered herself to be straight, she didn't mind the occasional bed sport with her boss. Suki was a gentle and considerate lover, and knew all the erotic buttons to push in order to bring Alex to multiple climaxes. Having lost her virginity four years ago to a maintenance worker at the apartment building on West Fourth Street, Alex was no stranger to lovemaking but preferred men in her bed.

Suki's room was on the second floor, which was large room with a tall, mullioned window overlooking the alleyway between her building and the one next door. The king-sized bed was covered with a cream-colored spread, its surface devoid of throw pillows or other feminine frills.

They hastily divested themselves of clothes, reclining on the bed together. Suki began by stroking Alex's thighs and breasts, planting little kisses on her neck and nipples at the same time. They were soon entangled in each other's arms, giving and receiving touches and erotic exchanges with their tongues. After both of them had reached climaxes multiple times, Suki fell into a deep slumber, her arm resting on Alex's belly possessively.

Alex stared at the ceiling, her body relaxed and satisfied. It wasn't so bad being Suki's occasional lover, but she sensed her boss would like to make it a permanent arrangement. Alex wasn't ready for such a commitment - not to a man

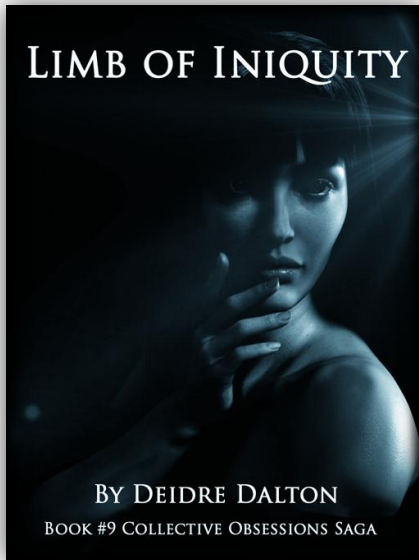
or a woman - as she enjoyed her independence and her life as it was in general. She had no intention of settling down any time soon.

With a sigh, Alex gently extricated herself from Suki's arm and quietly rose from the bed. She dressed hurriedly, smoothing her hair back with her hands. With one last fond glance at Suki, who was still sound asleep, Alex left the room and closed the door behind her.

BOOK INFORMATION

Limb of Iniquity will be the ninth and final book in the Collective Obsessions Saga by Deidre Dalton. The novel is tentatively scheduled for release in 2025.

More excerpts will follow in the coming months.



<https://deborahotoole.com/collective/limb.htm>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deidre Dalton is author of the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, which chronicles the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than 165 years, most of which are set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine. Titles in the ten-part family saga include *Hearts in Sorrow*, *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight*, *Megan's Legacy* and *Limb of Iniquity*. For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/collective/>

She is also author of the *Bloodline Trilogy*, which follows the uniquely magical journey of three women through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*. For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/bloodline/>



Deidre is author of the *Larkin Community Cookbook*, which is a compilation of recipes mentioned or prepared by characters in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, and the electronic versions of *About Larkin* (companion guide to the *Collective Obsessions Saga*), and *The Private Journal of Colm Sullivan*.

Writing under her real name of Deborah O'Toole, Deidre is also author of the fiction titles *Celtic Remnants*, *The Crypt Artist*, *Glinhaven*, *In the Shadow of the King*, *Mind Sweeper*, a book of poetry known as *Torn Bits & Pieces*, and the *Short Tales Collection*.

For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/>

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, she also writes for the cooking/recipe website Food Fare. She is author of a dozen cookbooks, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.

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Deidre is a native of Greenwich, Connecticut. She has also lived in San Francisco, Reno and Spokane, among other US cities. She currently resides in the mountain west.

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