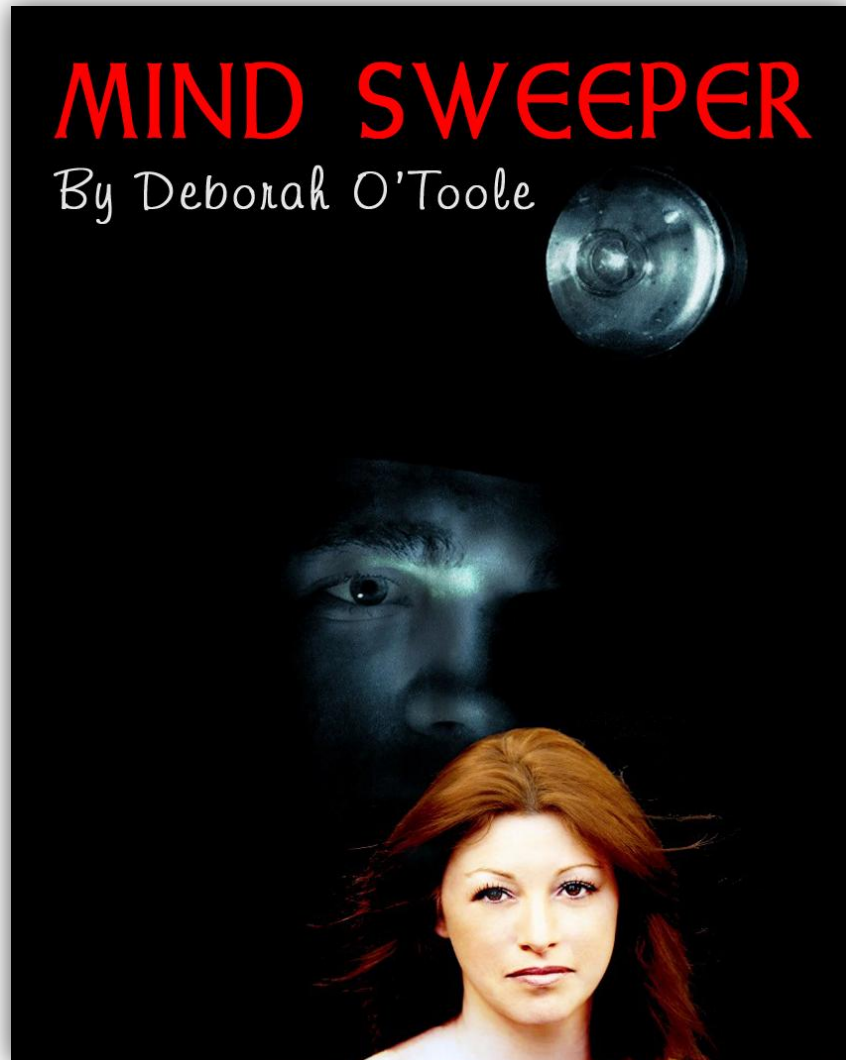


Excerpts from:
MIND SWEEPER

By Deborah O'Toole



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ABOUT "MIND SWEEPER"

Mind Sweeper is a uniquely haunting mystery/suspense novel by Deborah O'Toole, released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in 2021.

Newly-widowed Beth Mills accepts an outpouring of sympathy from her community after a freak mining accident takes the life of her husband, Aaron. Unbeknownst to anyone, she is secretly delighted that her cruel husband is lost to her, but never expects his vicious ghost to return and haunt her in more ways than one.

For more, go to:

<https://deborahotoole.com/>

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter One

June 2007

Timely Cataclysm

BETH MILLS WINCED when she heard Louise Martin's anguished sobs. The grief and tension in the room was highly palpable, leaving no one immune. Beth averted her eyes from Louise, dipping her head to stare at the floor. It was best not to interact with anyone unless she had to.

She heard a door open and close, but refused to look up. The room grew hushed except for the sounds of intermittent sniffing, and then the somber voice came.

Beth knew it to be her husband's employer, Misty Canyon Mines owner Bob Palmer.

"The current bore hole drilled to the floor of the mine has given us additional information," the voice was hesitant, as if reluctant to continue. Beth took this as a good sign. "We dropped the camera down and found three lifeless forms."

The entire room gasped, as if everyone present had drawn breath at the same moment. Beth was silent, still staring at the floor.

"I'm sorry to say we have assumed the remains to be that of Tomas Martin, Kevin Reardon and Aaron Mills," Bob said, his voice cracking with emotion. "We can't be one hundred percent certain because of external damage to the bodies, but it stands to reason as all three men are missing. We haven't accounted for John Mejza and Al Pierce. At this point, we have no reason to believe any of the trapped miners will be found alive."

Louise Martin's sobs began anew while Annie Reardon cried out, rocking back and forth in her chair. Other women rushed to Annie's side, trying to comfort her. She folded into their arms.

Beth Mills displayed no outward show of emotion at the announcement of her husband's name. She continued to stare at the floor, moving her feet around in little circles, her heels lightly scuffing the hard surface.

Floors were funny things, Beth thought idly. The Community Center's concrete floor was a god-awful patchwork in lime-green, with chips missing here and there. She remembered the May Day Dance just three weeks ago when Aaron swung her to his side, his beer-laden breath hot and repulsive on her face. She recalled the angry glint in his eyes; she remembered the pain of the bruise on her back, of his balled-up fist striking her over and over just a mere few hours before the dance. He always made sure to leave her visibly unmarked, hitting her in places that would never be exposed to public gaze.

"Bethany?" Bob Palmer was talking again, but this time he was sitting next to her, his hand touching her arm lightly. "Bethany, I am so sorry. *I am so very sorry.* Is there anything I can do for you?"

Beth fought the urge to laugh out loud. Instead, the sound was muffled as she covered her mouth with her hands.

Bob took her display as grief, sympathetic to her attempts to mask an outburst. "Is there *anything* I can do?" He repeated quietly.

She finally looked up, staring at Bob. His iron-gray hair was unkempt, and there were deep shadows under his brown eyes. She wanted to laugh again, but held her hands firmly to her mouth.

"*You have already done the best thing you could ever do for me,*" she wanted to say. "*You waited too long to drill the bore hole into the mountain and in all likelihood my husband suffocated to death. Or was he crushed by the cave-in? Whatever the case, you have liberated me from a monster, from a pig of a man.*"

Instead, she moved her hands away from her mouth and whispered: "I don't know what to do. I never imagined this would happen. *What am I supposed to do now?*"

Bob gazed into Beth's damp blue eyes and felt a wrench in his heart. He had been plagued by various stages of guilt since the Misty Mountain Mine collapse six days ago. He felt great sorrow for Beth because he admired Aaron Mills, who was known in the community as a man of great character and ethics.

"I can help you, Bethany," Bob told her consolingly. "Whatever you need me to do, I'm there."

She stared at him again. "*For starters I need you to stop calling me Bethany,*" she thought with sudden viciousness. "*Aaron called me that, and I hated it. He called me Bethany when he shoved my face into the toilet, and when he pushed my hand onto the hot stove element. He called me Bethany when he sodomized me with a beer bottle, and when he dry-shaved my privates. Please don't call me Bethany. It's Beth . . . Beth . . . Beth.*"

Bob took her silence as shock. He reached for her hand as she lowered her head. He studied her short-cropped auburn hair, taking in the beginnings of silver at the temples. He knew she was at least forty years old, but despite the bits of gray she looked like a girl in her twenties.

"I need to get out of here," she spoke without looking up. "I need to go home."

"Let me take you," he suggested.

She shook her head. "Thank you, but no. Please, I need to be alone. It's best if you stay here to comfort the others."

He nodded in understanding. "Of course, Bethany. I'll call and check on you later, okay?"

"I'll be fine," she said. "I just need to be alone to wrap my head around this, to try and comprehend . . ."

"Let me walk you to your car," he said as they rose from their chairs.

She refused his help. "I can manage, *honestly*. I need some air, some space . . ." she purposely let her words trail off, hanging her head again and covering her mouth with her hands as the grin threatened to spill.

"I'll call you later," he repeated.

Bob Palmer watched as Bethany Mills walked away from him, his eyes sad. She was such a lovely woman, tall and slender with a naturally poised grace and lightness of movement. He continued to observe her as she made her way through the room, accepting condolences from all who approached her. While she seemed to be in an understandable state of shock, she was managing better than he hoped.

Bethany and Aaron were a familiar sight in Ivytown. They regularly attended church services and community events, typically holding hands and conversing freely with the locals. Aaron was a native son of Ivytown and thought of as a natural leader and a man with a highly compassionate nature. He volunteered countless hours of personal time to the Community Center, often with Bethany in tow. His loss was a great blow to the close-knit mining town.

Twinges of guilt surged into Bob again. The influx of emotions had become a familiar state of affairs for him in the last six days. While he knew Misty Canyon Mines met all safety guidelines, sanctioned and otherwise, he could not help but feel responsible for the disastrous cave-in. Miners bonded like family, and Bob felt each loss personally, to the core of his being. He doubted the community would ever truly recover from the tragedy.

* * *

A HANDFUL OF journalists waited for word outside Ivytown's Community Center. Most of them were local, with only one television crew from Portland. The magnitude of the mine accident was not nearly catastrophic enough to warrant national attention. The assembled media had been waiting all night, receiving only scattered bulletins from Bob Palmer every few hours. The updates were not reassuring, nor were they deeply informative as of yet.

When Beth opened the doors of the Community Center, reporters looked at her expectantly. One stepped forward with microphone in hand, but Beth waved him away. "Sorry," she murmured. "You'll have to wait for Mr. Palmer. I don't have any news for you. Please, let me by."

The reporter stepped aside, while others in the group refocused their attention on the double doors of the Community Center to resume their waiting game.

Beth breathed in the night air, grateful to be away from the benevolent support of those inside the Community Center. She felt as if she would snap if she had to endure another murmuring conversation or light pat on the arm. *It was unbearable.*

"If there is anything I can do . . ."

"Aaron was such a wonderful man . . ."

"I am *so sorry* for your loss . . ."

"*Please* let me know if there is *anything* I can do . . ."

The words racked her brain as she reached her dark blue Bronco in the parking lot. She slid into the driver's seat, closing the door and locking it. She rested her forehead on the steering wheel, trying to gather her thoughts before she drove away.

Her reality came with sudden clarity. *She was free.* She was finally free of the monster everyone called her husband; she was liberated from the pain, the pretense and the violence. Seven years of subterfuge fell away from her in a clean wash, brought about by a blessed natural disaster that no one could have predicted.

She wasn't thinking of the other families suffering through loss today. Truth be told, she did not feel she was suffering at all but was rather elated by the seemingly impossible turn of events.

She smiled, her forehead still resting on the steering wheel. Days of anticipation and hopeful, tortured waiting had left her tired and drawn earlier, but now she was energized and renewed. Her battery was fully charged and she couldn't wait to run with it.

Beth started the engine and drove her Bronco out of the parking lot slowly. She saw others leaving the Community Center for their respective cars, but she studiously avoided them. Once she reached the road, she turned left and accelerated.

It was a dark, warm night, the stars bright in the sky. Her headlights stared down Main Street, glossing over the painted yellow divider lines. She had made this trip many times before, more often than not with Aaron. Their home next to Ivytown's only cemetery was a five-minute drive from the Community Center.

She balked at the location when Aaron first brought her to Ivytown, but then fell in love with the old structure. It took her a bit longer to realize Aaron liked the locality so no one could hear her screams.

The house itself was a dream. Aaron inherited the family property many years ago – long before he met her - and it contained a quintessential two-story turn-of-the-century sandstone abode. The attic included storage and a large, finished area which Beth used as a sewing room. It had been her one true salvation to retreat into "Bethany's Tower" as Aaron called it, a place where she could make her own clothes and achieve relative peace while needle-working and knitting.

Aaron scoffed at her favorite pastimes, rarely coming into her retreat. However, this did not stop him when he was in a battering mood: he simply dragged her by the hair from the attic to pummel her on the darkened staircase leading to the second floor. She always assumed he did not beat her in the attic because he was afraid of accidentally sticking himself with the many needles lying about.

"The prick was afraid of being pricked," she thought with some humor.

A mile from the Community Center, Beth realized she was alone on Main Street. No cars were coming toward her, and none were behind her. A great relief flooded her body as she allowed herself the mirth she had been containing since learning Aaron was presumed dead.

The sounds of her laughter were muffled in the Bronco, bouncing off windows and drowning out the air conditioner. She snorted at the end of another round of giggles, causing her to laugh even harder.

She tasted salt as tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. She wiped her eyes and felt the stinging contact of her salty flesh. She sniffled, coughing on another laugh with a wide smile.

Then her voice came fierce in the confines of the Bronco: "The son of a bitch finally got what he deserved," she spat aloud. "And I didn't have to lift a finger. I hope he suffered full terror before life left his useless body, and I pray his last thought was of me, alive and well without him."

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Three*June 2007**The Funeral*

BETH SAT ON her bed, poring over photographs of her husband, old and new. It was not a pleasant task, so she fortified herself with several glasses of wine before undertaking the ghoulish chore.

The sun was setting as she flipped through the images, leaving small shadow spots on the bedroom carpet. She sipped her red wine slowly as she gazed at black and white and color pictures, many of them brining back memories she had hoped were long erased from her mind.

Aaron smiling on their wedding day, giving no hint of his truly dark personality. There was another. Aaron pictured in his work gear and mining hat, standing in front of Misty Canyon Mines with his fellow coal diggers, smiling and looking into the camera with an almost innocent eagerness. And yet another: Aaron with her at the May Day Dance just three weeks ago, a few hours after he had beaten her with his balled-up fist and leaving hidden bruises on her back. His face was passive in the picture, as if all was right in the world, while Beth looked pinched and nervous.

Then she came upon a photograph taken a year ago during the Misty Canyon Mines summer picnic, which was held in the public park nestled between the Ivytown Library and City Hall. Aaron was seated at one of the wooden picnic tables, wearing a white polo shirt and khaki knee-shorts. He looked refreshed and at ease, a slight smile on his face. She stared at his ruddy features, wondering who had taken the picture. She could not remember. It was a blur to her, probably because earlier in the day he viscously kicked her in the shin when she served his breakfast fifteen minutes later than usual.

"This will do," she whispered, taking another sip of wine. "His friends will like this photo. It captures Aaron as *they* knew him. Too bad I never got a picture of him red with rage as he beat me. Then they'd know the *real* Aaron, the man they so admired and adored."

She released the photograph and watched it flutter to the top of the pile on her bed. If she had the nerve, and the utter gall to disrespect the dead no matter how loathsome he had been in life, she would proclaim her abuse at his hand to the entire community. But what good would it do now? If anyone *did* happen to believe her, they would probably find it in appalling poor taste if she revealed the truth so soon after his "tragic" death.

She picked up the picture again, placing it on the nightstand next to the bed, along with her empty glass of wine. Then she swept the rest of the photographs onto the floor with her hand, not caring as they floated and scattered over the carpet.

Beth laid her head on her pillow, her eyes closing wearily. "Somehow, someday, I will get revenge for what Aaron did to me," she said to herself groggily. "Whether he is aware of it from his place in hell or not, I *will* have my judgment day."

* * *

AARON'S EMPTY CASKET was interred in the family mausoleum in Ivytown Cemetery a few days later. Prior to burial, there was a short memorial service at the funeral home.

The Mills Family Mausoleum had been built shortly after Aaron's great-grandfather completed construction on the Mills family home.

The gray-stone structure was deceptively small, with wrought-iron coverings around the entrance door and the tiny basement windows. A short flight of stairs led into the heart of the mausoleum, which had a large floor space and stone markings for each individual crypt. Beth never liked the building, found it unsettling that it was so close to the house, but Aaron seemed content to have the remains of his father and brother nearby.

"Me and you will be in there someday," he told her often, usually after he had consumed several beers. *"We'll be right alongside each other for eternity, with Daddy and Jesse for company."*

After Aaron's posthumous burial, at which half of Ivytown attended, Beth hosted a gathering inside the house. She stayed up late the night before, baking cakes and cookies, and preparing trays of cold appetizers. Bob helped her serve tea and coffee, assisting her with the wash-up afterward.

Beth wasn't sure how she made it through the reception with her sanity intact. She wanted the entire farce to be over with, but she forged ahead with the proper sad smile pasted on her face.

Roger Ellison came to the reception, having missed the crypt-side service. He was one of Aaron's oldest friends, the two of them having gone to high school together. Roger was now a local doctor who operated Ivytown's only walk-in medical clinic, which specialized in treating miners and their families. He had been married and divorced twice in ten years, with three children who lived with their respective mothers in Portland and Seattle.

Roger reminded Beth of Aaron in so many ways - the tall frame, husky build and blond hair. But where Aaron had possessed a classically handsome face, Roger's countenance was rounder, less defined, and his eyes were coal black rather than green. Roger, too, was kinder and more thoughtful than Aaron was in private, his concern for the welfare of others prevailing over secretive and hellish needs.

Despite Roger's medical qualifications, Aaron had never seen fit to use him as their primary doctor over the years. This puzzled Beth in the first flush of their marriage, but after the beatings commenced she understood all too well why her husband avoided the

local medico in favor of strangers at a hospital in Portland. Roger never questioned his friend's choices, which puzzled Beth even further although she never pursued an answer for fear of retribution.

Roger looked sad and exhausted, his blond hair tousled with dark circles under his eyes. Beth had not seen him at the Community Center the night Bob Palmer spoke to the crowd because he had been at the mine site, waiting for rescue workers to bring the injured and maimed up to the surface. His wait had been in vain as the course of events played out. Beth had not seen him since the official announcement that the trapped miners were dead.

Roger made his way to her and hugged her lightly. He stood back to look at her face, and she saw the sorrow in his eyes. "I'm so sorry, Beth," he said, his voice hoarse. "I wish there was something I could have done."

Beth nodded in understanding, hoping she appeared convincing to one of Aaron's oldest friends. "I know, Roger. There was nothing you could do. It was out of everyone's hands, including the rescue workers."

Roger looked down, shaking his head. "Nothing like this has happened here since . . . well, since the accident that took Aaron's father and brother some twenty years ago. I suppose that's a good average as far as mining accidents go, but it doesn't provide solace for those left behind."

"No, it doesn't," she agreed with a murmur.

"I'm sorry I haven't called or stopped by sooner," he apologized, looking at her again. She saw the tears in his eyes. "After I left the mine site, I returned to the clinic. I have been inundated with patients - wives, children, and other kin - all of them distraught and experiencing symptoms of grief. I can't tell you how many prescriptions for sleeping pills I've filled in the last few days."

"Poor thing," Beth said with genuine sympathy. "You need to get some rest, Roger, or *you'll* be the one collapsing. Then you won't be of use to anyone."

He looked stricken. "I didn't mean to imply that my brand of suffering is worse than that of the community," he apologized again. "I just wanted you to know why I hadn't contacted you sooner."

Beth took his hand in a gesture of forced sympathy. "I completely understand."

He leaned over and pecked her on the cheek. "You're busy with this reception right now, so I'll get back to you, okay? If you ever need to talk, just pick up the phone and call me. I'm in the book."

"Aaron had you on speed dial," Beth said with a small smile.

Roger tried to return her smile but it came back as a cheerless grimace. He squeezed her hand and moved on. "*At least he didn't say 'is there anything I can do?' or 'I'm sorry for your loss' before he walked away,*" Beth thought with relief. "*He is a bit of a hand-toucher, though.*"

Beth also saw Anthony Simonetti at the gathering. She looked forward to her private meeting with him later. She was still uncertain how much Aaron actually left her in his will, but anxious how it might affect her future.

Although well-known by Ivytown residents, Beth didn't really count any of them as close friends. She had always been afraid to let anyone too close for fear they would deduce her abusive and shameful circumstances. She saw Edward and Marilyn Daniels at the service, looking somewhat out of place in their old-fashioned mourning garb - black and shapeless - from another generation. She idly wondered if Edward and Marilyn had told their niece Maxie about Aaron's death, but she quickly shrugged the thought aside.

She was surprised when Amy Grace approached her, engaging in lengthy conversation. Amy was the secretary at Misty Canyon Mines, and she knew most of its employees quite well. She was a tall woman in her early thirties with long blonde hair and blue eyes.

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Mills," Amy said to her in a quiet aside.

Beth steeled herself to the phrase, hackneyed by its monotony and pretension. "Thank you, Amy. But please call me Beth."

Amy smiled. "If there is anything I can do for you . . ."

Beth studied the woman briefly, realizing there was something familiar about her name. Not just a sense of work-related general acquaintance, but a kernel of personal association that came with the surname of Grace.

"I seem to remember that Aaron knew your family," she said. "But I can't recall . . ."

Amy reddened slightly. "My older sister Andrea dated Aaron in high school," she replied.

"I see," Beth said faintly. "Whatever happened between them?"

"Aaron wanted to work in the mine as soon as he graduated from high school, but Andrea wanted to go to college first. The summer after graduation they drifted apart and lost touch. My sister went to Ashton College in Vancouver, where she also met and married a fellow student. They still live in Vancouver."

"You must be upset by Aaron's death, too," Beth observed. "Did you know him well?"

Amy nodded. "I knew your husband as well as anyone else in the mine. Since he was a supervisor, he attended staff meetings in the office. He was such a thoughtful and intelligent man, always bringing croissants to the conferences. We are going to miss him."

"*Thoughtful and intelligent, my ass,*" Beth repeated Amy's words in her mind. "*He never let me eat croissants.*" Aloud, she said: "Aaron had a great many friends in the mine. It's understandable as he worked there for most of his adult life, but I'm afraid I don't know them all."

"He spoke so highly of you, Beth," Amy said, almost in eager fashion. "He bragged about what a good cook you are, and how you kept your home so clean. He also mentioned your love of needlework and seemed particularly proud that you made some of your own clothes."

Beth was speechless. When had the bastard ever spoken highly of her, especially to her face? She felt a bubble of laughter coming on, so she quickly covered her mouth with her hand and coughed.

Amy touched her arm.

"*Oh God, not another arm-toucher,*" Beth thought wildly.

"I didn't mean to upset you. I'm sure hearing about how Aaron spoke of you is painful right now. I apologize."

Beth recovered herself. "You didn't upset me, Amy, and you have no need to apologize. It's going to take me a long while to get through all this, but hearing about Aaron's affection helps." Smiling, she added: "I need to tend to the other guests, so will you excuse me?"

"Of course, Beth. *Please let me know if there is anything I can do . . .*"

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Five

June 2007

Nightmare Inauguration

THE NIGHTMARES BEGAN the week after Aaron's funeral.

Beth gradually eased herself into a comfortable routine. She rose late, ate a big breakfast, and then took a long walk in the cemetery woodlands away from the bastard's grave. She typically enjoyed a leisurely lunch on the deck, and then a nap with a bit of television in bed. She ate a light supper, and then devoted her evenings to sewing and needlework in the attic before retiring after midnight.

A few days after the funeral service, Beth decided it was time to get rid of Aaron's personal belongings. The presence of his clothes, his combs, brushes, soap and other items made her uneasy as she still slept in the bedroom they once shared.

After obtaining several cardboard boxes from the local grocery store, she gathered Aaron's clothes from the bedroom closet and dresser, his shoes, his bedside books and reading glasses, his shaving accessories and his aftershave lotion, *Aqua Velva*.

How she hated the smell of *Aqua Velva*. The scent of it was in her nostrils forever. The stale aroma lingered as she remembered his years of abuse, bent over as he beat her senseless or raped her. She shuddered. For good measure, she took the remaining bottle of cologne and poured it down the sink.

She packed his brushes and combs, recalling how he used to take great care in making his blond hair appear naturally spiky, spending more time on his outer shell than she ever did. His hair was so thick he resorted to using hairbrushes rather than combs. When it came time for a trim he would only trust the local barber in Ivytown, Miguel Sanchez, who had been taking care of the miners' hair for many years.

After she finished packing his belongings, she hauled the three boxes to the attic, one by one. Shoving them in a far corner, she placed a blanket over the top of the boxes so she wouldn't be reminded of them every time she came into the room.

For the most part Beth was content, happier than she had been in many years. Aside from occasional bad memories, she felt like she was on vacation and loathed the idea it might come to an end.

But of course it did. The first nightmare came on a late June evening. She was curled into a ball in the middle of her bed, sleeping peacefully. She saw herself as such in the nightmare, the setting almost surreal in its tranquility.

Then the tall windows flung open violently, bringing a rush of wind across the room and onto the bed. The air was uncharacteristically cold for June, so Beth shivered and huddled deeper under her blanket.

Footsteps awoke her in the nightmare. They came from the corridor outside the bedroom, approaching the door with agonizing slowness. They were heavy steps, like those made by someone wearing work boots.

In the nightmare, Beth began to slowly waken, vaguely annoyed by the listlessness of the footsteps. "If you're coming in, *do it already*," she grouched with impatience.

As if in answer, the bedroom door opened with an odd creak that she'd never noticed before. She lay still in the bed, her breath shallow as she waited. She heard the plodding footsteps move across the carpet, and then suddenly come to a halt.

She felt the bed jolt when the footsteps stopped, as if the person coming for her bumped against the mattress. She opened her eyes unhurriedly; afraid of what - *or who* - she might see.

The first thing she envisioned was the murky light emanating from the miner's hat, placed square in the forehead. She sat up in the bed, cold fear gripping her insides. She was terrified, but she had to know who was standing over her with such quiet interest.

The shadow of Aaron's face showed underneath the miner's hat. His spiky blond hair jutted from the base, his emblematic unshaven appearance seeming like peach-fuzz on a piece of fruit. Mud and coal streamed down his face, as if he were fresh from Misty Canyon Mines.

The unmistakable fragrance of *Aqua Velva* assailed her nostrils, filling her with fresh terror. The scent of the aftershave was mingled with dank and moldy earth and the stench of decay.

His presence petrified her, but it was the stare he directed her way that began the trembling in her body. He was too quiet, *too* still. It wasn't like him to be so immobile, unless there was a full-scale storm of anger and fisticuffs ahead.

"How can you be here?" she gasped. "You're dead!"

He threw back his head and laughed. It was the horrible, maniacal mirth she remembered during his most brutal moments. It triggered a deep hysteria within her, forcing her to scream and retreat. She pulled the covers over her head and continued to scream, squeezing her eyes tightly shut, feeling every nerve ending in her body as if they were on fire.

When she awoke again, sunlight flooded the room from the open windows. The only sounds were the birds chirping outside, and the gentle wisp of a breeze. She lay still, listening, trying to orientate herself.

She sat up in bed, a sense of relief coming over her. *It was just a dream*. She had nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. She swung her legs to the side of the bed, intent on rising to start her day.

Then she felt a strange sense of wet muck seeping between her toes. She closed her eyes, afraid to look down. *What fresh hell was awaiting her now?*

There was a fat streak of mud under her feet, the combination of two very large footprints. A faint sprinkle of black dust surrounded the prints, spread out on each side.

Then she detected the faint stench of *Aqua Velva*, barely a wisp of scent but unmistakably present.

"Mud, coal dust and *Aqua Velva*," she said. "So it wasn't a dream after all. He *was* here, and he *was* laughing at me . . . or am I simply losing my mind?"

She stood up, her fear turning to anger. "I have absolutely nothing to feel remorseful about," she scolded herself. "If this insanity is coming about because of some deep-seated guilt over my joy at Aaron's death . . . well, it's just *ridiculous*. I did nothing during our marriage to warrant his violent and despicable treatment of me. I stayed and stayed and *stayed*, accepting his abuse for fear he might kill me. If anything, he should be burning in hell and I should be as free as a bird."

She moved to the bathroom, where she retrieved a towel to clean the mud on the floor. She would put the incident from her mind and carry on with her day.

"I won't let the bastard control me from the grave," she promised herself as she cleaned the bedroom floor. "Not now, not ever."

* * *

IT WAS NEAR lunchtime when she heard the doorbell ring. She had been mopping the kitchen floor, the finishing touch to her whirlwind of cleaning for the morning. Since Aaron's death she avoided such chores, but the activity kept her mind occupied.

When she opened the front door she was shocked to see none other than Maxie Daniels. The woman smiled at her, reaching out her hands.

"I took a chance you'd be home," she said. "I just got into town and wanted to see you."

Beth was stunned, but happy to see her former co-worker. Maxie was the last person she expected to see, yet her presence brought a surge of elated relief.

"What on earth brings you to Ivytown?" Beth was finally able to ask, taking the woman's hand.

Maxie's eyes clouded. "I'd been planning my two-week vacation with no more idea than to hang around my apartment in San Francisco, but when I heard about Aaron . . . I'm so very sorry, Beth."

Beth drew her into the house. "Please come in," she said quickly, shutting the door behind them. "Thank you for your sympathy, Maxie. It's been a rough few weeks. Did you just find out about the mine accident?"

Maxie nodded. "My aunt and uncle told me about it a few days ago," she admitted. "They didn't think to call me when the accident occurred, probably because Aaron and I weren't exactly close. I heard about it the roundabout way when I called to check in with them last Sunday."

"It was a tragic accident," Beth said, attempting to compel an echo of grief into her voice.

Maxie searched Beth's face momentarily, as if she were forming a comment. Then she seemed to change her mind.

"How long will you be in Ivytown?" Beth asked, letting the moment go.

"Two whole weeks," Maxie replied brightly. "When I heard about Aaron, I decided to come here to visit my aunt and uncle, and to check on you. We seemed to lose touch after you and Aaron were married, but I would love to catch up."

Beth blushed slightly, remembering her avoidance of Maxie - or anyone else from her past - following her wedding to Aaron. The beatings left her ashamed, unwilling and unable to stay close to people she already knew.

"We'll have to talk about that," Beth said softly. "Why don't we have some coffee?"

Ten minutes later, Beth and Maxie were seated in the kitchen, enjoying mugs of steaming hot coffee and buttered blueberry muffins.

"Are you still working at the ad agency?" Beth asked after she poured them a second cup of coffee.

Maxie's amber eyes lit up. "Yes, can you believe it? I've moved up to executive administrative assistant. My boss is the firm's new president, Morgan Bailey."

Beth raised an eyebrow. "Morgan is president of the firm now? When and how did *that* happen?"

"It sounds incredible, doesn't it? About a year ago the old boss was discovered embezzling funds and was fired. As you know, Morgan was Carl Gillis' executive assistant, learning all he could from the old man. Morgan was not interested in the less than legal business acumen of our former boss, but rather his ability to draw in clients and fix on a winning advertising strategy. The board of directors was so impressed by Morgan's abilities after they fired Gillis they decided to put him in place as president. Let me tell you, he hasn't let them down. Morgan has done a smashing job, and everyone loves him."

Beth shook her head with a smile. "But I just can't picture Morgan as the president of the company. Wasn't he awfully skinny, with pimples and thick glasses?"

Maxie laughed. "Indeed, but you should see him now. He wears contact lenses and works out at Gold's Gym on Market Street. To top it off, a dermatologist did wonders for his skin. You wouldn't recognize him today. In fact, he has become quite a ladies' man."

Beth joined her in laughter. "If you say so. I would never have guessed *that* outcome."

Maxie sipped her coffee. "Do you ever miss it?"

"What?"

"Working at the ad agency?"

Beth shrugged. "I did in the beginning, when I first moved to Ivytown. I felt so alone and isolated then. But after awhile I became used to the routine of a small town, and I suppose I forgot about work and my place in San Francisco."

"You can always come back."

"After a seven-year absence?" Beth was skeptical. "I doubt even Morgan Bailey is that accommodating. Besides, I'm not sure what I want to do right now."

"Do keep it in mind," Maxie urged her. "What is there to keep you in Ivytown now? Aaron's house? Surely you could sell it, move back to San Francisco or anywhere you like for that matter, and start a new life."

Beth recalled the terms of Aaron's will. "If only it was that simple," she said.

"It's as simple as you make it," Maxie insisted.

"Aaron made sure nothing was simple," Beth said bitterly before she could stop herself. She was aghast at her personal statement, not used to sharing her feelings with anyone.

Maxie was attentive, leaning forward over her mug of coffee. "Beth, please feel free to tell me what is bothering you. I noticed it the minute you answered the front door. Your nerves are strung as tight as a wire, which is understandable considering what you've been through the last few weeks. But I think there is something else on your mind, and I would like to help you if I can. Please trust me. Anything you say to me will never go further than this room."

Beth wasn't ready to fully confide in anyone. Seven years of fear and mistrust left her uncomfortable in revealing her thoughts, although she knew Maxie could be trusted. But she couldn't bring herself to do it - *not yet*. She smiled timidly. "I'm just maudlin, really. The last few weeks *have* been difficult, and I'm being overly sensitive. I hope you can understand."

Maxie stared at Beth for a moment, not believing the explanation but deciding to leave the matter alone for now.

"Can you stay for lunch?" Beth asked her, desperate to change the direction of their conversation. "Or perhaps you'd rather come back for dinner?"

"My aunt and uncle have plans for dinner tonight," Maxie told her as she finished her coffee. "We're going to the Pinecomb Inn for their famous chicken and dumplings. Would you care to join us?"

Beth demurred. "Not tonight, I'm afraid. I'm not up for dinners on the town yet."

Maxie nodded. "I fully understand. There's no pressure, Beth. You need to mourn and recover at your own pace."

"Can you stay for lunch then?" Beth pressed her, not wanting the woman to leave.

"I have to run some errands for my aunt," Maxie replied with regret. "I'd like to take a rain check, though. I can come back tomorrow with pizza and beer around one o'clock. How does that sound?"

Beth was instantly cheered. "That sounds wonderful. I'll look forward to it."

Maxie hugged her impulsively, feeling Beth's slight recoil at the contact. She stepped back to observe Beth closely, noticing the strain around her eyes. "You need to get some rest," Maxie said quietly. "I think a good sleep will help your outlook tremendously."

Beth agreed. "It's not as easy as it sounds, but it is getting better by the day."

"Good," Maxie said as she and Beth made their way back to the front door. "After lunch tomorrow, is it possible I might see Aaron's grave and pay my respects?"

Beth was appalled into silence by Maxie's casual request. The idea of visiting Aaron's sepulcher again filled her with trepidation, with a fear she could not identify. After her nightmare last night, she was vaguely reluctant to view the final resting spot of her husband, the irrationality of it annoying her. Not that he could jump out of the cold earth to attack her, considering his body wasn't even there, but the absurd notion kept her at bay nonetheless.

"I can point you in the right direction to the Mills family tomb," Beth murmured, refusing to meet Maxie's eyes. "It's only about twenty feet away from here, but I'm not ready to go back yet."

Maxie took Beth by the arm near the front door, her tone full of sympathy. "I understand, of course. Yes, I would like to visit the mausoleum and pay my final respects tomorrow."

"I appreciate your concern," Beth said lightly, although she truly wished the entire subject matter would simply go away. "I'll see you tomorrow, then?"

"I'll be here at one o'clock," Maxie assured her. "It's so wonderful to talk to you again, Beth. I'm looking forward to lunch so we can continue our conversation."

After Maxie left, Beth hurried back to the kitchen to tidy the coffee mugs and muffin crumbs. She was nervous and unsettled, the energy making her anxious to keep her hands busy. Talking to Maxie about Aaron spooked her more than she realized. She had no desire to visit his damnable tomb, knowing full well the sight of the crypt would set her trembling with fear and loathing.

She walked out onto the deck. She breathed in the fresh air, hoping to clear her mind. Unbidden, she allowed her eyes to wander to the cemetery, where the Mills family mausoleum was clearly visible across the narrow dirt road. Its gray stone exterior was somewhat worn by years of rain and snow, but the structure was impressive all the same. In a flash, she realized people would expect her to be interred with the Mills family someday by virtue of her status as Aaron's wife, but she decided to remedy the assumption the first chance she got.

Back in the house she telephoned Anthony Simonetti's office, speaking to his wife Meredith. "I'd like to make an appointment with your husband to draw my own will," she told her. "Is that possible within the next few days?"

"Of course, Mrs. Mills," Meredith responded with some surprise. "Anthony has an opening tomorrow morning around nine o'clock. Would that be convenient for you?"

"Yes, I'll be there," Beth said. "See you then."

She felt better already. Making sure she did not lie alongside the empty grave of Aaron Mills for all eternity was a good start, another effort on her part to distance herself from the bastard who once called himself her husband.

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Eight

January 2001
Life in Ivytown

BETH MISCARRIED TWO months later, through no fault of her own. The initial joy she experienced and shared with her mother during the holidays was replaced by an episode of Aaron's rage and the loss of her child.

She didn't tell Aaron she was pregnant until after the New Year, until she was absolutely certain she was carrying their first child. She kept an appointment with her obstetrician in Portland, and the doctor confirmed her condition.

Deliriously happy, Beth played out a scenario in her mind whereby she informed Aaron of his pending fatherhood, imagining his joy equal to hers, of his smiling face and look of pride when he heard the news.

She dressed in a light-gray sweater and skirt, the fabric soft and clingy against her skin. She had purchased the outfit at the Ivytown Boutique following her appointment with the doctor, unable to resist its alluring softness.

Later, she realized with great bitterness that apart from their courtship – when Aaron filled her head with romantic notions of understanding, thoughtfulness, compatibility and the vehement promise of a happy life together – he probably never *really* felt the same way she did – not at their wedding, and certainly not during their agonizing marriage.

The February night she decided to tell her husband she was pregnant, Beth prepared his favorite foods: broiled steak with the fat trimmed off, steamed broccoli and pasta salad with Greek olives, grated carrot and sliced scallions, and Sangria wine.

She set the dining room table with their formal dinnerware, laying out scented vanilla candles at each end of the polished surface. She smoothed linen napkins underneath shiny silver forks and knives, and painstakingly hand-wiped two wine glasses so that no water spots would mirror through the maroon color of the liquid.

The meal started out well enough. Aaron complimented her on her dress. She noticed his eyes taking in her curves with interest, a light in his eyes she hadn't seen in a few weeks because he was always tired from working in the mine all day. She knew the look signaled that he wanted to make love to her later, after dinner and *after* a few glasses of wine.

They were just finishing their meal when Beth decided to tell her husband the good news.

"I saw Dr. Hunt in Portland today," she said, watching him as she took a small sip of wine. *Mustn't drink too much now that I'm pregnant*, she thought. *But surely a glass of wine won't hurt once in awhile.*

"Oh?" he replied casually, not looking her way. Instead, he popped another piece of steak into his mouth. "What for?"

"I've been queasy and out of sorts for a few weeks," Beth said, managing to hide her disappointment at his apparent lack of interest.

"So what's the verdict?"

She was momentarily puzzled. "Sorry?"

Aaron paused eating, setting his fork on the table. "What did the doctor say?" he asked slowly, emphasizing each word as if he were talking to an imbecile. "*What did the doctor say was wrong with you?*"

Beth felt her skin fuse with the heat of banked anger at the patronizing tone in his voice. How was it he could turn her happiness sour within a split second? She looked down at her plate, her eyes trailing the ooze of blood from her steak. She felt her stomach begin to roll, her nausea threatening to rise to the surface.

"Answer me Bethany," Aaron pressed sternly. "What did the doctor say?"

The joy had already escaped her. She was suddenly left wishing she had nothing to say to him, with no news to impart. Why bother with guessing games and flowery phrases now? The excitement was gone. Worse, she felt as if something was about to go *very wrong*.

"I'm pregnant," she blurted out unceremoniously. With a last sliver of hope, she looked at her husband to gauge his reaction. How could he possibly find fault with her for carrying his child?

Finally, Aaron paid attention to her. His stare was unflinching, neither shocked nor emotionally moved. The silence seemed to drag on for minutes rather than seconds. She met his eyes, not daring to move otherwise.

"Pregnant?" he asked matter-of-factly.

She nodded. "Yes, darling - pregnant. Remember how we talked about becoming parents? I have to admit it wasn't really planned for *right now*, but here we are. You're going to be a father, Aaron. According to Dr. Hunt, the baby is due in mid-August."

"Planned?" he said vaguely, a look of surprise finally crossing his face. "Talked about becoming parents?"

At least he was showing some sort of emotion, although stunned surprise wasn't what Beth had hoped for.

"Yes," she answered him. "We talked about becoming parents. The night you proposed to me you also asked me to be the mother of your children. Remember?"

Aaron pushed away from the table, his chair making a scraping sound across the floor. She immediately tensed.

"That was before I realized what your physical future holds in store," Aaron said coldly. "You have no choice in the matter, Bethany. *Look at your mother*. It's your destiny to take after your mother as you age, and I don't like it. *Not one bit*. Mother Kern would probably be fit and slender if she hadn't given birth to you, but having a child ruined her

body, and her health. Inevitably, the same thing will happen to *you*. There is no way around it, unless you remain childless."

Beth's head was spinning. She was not able to fully comprehend his words - they sounded like garbled noises to her, the irrational ramblings of a fanatic. "W-what are you saying?" she asked, bewildered.

"It's not too late," he said, his voice coming as reasonable to his ears. "You're not too far along; you haven't gotten fat yet . . ."

She gripped the edges of the table with her hands. "What are you saying?" she cried out. "Tell me, what are you saying?"

Aaron stood up, knocking his chair backward to the floor where it fell with a large *crack*. He leaned down to her, and she saw the disgust and anger written there.

He began to shout, his voice causing her to jerk in reaction. "What I'm saying, Bethany, is you have to *get rid* of it. I'd rather be childless than have a fat wife." He leaned even closer to her, if that was possible. "Do you get me *now*? Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

She was horrified, but unable to move. "Are you insane?" she dared to ask him. "Have you lost your mind? I'm *not* getting rid of our baby, Aaron, no matter what you say."

He snorted - an ugly, dismissive sound that was in keeping with his callousness. "Like you have any say on the matter," he spat. "You dumb, misguided bitch."

Before she could speak, he grabbed her from the chair and yanked her to the floor. She started to scream, but - *whack!* - he slapped her hard across the face.

Then he began dragging her, first out of the dining room and into the foyer. She started to struggle, clutching at his wrists with her hands. He kicked her in the ribs, forcing the breath from her body.

Pulling her by the hair, he climbed the stairs one at a time. Every step caused her great pain, from the roots of her hair to her ribs, back and legs. Her arms were useless, flailing about wildly but somehow never connecting to his body in defense.

Finally, with one great heave, he dumped her on the floor at the top of the stairs. She was grateful for the respite, feeling the soft carpet against her burning face.

Aaron knelt down over her. She could hear he was winded from his exertions, but he managed to talk anyway. "You're going to lose the baby," he rasped. "Through no fault of my own or of your own, you had a few too many glasses of wine and tripped down the stairs. *Do you understand me?* That's how it's going to go, and that's what you're going to tell the doctor when I take you to the hospital."

"No," she whispered, the effort hurting her ribs. "I *will not* do as you say. I want my baby, Aaron. For God's sake, *just let me go*. I will leave this house tonight and you will never have to see me again, but please . . . *I want my baby*."

"*I want my baby, I want my baby*," he mocked her. "Tough *shits-kee*, Bethany. And I *will not* let you go. You are *my* wife, whether you like it or not, and that's the way it's going to stay."

He grabbed her by the hair again, raising her head off the floor. "You'll do as I say, or I'll kill you here and now. I'll bury your body where no one will find it. I'll tell people you ran off and left me, and you know god-damned well they'll believe me. People will say: *Poor Aaron Mills, mixing it up with a city girl only to have her run out on him.* It will be just like what my stupid mother did to my father. And just think what your disappearance will do to your fat hog of a mother."

He let go of her hair, forcing her head to the floor with a thud. She moaned, closing her eyes to the horror of her predicament. She was helpless against him, and he knew it.

"Can I expect you to cooperate, Bethany?" he asked her sharply.

"Lose my child or lose my life," she thought hazily. "Put my mother through unimaginable grief and hurt . . . but what about after it's all said and done? How can I stay here, stay in a marriage that has become a literal hell on earth, a torture chamber filled with fear and beatings and unspeakable acts . . ."

"I asked you a question, Bethany."

"I'll cooperate," she choked out. "Whatever you want, but please stop hurting me."

"Just one more hurdle, sweetheart," he breathed. "Come on now, stand up."

"But why?" she cried. "Aaron, I hurt so much. Please, let me go to the bed."

"Not yet," he soothed. "But soon."

He pulled her to her feet. The blood rushed to her head, and she fell against him. He led her to the top of the stairs, where he faced her towards the foyer below.

He put his lips to her ear. "Are you ready, Bethany?"

"Ready for what . . ."

Before she could finish her question, he pushed her forward, away from him.

She felt as if she were freefalling into space, slow motion taking her down the flight of stairs. She propelled past the balustrade, which was blurry in her vision, and her skin went cold as the blood seemed to drain from her face.

"He's going to kill me after all," she thought. "It was all a ruse."

Mercifully, she blacked out. It would be the last thing she remembered for a long time. However, the emotional scars were permanent, everlasting, even before she landed in the foyer, her body a crumpled heap.

* * *

FOR APPEARANCES SAKE, Aaron took Beth to the Ivytown Clinic rather than the hospital in Portland, the one and only time he used the local medical services during their marriage.

"How would it look if I took you to Portland now?" he asked from the driver's seat of the Bronco. "Falling down the stairs and losing the baby . . . it wouldn't do if people found out I hauled you to Portland rather than the local medical facility."

Beth lay in the back of the Bronco, her face pressed to the fabric of the seat. Blood seeped from her nose and dripped onto the floor. If Aaron saw the mess, he would beat her again for sure. "*But I have nowhere else to go,*" she thought incoherently. "*What would he have me do? Hang my head out the window?*"

What seemed like minutes later - or was it hours? - Beth found herself being tended by Roger Ellison, Aaron's high school friend and local resident doctor. Beth knew Roger was on his second marriage, the first one having ended in acrimonious divorce and hefty child support payments. His second wife, a native of Seattle, was pregnant with his third child and he seemed sublimely happier than the first time around.

Roger was visibly alarmed when Aaron brought Beth into the clinic. He rushed into the sparse waiting area, heading directly to Beth as she sat in one of the pale yellow chairs made of uncomfortable heavy plastic. Aaron stood next to her.

"What in God's name happened?" Roger exclaimed, taking in Beth's swollen face, the dried blood in her nostrils and the dark red fluid seeping through the front of her skirt. He also noted her labored breathing and her glassy stare.

"My baby," Beth sobbed, glad to see Roger's concerned face. "And my ribs . . . I think I broke my . . ."

"She fell down the stairs, Rog," Aaron cut in, glancing harshly at his wife. "She had a few glasses of wine, I think, went upstairs for something, and when she came back down she tripped and fell."

Roger grabbed Beth by the elbow. "What's this about a baby?"

"She's pregnant," Aaron said flatly before Beth could speak.

"Let's get you into one of the exam rooms," Roger said gently, helping Beth from the chair. "Can you manage to walk a few feet?"

She winced in pain at the movement, but nodded. "I think so."

An hour later, Beth was sedated and lying on a gurney in one of the curtained-off exam rooms. She was sore, but pleasantly drowsy. Roger came in and out to check on her, while a nurse tended to her periodically.

Aaron hovered in the background, glaring at her when he thought no one was looking, warning her to keep silent with his eyes. *Or face the consequences,* she thought.

At some point, Beth recalled Roger pausing at her side, checking her pulse and taking her temperature. He drew the white plastic curtains around her gurney, ushering Aaron outside the area with a wave of his hand. Reluctantly, Aaron moved away.

As he took her pulse, Roger looked at Beth and spoke softly. "You realize you lost your baby, don't you Beth?"

"Yes," her voice came out as a croaked whisper.

"There was no permanent damage," Roger continued. "You should be able to have more children."

Beth said nothing, turning her head away slightly. How could she tell Roger there would be no more children? That Aaron didn't want kids because he was afraid she would

become fat? Or was Roger already aware of Aaron's peculiarities, having the good grace not to mention them?

"I *wasn't* drunk," she said suddenly, turning her head back to look at the doctor.

He leaned closer. "Sorry?"

"I *wasn't* drunk," she repeated.

"You mean you weren't tipsy when you fell down the stairs?"

"Right," she agreed. "I wasn't even remotely tipsy."

Roger was silent for a moment, an expression of confusion flickering across his face.

"Then what happened?" he asked her at length.

Beth's attention was drawn behind Roger to a half-inch gap between the curtain closing. She saw Aaron's shadow through the curtain, and one of his eyes peering through the gap.

The immense anger transmitted by his eye, the electric hatred shooting directly at her, sent a shiver of fear through her body. He was watching, and listening to every word. He was letting her know if she made one wrong move it would mean her own death - one way or another.

The overhead light of the exam room cast the hint of a shadow over Aaron's face through the curtain gap. It made him appear more menacing and evil, capable of cold-bloodedly extinguishing her life if the spirit moved him.

"I was just clumsy," Beth finally spoke, her eyes darting to Roger. "I was at the top of the stairs when the rubber sole of my shoe skidded on the carpet." *Please notice that I'm not wearing rubber-soled shoes*, she begged silently. Aloud, she continued: "It was a silly, stupid accident." She paused. "But I was *not* drunk," she reiterated.

"Beth, you're going to be okay," Roger told her, his tone soothing. "Please don't blame yourself for this, don't let guilt consume you."

Roger took her explanation as an encroachment of guilt, assuming she blamed herself for the "fall" and therefore the loss of her baby. It was best to let him think so, and safer not further aggravate Aaron with any more broad hints.

"Thank you Roger," Beth said weakly, feeling a wave of sedative wash over her.

"I want you to rest a little while longer and then you can go home," Roger said, touching her hand on the rough medical coverlet.

"Whatever you think best," she said drowsily, closing her eyes.

A minute later she heard Roger and Aaron conversing in low tones on the other side of the curtain, but she could not make out their words.

"*They're probably talking about me,*" she thought, opening her eyes to look at the exam room ceiling. "*Talking about me and the baby.*" She closed her eyes again, squeezing her lids tightly as she felt hot tears beginning to form. "*A few hours ago I had a child growing inside of me. In one violent swoop, Aaron took my baby away from me. How can I ever begin to possibly forgive him? How can I stay with him now, knowing the kind of monster he truly is?*"

She wiped her eyes with the palm of her hand. *"Because he'll kill me if I try to leave him . . . I'm stuck . . . trapped in a marriage that is hell on earth . . . with a psychotic tyrant who really doesn't know what it means to be a man . . ."*

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Ten*2002-2003**Life in Ivytown*

BETH HAD ALWAYS wanted a dog or a cat, even before she met Aaron Mills. She never had the time or occasion to have pets, either in San Francisco or now in Ivytown. She didn't think Aaron would let her have an animal, anyway. God forbid it might detract her attention from *him*.

Finally, the occasion presented itself in the spring of 2002. Aaron and Beth attended a fundraising event at the Ivytown Animal Shelter, where he was at the forefront of local philanthropic efforts. Beth went along because Aaron expected it of her, and because she found the cause to be worthy: raising money to provide neutering, spaying and vaccination services for homeless dogs and cats.

The community pulled out all the stops for the fundraising event, so the animal shelter was crowded with local adults and children. Frankfurters - albeit made from chicken and pork - went for \$2 apiece, and sodas for \$2.50. But it was all for a good cause.

Aaron volunteered to serve the sodas, so he was kept busy and lost track of his wife's whereabouts.

Beth walked through the kennels, looking at the mature cats and dogs needing a home. Puppies and kittens were the most popular, with children swarming around the cages to get a closer look.

She saw Gaby with her six brothers and sisters in a large dog run at the rear of the shelter. All seven puppies were chocolate-colored Labrador retrievers, but Gaby was the only one with a heart-shaped white patch of fur on her chest. Still unsteady on her puppy feet yet incredibly playful, she also seemed the liveliest of the bunch. She raced to the back and front of the dog run repeatedly, knocking over a few of her siblings in the process.

Beth asked the shelter attendant to bring Gaby to her. "I just want to get a closer look," she said.

Gaby seemed eager for Beth's arms, reaching out her paws and seeming to melt in her embrace. Gaby proceeded to lick Beth's face profusely.

"I want her," Beth said, staring at the puppy in wonder. Not only was she instantly in love with Gaby, she knew instinctively the dog would provide a secure and loving alternative to Aaron's abuse. Just like her sewing "tower," Gaby would be a safe refuge from the emotional and physical storm around her.

Aaron would deny her if he could, Beth knew. She had to plan carefully in order to force his agreement. The only way to do that was to plead her case in front of other people, using a sweetness of voice that created great empathy - which would be lost on Aaron, but not on normal, compassionate human beings.

Aaron saw Beth coming with Gaby in her arms. He glared at her, but she ignored his subtle warning.

"Look darling," Beth said loudly, happily. "Look how beautiful this puppy is. Aaron, please - just *look* at her."

There were more than a dozen people standing around the soda station. When Beth spoke to her husband, all of them turned to gaze at her holding Gaby.

"You know we don't have time to take care of a dog," Aaron said affably, almost kindly, although Beth knew by the flush on his face that he was becoming angry.

"But she's an orphan," Beth pleaded, coming to stand next to her husband. "If we don't take her, she might be euthanized. *Please*, Aaron. I'll take care of her - you won't have to lift a finger. Besides, taking her - and paying for her - will be my contribution to the fundraiser."

Aaron was at a loss for words, his eyes slowly covering the crowd. They were all waiting expectantly, hoping he would agree to his wife's heartfelt and sincere entreaty. What else could he do?

"I don't know, Bethany," he demurred, playing his role to the hilt. After hemming and hawing, and then capitulating, he knew the people standing around him would find him even more admirable than they already did.

"*Oh please* Aaron," Beth begged expansively, her eyes watering. "*Please*. I'll never ask for anything else for the rest of my life."

A few of the local men chuckled, one of them uttering: "That's what they all say, Mills. And then a week later they want something else *more* than anything in their life."

Gaby whined, squirming in Beth's arms to turn and lick her face.

The crowd "oohed" and "ahhed."

Aaron flushed slightly, which was barely discernible to anyone but Beth. It was just another sign of his anger and displeasure with her. But she didn't care. She wanted Gaby, and was prepared to go to any lengths to get her.

Aaron smiled broadly, although the warmth did not reach his eyes. "Okay, Bethany, the dog is yours. How much is she going to cost me?"

"Just one hundred dollars," Beth replied hugging Gaby to her. "Very much worth it, don't you think? And for such a good cause."

"I give up," Aaron said, throwing his hands in the air. "She's yours."

The onlookers clapped simultaneously, which brought another smile to Aaron's lips.

Surprisingly, Beth suffered no retribution that night when they went home with Gaby. Oddly, he seemed distracted and uninterested in Beth's barely-contained happiness. However, she knew her husband and his mood swings well enough to understand he could turn on a dime, and now was not the time to lull into complacency in his presence.

Beth trained Gaby, although she had no formal guidance to help her. The puppy was a naturally loving and curious companion, who grew to be protective of Beth and mildly accepting of Aaron. For his part, Aaron occasionally gave Gaby a pat on the head, or a

bloody steak bone. Beth began to relax somewhat, seeing their little family as complete, but never lost her ability to sense the warning signs that usually precipitated an attack by her husband.

Beth's favorite times were when Aaron worked the night shift at Misty Canyon Mines. She would let Gaby into the bed - where Aaron never allowed her - and they would snuggle through the night. Beth made sure to awaken an hour or so before Aaron was due to return home so she could vacuum any stray dog hairs left on the bed. She knew there would be hell to pay if Aaron ever found out Gaby slept in the bed with her when he was gone.

"So what does that say about my marriage?" Beth thought sadly. "I'd much rather sleep with Gaby than with my husband. We can rest without fear, and it's one of the few times I feel trust and unconditional love."

* * *

GABY WAS MORE than a year old when Aaron announced he wanted to take the dog pheasant hunting with him. It was the chukar and pheasant season in Oregon, and Aaron was an avid hunter. He typically went with friends from the mine who had their own dogs, but this year he wanted to take Gaby.

Beth didn't want Gaby to become a hunting dog. Gaby was *hers*, the only source of comfort in her life. She was afraid Gaby might get hurt, fighting with other dogs or traipsing through the woods on the lookout for poor, defenseless birds.

Aaron tried to reassure her. "I know how much Gaby means to you," he said. "I won't let her come to any harm. You have to understand that Gaby is a retriever, it's in her blood to chase birds, it's her instinct to hunt and retrieve. Why would you want to hold her back, deny her that bit of happiness?"

Beth finally relented, although she was still petrified something bad would happen to her precious Gaby. The first time Aaron took the dog hunting, Beth stood on the front porch of the house, tears running down her face as they drove away.

"I'm being foolish," she remonstrated with herself. "Gaby was so excited to go, she was happy to get into the Bronco with Aaron. I'm acting like a mother on the first day her child goes to school. I have to let Gaby live, to enjoy herself."

Aaron and Gaby returned home that night, a brace of chukar to show for their hard work. Gaby was ecstatic to see Beth, bounding in the air and licking her face.

"See, she's none the worse for wear," Aaron told Beth, a tender smile on his face. "She's a natural, and a real trooper. She did a great job today."

Beth thought she must have imagined the warmth in Aaron's voice, so she said nothing.

There followed a relatively peaceful period in their marriage, perhaps the only time Aaron didn't display anger, or physically abuse her for nearly six months. They had tense

words on occasion, but he never raised his hand to her and their ructions were quickly forgotten.

Gaby still snuck into bed when Aaron worked the night shift. This remained Beth's favorite time. The love she felt for Gaby was deeply abiding, the canine being her virtual lifeline.

That Christmas Paula Kern came to Ivytown again, where she too fell in love with the effervescent Gaby.

"This dog has lightened you considerably," Paula told her daughter as they sat around the kitchen table a few days after Christmas. Gaby lay under the table, her chin resting on Beth's foot, while Aaron was in the living room watching television.

"Gaby is my joy," Beth agreed, smiling when the dog heard her name and licked her hand under the table.

"I can't believe Aaron let you have an animal," Paula said, lowering her voice. "I get the impression he doesn't like sharing you with anyone else."

In a flash, Paula's remark reminded Beth of the loss of her baby. It was true. Aaron did not like sharing her with anyone, especially a human being of his own making. However, he did not seem overly perturbed by Gaby. It was on the tip of Beth's tongue to tell her mother the truth about the night she lost the baby, but enduring fear of her husband forced her to remain silent.

"Even Aaron has taken to Gaby," Beth said, deciding to ignore her mother's remark in response.

"I see that," Paula said. "To be frank, I was starting to worry about you being alone all the time. I mean, with Aaron working a lot of nights you must get lonely. Gaby must be a godsend."

"She is my savior," Beth replied fervently before she could stop herself.

Paula raised her eyebrows, not knowing how to respond to her daughter's statement. She was clearly passionate about the dog.

"As long as she makes you happy," Paula said gently. "That's all that matters."

Beth would remember their conversation much later, when she was deprived of her beloved Gaby and her mother in one fell swoop.

**MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Thirteen**

*August 2007
Hidden Traces*

THE IVYTOWN LODGE had originally been built as an apartment building for miners and their families in 1934. It was converted into a guest lodge in 1971, and was now a popular pit-stop for travelers passing through on their way to Portland or onto tourist attractions such as Aquatic Park in Milwaukie, Boones Ferry Marina, Fort Vancouver and Mount Hood National Forest among others.

Located on the outskirts of Ivytown, the Lodge contained twenty-five guest rooms with an in-house café, gift shop and boutique, and a covered swimming pool. The two-story structure was surrounded by pine trees, designed in log cabin fashion with cedar bark siding and large interior beam supports. The building rested down a slight incline from the main highway, its gabled roof and dormers clearly visible from the road. The grounds also held a trout pool, one small waterfall, a campfire circle, and stone retaining walls with curbing that bordered pathways on the property.

Morgan had already checked-in the day he arrived in Ivytown - *was it just yesterday?* - but he insisted Beth take the room next to his on the second floor.

"There is a connecting door," he told her. "Please don't think I'm some sort of lascivious opportunist. I'm not trying to take advantage of you, I just want you close by in case you have another nightmare and get scared."

Beth appreciated his explanation, moved by his obvious concern for her welfare and the sincere respect he afforded her. She was unused to such kindness after seven years with Aaron, so she secretly relished in it.

The rooms in Ivytown Lodge were modest, darkly paneled affairs but they were clean and comfortable. Beth's room had a double bed with a blue floral bedspread, a nightstand, a television resting on an oakwood dresser, and a small rounded table with two chairs by a window overlooking the front of the Lodge. The bathroom was compact, but sparkling and fully functional.

"Drat!" she muttered. "I don't have a change of clothes for tomorrow."

"I'm sure you'd rather not go back to your house now," Morgan said. "You'll be fine. You can change when we get there in the morning."

"I think I'll take a shower just the same."

"I'll go and order us dinner from the café downstairs. Do you have any preferences?"

"Something light," she replied. "A salad would be nice, or a chicken sandwich."

"I'll be back before you know it."

After he left, Beth took a long shower, washing away the tumultuous events of the day. She dreaded putting her old clothes back on, so she wrapped herself in the large

terrycloth robe provided to guests by the Lodge. She ran her hands through her short hair to remove the tangles, and then stepped out of the bathroom.

Morgan was sitting at the table by the window, unpacking food from a large brown paper bag. He set down two white take-out containers, and then placed napkins and plastic utensils. There was also two styrofoam cups in the middle of the table, which she assumed held water or soda.

Her attention was drawn to the bed. Draped to one side was a pair of light blue jeans and a rust-colored shirt with the words IVYTOWN emblazoned across the front. Her eyes widened in surprise.

"Where did the clothes come from?" she asked, pointing to the bed.

He grinned. "After I ordered the food, I went into the boutique next to the gift shop. Did you know they sell clothes from The Gap? Anyway, I knew you didn't want to wear your old clothes after a shower, so I guessed your size and picked up the jeans and shirt. They're kind of touristy. I hope you don't mind, but I do hope they fit."

"You shouldn't have."

"Go try them on," he urged her.

She returned to the bathroom with the clothes, glad Morgan had taken the time to buy them for her. It was just another example of his consideration and kindness. Of course the new clothes fit her perfectly, and they felt clean and snug against her freshly-washed skin.

"Thank you," she said when she joined Morgan at the table. "The clothes fit. How did you know?"

Morgan was biting into the cheeseburger he'd brought back from the café, but paused when he saw Beth. The blue jeans fit her long and shapely legs, and the shirt complimented her auburn hair and creamy skin-coloring. He always felt Beth was a beautiful woman, but in that moment - freshly showered and without the aid of cosmetics - she was perhaps at the most stunning he had ever seen her.

"How did you know the clothes would fit?" she repeated.

"Lucky guess," he replied warmly, his eyes traveling over her again. He tried to regain his composure, gesturing across the table. "I brought you a grilled chicken sandwich on a hoagie roll with iced tea. Are you hungry?"

"I'm starved, believe it or not," she sat down, smiling at him. "Thank you for everything you've done today, Morgan. I feel free somehow, as if most of my mental demons have been laid to rest. I'm anxious to move on with my life, and it's all due to you."

He reached across the table and took her hand. Their eyes met and held. Warmth filled her body as they stared at one another, and she felt a tingling thrill build in the pit of her stomach.

"You're very welcome," he said softly, letting go of her hand. Then he smiled. "Let's eat."

After a few minutes, Morgan asked her: "Do you remember how to access the secret passageway in your house?"

Beth took a bite of her sandwich. "Like I said before, Aaron showed me the passageway once. We started in the bedroom, where he touched the frame of the full-length mirror. When he did that, the glass opened to reveal a round hole in the wall, big enough for an adult to pass through. He took me in and we stopped at another opening behind the wall in the living room, and then out under the deck. The passageway was dark and damply cold, and we had to use a flashlight to see our way. The walls were thick and made of stone, I think, although I can't be certain. Aaron told me that the passageway is also soundproof. How his grandfather managed that, I'll never know."

"There are different ways to soundproof rooms," Morgan informed her. "It's not an easy task if windows are involved, but he could have used insulation or lead sheetrock to mute sound. If Aaron's grandfather built it himself without help, it must have taken him years to finish. It sounds like a well-planned project, especially if it goes from the second floor of the house to underneath the deck."

"After that one time with Aaron, I never went into the passageway again. I never had cause, and it certainly didn't interest me enough to go exploring on my own."

"Are you nervous about going inside?"

"Just a bit," she admitted. "What if Aaron is hiding in there? What if he pops out and kills us all?"

"I don't think that will happen," Morgan told her. "If he's there when we open the passageway from your bedroom, he will surely hear us from inside and try to get away through the deck entry. I don't think he wants to be caught alive, Beth, because he must be up to something nefarious if he's playing the role of a dead man. Everyone assumes he's buried in the mine, which is perfect cover for his activity. Second, we *need* to explore the passageway. If Aaron is truly alive and he is using it to come and go from your house, we have to find out why and put a stop to it. He needs to be exposed."

"I just cannot imagine what he'd leave behind in the passageway," she said.

"Maybe tools he uses when he visits you in your dreams," Morgan replied. "I'm not really sure what we're looking for, either, but we have to give it a try. It's either that or do nothing, and let Aaron - or the ghost of Aaron - carry on with his devilment."

"No thanks," she shuddered. "I'd rather not see him again, thank you, in my dreams or otherwise."

They continued eating. After several minutes, Morgan spoke again. "I know you haven't decided what to do or where to go yet, but if you want your old job back you can have it. There is no rush, no pressure for a decision, just take your time and think about it. If you want to come back to the ad agency, that's great. If not, that's okay, too. No hard feelings."

Beth set her half-eaten sandwich aside. "Do you really mean that?"

"I do."

"But I haven't worked in years."

"You were good seven years ago, Beth. I can't imagine much has changed. It won't take you long to get back in the saddle."

"I don't know what to say," she stated. "Can I have some time to think about it? There's nothing to really hold me in Ivytown, and I do miss San Francisco, but taking on the ad agency again is a big step. I feel out of the loop."

"Take your time," he said generously. "Just know that the offer is open, with no expiration date."

After they finished eating, Beth cleared the small table and gathered the empty containers in the paper sack. "That hit the spot," she said. "I don't think I've ever eaten food from the Lodge before, but I must say my chicken sandwich was excellent."

Morgan yawned. "I'm beat. I think I'll go take a shower and then hit the sack." He stood from the table. "You can leave the door between our rooms unlocked, if you want, and if it makes you feel safer."

"I trust you," she said emphatically.

On impulse, he leaned forward and kissed her quickly on the lips. "Good night, Beth."

"Good night, Morgan."

He left the room, closing the door behind him.

Beth slid into the double bed, fully clothed. She was suddenly very tired, but also warmly satisfied.

"I've had a long day," she thought. "Just last night I was scared out of my mind, dreaming that Aaron was chasing me down. Now here I am tonight, free from my mental demons for the most part." She snuggled deeper under the bedcovers. "And I've got my old friends back, amazingly, gratefully. One of them might even be my knight in shining armor. Maybe - just maybe - I'm falling just a tiny bit in love with Morgan Bailey..."

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Fourteen

August 2007

One More Aaron Night, with Feeling

BOB PALMER SPENT Sunday morning reading *The Oregon Herald*. He enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of scrambled eggs and toast, and then sat in his living room to peruse the newspaper. It wasn't until he finished reading the publication from back to front that he allowed himself to think about his meeting with MSHA the day before.

"We are convinced the mine collapse was deliberately set," Andrew Gibson had told him in the windowless conference room at the office.

Gibson, a tall man with sandy hair, was accompanied by his district manager Brent Shelby. Bob had talked to Shelby on the telephone over the years, all to do with mining affairs, but had never met him in person. Shelby was vastly built, his corpulent frame housed in khaki trousers and a loose-fitting dress shirt. He was sweating profusely, even though the conference room was air conditioned, and his moist lower lip protruded even when he was silent.

"How is that possible?" Bob asked, shocked by the findings of their investigation. "Who would do such a thing? And *why*? How can you prove it?"

"We examined the video taken by the camera in the bore hole," Shelby replied. "We watched the film over and over again, I might add. We didn't want to miss anything. It wasn't until we viewed the video dozens of times that we noticed the power cords on several of the safety lamps were frayed."

"The damage to the cords was not a result of the collapse," Gibson continued. "It looks as though someone stripped the cords nearly to the core, leaving just enough of the composite safety coating to hide the frays. You know as well as I do that a spark can ignite methane gas deep in the mine, causing an explosion. The explosion led to the virtual collapse of the stopes, which of course buried the miners alive."

"We originally thought it was a rail car that created the sparks," Bob stated thoughtfully. "Now you think it was produced by sparks from frayed lamp cords? What could cause them all to spark in the first place, and all at the same opportune time?"

"I know this is going to sound far-fetched," Gibson said. "But I think we can prove someone used a sophisticated remote device to ignite the sparks, maybe even implementing wireless technology. Whatever the case, it had to be long-range switch system. In the video we can see the remains of what might be an RCT receiver, located next to three safety lamps near one of the offshoot tunnels. Mind you, the tunnel in question was the last one used by the miners before the collapse. This means someone knew where the men would be in the mine at the exact time of the explosion."

Bob was suddenly defensive. "Are you accusing me?"

"Not at all," Shelby spoke up. "We think it might have been a disgruntled worker, or someone from the outside - a competitor wanting to discredit you, perhaps."

Bob shook his head. "How would anyone else know the work schedule? I set the timetables, after which they are maintained by shift supervisors. The actual workers don't know where they're going in the mine from day to day, at least not until they report for their shift."

"Aaron Mills was the shift supervisor on the day of the collapse," Gibson said pointedly.

"Yes," Bob agreed, although he was growing irritated. "And Aaron Mills is dead, along with four other men in my employ. Are you suggesting Aaron set the explosion to commit suicide?" When Gibson shrugged, Bob continued strongly: "Why on earth would he do that? He was a respected member of this community with a loving wife at home, not to mention being well-paid for his position in the mine. Cripes, gentlemen, Aaron started working for me right out of high school, some twenty-eight years ago. His father worked for my father, and so on and so forth." He shook his head. "I just can't see Aaron taking his own life, not to mention those of his coworkers."

"Didn't Aaron's father and brother die in the 1987 Misty Canyon accident?" Shelby wanted to know. "Perhaps he held a grudge?"

Bob snorted. "Surely not. Why would he wait twenty years before taking action, for crying out loud? No, there has to be some other explanation."

"I'm willing to concede Aaron might not be responsible," Gibson said. "However, we're certain the explosion and subsequent collapse was deliberately set. If not brought about by Aaron by process of elimination, then someone else surely had a hand in it."

"Is that going to be your official word?" Bob asked coolly.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. Now that our inquiry is complete, other federal and local authorities will probably launch a separate criminal investigation."

"I have no intention of being uncooperative," Bob told Gibson. "I want answers just as much as you do."

"I understand," Gibson replied sympathetically. "I apologize for the length of the investigation, but we wanted to be certain of our facts before making a pronouncement. We also wanted to give you the courtesy of first report, as it were."

"Thank you for that," Bob said grimly. "I'll keep my mouth shut until you make a public statement."

"Your discretion is much appreciated," Shelby intoned. "I'll send you a copy of our full report in a few days time."

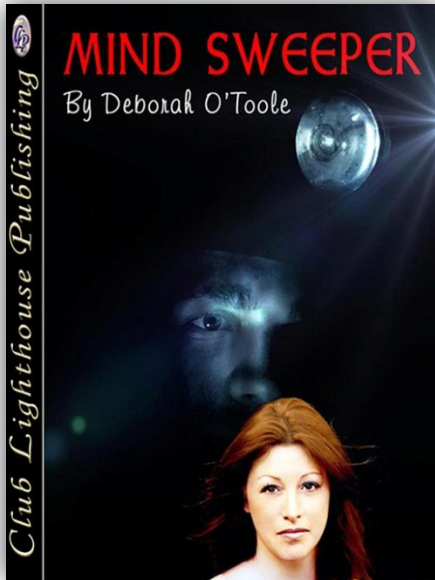
After he left the office to return home, Bob was still in a state of semi-shock. It never occurred to him that the mine explosion might be the result of deliberate intent to do harm. He could think of no one "disgruntled" enough to kill five miners and destroy their livelihoods.

However, he was willing to trust Andrew Gibson. The man knew his job, and did it well. Gibson was thorough and not likely to give over to illogical conclusions or to let fly wild accusations. Bob was willing to agree with him to a certain point, but he drew the line at fingering Aaron Mills as the mastermind behind the mine collapse.

It was simply inconceivable.

"MIND SWEEPER" INFORMATION

Mind Sweeper by Deborah O'Toole was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in 2021.



BOOK DETAILS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah O'Toole is the author of *Celtic Remnants*, a novel of enduring yet impossible love and betrayal set in the turbulence of Ireland, glamour of London and wilds of Scotland. She is also author of *Glinhaven*, *Mind Sweeper* and *The Crypt Artist*.

In addition, she writes darkly abstract poetry (*Torn Bits & Pieces*) and short-story juvenile fiction (*Short Tales Collection*), and is the author of a series of historical essays, articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and dark obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one 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*. The novels were released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

Also writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of "The Bloodline Trilogy." The novels follow the uniquely magical yet ominous journey of three women through time. The trilogy includes *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*.

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, Deborah also writes for the recipe website Food Fare. She is writer and co-editor of twelve cookbooks, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.



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