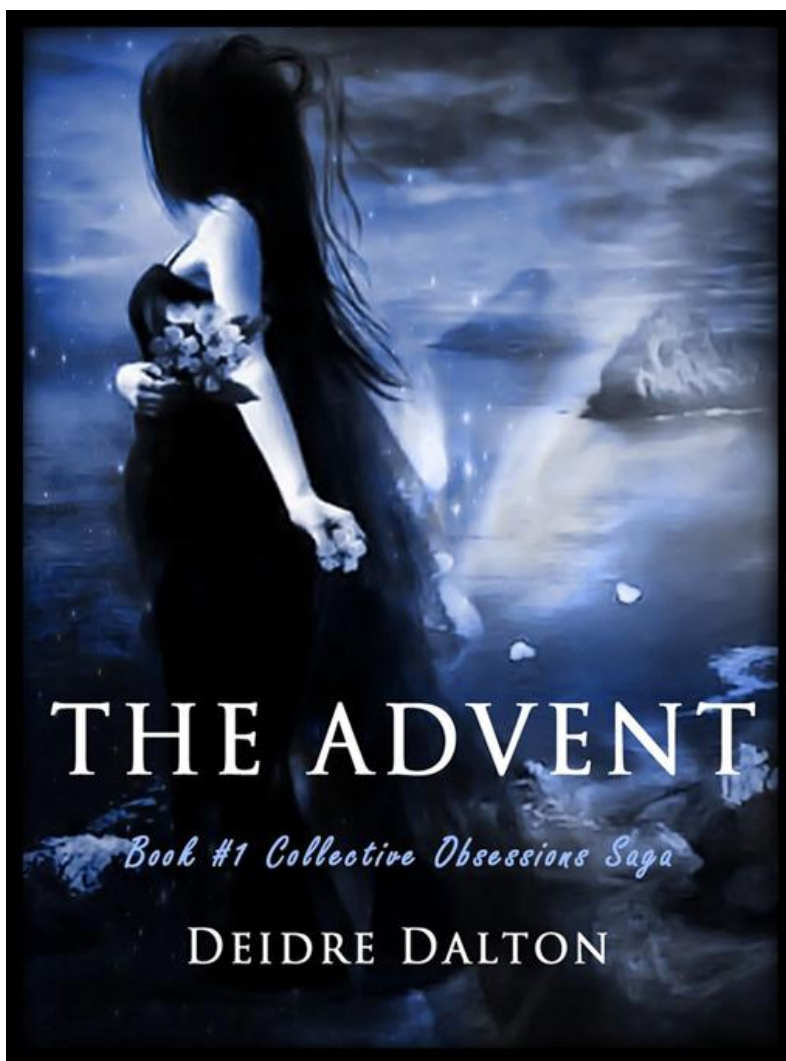


THE ADVENT

Part One of the Collective Obsessions Saga

By Deidre Dalton



Club Lighthouse Publishing Book.
ISBN: 978-1-534880-76-4

All rights reserved.
Copyright ©Deidre Dalton.
Cover Art: T.L Davison Copyright ©2016

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without written permission. This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is purely co-incidental.

For information contact: editor@clublighthousepublishing.com

A Club Lighthouse Historical Romance/Family Epic Edition

CHAPTER ONE

October 1865-September 1866

Castletownbere, County Cork, Ireland

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Savings? What savings?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Next year." John leaned back and laced his fingers behind his head. "I'll need to sell Gracie's house in Tralee, which will mean even more money. We have to sell our cottage,

and all of our furniture. We won't need it in America. I want to start all new. We need to go to Dublin to get new clothes, and luggage to put them in. I want fancy leather luggage for you, me and the kids." He paused. "Where are the little snappers, by the way?"

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

After supper, Anne put the children to bed and joined John by the turf fire for a last cup of tea. John usually stayed up later than everyone, his mind running and dreaming.

Anne knew he would be full of ideas tonight, excited beyond belief by their good fortune and eager to get started on his dreams.

"Will you be up long?" she asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

She looked at her image in the candlelight. While she wasn't beautiful, her face was arrestingly serene and self-possessed. She was tall, almost five-foot-nine, with a long and

narrow face, thin lips, and a rather elongated nose. Her skin was naturally pale, the darkness of her eyes like distinct coals set amongst translucent ash. At thirty-one, she managed to look younger than her years. She noticed her hands and grimaced. Big, like her feet, she thought, and red from kitchen work, with large knuckles and short nails. John always said he adored her looks, that he had no use for small, frail women. He loved that she was tall, strong and healthy. Beneath the details, visible only to discerning eyes, were poise, a slight reserve, a natural nobleness and a touch of melancholy.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She smiled contentedly as her eyelids grew heavy. Their life had always been comfortable. They never suffered like most of the Irish, generation after generation. Combined with the O'Quinn's stability before their marriage, and John's success since, Anne had never known deprivation. She worked hard, but had never starved. She had never been evicted from her home by the British Crown rent collectors, nor punished for her religious beliefs. Their home on the Beara Peninsula was too far south and remote for the British to practice their high-handedness. The English influence was weak in Castletownbere, and rarely felt even as far as Bantry. However, they knew if the British government ever

discovered the smuggling practices in Castletownbere port, the distance would no longer isolate them.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was still haunted by Maeve's death, although he hid it from Anne. He felt a great affection for Anne. She was a good wife and mother, her temperament so genial that she

made his home a peaceful haven. She was also a willing participant in his dreams of America, making it clear she would follow him anywhere.

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

The *Tobercurry* was due to set sail from Dún Laoghaire Harbor. Since Dún Laoghaire was more than two hundred miles north of Castletownbere, John booked passage on a

stagecoach. They would stay at an old inn called Na Mara the night before sailing, which overlooked the city's harbor and departure site of the *Tobercurry*.

* * *

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

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

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

CHAPTER TWO

*June 1880-June 1881
Larkin, Maine*

CLEA BARTON-BROOKS STEPPED forward to give her employer a small book, which was bound on the left edge with string. "Would you like to decide today's menus, Ma'am?"

Anne looked up. She held out her hand to take the book from the head maid of Larkin House. "Yes, I would." She paused. "Are the children home?"

"Yes, my lady. Master Roderick is out at the stables, and Miss Mary is in her room with the tutor."

Anne nodded. "Please inform them that I expect them to join me for lunch at one-thirty today."

"Yes, Ma'am."

While Anne perused the menu, Clea watched her employer discreetly. They were in the sitting area of Anne's suite of rooms. The mistress of the house was still in her night clothes and robe, lounging on a brocade settee in front of the white marble fireplace. It was after eleven, and Clea could not imagine why Mrs. Larkin chose to stay in her rooms so far into the day, much less still in her night clothes. Maybe it was because Mr. Larkin was away for a few days. Anne always spent a lot of time in her rooms when her husband was gone for any length of time.

Choosing menus was a daily ritual. The menu tome belonged to the French-born family chef Claude Mondoux, whom Mr. Larkin hired several years earlier. Mrs. Larkin always took her time with the menu book, taking obvious pleasure in deciding what her family would eat for the rest of the day. Clea found the process tedious, but it was not her place to comment. She liked Mrs. Larkin, who was a kind employer, sweet when she wanted to be, but also very circumspect on occasion.

At forty-five, Mrs. Larkin looked youthful and healthy, although with the subtle aid of cosmetics and expensive, stylish clothes. Even her white night gown and silk robe were sedate and elegant. She still made many of her own clothes. Clea often helped her as she was talented with a needle. Dressed down, as she was, she wore her hair loose to her waist. When she was suited for the day, Mrs. Larkin wore her hair in a chignon, with a lace cap fringed with tiny diamonds. Clea thought her employer attractive, although not beautiful. While she could be friendly and understanding, Anne could also be cool, correct and remote. She had the darkest brown eyes Clea had ever seen, appearing almost black.

"Will Mr. Larkin be returning from New York today?" Anne asked the maid, setting her tea cup on the small table in front of her.

"I believe so. Nigel said he expects him this afternoon, perhaps in time for tea." Nigel Barton-Brooks was Clea's husband, and butler for the Larkin family.

Anne nodded. "Good. Have Claude make a special tea with my husband's favorite things. He likes boiled eggs and toast with his tea. Also, we'll have vegetable broth for lunch, with rice and salmon. For dinner, tell Claude to prepare the lamb stew Mr. Larkin prefers, with fresh bread and butter. For desert we'll have pears in cream, and cheese with wine."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Anne wrote in the menu book and then handed it back to Clea.

"Will that be all, Ma'am?" Clea asked.

"For now," Anne responded crisply. "Please take away my breakfast tray, and send up one of the other maids to tidy my room. Then I would like you to return to help me dress for the day." She paused, looking down. "Also, please tell Nigel to send up a tray with a decanter of sherry."

"Of course, Ma'am. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment, thank you."

Clea picked up the sterling silver tray that bore the remnants of Anne's meager breakfast from the table in front of the settee. The lady of the house rarely ate much in the morning; just a few cups of coffee, and a piece of dry toast. Clea went to the double doors. When Mrs. Larkin said nothing further, she went out the door, set the tray on the floor, closed the door quietly, and then hurried down the hall of the second floor.

Clea was a slender woman with blonde hair shortened to her shoulders, cornflower blue eyes and a creamy English complexion. She had been born in Reading, England, but followed her betrothed Nigel Barton-Brooks to America seven years ago. Neither of them left much behind in England, both of them having spent all their working lives in domestic service. When Clea came to America, Nigel had already been working for the Larkin's for two years. After a brief engagement, they were married on the estate and now shared a room on the fourth floor of the mansion, where most of the servants were housed.

Clea hurried along the corridor. Before coming to America she worked for a selection of wealthy clients in England, some of them titled, but had never seen a house as big as the Larkin's, nor one as opulent. Mr. Larkin spared no expense when he began building the estate more than thirteen years ago, which he completed in 1874 with the help of renowned architect Richard Morris Hunt. The mansion was constructed on a steep incline that Mr. Larkin christened Banshee's Point, and was surrounded by a dense stand of pine trees and endless green lawns. At the top of Banshee's Point was a path that led to the estate's lighthouse and sheer, rocky cliffs which overlooked the ocean and private beach.

The house was a combination of vernacular Châteauesque and mock Tudor design, with elaborate towers and spires and countless mullioned windows. Ivy and moss clung to the exterior walls, giving the mansion a rather eerie ambiance. The rooftop of the house could only be accessed from the lofty attic, where a door and steps led to the apex. Rather than the simple, railed-roof platform found atop many coastal homes, John Larkin built his widow's walk so it ran almost the entire length of the house. Instead of wooden railings, the protective barriers were made of grey stone and reached high enough so people could rest their arms safely and look over the side. From the rooftop, Larkin Village could be seen in the distance.

The stables were located to the left of the mansion, where no fewer than twenty horses were kept with several carriages and buggies.

The sheer size of the estate awed Clea at first, and even now there were times when she hardly believed she worked and lived in such a place. In her experience, only Windsor Castle compared with the Larkin estate.

Clea wore the required maid's uniform, which included a long sleeved, high-collar dark blue dress with white apron and white lace cap. Oddly, it was not the usual black but blue at Mrs. Larkin's insistence. They wore black only for formal occasions. The uniform was clean, crisp and attractive, so Clea didn't mind wearing a fresh one each day.

She paused in front of a large window on the landing above the main floor. She looked toward the path that led to the beach and newly-built lighthouse on Banshee Point. The sky was dotted with white, fluffy clouds and a slight breeze came in from the ocean. She sighed even as she appreciated the view. One of her duties was to clean the window once a week, using a device Mr. Larkin designed so she could reach the top of the twenty-foot high pane.

The apparatus was ingenious, she thought. It had a long wooden handle with a bundle of clean, white cloths at the end. Clea dipped a bundle into soapy water to wash, a clean bundle into clear water to rinse, and yet another bundle to dry the window. It left the panes remarkably clean of streaks and water spots.

Clea's daydreaming was interrupted by the sound of whistling in the foyer below, which she recognized as her husband's. She continued down the steps, still carrying the tray.

Nigel, a diminutive, diligent man in his late twenties with black hair and dark blue eyes, whistled as he dusted furniture in the foyer. He wore dark blue trousers, a white shirt, and a butler's daily dress coat with short tails and brass buttons. He paused and watched his wife come down the staircase toward him.

"How is Mrs. Larkin this fine morning?" Nigel asked, taking the coffee tray from her.

"She seems fine." Clea brushed back a lock of blonde hair. "She chose the menus for the day, so I suppose I'd better get the book into Claude."

"I'll take the coffee tray into the kitchen later." Nigel set the tray on the oak table in the center of the foyer. "I imagine the Missus needs you back upstairs to help her dress."

"Aye, that she does. She asked me to tell you to bring a decanter of sherry to her right quick. She wants drinks before lunch at one-thirty."

A grimace flickered across Nigel's face, and then his expression went neutral again. "Very good. I'll take it up now." He hesitated. "Does the Missus seem out of sorts?"

Clea glanced around to make sure none of the other servants were in hearing distance, and then answered her husband softly: "Not today, but if she drinks the whole decanter of sherry before lunch, as she did yesterday, she *will* be out of sorts."

Nigel shook his head slowly. "It's a good thing Mr. Larkin is coming back today. The Missus doesn't drink so much when he is at home."

"I know." Clea replied. "I'd better be giving the menu book to Claude. I have to send a maid up to Mrs. Larkin's room, too, before I help her dress."

"Be on your way, then. I'll see you later at tea, darling."

Clea kissed Nigel's cheek quickly, and then hurried to a door at the left of the foyer, which led to the cavernous kitchen and culinary domain of Claude Mondoux.

* * *

ANNE STOOD IN FRONT of the French doors, looking out across the lawns of the estate. Even now she had to remind herself that the mansion was her home, that the place was real. The vast and elegant structure, the ten thousand acres surrounding it, the beautiful furniture, artwork and fashionable clothes were all *very* real. Larkin Village, only seven miles away, was real, too, with people living in their own homes and living their own lives. And they all had John to thank for it.

She sighed. There was nothing for her to do. With all of John's money, and with servants at her beck and call, the days stretched out lonely and empty of purpose. John didn't need or want her anymore. No one appeared to need her, not even her grown children. Her son Roddy was kind and thoughtful, but for some unfathomable reason her daughter Molly hated her with a fierce intensity that seemed to bubble just below the surface.

Anne felt empty, adrift and alone. The sherry helped, of course. It warmed her insides and temporarily melted her cold, hard place of loneliness.

She moved away from the French doors and returned to the settee by the fireplace. She leaned back into a cushion and sighed again. She smoothed her dressing gown on her thighs, and then laid her hand to rest in her lap. She felt faint today, not herself, as though she could not find her balance. She did not feel like getting dressed and going downstairs to have lunch with the children today, but she knew that she must. She was determined not to give Roddy and Molly more fodder to take to John, especially Molly who seemed to enjoy regaling her father with tales about Anne's strange mood swings in recent months.

She hated it when John was away on business, which was always frequent. They had not shared a bedroom for five years. *Why? What was wrong with her?* She knew she was no longer young or even marginally attractive to her husband, but he loved her once. She still felt a consuming, steady love for him. She knew John did not feel the same toward her, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. Even if he had found someone in the village for companionship, she was still Mrs. John Larkin, and no one else could lay claim to that title. He was her husband for the rest of her life. John could make her feel secure and confident again if he so wished, but he was hardly home. *Why?* They had been in America for fourteen years, with John's dreams already realized. Their wealth was beyond reason, and continued to grow as John monopolized Maine's lumber business, and the export of blueberry and maple foodstuffs. *Why did he need to keep chasing more?*

And the house. She never dreamed she would be living in such a large home, akin to a palace in her mind. It was so enormous she was certain she hadn't seen every room, but for John it was physical proof that his dreams had come true. It was an inspired vision that had become somewhat of a nightmare for her. The massive house, though elegant and luxurious, overwhelmed her, even frightened her, as though it was a living thing that could consume all of them in its ravenous embrace.

"Miss Clea sent me, Ma'am, to tidy your sleeping room." Anne was startled out of her reverie when Mavis, the downstairs maid, spoke and dipped a shy curtsy in front of her.

Anne smiled faintly at the maid's lingering Cockney accent, relieved to find distraction from compulsive thoughts that chased one another like frightened mice in her brain. "Go ahead and tidy-up. I'll stay here until you're finished."

"Very good, Ma'am."

A few minutes later, Nigel came in carrying a small tray with a crystal glass and a decanter of sherry. Anne smiled and nodded as he put the tray on the table in front of her. "Thank you, Nigel." She was comforted by Nigel's quick efficiency, and trusted him implicitly.

"Would you like me to send Clea up now, Ma'am?" Nigel asked, watching Anne eye the sherry with thinly disguised longing.

"Give her a few minutes. Mavis just came in to tidy the bedroom."

Nigel bowed slightly. "Very well, Ma'am. Is there anything else I can do for you before I return downstairs?"

Anne's glance was hesitant. "Could you look in on my father? I know he has his own maid, but I feel so much better when you check to make sure he's all right."

"Gladly, Ma'am. I like Mr. O'Quinn. He always has a joke ready for me."

"Thank you, Nigel. I appreciate all you do for him. Since he hasn't been able to work, I'm afraid he has become rather restless and bored."

"Perhaps I could interest him in a card game this afternoon. He enjoys that."

"You would do that for him, Nigel?" Anne seemed surprised.

"Yes, Ma'am. As I said, I like Mr. O'Quinn. I can play cards with him for a little while, but then I'll need to get things ready for Mr. Larkin's return."

"Of course. Thank you again, Nigel."

"My pleasure, Ma'am. I'll send Clea up now."

"Yes," Anne murmured.

After Nigel left, Anne hurriedly poured sherry in the small glass. She sipped, swallowed, raised the glass to the light to admire the amber color, and then took a deep breath as the warmth spread through the coldness in her chest. *Another sip.* She leaned back, smiling. She felt better already, relaxed and more confident. *Another sip.* Her mind wandered. When John began employing servants for the house, he insisted they be English-born. His methods puzzled Anne. Why not hire Irish? Why choose people from a country he professed to hate? He allowed Irish people to be hired for outside work, but never in a domestic capacity. He made one exception for their daughter Molly, letting her keep her treasured young maid Maureen Kelly, who was from Ireland. The family chef Claude Mondoux was French, but all other servants inside the mansion were English-born, including the carriage drivers and three boys who helped Claude in the kitchen.

Finally, Anne asked John about it several years ago. "Darling, why do you prefer the English as domestic help? Wouldn't you rather Irish immigrants have the chance to work?"

John seemed eager to explain. "The English are such snobs, Annie. They think they're high and mighty above everyone else, especially the Irish. They look down their noses at the common Irishman, and it boils my blood every time I see it, or hear of it. When it was time to hire servants for the house, I decided to put the bloody limeys in their place in my own way, without them knowing it. I gave them menial chores, the basic, simple jobs while I hired the Irish for more complicated work. It takes more talent to tame a horse or create a garden than it does to clean a room, make a bed or swill slop. It tickles my funny bone that our English servants assume we hired them for domestic work because they're superior above all others. Instead, I find them to be superior only at being ordinary and complacent. They're boorish snobs, and always will be. It's best to keep them in their place in the house, doing the work of simpletons."

So Anne had finally understood. She did not agree, but daren't tell John so. She liked Nigel and Clea, but they were there to do a job. She did admit to private amusement by watching them preen, thinking themselves better than everyone else, including their Irish employers.

Anne refilled her glass, anxious for another tippie. Almost simultaneously, Mavis came out of the bedroom and Clea came in to help her dress for the day. Reluctantly, Anne left the glass on the table. It wouldn't do to gulp sherry while the servants hovered about her.

"I'm finished, Ma'am," Mavis said. "You have clean bed linens, and I opened the sheers to let the sun in."

"Thank you, Mavis. That will be all."

"Yes, Ma'am." She curtsied and left the room.

Clea stood before her, smiling. "Are you ready to dress, Mrs. Larkin?"

Anne stood a trifle unsteady. She wasn't drunk, but nor was she quite sober. "I'm ready," Anne took Clea's offered hand. "I'd like to wear something light today since Mr. Larkin is due home."

Clea nodded, leading Anne toward the bedroom. "Yes, Ma'am. I know just the thing. That pretty blue dress with the flower print that we made last week. You haven't worn it yet."

"Yes. Perfect. I want to look nice for my husband."

"*You won't be attractive to Mr. Larkin if you keep tipping sherry,*" Clea thought to herself, then said aloud: "We'll do your hair up nice, too, Ma'am."

Anne nodded happily.

* * *

THE MANSION'S DINING ROOM was imposing. Tall windows opened to welcome the fresh sea air. A massive, custom-made Waterford chandelier cast brilliant light onto artwork displayed on the walls and over the oak dining table that could easily seat sixty people. Today, for lunch, Roddy sat at the head of the table, with Molly to his left. They were waiting for their mother to come down and join them for the midday meal.

At twenty-one, Roddy was as tall as his father but leaner. His coloring was similar to Anne's, but he had arresting blue eyes. The kindness of his face and demeanor often cloaked a sharp intelligence, although he was quick to put those who underestimated him into their place. Roddy had been schooled at Cornell University in New York for the purpose of working with his father in the family businesses. Not incidentally, he was looking for a bride of suitable background to carry on the Larkin name. He knew his parents wanted him to marry into a wealthy, socially respected family, preferably Irish Catholic.

Molly was almost sixteen, and a natural beauty. While her alabaster coloring remained the same as in childhood, it had matured to give her a delicate air of mystery with dark, almost exotic eyes. Her lips were full and wide, often exposing her enchanting smile with blinding white teeth. She could be mercurial and self-centered, and then in the next instant charmingly gregarious. She was poised for the most part, with a definite show of breeding to warrant the occasion. In truth, and behind closed doors, she possessed a quick wit and blunt manner. She liked nothing better than to engage her father, brother and frequent male guests to the mansion in high-brow conversation.

Roddy adored his little sister. They remained close throughout childhood, and he thought her one of the most beautiful creatures he had ever seen. He knew one day she would find a spectacular match with a worthy gentleman. Being the daughter of John Larkin, one of the richest men on America's East coast, certainly didn't hurt her prospects. However, her willfulness and tendency to be snappish concerned him. Some of her less-than-ladylike traits might get in the way of her finding a good match. But then, she could be very sweet when she chose to be.

"Mother is late," Molly declared, stifling a yawn. "I want to ride Tempus after lunch, before Daddy gets home."

"Mum isn't late for lunch yet. Give her a few minutes." He paused. "You ride too frequently for a lass, Molly. Tempus is a very spirited horse. One of these days you might hurt yourself."

Molly glared at him. "I can ride as well as you, if not better. You won't admit it, because you think men are superior to women. You're wrong. I'll ride as much as I like, and I'll ride better than you."

Roddy grinned. "I knew you'd say that."

"Then why bait me?" Molly smiled at him.

"Because you're smashing fun to tease, sister. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd wither and die. It's as simple as that."

"Who will wither and die?" Anne asked as she entered the dining room, walking to the chair at Roddy's right.

"Hello, Mother. I was teasing Molly," Roddy said as he got up to help Anne with her chair, noticing the alcohol induced flush on her face. "She told me I would wither and die without her."

Anne smiled. "I'm glad you two get along so well, and so is your father." She picked up a napkin and spread it over her lap. "But it won't be long before you both find suitable matches and follow your own paths."

"We will always be brother and sister," Molly protested. "Nothing can change that." Hearing the sharpness in her voice, Roddy threw his sister a warning glance.

Anne smiled, pretending not to notice Molly's malignant stare. "Shall we eat? I'm famished."

As though waiting for her cue, a maid brought in a tray and served them. They began to eat, the conversation drifting to safer topics. Their talk turned to John, which was natural because he was the family's center, their driving force, a person from whom they took their identity. When he was absent, and she did not need to vie for his attention, Molly's stiff resentment toward her mother eased somewhat.

"Daddy was going to try and find a keeper for the new lighthouse on this trip to New York," Roddy said as he tucked into his rice and steamed salmon. "He wanted to find an Irishman coming off of the boat, so to speak."

Molly leaned forward. "The lighthouse is so modern, how can Daddy find anyone who knows how to run it?"

"Your father will instruct whomever he hires," Anne said softly, putting down her fork. "He will evaluate the lot off the boat, and will know instinctively who is right for the job. He'll know who is smart enough to learn how to work the lighthouse. You'll see."

Molly began to bristle, annoyed that Anne presumed to educate her about how amazing her father was. Roddy saw Molly stiffen and hastily picked up the bread and offered it to her. Distracted, Molly's mood did a swift change. "Yes, it's amazing how he does that. I wish I had that talent." Her adoration of her father showed in her eyes and voice.

"So do I," Roddy said. "Maybe someday."

"I think he had the talent from birth." Anne's mind drifted back to the early years with her husband. She picked up her wine glass, smiling quietly. "He's been a whirlwind since we met in 1854, when he was courting my sister Maeve. Ask your Grandfather Dary about it sometime. John has always been a shining light."

Roddy watched the two women in his life. Molly listened, absorbing her mother's words about their father, almost as if she were trying to gather everything about John to herself and make him exclusively hers.

The deterioration between mother and daughter began soon after they arrived in America, when Molly was four. During those early years, Anne and John worked together. Anne seemed to glow in John's presence. Molly slowly began to reject her mother, becoming cold and judgmental toward her, while trying to keep John's sole focus on herself. Roddy wondered if the competition for John's attention had caused his father's frequent and long business trips. Roddy watched Molly's inordinate love for their father escalate to cool apathy towards their mother. At the same time, he saw Anne draw into herself, where she remained lonely, lost and hurt.

"Your father has accomplished much since we came to America," Anne continued to reminisce. "You might remember our first days here, Roddy, when we lived in a small house in Bangor. A few months later, John bought a large parcel of property near Searsport from a farmer named Frank Cumberland. John began to build our home, as well as Larkin Village."

"I remember Bangor and Searsport," Roddy said. "They weren't bad places. Molly didn't like the seaside inn we stayed at in Searsport because the proprietor was a woman who kept pinching her cheeks to put color in them."

Molly laughed. "I remember that. She was fat and always smelled like whiskey. She thought I needed flush to my face, even though I kept telling her it was my natural color. I wonder if she's still alive and running her seaside inn?"

"I doubt it," Roddy responded. "She was old back then. I haven't been to Searsport in years, but if she's alive now she would have to be eighty if she was a day."

The family chef Claude Mondoux entered the dining room with his usual flourish, carrying a tray with three dishes on it. The tall, slender man was in his late thirties, his hair drawn back into a club to better display the single gold earring in his left ear. Claude always prompted attention with his energy and wondrous smile. He loved cooking for others and seeing their pleasure, but was also forthright and not the least bit subservient.

"Madame," he said. "I have prepared a surprise dessert for you and your children." He placed the tray in front of her, and spread his arms dramatically. "You know I love to experiment with new dishes, and I dreamed about this one last night. There is so much zucchini in the garden, and every year so much is thrown away because no one will eat it. I had to find another use for it." He gestured to the tray, calling attention to the three dark bread-like slices with butter melting into them. "These are still hot from the oven, Madame. I grated your poor zucchini, and mixed it into makings of sweet bread, like one would with a cake. I insist that you and your children test my efforts and tell me what you think."

Anne raised her eyebrows. "What do you call it?"

"You hesitate, Madame. You always hesitate when I bring you my new dishes, and yet you seem to like all of them. Please try this. I promise you will like it. I call it *zucchini loaf*. It will go well with tea. Please, try it and you will see." He slid a plate over in front of her. "Just one bite, Madame."

Smiling indulgently, Anne took a bite. Roddy and Molly watched her expectantly. "Claude, this is wonderful!" She took another bite. "How can zucchini be made to taste so good? I wouldn't have believed it, but I really like it. Try it, Roddy, Molly. It's sweet and moist."

Claude beamed. "You see, Madame. I have not failed you."

Both Roddy and Molly tried the bread, and liked it. Anne finished hers, and then said: "Did you make extra, Claude? I mean, did you make more than one loaf of this delicious bread?"

"*Oui*, of course I made more than one. I made six. I tried it first on the maids this morning, and on Nigel. They insisted I make more. So I did." He smiled and shrugged.

"Good. Please serve it with tea this afternoon. Mr. Larkin will be pleased by your efforts. Claude, you have outdone yourself again."

"I will serve it to the Monsieur with his tea," Claude said happily. "Along with his boring old boiled eggs and toast. He will marvel, just as you."

"I'm sure he will," Anne agreed.

Claude returned to the kitchen. A few minutes later, Anne excused herself, saying she wanted to rest before tea.

After she left, Molly stood and threw her napkin on the table. "I'm going for a ride on Tempus. I'll give him a good run on the beach."

Roddy glanced at her. "You just want to see the keeper's cottage, don't you?"

Molly nodded. "It's so quiet down there, so beautiful by the ocean. I can be myself there, and be alone." She walked over to a window. "I think I'd be happier if I lived in a cottage, rather than this big house."

"I know. If you had your way, you'd be a hermit."

"Yes, I would. There is so much expected of us, Roddy, and I hate the fact that we have to live up to all of it." She paused, looking at him, her dark eyes sad. "I don't know if I ever want to marry. I like living here, yes, and I love the beach and the new cottage Daddy built. If I had my way, I'd live there. I could live and do as I please, and not pretend to be enthused about marrying someone someday, and giving birth to a brood."

"Don't you ever dream of falling in love?" Roddy asked, surprised. "I thought all lasses dreamed of a Prince Charming and living happily ever after."

"I can live happily ever after without a man, but I suppose I don't have a choice."

"Neither do I, you know," Roddy pointed out. "I have to marry well to carry on our name, whether I like it or not."

"You have it worse than I do. I don't have to carry on anything, really. My role in life is to marry well and live out my life in docile subservience."

Ignoring her remark, Roddy changed the subject. "The lighthouse keeper's cottage is built like the home we had in Ireland, although you probably don't remember."

"I don't."

Roddy stood from the table. "Will you please do me a favor and take one of the stable boys with you when you ride? I'm afraid Tempus will throw you, and no one will be around to help."

"I'll be fine. I've been riding practically all my life. Besides, I don't want company."

"Fine. I won't argue with you. Wouldn't do me any good, anyway, would it?"

"True."

As Molly turned to leave, Roddy suddenly asked: "Why are you so indifferent to our mother, Molly? Why do you treat her as you do?"

Molly stopped at the doorway and looked back at him. After a long moment of uncomfortable silence, she said: "Call it lack of respect, or lack of understanding. *I don't understand her*, Roddy. We have nothing in common. Besides, I find her insipid and boring."

All she does is stay in her room and drink herself into a stupor, unless Daddy is home. Then she's all smiles and witty talk. I'm sorry, Roddy, I know you love her, but I don't, and I can't explain it. All of my life I've had the feeling that she doesn't love me, either, that she resents me for some reason."

"Maybe it will change when you get older," Roddy suggested hopefully. "When you were small, you adored Mum. You never wanted to be away from her."

Molly shrugged. "You may be right, but I doubt it. Don't worry. I'll try to keep my feelings in check, and act with the proper decorum."

Roddy frowned, watching her leave. He was glad his father was coming home today. He always put things to rights, making everyone was happy again. Even Mother. Pushing his chair toward the table, he left the room with a troubled expression on his face.

* * *

JOHN O'LARKIN FELL IN love with the state of Maine the minute he saw it in the autumn of 1866. It was tucked up against the Canadian province of New Brunswick and the state of New Hampshire. Almost 31,000 square miles, with a population of only 500,000, it was the state farthest east, and 400 miles from New York City.

Maine reminded John of Ireland. When he found land he wanted to settle, the thatched-roof cottages and the lush green landscape reminded him of Castletownbere on the Beara Peninsula. It almost made him homesick.

John chose a twenty-two mile stretch of Maine coastline between the villages of Searsport and Stockton Springs. Larkin Village was formally settled in the spring of 1867. John dropped the "O" from Larkin because he thought it sounded more American, easier to remember and pronounce. He also legally changed his own name in the process.

Once the settlement of Larkin Village was initiated, John started construction on his dream mansion. He hired a team of men and horses to plough a six-mile road from Larkin Village into the countryside. He dubbed the road Larkin Highway, secretly amused to have taken the name from highwaymen who robbed travelers.

From the highway, he had another road ploughed northward on an incline. Almost one mile in, he cleared an area amongst dense pines and built his mansion. Construction on the house was slow at first because he had several ongoing projects at once. He was financing and developing the village, building homes and businesses, including a lumber company he would own, and cultivating blueberry farms and the production of maple sugar products. Within a year, with Anne's help, the mansion began to take shape. They designed the main and first floors, and finally moved into the unfinished structure in 1868.

By now, of course, the mansion was finished, and Larkin Village was thriving. John estimated that a thousand souls lived in his seaside village, which had its own city hall and sheriff. The biggest store was the grocery, which John kept stocked with fresh food from shipments received weekly from Bangor and Portland. Most of the villagers grew their own vegetables, but they were glad to have the convenience of buying meat and other items from the grocery.

In the beginning, Dary O'Quinn continued to earn a living as a blacksmith. He opened his own shop known as Quinn's Forge. When Dary became too infirm to work, a local by the name of Jack Kelly took over the shop. Jack's daughter Maureen became Molly's maid and confidant.

Everything John Larkin ventured into once in America became an unqualified success, flourishing as if alive with its own purpose. By 1880, he was a millionaire four or five times over, and his fortune continued to grow at an astonishing rate. In addition to his business ventures, he invested wisely and his fortune blossomed. His future and that of his family seemed to be paved with gold.

John made frequent trips to New York to monitor his investments, to analyze any new business opportunities, and to scout workers for his estate. He preferred solid English immigrants for the household jobs, and native Irishmen for harder, better paying tasks. That was his purpose for going to New York in June of 1880. He was also looking for an Irishman to operate his new, modern lighthouse on Banshee Point.

John hired four Irishmen off of the boat in New York to take back with him to Larkin Village. Their heritage was evident by their names: Seamus Flaherty, Patrick O'Connor, Barry O'Toole and Colm Sullivan. All were young, healthy and eager for work. John decided almost instantly to make Colm his new lighthouse keeper. The lad was quick, seemed honest and professed to have worked the lighthouse in his native Malahide. Needless to say, John was pleased with his trip to New York.

John, his driver, and the four new Irish servants left Bangor by carriage early on the morning of June 6th. The trip would take two days. John was excited about returning home to teach Colm how to run the lighthouse, and it was time to start emphasizing to his children to make their future marital arrangements.

He also realized he had to do something about Anne. He knew her drinking had increased in the last few months, usually while he was away, and she was becoming withdrawn and forgetful. Nigel kept his eye on Anne and reported her activities to John, both of them agreeing she should never know.

John planned to have a quiet conversation with Anne in order to learn what was bothering her. He still held a deep, if undemonstrative, affection for her and hated to see her unhappy. He was sure he could set her to rights with one small conversation, and all would be smooth again. Then he could focus on making good matches for Roddy and Molly. John's next order of business was to safeguard the legacy of his family with grandchildren, who would carry on the newly-distinguished American name of Larkin.

CHAPTER THREE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"How come Larkin chose you to work in his new lighthouse?" Flaherty asked Colm.

Colm shrugged. "I worked in one in Malahide."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The men stood listening and watching him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I don't mind if you take a drink. There's a pub in Larkin called the Amber Whale that you might come to frequent soon enough. But know this: I will not tolerate drunkenness on the job. I will simply not abide it. I don't subscribe to the quaint notion that all Irishmen are drunkards and good-for-nothings. I have proven otherwise. If you are discovered drinking while working for me, you will be dismissed at once, and you can find your own way off my estate. What you do on your time is your own business, as long as you break no laws, nor hurt anyone else in my employ or in the village. My wife, Mrs. Larkin, is particularly moral and will not have indecent frolicking with any of the maids. Do I make myself clear?"

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Colm watched the chef with amusement, finding him interesting. Claude caught his eye and grinned. "You are the *beau garçon* of the bunch, *non*? You will be noticed here, I can promise you that. I can just hear the ladies in the village. *Mon dieu!* You will break many hearts before you are through, won't you?"

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

"Isolated, yes. Boring, *non*. You will see." Claude brought a loaf of warm bread on a wooden bread server to the table and sliced it for them. "Mr. Larkin is a very fair man," he continued as he buttered the slices. "But do not cross him, or you will find yourself booted

out into the cold. I've seen it. A year ago, a stable hand drank too much at lunchtime and tried to go back to work. The *Monsieur* caught him, and fired him on the spot. The man had to walk the seven miles to the village. I think he works on a blueberry farm in Searsport now. Terrible mistake he made. This is a good place to work, and the living conditions are above par."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Claude studied Colm for a moment, reflecting, and then he chuckled. "Perhaps you think so," he said mildly. "But you are here in America now. I predict your life will become *extraordinaire* very soon. I have a sense about these things, *Beauty*. You will be someone here."

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

Not then, but later.

* * *

WATCHING HIS MOTHER AND sister, Roddy thought the only time they were in tune with each other was when his father present. They both worshiped him, for different reasons. Anne loved him as a wife, devotedly, and with admiration for all he had accomplished. Molly held her father in awe, eagerly absorbing his every word, glowing when he directed his attention to her. It was an amazing process to observe, let alone be a part of.

The drawing room, where they took their tea every day, was one of Roddy's favorite rooms. It had warmly paneled walls and French doors that opened to a wild flower garden, which overlooked a terrace and cobbled walk. Beside the large Jacobean fireplace was an oak sideboard, and several settees, love seats and divans, all designed with an antique rose pattern. Polished tables were draped with the same lace cloths as covered the sideboard, and lamps had smoked glass with roses traced on each shade. Thick, blue and rose carpets gave the room rich warmth. Anne had decorated the room, and it was also one of her favorites. It was a relaxing place to entertain guests and to enjoy a cup of tea.

John held court from a high-backed English chair, which contained patterns and carved legs. He told them about the four Irishmen he hired in New York, in particular the lad he chose to operate the new lighthouse.

"How will you get by government requirements to hire this fellow?" Roddy asked. "How can you be sure they'll let you hire an Irishman just off the boat?"

John smiled. "I was given a lot of leeway by the U.S. Lighthouse Service," he said carefully. "For starters, I built and paid for the lighthouse following their engineer's drawings. I did that on the condition I could choose who to hire as the keeper. All the Service asked of me was to have the new employee sign a paper agreeing to a six-month probation period. There will be random inspections and a silly inventory control, but it's a small price for having the man I want in the lighthouse."

Roddy considered briefly and nodded. "So they waived their requirements for a keeper? That seems odd, even if you did pay for the tower. Usually, they're so adamant about wanting experienced navy men with years of service. And they set the salary of the keeper, too, don't they? Who will pay your new keeper? You or the Lighthouse Service?"

"The Service will pay him. They let me decide who to hire only because I paid for the lighthouse. I absorbed all of the cost, and the Americans seem to fancy that. The lad I picked will do well. There will be no problems."

"If you're sure."

"I'm sure," John said firmly. "I have three copies of the government contract in my pocket. One for them, one for me and one for the keeper. All the lad has to do is sign, and the deal is done."

"May I see the contract? Just out of curiosity?"

"Perhaps later." *The lad needs to learn to trust me.* He turned to Anne. "We'll be having guests within the next fortnight."

"Oh?" Anne was surprised. "Who?"

"A family I met in New York." He accepted another cup of tea from a hovering maid. "The man's name is Elliot McShane. He's a publisher."

"A publisher? What does he publish?"

"He's the publisher and editor of a very well-read newspaper in New York, with a posh townhouse in Manhattan. He's from Scotland, and his wife is part French and part

Welsh, I believe. Anyway, the McShane's are the new darlings of New York society. I met Elliot at a shareholder's meeting last week, and he invited me to supper in his home. He's a very hospitable man, very decent. So I returned the favor by inviting them to come for a short summer holiday. They never seem to get out of the blasted city, so he was quite receptive to my offer."

"What is the purpose for the visit?" Anne knew her husband always had another agenda.

John grinned, pleased Anne was still in tune with him. He set his tea cup down, and crossed his legs. "Elliot has four children. A son, who is eleven, and three daughters, ages fifteen, sixteen and seventeen." He noticed Roddy's sudden interest. "And all of the girls are eligible. The oldest hasn't even come out in society yet."

"You want me to pick one for a bride, don't you?" Roddy was not entirely displeased.

"It's entirely up to you. You may not like any of them. I'm just trying to make it easier for you. It's time you made some kind of arrangement to ensure the future. If you don't fancy any of Elliot's daughters, you're free to travel to New York to begin your search. Just consider the lasses. The McShane's are a good family, they're wealthy, and I'm sure Elliot would be generous with a dowry."

"You have already discussed the matter with Mr. McShane?"

"Yes, of course. He was very open to the idea. He thinks one of his daughters would make a splendid match for a son of mine. But, still, it's up to you."

Roddy thought for a moment. "Very well, I'll give it a chance. Will you tell me their names, and if they are even remotely attractive or intelligent?"

John nodded. "The oldest is named Chantal, she's blonde and very pretty. They are all blonde, to varying degrees. The middle lass is called Sascha. A strange name, I grant you. It may have come from the mother's Welsh heritage. Sascha is quiet, studious, and attractive. The youngest is named Kiera. She's quite lovely; the prettiest of the three and the most lively."

"I assume you recommend the youngest, since she has the most child-bearing time?" Roddy asked ruefully.

"That's up to you," John replied.

Anne appeared indifferent to the conversation, but Molly was indignant. They were discussing Roddy's future like a business venture, and the girl like a commodity. But she said nothing. At least Father wasn't plotting *her* future . . . yet.

"I'll give it a go," Roddy agreed. "What do I have to lose?"

"Nothing, and everything to gain," John agreed.

Molly raised her cup to hide her face. She felt sorry for the girls. Did they know their future was being bartered? Molly thanked God she was the second born and a girl. Her future was less important, although Father expected her to marry well someday. A day much farther off than for Roddy and an unsuspecting McShane lass.

John stood. "I'd like you to meet the lads I hired in New York." He held out his hand to Anne. "I found a good lot this time, especially the man I want for the lighthouse. His name is Colm Sullivan, and he's come from Malahide. A word of warning, Molly and Anne: this young man was given his looks by the angels. With his face and build, he should have been born into a great family. I've never seen a more physically perfect man."

"Daddy, really!" Molly exclaimed. "You're making up tales again. How can a man just off the boat be a perfect male specimen? I've never heard of such a thing."

John chuckled. "You'll see." He took Anne's arm. "Let's go to the kitchen to meet the lads, and then I need to take Colm down to the keeper's cottage to rest. He'll need it to learn the ways of Banshee Point Lighthouse."

Roddy and Molly followed their parents. Roddy was not really interested in meeting the new servants, but it was a ritual with John, as much as deciding menu's for the family was for Anne. "*I must admit,*" Roddy thought as they crossed the foyer. "*I'm curious about this Colm fellow, not only because of Dad's description of him but because he will be the new lighthouse keeper. I need to be sure that he has the stuff, the stamina, for the job.*"

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

COLM FOLLOWED JOHN OUT the back door, still a bit dazed and glad that John was silent. He wasn't sure he could have responded properly. He had to get his wits about him, to clear his head of the image of Molly. He had never felt like this before, and he didn't know how to manage or interpret it. He couldn't even name it. Yes, Molly was beautiful, but there was something else about her. He had felt frozen to the spot when he first saw her. She felt it, too - of that he was certain.

"Did you hear me, Colm?"

They were walking across the lawn and apparently had been for several minutes. "I'm sorry, Mr. Larkin. What did you say?"

"I asked if you could read and write," John repeated, sounding impatient.

"Yes, I can. My mother, God rest her soul, insisted that both my younger sister and I be formally schooled in Malahide. I went as far as the ninth grade."

"Good! When we get to the cottage, I want you to look over a document the United States Lighthouse Service sent me. It's a contract of sorts, and you will need to sign it in order to work at the lighthouse, and to be paid by them."

"A contract? You didn't tell me anything about a contract, sir."

"Does it matter?"

They stepped off the lawn onto a dirt path leading down to the ocean. "No, I think not. What does the contract mean?"

"It's a mere formality," John was pleased Colm had not balked at the contract before he knew what it said. That meant Colm trusted him, which was important to John. "I paid for the construction of the lighthouse, but the government controls all lighthouses in America. They inspect them, supply them with tools, and pay the keeper's wages. I wanted control on who was operating the lighthouse on my land, so the U.S. Lighthouse Service agreed to let me do that if I paid for the actual tower. However, legally, you will be a government employee. They will pay your salary."

"Do you mean I won't work for you after all?"

"No, no. I'll give you a few extra duties here and there, so that technically you work for me, too. And I will pay you separately, of course, on top of what the agency pays you."

"That sounds fair. I'll be glad to sign the contract, after I read it."

John chuckled. "Good enough. Now watch your step here. The path goes up a bit, and soon you'll see the lighthouse. But we're not going there tonight. I'll take you to the cottage, and in the next few days I'll take you up to the lighthouse."

Pines and rock formations lined the side of the path. Colm smelled the salt air and heard the crashing waves before he saw them. At a crest, they saw the ocean. From there the path went left and up to the Banshee Point Lighthouse, and ahead it went down to what looked like the roof of the keeper's cottage.

Colm stood still and looked out over the blue-gray water, the waves crashing onto the rocks and the pale sand below. Seagulls swooped and screeched, white against the water. Though it was close to dusk and shapes were indistinct, he saw the gray brick lighthouse clearly, standing high above the sea, taller than any lighthouse he had ever seen.

Understanding the impression the lighthouse made, John waited patiently, and then said quietly: "Yes, it's a beauty, but I'll show it to you another day. Let's get you settled in the cottage before it gets dark."

Colm started, flustered to have stared so long. "Yes, sir. I'm ready, sir. The lighthouse is so tall. I was just caught up in its size."

"That's twice now, lad." John thought. *"Pay attention."*

They continued fifty yards down the path to a white fence-enclosed cottage built back from the edge of a sharp cliff. Another path led from the cottage down to the sea. Colm felt his heart expand as they neared it. It was white cottage, trimmed in green, and topped with a thatched roof like most every cottage in Ireland. Again he stood and looked. He listened to the wind whispering in the pines, grateful to be there. He followed John to the front door and inside.

Colm stopped inside the door. It was immaculately tidy. It looked and smelled clean. During the day he knew the sun would shine in all the windows. The floors were light-colored, apparent in the bedroom, kitchen and the indoor water closet. There was furniture, and sheer curtains on the windows.

While John lit one of the lamps, Colm set down his suitcase. "There's a bedroom with a porch on the other side of the fireplace," John said. "You can look around after I leave, but right now let's go into the kitchen so I can show you the contract."

Colm nodded, not looking away from the fireplace. It was unusual in that it opened into the living area and the bedroom on the other side. How clever to heat two rooms at once. There were cushions on the hearth. Colm decided to light a fire as soon as John Larkin left him alone.

They went into the small kitchen. Tired, Colm sat at the round oak table while John lit another lamp. Colm looked around: the room contained tall windows, a wood-burning stove, a small icebox, a sink, a long counter and a pantry closet. A back door led outside into the area that faced the direction of the mansion.

John sat, leaned his elbows on the table, and rubbed his eyes. Watching him, Colm noticed for the first time how tired he looked. It had been a long journey for all of them. John adjusted the wick on the lantern, took some papers from his inside jacket pocket, and laid them on the table. "I want you to rest for a few days. I need to do the same, to be honest. I'm not as young as I used to be, and as much as I hate to admit it, I have to back off once in awhile.

"After we rest, I want to show you how to operate the lighthouse. It's very modern, and some of the duties are complicated, yet I'm confident you'll catch on fast. The summer months aren't too busy for a keeper, but autumn and winter will make up for that. You'll see. Your job is important, very important. It saves lives. At any rate," he unfolded the papers in front of him, "this is the contract from the U.S. Lighthouse Service. Three copies: one for you, one for me, and one for the government. Please read it carefully, and if you find it acceptable, please sign all three copies. Then, legally, we are free and clear to get started."

Colm took one of the papers from him, smoothed it flat on the table, glanced at John momentarily, and when he nodded, he began to read the contract slowly and carefully. He wanted to avoid mistakes, so, tired as he was, he read slowly. After several minutes, he looked up. John was staring at him.

"Well? What do you think?"

"It seems to be in order. It's plain and simple. But the yearly salary . . . is that a misprint? I mean, it's so much." He hesitated. "And how is it my name is already on the contract? How did you know . . ."

"I filled in your name before we left New York," John grinned. "As for the money, that's what they're willing to pay you. It's no mistake, lad." He reached over to small cupboard near the sink and pulled out an inkwell and a pen. "You need to sign each copy once, as do I. The lighthouse agency has already signed. See how they trust me?"

Colm took the pen and signed each copy of the contract:

PROBATIONARY APPOINTMENT

Department of Commerce and Labor
APPOINTMENT DIVISION, Washington, D.C.
May 25, 1880

Mr. John K. Larkin

Sir:

You have been appointed to choose one individual to keep the lighthouse at Banshee Point, Maine, on a probationary contract. You are wholly responsible for this person to do the work correctly, and he will follow our guidelines and conditions. We will be

responsible for his pay per month, as stated below. Please recite and have him sign the following duly:

You have been appointed, subject to taking the oath of office, Assistant Lighthouse Keeper of Banshee Point, Maine in the U.S. Lighthouse Service, chosen by: Mr. John K. Larkin, owner of such structure and to be named such under your full, birth-given name: Colm Michael Sullivan at a salary of 500 dollars per annum, effective on the date on which you enter 1, upon duty in the above-mentioned position.

(By selection from Certificate No. 8976, and subject to a probationary period of not to exceed six months as provided by paragraph (c) of section 1 of civil-service rule VII, to be found on the reverse hereof).

John Kevin Larkin

Owner, Banshee Point Lighthouse
Banshee Point, Maine

Colm Michael Sullivan

Lighthouse Keeper
Reported for duty June 8, 1880

By direction of the secretary:

Respectfully,

George Deaton-Smith

Chief of Appointment Division

John took two copies of the contract, put them in his jacket pocket, and lay the third copy on the table. "That copy is for you. Do with it what you will. At the end of six months, the Lighthouse Service will send me a permanent contract, worded much like this one, and we'll be all set. You will be appointed for life, lad, unless you go mad or die in an untimely fashion. However, I predict you have many years ahead of you here. Happy years."

Colm smiled for the first time since they entered the cottage. "I believe you're right, sir. I feel more secure already."

"It's been a hell of a journey for you, hasn't it, lad?" John asked, relieved that the contract was signed.

Colm sighed. "It seems like years since I stepped onto the boat at Malahide, but I feel good about this. With no family left, I decided to come to America and I know I'll not regret it."

"I'll leave you now." John rose, suddenly tired. "Treat this cottage as your own. Hang pictures, paint the walls, do whatever you like. I fashioned this house like my own in Ireland, so I'm sure you will find it comfortable. There are no supplies to speak of here, so if you get hungry, come up to the mansion to eat. Claude always has a pot of something cooking on the stove. My carriage driver will make a trip to the village this Saturday, where you can get your own supplies, if you desire."

"Thank you, sir." Colm stood and extended his hand. "I'll do that."

John shook his hand. "Have a good rest, and I'm sure I'll see you tomorrow."

Colm was alone in his new home. He stood in the kitchen listening to the sound of the wind and the waves. Then, shaking his head in near disbelief, he went to the living area, picked up his suitcase, and carried it to the bedroom doorway. He stood absorbing the sight of the room.

The walls were knotty pine. The large four-poster bed had a beige canopy, and the peach coverlet looked hand-woven. The mirror and dresser in one corner, and small table and chair in the other, matched the bed. Double French doors led to what looked like a porch, and were hung with sheer drapes. He went to the doors and opened them.

On the porch, a table and two high-backed chairs faced the ocean. The beauty and serenity of the house, the area, were all so pristine, fresh, and unspoiled that it felt like a dream.

Colm turned and went back inside. Leaving the French doors open, he went through to the living area and started a fire in the fireplace, as he'd wanted to do from the moment he saw it. Even though it wasn't cold outside, the warmth felt good, comforting, welcoming. He went back to the bedroom, looked at the fire momentarily, smiled, then put his suitcase on the bed and undid the old belts that held it closed.

With the suitcase open wide, he began to unpack. His possessions were few: scant clothing, a pipe with no tobacco, a pair of worn work boots, several pieces of paper and three pencils, and a blue-covered book that looked new. He picked up the book and held it to his chest, over his heart. Then, carrying the book, he went back to the kitchen, picked up the pen, the inkwell, and the lantern, went through the bedroom and French doors, and onto the porch. He put everything on the table and sat in one of the big chairs.

With a sigh, he picked up the pen. He was tired, and tempted to climb into the big bed and sleep for hours. But first, he wanted to make an entry in his journal, a book he'd had in his possession for the last year. His mother had given it to him before she died, because she knew how much he loved to write and draw. He saved it for this time in the new world, and wanted to put his thoughts on paper before he went to sleep, while his memory was fresh. Dipping the pen into the inkwell, he wrote on the leather cover:

The Private Journal of Colm Michael Sullivan

1st Keeper of the Banshee Point Lighthouse

June 1880 to _____

Then he opened the book, marveled at the clean whiteness of the pages, each lined with a thin strip of gold ink. He knew his mother must have spent a fair bit of money for this journal, most likely purchased in Dublin. He stroked the page. With this new beginning, he had much to write about: his sea journey, the long trip from New York to Maine, and his first impressions of the extravagant house on the hill.

But there was more. Despite all he had been through, Colm knew the most important occurrence had been his first meeting with Molly Larkin. Adjusting the lantern, hearing the wind and the waves, he began to write.

CHAPTER FOUR

JOHN CLIMBED THE STEPS to his suite on the second floor, planning to freshen up before visiting his wife in her own rooms. He considered his private suite a sanctuary, a place of blessed peace and tranquility. There he could rest and think, shutting out the world's demands. Keeping his fortune intact, much less making it grow was hard work. And there was the responsibility of the mansion, the people on the estate and in the village. With his mind so constantly crowded, he relished time to sit and think of nothing, to clear his mind and recharge himself. The desire for peace and calm was one of the reasons he chose five years ago to have a separate bedroom from his wife. He did not know if Anne understood, but she never questioned him or complained. She was loyal and trusting.

At the double doors of his suite, carved with a replica of the lighthouse, John paused. Then he opened the doors, and liked what he saw. "*Bless Nigel Barton-Brooks. He always has my room ready and cozy for me.*" His quarters were the largest personal space in the house, as he planned from the start. Although it was called a suite, it was in reality a huge room, open, unrestricted and relaxing.

The ceiling was high with dark wood beams, giving the room a light and airy spacious feeling. The wood in between the beams was painted an off white, contrasting with the darkness of the walls. There was a four-poster king-sized bed to the right side of the room, with a dark blue bedspread and matching bed tables on each side with glass lamps. There were four large windows in the room, all with black molding, and sided by beige and dark brown draperies. A fire crackled in the fireplace, welcoming John to the settee and table where he liked to work.

Over the French doors, and up a flight of curved wrought iron steps, was a small loft with another window above it. The loft window was round, like the porthole of a clipper ship, with two chairs underneath. John personally designed the area and spent as much time as he could in the loft. He never tired of it.

Outside the French doors was a balcony, with a partial view of the estate that included the lighthouse. In a few days he would see the beacon from the lighthouse sweeping across the beach and over the grounds of the estate. He was excited by the prospect, and anxious to show Colm all the workings of the lighthouse.

John crossed the room to his suite's private water closet, poured warm water into the bowl, mentally thanking Nigel for providing it. He ran his wet fingers through his hair and then quickly combed it in front of the mirror. He noticed how tired he looked. Understandable, since he had accomplished much in the last few weeks. He invested in a new company in New York that was certain they had cornered the market on canned condensed milk. Time would tell. He also tended to his other investments, which were doing very well, and managed to socialize and meet Elliot McShane and his family. He was almost certain the McShane's would be a stepping stone to ensure continuity of the Larkin name through a compliant Roddy.

Finding four new Irish servants had been a stroke of good fortune, especially Colm Sullivan, who was bright, quick, and faultlessly handsome. Not that his looks mattered, but they didn't hurt. John analyzed every person he hired in any capacity, and enjoyed a variety of personalities around him. He appreciated Claude's bluntness and amusing comments, and the staid, duty-bound Nigel and his wife, Clea, who were such a help to Anne. When

Nigel and Clea had their first child two years ago, a daughter they named Layla, John offered to stand in as the godfather at the baptism.

With one last glance in the mirror, he returned to his room. He saw Nigel standing by the fireplace with a tray containing two decanters, one of Jameson whiskey, the other of lager, and two glasses. John poured a dram of whiskey into one of the glasses, and drained the amber liquid in one swallow.

"Thank you, Nigel. I've been waiting for that all day."

"You must be exhausted, sir," Nigel said, refilling the glass. "It's a long trip from New York by carriage."

"Aye, it is. I wanted the new lads to get a good look at this country. I must say, I didn't mind seeing it myself. A good night's sleep and I'll be as right as rain."

"Would you like me to have water sent up for a proper bath, sir?" Nigel noted that the master of the house was travel-worn, a bit dusty, and smelled strongly of horses and sweat.

"Yes," John grinned. "I know I'm a sight, smell worse, and you can abide neither. However, delay the hot water for about one hour. I need to speak to Mrs. Larkin. Then I'll return and bathe."

"Very good, sir. I will await you then."

John tossed back the second glass of whiskey. "How did my wife behave while I was gone?"

"Much the same as always when you're away," Nigel had expected the question. "She drank quite a bit of sherry in the late mornings, and early afternoons. She spent a great deal of time in her sitting room, alone, and I know she drank more after retiring for the evening. She always asked for another tray of sherry before she said good night."

John sighed. "Damn. That's what I thought she'd do, but hoped she wouldn't. Now I think it's time I had a talk with her." He held up a hand to stay Nigel's protest. "Don't worry. She will never know you or Clea watch her for me. I wouldn't want her to lose trust in either of you. You perform a great service by telling me these things. I just want to help Anne, and make sure she's happy."

Nigel nodded his head. "Yes, sir. Clea and I are grateful that you trust us to look after Mrs. Larkin. We will never let you down, sir."

"I know, Nigel. And you know how much I appreciate it." He picked up the decanter of lager and drained it in one go, then sighed and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "That will be enough spirits for me tonight. Now I'll go to Anne. I can't keep putting it off. The sooner I speak with her, the sooner I can have my bath and get into my bed." He stood, and Nigel stepped back respectfully.

"Your bath will be waiting when you return, sir. And I will have one of the maids warm your sheets with a hot water bottle."

"Thank you. I'll be back in an hour, or less."

Nigel nodded and watched him leave the room, then cleared the table. He was relieved Mr. Larkin was back. Nigel and Clea both disliked spying on anyone, particularly on their employer's wife. The only person who seemed to be able to talk to Anne was her husband, so they both hoped she would settle down and behave like the lady of the house with the proper decorum required.

Nigel walked to the double doors of the bedroom without his normal energy. The day had been long, and it wasn't over yet. He was tired, and wanted nothing more than to

join Clea and Layla in their cozy little room on the fourth floor. He still had the master's bath to tend to, and it was well after nine o'clock. It would probably be past midnight before he could seek the blessed sanctuary of his own bed.

No one heard Nigel's grumbling as he shuffled down the hall. "Tomorrow will be different. The master is back, and he will set the Missus to rights and she will be her old self in the morning. *I hope.* I don't know how much longer I can stand fifteen-hour days. I'm just getting too old for this."

* * *

WEARING A WHITE SILK nightgown, hair loose and free, covered with warm quilts and satin sheets, Anne lay comfortably in her large bed. She was ready to slip into slumber, secure that John was home and all was well. He always made everything perfect and serene. He took care of all unpleasantness without apparent effort.

She was startled when he walked into her bedchamber from the sitting room, fully dressed and looking refreshed. He smiled at her, and shut the door behind him. He walked over and sat beside her on the bed, smoothing the coverlet with his hand. Anne sat up and returned his smile, happy to see him, but puzzled. He rarely came to her bedroom. In fact, he hadn't done so in more than five years. They spoke together in the drawing room, or at the dining table. If they needed greater privacy, they usually took a stroll on the estate grounds.

"Are you well, John?" she asked, concerned.

He took her hands. "Yes, very well. A bit tired, but I'm not young anymore. I think I'll limit my trips to New York to twice a year, possibly once. If we need servants, I'll find them in the village, or I'll advertise in Elliot McShane's newspaper in New York."

Delighted, Anne laughed. "That sounds wonderful. That would make me so happy. You've worked very hard for so many years. It's time you enjoyed the fruits of your labor."

John chuckled. "Well, there's plenty to do around here. I'll just travel less."

"That's wonderful." The glow in her eyes was proof of her pleasure.

He looked at her closely. "Is all well with you, Annie? You seemed a bit out of sorts when I arrived home today. Is there something bothering you?"

"You know how I am when you're away," she said gaily, relief at his news still evident. "I don't like it, but I have to live with it. I must be a problem for Nigel, Clea and the children. Roddy probably thinks I'm a doddering old fool when you're away, a baby afraid of her own shadow."

"Roddy thinks no such thing. He adores you. But Molly is another matter, isn't she?"

Anne's happy mood became subdued instantly. She looked down at her hands, chewing her bottom lip nervously. "Molly doesn't see me in a very loving light, I think."

"I can see that. Molly is almost outright hostile to you. Do you know why?"

Anne shook her head. "No. I don't."

"I will speak to her and get to the bottom of it."

Anne clutched his arm. "No. Please don't. I love her, but for some reason she thinks ill of me. I'd rather she comes to me of her own free will. I don't want false affection from her just because you chastise her. Perhaps it's her age. I'm sure she'll outgrow it."

"I won't tolerate her disrespect towards you. I simply will not allow it."

Anne looked embarrassed. "Molly isn't exactly disrespectful. She stops short of that. Most of the time she barely speaks to me. That's not exactly disrespectful, is it? Let's just say she is formal with me."

"You are her mother," John's voice was sharp. "I will brook no disobedience from her. Perhaps it's time we looked into finding her a suitable husband, too. It might settle her down."

"You might be right." Anne was glad John mentioned the idea of Molly's marriage first. It would be good to have Molly's cold presence gone from the house, and safely married to a man who would take care of her. Anne hated to admit it, but her own daughter made her feel insecure and inadequate. In the deep recesses of her mind, Anne also knew her feelings of angst towards her daughter were based on her mercurial character, so much like Anne's sister Maeve, which brought with it the memory that Maeve was John's first love. It was an uncomfortable situation, awkward at best.

"We'll talk about it later." John patted her hand. "I want to point Roddy in the right direction when the McShane's arrive in two weeks. When Roddy is safely married, we can decide what to do about Molly. Does that suit you?"

"Yes, that sounds reasonable to me." Anne nodded, feeling better already, and she shifted her focus to her much-loved son. "Are you sure the McShane girls are good enough for Roddy? I mean, are they well bred? Are they educated?" She blushed slightly. "I don't mean to sound overbearing, but I want Roddy to have the best."

"I understand." John was surprised by her questioning. It was out of character for her. "All three of Elliot's daughters are suitable, Annie. They can read and write, they have impeccable manners and they dress properly. As I said earlier, the middle daughter, Sascha, is a bit quiet and studious. Elliot told me she is an avid reader, and that she fancies books on the Orient, specifically about Japan. I'm sure Roddy will prefer one of the other daughters, though. Chantal, the oldest, would be best for him in my opinion, but maybe he will like Kiera, the youngest. She is a happy sort, always laughing and preening. We'll see, I suppose. I trust our son to do the right thing."

"He will. He has never disappointed us." *Unlike Molly*, Anne thought unkindly.

John stood, ready to go back to his room and have a bath. He felt he had calmed Anne, and he was relieved. But he had one more piece of business, and he tried to choose his words carefully. "Annie dear, I have some advice for you. You can take it or leave it, but I want you to listen to me closely. I have your best interests at heart. You know that, don't you?"

Anne nodded. "I always listen to you, John. Always."

He lowered his voice. "Please cut back on the amount of sherry you're consuming each day, my dear, or anything else that contains alcohol. I'm not asking you to completely stop your tipples, I'm just asking that you minimize what you drink."

Anne was completely undone with embarrassment. She was deeply ashamed of her little secret, and had no idea John was aware of it, making the shame even harder to bear. She put her hands up to conceal her burning face. "I'm so ashamed of myself," she whispered. "I'm sorry, John. I will do as you say, I promise. But how did you know? How?"

"That's not important, Annie. The fact is I do know, and I hate to see you unhappy. Now that I'll be staying home more, maybe the secret drinking will stop?"

She nodded vigorously. "It will. It will. I can stop altogether, if you like."

"That's not necessary, my dear." He bent over and kissed the top of her head. "I'm really quite tired, so I'm going to retire for the evening. We'll have a big breakfast in the morning, Annie, and maybe take a walk on the grounds after that."

"Oh, yes. I'd like that." She smiled tremulously. "Please go and get your rest, John. And thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I love our little talks."

He smiled, and then he was gone.

Anne hunched over in her bed, filled with a sudden anger. Who had gone to John and told him her secret? *Her embarrassing little secret?* Certainly not Nigel or Clea. They were too faithful, too devoted to spy on her and treat her like a child behind her back. They were too circumspect and respectful of her to do such a traitorous thing. She lay down and pulled the coverlet up to her chin. She was sure to get another one of her violent headaches now. She needed to sleep; she needed to rest, and tomorrow would be a better day. John was home, and all was right with her world.

As she began to drift off, she thought: *"I'll bet it was Molly who told John. She would do anything to make me look bad, so that she looks better. I'll be so glad when she's married and out of my sight. She reminds John too much of Maeve."* Her sleepiness disappeared and she was suddenly wide awake, her heart pounding, She was too furious to sleep now.

* * *

TRUE TO HIS WORD, John let Colm rest for a day and a half, which is exactly what Colm did. He bathed, wrote in his journal, walked on the beach, but always with an eye to the mammoth lighthouse. It was the tallest he had ever seen - he guessed its height to be at least 125 feet. In addition, he made himself comfortable in the cottage, but ate his meals at the mansion. There he saw his fellow travelers Flaherty, O'Connor and O'Toole. None of them seemed the worse for wear, and even Flaherty had softened a little. He told Colm that their sleeping quarters on the fourth floor of the mansion were "gigantic" and included a private water closet. Colm was pleased for his friends.

On Colm's third day, John knocked on the door of the cottage at mid-morning, asking if he was ready to tour the lighthouse. Colm eagerly joined his employer on the short walk to the tower.

John led the way to the lighthouse door and opened it. Inside it was cool and immaculate.

"It's so clean," Colm commented. "Who sweeps the place?"

John chuckled. "You'll be cleaning it now, lad. Before you came, one of the house maids came down here to tidy up. The Lighthouse Service does random white-glove inspections throughout the year. They want everything to be pristine, including the windows, the walls and the staircase. That will be your job now, too. It's part of the keeper's duties."

Colm nodded. "Oh."

"Don't worry. It's not bad. Some days you'll be so bored, especially in the summer months, that you'll be glad for something to do."

John led Colm to the metal spiral staircase. Colm had to crane his neck to look to the top. It seemed to wind up endlessly to the very pinnacle of the lighthouse.

"It's a good thing you're young," John said, as they stood at the bottom of the staircase. "Molly came with me here once, when the tower was just completed, and she

made it a point of counting the steps up to the top. According to her, there are two hundred steps. That changed my thinking a tad, I must admit. Before I knew how many steps there were, I didn't mind the climb. Now that I know, it seems harder and harder to get to the top every time I come here."

Colm laughed. "I'll get used to it, sir. I don't mind exercise. I sat so much on the sea voyage and the carriage journey that I welcome the physical work."

"That's good. You'll probably be making several trips a day up and down those stairs, especially in the winter months."

Every five feet on the staircase there was a small, round window made of thick glass, built to look like a ship's porthole. It took John and Colm ten minutes to reach the top of the lighthouse. Both men were out of breath, Colm slightly less. He was the first to walk over to look out the glass through which the beacon sent its beam across the waves. He was speechless. The view of ocean, shore, land, estate, all miniaturized from this distance and overarched with blue sky was overwhelming.

"Spectacular, isn't it?" John asked, smiling.

"I've never seen the like. My God! I can see everything from here. The lighthouse in Malahide wasn't even a whit the size of this."

"The air smells sweeter, too."

"It does. And saltier."

The tower room held two desks, bookcases with volumes on maritime law, lighthouse regulations, oceanographic maps, and a wild life book on birds and fish common to the area. John pointed to one of the desks, where Colm saw a big leather-bound book with a bright red tassel marking a page. "That's the keeper's log. The Lighthouse Service sent it to me when the tower was completed. I've never used it. The service requires you keep a daily log on everything that goes on here: the weather, ship sightings, and an inventory of supplies used, right down to the polishing cloths. Then, when you need more supplies, the service will send only what you've recorded in this book. And, before they will issue more items, you have to turn in the old supplies, even if they're broken, worn out or used up. It's a lot of paperwork, and tedious, but it has to be done in order for things to run smoothly."

"How often do I get lighthouse supplies?"

"Three times a year. You turn in your paperwork, and they'll send you new supplies. It takes about three weeks altogether, including mailing in the forms and old supplies, them checking it all over, and then mailing you the new supplies. That's why it's important that you keep track of everything, including the kerosene you use for lamps, and the beacon. The service will send all of that to you."

"I read and write well, sir," Colm reminded him. "It won't be a problem."

"You might have to do a bit of drawing, too," John informed him, handing him the keeper's log. "If a ship comes into the inlet, you have to record their position in nautical terms, including a drawing of their size and their origin. You can do that?"

"Yes, sir." Colm smiled. It was ironic that something he did very well, such as drawing and painting, were required for his new job. "Drawing is a hobby of mine, sir. I used to draw my village in Ireland, and then paint it. My mother, God rest her soul, had my paintings framed and hung on the walls of our cottage."

Interested, John looked at him. "What happened to the paintings?"

"The cottage burned down last year, and the paintings went with it."

"How many were there?"

"Eight, I believe."

John paused in thought. "Is that how your family died? In a fire?"

Colm shook his head. "No. My parents were killed during a British raid in Dublin. They were innocent bystanders, but got caught between some British soldiers and a few republican lads." He paused. The memory still hurt. "Then I was alone with my younger sister, Bridget. About six months later, British soldiers came to Malahide and torched our cottage. I was working, and Bridget was alone. That was the end of my family, and my art."

Seeing the pain in Colm's eyes, John said: "I'm sorry, Colm. I didn't mean to pry."

Colm looked at him, surprised by the man's compassion. "You're not prying, sir. My story is all too common in Ireland, as I'm sure you're aware." He looked out the windows again, his expression thoughtful. "I've always believed my father was an innocent bystander in the Dublin raid, as I said, but I've often wondered if he was somehow involved with the republicans. Most Irishmen who hate the English are involved, or wish they were. It was the specific way the British soldiers came after my family cottage that made me suspicious, putting the torch to it and no other. It doesn't feel like a coincidence."

John watched Colm, sorely aware of Irish suffering. He felt a twinge of guilt over his lack of participation in it, which was, after all, one of the reasons he left Ireland. He thought he left it behind fourteen years ago when he came to America, but now Colm's story made it fresh again. "*I've nothing to feel guilty about,*" John thought. "*Or do I?*"

He changed the subject. "So, you still draw as a hobby?"

"I try, yes. I like it very much."

Although John had no artistic talent, he was beginning to collect fine art. He had acquired a modest collection of paintings from both celebrated and starving artists. He made a mental note to watch Colm's progress - he could be as good as the famous ones. John might have a lighthouse keeper and an investment opportunity all rolled into one.

"We had better go over the prisms now," John said, pulling himself out of his own thoughts. "They are an important part of this job."

"Sorry, sir, I didn't mean to ramble on about my past in Ireland."

"You weren't rambling. I asked you, remember? I'm interested in all my employees. Everyone is human, and everyone has a story, including you."

Time went fast while John showed Colm as much as he could that first day. Colm tried to stay focused. There was more to the job than he realized.

"I can't stress enough how important this lighthouse is, and your job here," John said to Colm as morning became early afternoon. "If a boat wrecks in the inlet, you are responsible for rescuing the passengers and crew, and providing them with shelter in the tower before you send them on their way."

Colm stomach rumbled with hunger. He tried to disguise the noise by covering his mouth and coughing. After a brief pause, John turned to Colm. "You know the Lighthouse Service will be paying you \$500 per year, which works out to be \$41.67 per month. They'll mail you a monthly bank draft that you can cash in the village, or you can endorse it over to me and I'll give you cash. In addition, as I've told you, I will pay you twenty dollars a month, so technically you will be in my employ."

"But what will you have me do to earn twenty dollars?" Colm asked, still amazed at the amount of money he was going to be earning. In a very few years he could save quite a

bundle of money, if he was careful. "I don't want to be given money just to say I work for you, sir. I have to earn it."

"Oh, you will. On days when you're not busy here, I want you to do odd jobs, such as helping the gardener, the cook, or the stable boys. Just ask them if they have extra work. That's how you will earn twenty dollars."

"Well, I don't know, sir. That's a lot of money for doing odd jobs. Not that I won't take the pay, but I'm not used to being offered so much money for my time."

"Get used to it my boy. I have a feeling you will do well here, and hope you will be happy. I like cheerful, contented servants who do their jobs well and never want to leave."

They were interrupted by a long, sharp whistle from below. John went over and opened a small window, stuck his head out, then pulled back in with a grin on his face. "It's my daughter. It looks like she's brought lunch." He pulled out a small gold timepiece. "Good Lord, it's almost two o'clock. I didn't realize the time, lad. You must be starved."

"Yes, sir, I am a mite hungry. I'll walk up to the mansion and see if Claude has anything cooking, and then come back so we can continue."

"Nonsense. Molly makes a habit of bringing me lunch when I'm at the lighthouse, knowing I lose track of time. She always brings enough food to feed ten people. Please, join us."

"If you're sure that will be appropriate, sir."

"Of course it is. I insist."

"Then I look forward to it." Colm was excited he would be seeing Molly again, more so than the prospect of food. He had not seen her since that first day in the kitchen. The chance to sit with father and daughter for a quiet lunch pleased him, and he was eager to get down to ground level.

"Roddy taught Molly how to whistle like that when they were children." John said as they descended the stairs. "My wife was horrified the first time she heard Molly do it, saying it wasn't lady-like. I find it amusing. Molly can out-whistle her brother now. You can hear her from two miles away, but she does it only when she's with Roddy or me."

"And me," Colm said without thinking.

John looked at him strangely. "Yes, and now you."

* * *

MOLLY STOOD WAITING IN the clearing in front of the lighthouse, holding a large wicker basket full of food and drink. She often brought lunch to her father when he was at the lighthouse, but her presence was also an excuse to see Colm again. She had been intrigued by their encounter in the kitchen a few days earlier and wanted to see if he would affect her in the same way again.

John beamed at her as he came out into the sun. She spread a blanket on the ground and set the picnic basket on one corner.

"What did you bring me today, Mary Margaret?" John put his arm around her shoulders. "Enough to feed an entire village?"

"It's all Claude's doing," she smiled at his teasing. "I tried to make lunch in his kitchen, but he shooed me away and insisted on doing it himself. He wouldn't even let me choose the wine or beer. I had to stop him from following me here, because he was so

concerned the basket would be too heavy. It isn't, but it's loaded. Look at what he prepared."

John bent over the basket, and Molly looked over at the lighthouse doorway where Colin leaned, ankles crossed, his vivid blue eyes riveted on her. A thrill as vivid as a chill made her shiver.

It took all of Colm's inner strength to stand calmly while Molly looked at him. He marveled at the whiteness of her skin. She looked like a rose: Irish black hair, milky skin, big dark eyes that slanted at the corners, nose that flared at the tip. Suddenly he was aroused and had to shift his position before he embarrassed himself.

Unaware of the silent interplay, John called: "Colm, come over and see what Claude sent for lunch. You won't believe it."

Colm moved from the doorway and walked over to them. Molly watched him. Would they be able to speak to one another directly? Or would they keep going around John, trying to avoid that first verbal contact as if it would change everything? She wondered if he felt it, too.

He stopped at the edge of the blanket, next to John. She inhaled sharply. Up close, his face was flawless, utterly perfect. He was easily the most handsome man she had ever seen. She was taken aback that a man could be so beautiful, so stunningly gorgeous.

When she realized she was using terms reserved for men's observation of women, she blushed slightly. If she wasn't careful, she would make a fool of herself before she even opened her mouth to speak to Colm for the first time. She had to remember who she was. She was Mistress Mary Margaret Larkin, a lady of position and wealth, and her manners had to remain above reproach with everyone, including the keeper of her father's lighthouse. But, oddly, she did not feel superior to Colm. He carried himself with an air that suggested he was her equal in every way, no matter that he was John's servant.

Still oblivious, John sat down on the blanket, patting it with his hands. "Come on, you two. I can't very well eat all this by myself. Come. Sit, sit."

Molly lowered herself gracefully, spreading her skirts, keeping her head down slightly, watching Colm from under the brim of her hat. He had long, blond, thick eyelashes, she noted. A woman would kill for those eyes, and the perfect symmetry of them. There was not one thing about him that she could criticize. *He was simply perfect.*

Then it occurred to her that she had not heard him speak. How did he sound? How would his voice affect her?

"Which would you prefer, Colm, wine or beer?"

"Beer, sir, please. I prefer beer." He took the flask filled with the foamy brew from John. "Thank you, sir."

Molly shivered. His voice was deep, clear and certain, with no hesitation. She felt a tingling in the pit of her stomach, and then chastised herself silently for her reaction to his voice. She was being foolish. She was grateful that she had not shamed herself.

"Molly? Wine or beer, lass?"

Molly started, and then smiled prettily. "Wine, Daddy, and just a small bit. You know I don't have a head for it. It goes straight to my brain, liquor does."

While John dug in the picnic basket, Colm drank his beer absently and watched Molly. John began to take out sandwiches wrapped in cheesecloth and lay them on the blanket. Finally, he picked up one sandwich and held it out to Colm. "Would you care for a

ham sandwich, Colm? Claude bakes the ham for hours, after marinating it in some sort of mustard glaze. It makes my mouth water just talking about it."

Colm looked at Molly. "What do you think, Miss Larkin? Would you recommend the sandwich? You know Claude's cooking better than I."

Molly was surprised that he addressed her, openly, although very properly, then realized he had done it deliberately, to get her to look at him and speak to him directly. Then recognizing a faint note of teasing in his voice, she smiled, tilted her head and fluttered her lashes. "Why, Mr. Sullivan, of course I would recommend the ham. There is none finer for hundreds of miles. Even Claude's leftovers are exquisite."

Chuckling, Colm said, "Then the ham it will be," he said, accepting the sandwich.

John laughed at the two of them. "Good choice, lad, since my silly frog made six sandwiches the same. How can we eat all of them? I see there's also cheese, apples and blueberry tarts. How the hell are we supposed to have room for tea?"

Molly laughed with her father. Colm felt a thrill of reaction start at the base of his skull and travel down his back. He took a large bite of his sandwich for distraction. Watching him, Molly received a sandwich from her father. "We always have room for tea, Daddy. Doesn't it seem so?" She was surprised to be a bit breathless because her heart was pounding.

John nodded. "Yes, lass, it does. I thank God every day that I found Claude in New York years ago. He is a true jewel, an authentic epicurean. It's a wonder he wasn't snatched up before I found him. Odd as he is, I don't know how we could manage without him." With a shake of his head, he bit into his sandwich.

Hungry as they were, they ate silently. Occasionally, Molly glanced at Colm, and found him looking at her. After several minutes of genial silence, she searched for a safe topic of conversation.

"How do you like your cottage, Mr. Sullivan?"

"I love it." He glanced at John and nodded affirmation. "It's very comfortable. And the view from the bedroom porch couldn't be better - except from the tower."

"Daddy designed the cottage like our home in Ireland. I don't remember it, of course, because I was so young when we came to America. But Mother and I decorated the inside of your cottage, so we had a hand in how it looks."

"I told Colm to feel free to add his own touches," John said, leaning back on his elbows, his hunger sated. "You know, portraits on the walls, or re-painting a room here and there."

"I like the cottage as it is," Colm said quickly, not wanting to change what Molly had a hand in. He was thrilled that she had been in the rooms, her hands touching things, her voice echoing in the stillness of the place when it was empty.

"Colm likes to draw, lass," John said. "Portraits, he says, back in Ireland."

Surprised, Molly raised her eyebrows. "What do you like to draw, Mr. Sullivan?"

"Please, call me Colm, Miss Larkin," he asked softly. "I'm just the hired help here, and you are a lady. There is no need to address me formally."

John chuckled. "Oh yes, I didn't tell you that Colm is educated, too. He reads and writes very well. That's how I found out he likes to draw. You won't likely get anything past him, lass."

"Oh." Molly breathed, setting her glass on the blanket. "Well, then, if I'm to call you Colm, you must call me Molly."

Flustered, Colm protested. "That won't be necessary, miss. It wouldn't be right."

"Why ever not?" She glanced between Colm and her father.

John smiled and nodded, accustomed to Molly's forthrightness. "I don't mind, lass. It's up to you, but I wouldn't be so casual in front of your mother. You know how she feels about propriety."

Molly stiffened at mention of her mother, but then quickly relaxed and smiled sweetly at Colm. "We'll compromise. You can address me as Molly as long as my mother is not about. I wouldn't want her to have vapors at the mention of my name on the lips of a servant."

John laughed. "There you are, lass. Smart move. Don't you agree, Colm?"

Colm flushed. "Whatever you say, sir." Then, with a slight smile, he looked at Molly. "And whatever you say, Molly."

Colm's voice speaking her name made Molly's skin tingle deliciously. "As I was saying, Colm, what do you like to draw?"

I'd like to draw you. "Seascape scenes, trees and animals. I once did a drawing of my younger sister, Bridget, and it turned out quite well. I'm not used to sketching people, but I don't suppose it's harder than anything else."

"Do you have art supplies?" Molly asked, intrigued. *An Irish immigrant who can draw, read, and write! What can't he do? His looks are perfect, his voice is thrilling, and he's educated. What's next with this beautiful Irishman, I wonder?*

"Very few." He didn't want her to know he was penniless in the new world, and would remain so until he received his first wages in a month's time.

"Daddy, surely you have extended credit for the servants at the grocery store in the village?"

"Yes, lass, of course, but we haven't made a trip to the village yet. My driver is making a run this Saturday, in two days time. Colm said he wants to go then, to get some food supplies so he can cook his own meals."

Molly's eyes widened and she turned to Colm. "You cook, too?"

"Aye, Molly. I cook as well."

Shaking her head in amazement, she picked up her glass and drained it. "When you go to the village, you should pick up art supplies, too. If you have artistic talent, you shouldn't let it lie dormant."

"I agree," John said. "I would like to see your artistic work one of these days."

"It's nothing out of the ordinary, I assure you," Colm said quickly.

"I'll be the judge of that," Molly teased. "Great artists never claim their talent, do they?" Colm met her eyes, and then smiled at her. Again she was struck by the pure sensuality of his lips and white teeth.

"If I ever complete a drawing, I'll let you look first. Then you can see for yourself that I'm only mediocre and I can say I warned you. I'm not very good at drawing, but you can tell what I'm trying to get an observer to see."

Before Molly could respond, John pulled out his timepiece. "It's soon four o'clock. We need to get back to the tower and do a few more things before dusk settles."

Colm stood, brushing off his trousers. "The time got away from me."

John stood, too. He looked at Molly. "Thank you, lass. That was a wonderful repast. As usual."

"Yes, thank you, Molly," Colm added, his eyes twinkling at her.

Molly raised her hand. "My pleasure. Now can one of you help me up?"

Colm reached out to her before John had a chance, and Molly took his large hand firmly. The touch of warm skin on warm skin startled them both, and their eyes met yet again. They both felt the electricity. Colm's breathing became shallow, while Molly's mouth opened slightly as her cheeks flushed.

As he helped her up, she brushed against him briefly. Colm's reaction was swift and unintended: he flinched and drew a sharp breath. The brief contact made him more aware of how desirable she was. They both took a step back.

Unaware, John put the picnic remains back in the basket and folded the blanket on top. "Can you carry the basket back to the house by yourself, lass?"

"Daddy, *really*. I carried it down here by myself when it was full, didn't I?"

"And so you did. Please tell your mother I'll be back in time for tea." He bent down and kissed her cheek. As she turned and walked up the path, he watched her with a small frown creasing his brow, wondering at her sharpness. Then, rubbing his hands together, he said briskly: "We can work for another hour if we hurry, and then we can light the beacon with the kerosene lamp in the tower. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir. I'm eager to get back to work." He steadied his breathing and followed John back to the lighthouse. As they climbed the steps, more slowly this time with full bellies, he thought only of Molly.

He knew he should not think of her as anything other than his employer's daughter. She was so beautiful, so mysterious, so open, and so closed. He was only hired help, and penniless at that. The more he saw of the estate, the more he understood how wealthy John was. Colm had no idea if Molly had gentlemen callers or beaux. She was still young. Not a child, but not a woman, either.

Molly could be no more than sixteen years old, if she was that, he mused. Still, she carried herself like a lady. She was mature for her age, he realized. She had known what was passing between them when they stared at one another all through lunch. She felt the charge in the air just as he had, and encouraged it, albeit discreetly. She made him feel he belonged here, that Larkin City would be his home. "*It is my home,*" Colm thought, warmly and gladly.

They were nearing the top of the tower. Colm heard John's labored breathing, so he slowed his steps to avoid pressing him. He felt joy as he thought: "*I may be poor, and I may be a servant, but I can dream without doing any harm. No one need know my thoughts, and I won't tell them to a soul. Molly is a lady, and I am a lighthouse keeper. That's how it will remain. But I can dream about her, because dreams are free. No one can take them away from me, and they will be my salvation.*" Satisfied, Colm mounted the last step and entered the lighthouse tower behind John.

* * *

EVERY SATURDAY, EXCEPT DURING the harsh winter months, a large flat-bed carriage took the estate servants into Larkin Village where they could shop at the grocery store, post and receive mail, visit friends, or merely get away from the mansion for the day. Many of the men frequented the Amber Whale, a combination tavern and lodging house founded in 1870, three years after the village was settled by John Larkin. An English

immigrant, Edward Bisiker, and his wife, Lizbeth, built the Amber Whale. When Edward died five years later, Lizbeth took over and made it a favorite spot for locals and travelers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nichols nodded. "Very well, miss."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the carriage turned onto Larkin Highway, and rumbled along another six miles to the village, Colm relaxed. He looked at Molly's hair, her shoulders, and the movement of her body as it adjusted to the bumpy road and shaking carriage. She was a total vision. A pretty colleen, he would call her back in Ireland. She had haunted his dreams since he saw her that first day on the estate. The lunch at the lighthouse two days earlier only fueled his desire for her, but he tried to temper it with the reality that she was a lady, the daughter of his employer, and there could be no changing that, no matter what his fortunes were. He watched her as Maine's countryside flew by.

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

* * *

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

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

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

LARKIN CITY HALL

Founded 1867

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

"Or other servants."

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

"I'm ready, Molly." Colm took her lightly by the elbow. "Lead this poor Irish peasant on," he teased her, noticing the flush in her cheeks. The feel of her slender arm through the

dress sleeve warmed him considerably, and he could sense her pulse beating a little faster. "At least she isn't completely immune to me or my touch," he thought with male satisfaction.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They walked to the rear of the store, where Colm relaxed his hold on her elbow. As they neared the butcher counter, he saw several people waiting for their meat orders. The smell of fresh sawdust rose from the floor as Molly walked to the meat counter and rapped on the surface with her fingernails. Within moments, a short, heavy man with a large moustache came to the counter, wiping his hands on a white towel. "Ah, Miss Larkin. How are you this fine day?"

"Very well, Basil. And you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Claude won't mind?"

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

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

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

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

* * *

THE AMBER WHALE WAS a block from the grocery, set back from the boardwalk on Main Street. The sign over the door depicted a whale slicing through blue waves, and the letters were painted in the same blue:

THE AMBER WHALE

Tavern & Lodging, Est. 1870

Lizbeth Bisiker, Proprietor

The tavern was popular, known well by travelers. Inside was dark and cool in the summer, and heated by several large fireplaces in the winter. Tables topped with candles in red glasses cast enough light to eat and drink, and left enough dark for privacy. Up the carpeted stairs were the rooms, ranging from three to seven dollars a night, kept spotless by maids hired in the village.

Claude was a regular patron of the tavern. His Saturday routine rarely varied. He rode with John Larkin to the village early in the morning, and placed his weekly order at the grocery. Then he enjoyed his favorite lunch, *escargot* with buttered rice and a bottle of wine at the Sea Wharf Café, next door the tavern. He knew most of the villagers, and spoke with many of them as they passed his table.

This June day he ate, paid his bill, walked to the Amber Whale, sat at the bar and ordered a frothy iced mug of beer. He visited with the barkeep, Robert Summerhay, a tall, thin Englishman. They talked about the weather, the price of tea, and a whole variety of

inconsequential topics. When he was off the estate, Claude wore dark brown trousers and a dark blue shirt, the gold earring intact, with his dark blond hair in its usual club.

It was early afternoon. The skies were darkening, and the air was sweet with the smell of approaching rain. Claude inhaled the scent and let his mind wander. John Larkin would come down the stairs soon and be ready to go back to the estate with Claude and the supplies.

Only Claude knew why John came to the village so often, although he was sure others suspected. Claude held many of John's secrets. People trusted and confided in Claude, and the master of the mansion was no different. John was an honest man, hard working, and loved his family above all else, but he was also a true man, and men were the same everywhere, whether in Maine or in France.

Claude knew John had been seeing Lizbeth Bisiker, owner of the Amber Whale, since her husband died five years earlier in a carriage accident. John and Lizbeth had been friends, but their relationship grew from there. Claude did not necessarily disapprove. The French were open about sexual matters, and nothing shocked him, or so he thought. The *Monsieur* had been married to Mrs. Larkin for a very long time, and the man had to live. Claude liked and respected Madame Larkin, too, but he knew John needed some sort of female companionship other than his wife. It was only normal. At least he did not seek the favors of the *la grand putaines*, who were also part of village society.

Claude ordered another beer. When Robert brought the brew, he said: "We're going to get some rain today."

"*Oui*. The *Monsieur* and I will be soaked to the skin on the ride back to the mansion." Claude sipped the froth off his beer.

Robert nodded, smiled, and moved on to another customer. Claude sighed. It was time to get ready to leave for the estate, and the *Monsieur* was late.

* * *

IN HER EARLY FORTIES, Lizbeth Bisiker was a beautiful woman with auburn hair, clear skin, pale green eyes, and a voluptuous figure. Her hair was beginning to gray, but henna kept her secret. Her home was the large private suite over the Amber Whale, which had a sitting room, a dining room, a small kitchen, and her bedroom with a private water closet. Only two people were allowed in her home: her twenty-two-year-old son, Adam, and John Larkin.

"I should be leaving," John commented, reaching up to touch Lizbeth's hand on his shoulder. "Claude will be waiting downstairs, and it looks like it's going to rain soon." He looked up and smiled at her. She stood behind his chair in her red silk dressing gown.

"Stay a little longer, Johnny. I haven't seen you in weeks," she said softly.

"I know. I've been busy. I want to stay, but I can't. Anne is expecting me for tea."

Lizbeth stiffened, but was silent. Instead, she began to massage his shoulders to ease the tense muscles. He looked worn and older than his years today. "What's bothering you, Johnny? You were tense when you arrived this morning."

"I know. I have a lot on my mind." He relaxed under her fingers. "I have a new lighthouse keeper, and in a few weeks we'll receive house guests from New York."

"Do I know them?"

"I don't think so. I just met them on my last trip. The man is Elliot McShane, and he's coming with his wife and three eligible daughters. Elliot is wealthy publisher and part of New York society. I want Roddy to meet the daughters, and I hope he will choose one of them for his wife."

"What does your wife think about that? Roddy's her favorite, isn't he?"

John did not answer her, realizing in that moment that he had reservations about sharing family information with Lizbeth, even after all this time. He had known Lizbeth for ten years, since she and Edward settled in the village in 1870, and had always found her attractive. Initially, his primary relationship had been with Edward, with whom he hunted and fished. After his accidental death, John tried to remain close to his widow. Gradually the relationship became sexual, a nice diversion from his life's routine. Lizbeth met Anne several times, but they found nothing in common. Anne thought Lizbeth vulgar and unrefined, and Lizbeth felt Anne was weak and ineffectual. They had not spoken since the funeral, and Anne, in her tightly circumscribed world, had no hint of the affair.

Despite their intimacy, John did not trust Lizbeth fully. She was lovely, understanding, a good listener, and highly sexual, but she was not devoted and loyal like Anne. Lizbeth was a survivor; she put herself first. Anne placed her husband and children first. John valued those qualities more than bed frolics. He did not have the heart to tell Lizbeth that all he wanted from her was sex, and occasionally to be a sounding board. "You know I don't like to discuss my wife or our personal life with you," he said finally.

Lizbeth lowered her eyes. It was a mistake to mention Anne at all.

"Roddy will do what is right," John said. "It's as simple as that."

"How long will your guests be staying?" Lizbeth asked, continuing the massage.

"A few weeks or more. I was thinking of having a formal dinner party while they're here, and inviting people like the mayor and the sheriff. Claude can arrange all that, I suppose."

"Will you invite Adam and me?" Lizbeth was offended he had not mentioned her. "You've included us in previous dinner parties."

John hesitated. True, Lizbeth and her son had been included in the past, when other guests were local elite. But this time was different. It would not be appropriate to seat the McShane's with Lizbeth and her son at the same table, especially considering the marriage agenda. How could he tell Lizbeth that?

Feeling his sudden distance, Lizbeth raised her hands from his shoulders and wished him gone. "Perhaps you don't want us at your dinner party with your society guests. Adam and I may not be here, anyway. I've promised him a trip to Bangor, and June and July is a good time to go."

Relieved, he stood. She had let him off the hook again, as she had done all through their relationship. "Yes, I'm sure you would enjoy Bangor this time of year."

"Yes, I'm sure I will." She looked away from him.

He shrugged on his jacket. "I must go. It's after two, and Claude is waiting."

"And you mustn't be late for tea."

Ignoring her remark, he kissed her cheek. "Thank you for taking time for me, Lizzie. I'll be back next week sometime."

"And I'll be waiting, as usual." Her tone was waspish, but he had already left. She cursed herself for letting jealousy blight their time together, but she was tired of being his mistress in the shadows. Yet what were her choices in Larkin Village? To be the lover of a

lumberjack, a farmer, a laborer? She shook her head. There was no alternative to John Larkin.

"You can make up for it by being more captivating next week," she advised herself as she changed clothes. "You don't want to lose John. You have to keep him intrigued. *Patience*. Anne can't live forever. There are no other women available for miles. And if anything happened to poor Anne . . . if she ever fell ill or died . . . Next week you will be sweet and welcoming and agreeable, and you'll have him back in your arms again."

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

"Any special lasses back in Ireland?"

"Nary a one."

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

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

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

"The perfect age for what?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Gladly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That doesn't please you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

"Was she the only person you drew?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

MOLLY STARTED POSING FOR Colm right away, but only Maureen Kelly knew their secret. Maureen accompanied Molly every time she came to the cottage or lighthouse. She loved the idea of a portrait for Mr. Larkin's birthday, so she took part of the charade willingly.

Timid, gentle, sensible Maureen seemed frightened of her own shadow at times, but she had a quiet inner strength that was not apparent at first. Her only living relative, her uncle Jack Kelly, ran Quinn's Forge in the village. He took over the smithy when Molly's grandfather, Dary O'Quinn, became too old and weak to work. Jack saw his niece when she came into the village on occasion, but other than that Maureen was alone in the world. She had come to Larkin with her uncle from Kerry three years before. Molly, then thirteen, had been drawn to the frail twelve-year-old, and asked her father if she could have the girl as a personal maid. John Larkin balked at first, preferring English servants in the house, but Molly persisted and John gave in. They became good friends, but Maureen, who was protective of Molly, never forgot she was the servant, and that Molly was in charge. There was genuine warmth between them, and John knew he had made the right decision.

Three days after the fourth of July, Molly went to the lighthouse in search of Colm, Maureen trailing her. It was windy, hot and cloudless. The girls walked quickly across the grass and down the rocky path to the lighthouse.

Maureen was afraid to climb the steps to the tower. "I don't like high places, Miss Mary," she said when they stopped at the tower door.

"Then you stay here and wait, and I'll go up the steps."

"Is that proper, miss? I mean, I'm supposed to be your chaperone. Am I still doing my job if I stay on the ground?"

"Of course you are," Molly soothed her. "I won't be long, and I promise it's fitting if you stay down here."

The doubt left Maureen's eyes. She was only trying to do her job, to keep Molly ladylike and proper. Mr. Larkin would expect no less, although he too, seemed taken with

the new lighthouse keeper. "I'll stay down here, on safe ground then, while you go and see Mr. Sullivan."

"One day you should go up those steps and see the wonderful view, M'reen. The view is astounding."

"Maybe I'll outgrow my fear, but not today, miss, thank you. You go on and enjoy the view, and I'll wait right here."

"You silly goose!" Impulsively, Molly kissed her maid on the cheek. "I'll be back before you know it, little lamb."

Maureen watched Molly climb the narrow, steep steps and shook her head. Molly was so brave, and so beautiful. She had strange ideas, but Maureen adored her anyway.

Lifting her skirts to clear the bottom of the stairs, Molly ran lightly up the steps, happy to be in the lighthouse, and eager to see Colm.

Barely out of breath, but glowing with a light sheen of perspiration, she cleared the top step. Colm heard her footfalls and was walking toward the stairwell when she popped in. His heart almost burst with happiness at her blinding smile. She raised a small parcel in her left hand. "Look! I've brought a snack. Ale and cheese and fresh bread." He laughed and reached out to her, took the bundle, set it down, then utterly without intention, pulled her to him and enveloped her with both arms. They stood, body pressed to body.

After the briefest moment, Molly's arms went around Colm. She rested her cheek against his chest, listened to the strong beat of his heart, experienced the precious heat of his body, and felt more complete than ever before in her life. She was where she belonged. She raised her face to look at him, and he lowered his lips to kiss her, slowly, deeply, as though kissing her very soul. Her arms moved up to his neck, and they breathed together as one body. She wanted to be even closer and returned his kiss with a passion she had never dreamed she possessed. Her tongue touched his mouth, his teeth.

Colm's knees went weak. His tongue met hers. He held her closer. *Was he dreaming?* Time stopped.

Molly pulled back slowly and looked at him with sleepy eyes. Then her eyes grew wide. With a giggle she spun around, lifted her skirts, and ran down the stairwell again, giving him a flash of her white stockings as she fled.

Dumfounded, Colm stared after her, rooted to the spot. Was she frightened by his intensity? His brazenness? No, she responded to him. He groaned. Maybe it was better that she fled. She would have seen his arousal if she stayed, and it might have shocked her. He stooped, grunting with discomfort, and picked up the snack she'd brought. There was only enough for one person, so it was clear she hadn't intended to stay. Would he see her again? Or would she be too embarrassed by his overwhelming passion? Would she tell her father? No, that was unlikely. Then it occurred to him that they had hardly spoken.

Snack still in his hand, he sat down at the desk. *He wanted Molly for his own.* The thought hit him with a jolt. What could he do? She was his employer's daughter. That fact created an unbridgeable gulf between them.

"I have to have her," he told the empty tower in anguish. "But how? God help me. I will never be the same again. I have to think. I have to plan. I love her and nothing can change that."

His voice shocked him, but also it released him. He stood and went over to the tower telescope, which was always aimed at the sea. He turned it so that it pointed toward the path leading up to the mansion.

There she was, walking up the path, followed by her maid. He willed Molly to look back so he could see her face. She turned, then stopped at the beginning of Banshee's Walk, and stared at the lighthouse. He focused the lens and saw she was smiling. Her face was beautiful, strange, and wonderful. She raised her hand, waved, then turned and walked away.

Stepping away from the telescope, he sighed. *What kind of game was she playing?*

Years later, Claude Mondoux would tell him: "Tragedy begets tragedy, *Beauty*. Neither of you could win the game of love, because it was unequal. It was a passion unrequited."

* * *

THREE DAYS LATER, SHE was back. Colm had just finished lunch and was getting ready to return to the lighthouse to work on the keeper's logbook. When he opened the cottage door to leave, there she stood, with Maureen behind her. Smiling, she twirled the parasol on her shoulder and laughed. "Surprised to see me?" Her face glowed.

Holding himself calm, he said: "Yes. What brings you here?"

"Are you busy?"

"Yes, I was about to return to the lighthouse. Why?"

She looked disappointed. "I thought I could pose this afternoon."

She watched him study her face and smiled sweetly. He wanted to spend the afternoon drawing her, but he had work to do and did not want to neglect it. He leaned toward her and said softly: "Come back at three. I have to work on the logbook for a few hours. I don't have a choice. Your father expects it of me, it's my job. Mr. Larkin is coming down to the lighthouse tomorrow to check on me."

She was contrite. "Oh, of course. I understand. I'm sorry I bothered you. I'll come back this afternoon."

He was relieved. "Thank you."

"You are most welcome, and *thank you*."

She returned later. She posed sitting on the boulder and holding her riding crop in her hand, as they had planned. Colm sat on a low stool several feet away, an old easel set up and his art supplies scattered on the ground around him. True to her word, the week before Molly purchased and brought him the art supplies. For the time being, he only used chalk and paper. The sketch would come first, which was the basis of the painting. Color and background could be filled in later when he worked indoors.

Meanwhile, Maureen sat reading on the cottage porch in a rocking chair. "What is she reading, Molly? I didn't know she could read or write."

"Maureen came to me when she was twelve," Molly said, while Colm continued to sketch. "She couldn't read or write then. From the way she watched me with my tutor, I could tell she wanted to learn. So I tried to teach her the basics, and she did very well. Now she reads better than I, and loves it. Right now she's reading a frightening book called *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, written by Edgar Allen Poe. I don't care for such books, but she does."

Colm chuckled. "Afraid of ghosts?"

"No. I'm not afraid of anything."

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

He paused, looking at her, pleased that she met his eyes directly. "What would you call your fast retreat from the tower the other day? Weren't you afraid then?"

She blushed furiously while he grinned. "You're not very charitable," she scolded quietly. "It's not gentlemanly of you to bring *that* up."

Colm was enjoying her discomfort. "I never claimed to be a gentleman. I'm a peasant, a servant, a poor Mick off the boat, remember?"

"And don't forget it," she snapped.

Taken aback, he stared at her.

Her face wore a sweet, twisted smile. "Tit for a tat." she challenged.

He laughed. "You're wicked. It sounded like you meant that, and it's not like you. You're not so cold."

"You don't know me." She shook her head.

"How so?"

"You'll see." Her voice held a knell of warning that he did not heed.

They became quiet for several moments while he sketched. Then Molly spoke quietly. "You're right. I ran because I was frightened."

"But why?" He was puzzled.

She took a deep breath. "Because I've never felt like that before."

"Like what?" He sketched faster, harder.

"Consumed. Possessed. Like I had lost control of myself and my actions."

"I felt the same way." His admission was soft, but he did not look at her.

"Truly?"

"Yes, truly."

"What does it mean, Colm?" She sounded both relieved and mystified.

"I think it means we like each other."

"Yes, that goes without saying, but this was different - *bigger*. I didn't feel like myself."

"Neither did I."

"So, what does it mean?"

"We'll have to wait to find out. I don't know either. I'm new to this, too. I never had a steady lass in Malahide, and I've never kissed anyone like that before."

"*Shhh*, Maureen might hear you." She was pleased to hear he'd never kissed another girl like he had her. It was too special. It made *her* feel special, which she supposed was a good thing.

"Maureen's not listening. She's reading."

"Even so, we have to be careful. We wouldn't want her to carry tales to my father."

"Would she do that?"

"I don't think so, but I'm not sure. My father pays her, even though she's my maid. Daddy commands a great deal of respect and loyalty from those who work for him."

Soon, Maureen came off the porch and walked up the path toward them. "Miss Mary, we should get back. It's almost time for tea."

Molly stood and stretched. Colm put down his pencil. He studied her with an artist's eye from head to foot. Uncomfortable, she asked: "Is that all right for now?"

He nodded. "Yes. I got quite a bit done today. I think a few more sittings will do it, and then I'll put in the color."

"May I see it?"

"Not until I'm done. Remember, no peeking."

"I was just seeing if you remembered."

"Always testing me aren't you?"

She returned his smile as Maureen came to stand by her. "What time is good for you tomorrow?"

"Like today. The same time. This was perfect."

"Until then," she said softly. He looked at her and she winked quickly, and then turned and started up the path, Maureen behind her.

Colm sat on the low stool, watching her walk away. But she stopped, spoke to Maureen, and then came running back as Maureen continued up the path. Puzzled, Colm waited patiently.

She stood before him, smiling. "I adore you Colm," she whispered. "I want you to know that."

Speechless, he looked at her, and then found his voice. "What do you think of me, Molly? I mean, *exactly*?"

Her mouth popped open. "Well . . . I just told you."

While he was thrilled with her words, he was concerned about something deeper. "How do you see me, Molly?" He stood so he could get closer to her, not caring who saw. "Am I only a servant to you? Beneath you? Too common to take seriously? Please, I need to know."

She placed her hand lightly on his chest, and he felt her touch throughout his body. "Are you asking if I take you seriously, like a beau?"

He nodded, staring into her eyes.

Molly reached up to his shoulders, pulled him down and kissed his cheek. "One of these nights I'll sneak down here and surprise you as you sleep, and then show you how serious I am," she whispered.

Maureen reappeared on the path, watching them. Reluctantly, he pulled away from Molly. "Your maid is back."

"Don't forget what I said." Then she whispered: "One night . . ." She reached up and put a finger to his lips. Her whisper sent a shiver down his spine. "I'll be back to pose tomorrow." She turned and hurried up the path.

Almost numb, Colm collected his drawing materials and went inside. He put the easel by the front door, and went to the kitchen to put the kettle on for tea. He fetched his journal from the roll-top desk, returned to the kitchen and sat at the table.

Saturday, 10th July 1880. He wrote fast, until the kettle boiled. He made his tea strong, fortified with a generous measure of sugar. He took a tentative sip and returned to his writing:

So now I wait for Molly to come to me in the night. What will I do when she does? Do I know what to do? I've never made love before. Should I be appalled by her brazenness? She is supposed to be a lady, but I cannot help myself. I want her, and I think she wants me. I see no reason why we cannot have a wonderful life together. Mr. Larkin likes me. Would he accept me as an equal in his home?

I think I know the answer to my question, and don't want to dwell on them further. I will see what the night brings. I want it to bring Molly Larkin to me, I want to seal her to me forever. I want my blood to be a part of hers for generations to come, and even after that.

He stopped, scratching out the last sentence. His thoughts shocked him. He feared the peaceful tranquility of his life on the Larkin estate would be disrupted soon, but he could not help himself. Not then, and not later.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, something like that."

Claude shrugged. "The servants are having tea."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes?"

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

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

"I will tell her."

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

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

Colm,

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

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

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

Love, Molly

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

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

* * *

THE NIGHT MOLLY CAME to Colm, it was raining. The weather was fierce all day, windy and wet, and Colm spent most of the day at the lighthouse in the tower, watching for sea craft in trouble. John Larkin even joined him briefly, to check on his progress, but he complimented Colm on doing a "splendid job" and went back to the mansion. Luckily, nothing untoward had occurred during the summer storm, and Colm was able to return to the cottage after lighting the beacon, confident all was well.

He ate supper alone, leftover beef stew with bread and butter and a glass of beer, and then sat by the fireplace writing in his journal and the keeper's logbook. By eleven he was drowsy. After stoking the fire, he decided to retire for the night. The rain had slackened to a soothing drizzle. Once in bed he lay on his back, fingers laced behind his head, listening to the sounds of the night. The French doors were open and the air was sweet with a combination of rain and salty sea. Slowly he became drowsy and warm.

He did not hear her, but suddenly Molly was there, standing at the foot of his bed. He thought he was dreaming. The sea wind blew in through the doors. Her loose hair, her white robe, and the sheer curtains floated gracefully. He watched, trying to comprehend that she was really there and alone.

She did not speak, but glided to the side of the bed, slid in next to him, and laid over him. She caressed his face, his shoulders, and his chest. Hesitantly, he touched her in return.

Was she an apparition, a dream? Her cool skin was slightly damp from the rain. He touched her face and rose up to kiss her lips, and then her eyes. She responded by taking his hands and putting them on her breasts.

His breath caught in his chest. She wore nothing under her robe. He caressed her as he ached to do for so long, freely and naturally. There was nothing to stop them, no one to hear them above the rain and the crashing waves. She seemed ready to give herself to him without reservation, and he was prepared to respond in kind.

Outlining his lips with one finger, she murmured: "I want to fly into the sky, like a bird. I want to go where I please. Will you fly with me, Colm?"

Drawn into her luminous obsidian eyes and mesmerized by her poetic words, unable to speak, he pulled her to him. The movement shed her robe from her shoulders. His heart stopped when she reached to help him remove his nightshirt. Their time had come.

She was so calm, her movements natural and self-assured. She shed her propriety like a social garment and became a different person. What had happened to her? He drew a breath to ask her, but her lips found his with such intensity and passion that all thought left him. He let the dream absorb him into its pure magic.

He grew bolder, caressing her naked body, placing wet kisses on her neck and shoulders. She shivered as he traced the outline of her ear with his tongue. Then he lowered his head and engulfed her hardened nipple into his mouth, suckling and rubbing it with his tongue, hearing her moan and feeling her body stiffen against him. She smelled so sweet, so fragrant, that his desire for her was becoming almost mindless. She stretched her arm between them and touched his satin male hardness, and he gasped.

He had been hard and ready since he saw her standing at the foot of his bed, and now he marveled at her soft, insistent touch. He wanted to be gentle with her. He wanted everything to be so special that they would remember it for a lifetime.

But Molly was impatient. "Colm, please, I want to feel you in me. I want to be one with you now."

He kissed her, delighted by her passion, but hesitant. She was, after all, a lady. She was part of John Larkin's world of social position and wealth. *And she wanted him!* She was letting him know that. What did it matter if she was eager? He wanted her, did he not?

"Please, Colm," she pleaded, gasping at his touch.

He moved to her dark, soft place covered with silky hair. She was moist, ready. How could he hold back?

"I want you, Molly. I can't wait."

"Then take me Colm, please."

He spread her legs open. She helped eagerly by grabbing her own ankles to make her legs go wider. In complete trust and openness, she was offering herself to him willingly.

He groaned, inflamed by her wanton display. In the dim room, illuminated only by the dying embers in the fireplace, he saw her beautiful, smooth stomach, her breasts rising and falling with each breath. He put his hand over her wetness, stroking her gently. She moaned and her body moved frantically in response.

"Colm, I can't stand it. Please, put yourself in me. *Please.*"

He guided his engorged member to her opening and pushed carefully while she strained to push back, almost desperate to receive him. Suddenly he plunged into her, and she cried out. He paused. "Am I hurting you?"

"Only a little. Please, don't stop. Keep going, Colm."

He thrust into her even harder and began to move rhythmically, which she met with full abandon, exhorting him loudly to go deeper and harder. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pumping fast against him. He was so deep that he almost touched her insides, and he thought he would explode from the madness and the greatness of their mounting passion. He would soon lose himself in her.

Suddenly Molly started to wail. His vision blurred and his brain spun as he felt himself pouring into her. He called her name loudly, and she answered him in kind, digging her fingernails into his back.

Then he laid spent on top her. He could not move, and neither could she.

When he finally pulled himself from her and rolled over, she moaned and followed tight against him on her side, putting her head on his shoulder.

"I love you with all my heart," he gasped, trying to slow his breathing.

Molly did not answer him. Instead she caressed the blond hair on his chest, gently and slowly.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SIX

ELLIOT MCSHANE WAS A man who went after what he wanted. He made his plans and executed them with a nod to social etiquette, but without apology for the cold, calculating methods he used in reaching his goals. His purpose for coming to Larkin Village was to have one of his three daughters entice John Larkin's only son into marriage. He knew he would find no better family alliance, so if that meant making a miserable trip from New York to the godforsaken wilds of Maine, that's what he would do.

Elliot's wife, Tamara, was a mild, pleasant woman, of French and Welsh ancestry, and fluent in both languages. Her father, a French winemaker, had considerable wealth when he died, which Tamara and her younger brother shared equally. Her brother had stayed in France, but she had come to America with her Scottish husband, Elliot. He was ignorant of her wealth, and she intended to keep it that way. She knew their daughters would need the money if they failed to marry well. Their son, Zachary, would naturally inherit the McShane fortune.

Despite his wealth, Elliot was impressed by Larkin mansion and surrounding estate as the crowded buggy drove up the approach to the front door, followed by a carriage loaded with their luggage.

"Thank God we're almost there," Chantal remarked. "I need to feel steady ground beneath my feet again. It was a long trip, Papa."

Elliot glanced at his oldest daughter. "We'll be Mr. Larkin's guests for a few weeks, my dear. You'll have plenty of time to rest your pretty little bottom."

Chantal blushed, but said nothing. Blonde, slender, reasonably educated, she was eager to marry and start a family, which she accepted unquestioningly as her duty. An advantageous marriage would please her father, and making him happy was important. She feared his frequent anger, and disliked his punishments that were often degrading and obscene. But she accepted them, because she knew he would not punish her unless she deserved it.

Elliot looked at the lush beauty of the estate and thought of his other two daughters and son.

Sascha, a cool silver blonde, was sixteen years old. She irritated him because she was smart, quick and had a sharp tongue. She did not fear his wrath, but only turned pale cold eyes on him when he scolded her for a small infraction. Thus, it gave him great pleasure to hurt her when her offense was greater. Still, she would not cry or look at him during the punishment, so he was especially brutal with her. She read constantly, and her intelligence intimidated him.

Honey-blond little Kiera was rarely punished. At fifteen, she was bubbly, good-natured, obedient, without avarice, or even much of a will. She was perfect. He held her in high regard.

His only son Zachary was a disappointment. At eleven, he was sickly and pale, timid, poor at his studies, and clung to his mother. His need to please Elliot was cloying and pointless. Elliot believed the boy would not live to adulthood.

"*The insipid bitch,*" Elliot thought, looking at his wife. She was as pale as the brood of children born to her. The only one with backbone in the bunch was Sascha, and he despised her. He wished he could exchange personalities between Sascha and Zachary, but he was stuck with the lot. Tamara could have no more children, and divorce would destroy Elliot's

hard work in getting to the top of New York's social elite. Feeling his stare, Tamara turned to him. "Mr. Larkin never prepared us for the size of his estate, did he?"

Elliot grunted. "No, but I'm not surprised. He's shanty Irish. Not to be trusted. He's rich because he's lucky, that's all. I heard rumors he inherited some of it, and he's been lucky in the stock market. Monopolizing the lumber trade in Maine helped. He's just a simple sod buster from Paddy-land."

Tamara frowned. "Please, Elliot, not in front of the girls. You might predispose them to dislike Mr. Larkin's son, Roderick."

Elliot glared at her. "What of it? Like or dislike has no place in marriage, nor does love. Roderick Larkin had better take one of the girls as his wife. If not, the fault will be at *your* doorstep, not mine."

She turned her head, biting her lip. He smirked. She backed down again. He noticed they were approaching the front doors and arranged his face in an affable and friendly social mask.

Repulsed, Sascha watched Elliot's personality transformation. She hoped and prayed Roderick Larkin was nothing like her father.

* * *

"GUESS WHO?" MOLLY LAUGHED, putting her hands over Colm's eyes.

"Clea Barton-Brooks? Is that you? Cor, blimey, luv, give us a kiss!"

"Clea, my right foot! You're a beast, Colm Sullivan, for thinking I'm a maid!"

Colm turned to her with laughter in his eyes. "Just a little fun, Molly love." It was after lunchtime and Colm was sitting at the roll-top desk in his cottage. He had been writing in painstaking detail in the keeper's logbook and had not heard Molly tiptoe into the bedroom through the French doors. "Where's Maureen?"

"In the kitchen, making tea." Molly moved to stand in front of him. "Clea, huh?"

Colm grinned. "Jealous?"

"Not at all." She tweaked his nose. "Clea doesn't like men with big lips. Besides, she's married to Nigel."

Colm pulled her to stand between his knees so he could kiss her. "What would I want with a cold limey fish when I can have you?" he mumbled on her lips.

Molly blushed. "Be careful, M'reen might catch us."

"Blast!" He kissed her deeply, and she could not help but respond.

When they heard the tea kettle rattle, they parted. "Can you stay?" Colm breathed.

Molly shook her head. "Only for a cup of tea. We're expecting Daddy's house guests from New York, and I have to be there when they arrive. It's such a bore. We have to entertain these people for a few weeks, and I'm dreading it before they even get here."

"Who are they, and why are they coming?"

"Daddy met Elliot McShane while he was in New York hiring you and the others." She wandered over to the hearth and looked at the cold, grey ashes. "McShane publishes a big newspaper in New York, so he has lots of money and social prestige. He has three daughters of marriageable age, and Daddy's hoping Roddy will want to marry one of them."

Colm raised his eyebrows. "This fellow doesn't have any available sons, does he?"

Molly giggled. "Just one, but he's only eleven, I think."

"Good. I wouldn't want to fight a boy for you." Colm smiled. "You'll still be able to come and see me, won't you? To pose for the drawing and all?"

"You're thinking about the drawing?"

"That, and other things."

"Oh? What other things?"

"You naked in my bed, your legs spread and wrapped around me, your voice crying out my name, begging me to go deeper . . ."

Face scarlet, eyes enormous, mouth swollen with lust, she melted against his body as she received his kiss, uncaring of Maureen's presence. He steadied her.

"We can have a cup of tea together, but then I have to go back."

"Come to me tonight."

"I will. I'll pretend I have a headache, and go to bed early."

"Aye, that's my girl."

Maureen stood in the kitchen doorway, her face unreadable. "The tea is ready, Mistress Mary."

With a guilty start, Colm let go of Molly. She stammered: "I had something in my eye, a dust mote, and Colm was kind enough to look closely and get it out, M'reen."

"Yes, Miss," Maureen replied. "Quite nice of him, I agree." She went back into the kitchen.

Molly smiled at having fooled Maureen, although Colm was suspicious. Molly looked up at him. "Let's have that tea, and maybe later I can come and pose for you again."

"I'd like that," Colm said softly.

"So would I," Molly whispered "Especially with no clothes on."

"Most especially. I'll be waiting and ready, Mistress Larkin." Her knees felt weak at the warmth in his voice as they walked into the kitchen together.

* * *

MOLLY STIFLED A DAINTY yawn. The brocade chair was getting uncomfortable and her shell-thin tea cup and saucer felt heavy. She enjoyed the daily family teas, but the high tea with guests was boring. Claude always outdid himself when guests were present. It would be a wonder if anyone had room for supper. She glanced at the food laid out on the sideboard: finger sandwiches, fish pates, cakes, cookies, oysters in a bed of ice, tiny slices of fresh bread and fruit preserves. Now Claude was out in the kitchen, whirling about like a happy alchemist, preparing a sumptuous supper.

She glanced over at the McShane sisters on the settee. They were all blonde, polite and correct. The boy, Zachary, was awfully pale and quiet.

Roddy was positioned near the settee on a high-backed chair, visiting with the girls. Molly could tell he was bored, too. Mother seemed to be having a nice visit with Mrs. McShane. She was being too deferential to her guest, who seemed to be enjoying it. Molly dismissed them, with the smug presumption of naiveté, as flighty, afraid of their husbands, and not overburdened with brains.

While she concealed her opinion of Mr. McShane, she disliked him on sight. There was something unwholesome about him that she could not quite identify. He was coarse, with a hint of the Scottish burr, but there was an aura about him that made her feel unclean. She shuddered with distaste.

"I wish I was with Colm right now. We could be doing wonderful things together at this moment." The thought caused her warm, moist places to begin throbbing.

Molly did not judge her activities with Colm. She had given herself to him with no hesitation. She planned to continue, and damn the consequences. She adored him and could not imagine a life without him. Seeing him every day was a need now. She had to be with him, to be one with him in every way possible. Once she was naked in his arms, she lost all shyness and learned reserve, and felt whole and natural and complete. Just the thought of him made her skin tingle and her heart race.

She sighed, finished her tea, and focused her thoughts on the coming night.

* * *

AFTER A TEDIOUS FORMAL supper, Molly claimed a headache and excused herself. She went upstairs, and then slipped down the rear stairs and out the back door. No one saw her.

Colm was waiting for her. He took her immediately into his arms and his bed. He left a candle burning on the table beside the bed, where it flickered in the warm breeze off the water. After their first ferocious coupling, they lay sated in one another's arms. Colm stroked the top of her head with his large hand, and she sighed contentedly. "Do you ever fear we'll be discovered?" Colm wondered aloud, shattering her mellow mood.

"Yes. I do. My father would never understand, and my mother would fall over in shock."

"What about your brother?"

"Roddy? He would probably understand. He wouldn't approve, but he would understand."

Colm was quiet, continuing to stroke her hair. "We're getting closer every day. Do you feel it the way I do?"

She smiled and turned to look at him. "Yes. I've never felt as close to anyone as I do you."

"I want to shout my love to the sky," Colm thought, as he watched her eyes. *"I want to scream it to the heavens. Right now."*

"If we keep this up, we will be discovered, you know," she spoke softly, resting her head on his shoulder, but keeping her small, cool hand on his chest. "I assume no one knows what we're doing. I cannot fool Maureen, but I made her promise not to tell, threatening to dismiss her if she did. For the time being, we have to guard our time together, and keep it a secret for as long as possible."

Her words made Colm feel used and cheapened, but he kept his tone light. "I'll wait, because you ask me to, but I don't like hiding how I feel about you. I don't understand why we have to hide a love as pure and wonderful as ours."

"You have to consider my position, Colm." Her tone was cool and wary. "I'm not just a maid living on the estate. If we're discovered, the results could be catastrophic. My father would be shamed. He might cast me out of his house, and his life. If we were caught and if my mother had any say in the matter, she would delight in seeing me shunned and held up as a scarlet woman."

Colm was startled by Molly's certainty of her mother's reaction. "Why do you dislike your mother so much? I would give anything to have my own mother back alive."

Molly sighed. "I know, but my mother is different. Our relationship has been difficult for years, and I'm not sure why. I resent her, basically. She's a different person around strangers than she is with Roddy and me. She worships my father, but her weakness and duplicity sicken me. I suppose I needed her when I was a child, but I don't feel that way now and haven't since I was about four years old. I can't explain it in so many words, I just know how I feel inside when I see her, or have to talk to her, or be with her for any length of time. She dislikes me as much as I dislike her. I think she's jealous that Daddy and I adore one another. She can't stand attention from Daddy taken away from her. It's like a battle of wills between us. Who'll get Daddy's attention first, and who will hold it the longest? I don't know. Does what I'm saying make any sense to you?"

"Sort of," Colm said, not sure that it did. "Frankly, I'm more concerned about you and me. I want to be with you desperately."

"But you *are* with me, Colm," she said, using her sweetest, most persuasive tone. "Here and now. What else matters at the moment?"

He could not resist her words, her voice, or her body. She lay against him, her skin warm and sensual. She began to kiss him, placing her hands around him to pull him closer. He let passion sweep him away. He had no free will, and did not care. He had to have her at any cost.

She sat up and settled back on her knees, looking at him. She wore his nightshirt, which barely covered her hips. She held his eyes as she touched herself. He could see the barest hint of dark hair protruding under the hem of the nightshirt. She moved her hand and began to moan. He reached up and cupped her breasts, his breathing becoming labored as his excitement accelerated. She took off the nightshirt and flung it to the floor. Her eyes were mere slits in her face as the strength of her lust overtook her. She turned and faced the foot of the bed, elbows on the mattress, her bottom raised in front of him. In a silky whisper she said: "Take me this way, Colm. Put yourself in me this way."

He needed no more urging. He straddled her and slid deep into her, thrusting farther and deeper than he thought possible. Her moans grew loud, and she thrust back at him violently, feeling him at her center.

He had never been so excited in his life. He could not stop, and neither could she. She was almost screaming, her lust overwhelming her. He was afraid she might be heard as far away as the mansion, but his own climax carried him over the edge as stars exploded in his head. He called out her name, over and over . . .

They lay together again, resting for several minutes without words, in awe of what just transpired between them. Then Colm pulled himself out of bed and went to a basin of water in the next room. He wrung out a clean washcloth, went back to her and began to wash her off gently. She lay quietly, letting him clean her. Then he climbed back into bed and pulled her close to him.

"I have to go back," she whispered. "I can't take a chance and stay until dawn this time. Not with guests staying at the mansion."

"I know. Do you want me to help you dress?"

"Thank you."

He lit another candle to give her more light. She smiled at him as she fastened her hair atop her head with a pin. Her dark dress did not detract from her beauty or presence. Her skin glowed, and her eyes were bright. Colm knew he was responsible for making her so happy.

She kissed him. "I'll be back tomorrow to pose for the drawing - for *real* this time."

He nodded, not knowing what to say. He had yet to disengage himself emotionally from what they had just done. He was still in awe, but Molly seemed to have recovered quite nicely.

"Until tomorrow," she said softly as she went to the French doors.

"I love you," he whispered after her, but she only smiled, and then she was gone.

Colm fell onto his disheveled bed, exhausted. He was also troubled. Every time Molly left his bed, he told her he loved her, but she only smiled at him. He wanted to hear her say the words, to say she loved him. "*She must love me, otherwise why would she give herself to me so freely and wonderfully? But I say the words in my head, and speak them out loud, to her. Why doesn't she?*" He wanted her to be his in body, soul and name.

She would be his, Colm was sure. Soon.

* * *

SASCHA MCSHANE COULD NOT sleep. She stood by her bedroom window on the second floor, looking out at the moon-brushed estate. Suddenly, she saw Molly hurrying across the lawn and into the house through the back door. Shocked, she wondered where John Larkin's daughter had been until three o'clock in the morning. Respectable ladies were in their bedrooms at this hour, or at least inside their houses - certainly not scurrying around in the dark.

Her activity meant only one thing. Molly had a lover. "*Oh, what delicious a secret to discover,*" Sascha thought gleefully. "*And it must be a servant. Who else would live apart from the mansion but a servant?*" There were no acceptable and available men, other than Roddy, who lived on the estate. Therefore, Molly's lover had to be part of John Larkin's staff.

Sascha grinned and began to plot her future with quick precision.

* * *

MOLLY WOULD TURN SIXTEEN ON August 7th. Her father planned a party for her. He invited people from the village for the event, among them Mayor James Bretherton and Sheriff Thomas Callahan. He also extended invitations to several other shopkeepers, but did not invite Lizbeth Bisiker or her son Adam. The omission puzzled some, while others agreed that a barkeep would be an inappropriate guest amongst such august company as the McShane's.

A few days before the party, Sascha sought out Roddy. It was shortly after lunch, and she knew her mother and sister Chantal, along with Zachary, would be resting in their rooms, as was their practice. Molly was out riding her horse, according to Maureen, and Mr. Larkin had taken her father into Larkin Village to show him the sights.

Sascha would normally be in her room, resting and reading, but today she intended to speak to Roddy. She found him reading a newspaper in the drawing room. She paused in the doorway, watching him, dreading the conversation that was to come, but knowing it was her only chance to save herself because no one else would.

Again noting her pale blonde beauty as she stood in the doorway, Roddy rose from the divan. "Good afternoon, Miss McShane. Is there something I can do for you?"

Sascha walked a few steps into the room. "I'm sorry to disturb you. I need to speak with you while the others are not around."

"Is something wrong, Miss McShane?"

"Please, call me Sascha."

"Sascha. Of course." He nodded. "How can I help you?"

"May we sit?"

"Yes, forgive me. Here, please," he motioned to the divan, "I'll join you. Would you like some tea?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Roddy poured her a cup of tea from the silver tray on the drawing room table, and handed her the steaming brew on a china saucer. He sat beside her. She set the cup on the table and turned to him. "Do you know why we're here?"

Roddy was surprised, but dodged the question. "For a holiday, I suppose."

Sascha sighed. She would have to be blunt. "My father brought us here so you could choose one of us for a wife. I'm sure you know that."

Flustered, Roddy picked up his cup, sipped, looked at her, but did not answer.

"All right . . . Roddy . . . may I call you Roddy?"

"Yes."

"I apologize for being blunt, but for the sake of time, I must be. Our fathers want a marriage to come out of this visit, which was made clear to us before we left New York. Frankly, I was none too thrilled. I like my reading, and I like being alone. I'm in a difficult situation. My only way out is to marry you. I know we've been here only a short while, but have you already chosen one of us?"

Roddy gaped. Other than Molly, he had never known a woman to be so blunt in her conversation, so sure of herself, and so strong. Sascha went right to the heart of the matter. He thought briefly of avoiding her question, but then decided to be as truthful as she. Besides, he admired her courage. "I haven't made a decision."

Sascha smiled thinly. "I'm sure I'm not in the running, because you and I have barely spoken since my family arrived here. That's my fault to some extent. Since you're the only answer to my problem, would you consider choosing me?"

Roddy set down his tea cup. "What kind of problem? Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes."

"Can you elaborate?"

Sascha looked at him. "Yes, if you tell me whom you're really considering."

"Chantal."

"I thought as much. Is your mind made up?"

"No, but I think my choice is the obvious one. I find Kiera too young, too immature. Chantal is the oldest, closer to my age." He felt like he was discussing a horse trade.

"Would you consider me suitable?" Sascha asked, stunning him further.

"Of course. You're as suitable as your sisters. But, as I said, I'm considering Chantal."

"How can I change your mind?"

Roddy looked at her. He did not like being pressed. "I'm afraid you cannot. I think Chantal would be most suitable for me."

"Then you leave me no choice."

"No choice?" *Was there no end to this girl's cheek? What could she possibly do to change his mind?*

Sascha looked at her tea cup, and then turned her gaze to stare out the slightly ajar French doors. Then she shifted to face him directly, and spoke clearly. "Since I've been here, I've seen things. Only by chance, mind you. When I realized what was going on right in our midst, I knew that if I could not convince you to marry me, to get me out of my hell, I had a means to oblige you to help me."

She was talking about blackmail, Roddy realized with irritation. "What have you seen?" he asked.

"A few nights ago I saw your sister coming back from the direction of the beach."

"So? She goes to the beach most days. She rides her horse along the shore. It's one of her favorite pastimes."

"When I saw her, she was not riding but walking, and it was three o'clock in the morning."

He was speechless.

"Roddy, you're smart. You know as well as I do that your sister must have a lover. No lady is out and about in the middle of the night without a good reason. The only people who live on this estate, besides your family, are paid servants. I thought they were all housed on the fourth floor of the mansion, but then I learned the lighthouse keeper lives in a cottage on the beach. He's a paid servant, isn't he? And no one else lives on the beach. What could Molly have possibly been doing with the lighthouse keeper at three in the morning?"

Roddy blanched. Molly and Colm Sullivan? What other explanation was there? Molly rode her horse in the afternoons; she never left the house at night. *How long had this been going on? Did anyone else know?* "So, you are trying to blackmail me."

"You admit that Molly must have a lover?"

"I don't know, and neither do you."

"True, but I'm sure our fathers would find this bit of information interesting. I don't know how your father would react, but I know my father would leave at the hint of a scandal. Your marriage plans would go up in smoke, your parents would be shamed, and your sister's reputation would be ruined. And, if I have to, I'll make sure the entire village of Larkin knows what Molly is doing, as well as the social elite of New York. Then where will your family be?"

"So you admit you are trying to blackmail me," Roddy repeated impotently.

Sascha sighed. "Believe me, Roddy, I loathe what I'm forced to do, but I'm desperate. If I don't marry you, if I don't get away from my father, I will not be responsible for what happens."

Roddy's mind reeled. She was right. With the information she had, she could damage his entire family, and alienate the Larkin's and the McShane's in the process. "Why is it so important for you to get away from your father, and what is your blasted hurry?"

"You may not understand this," Sascha said sadly. "You are a man. You have no idea what it's like to be dominated all your life. I don't know what you think of my father, but the truth is he's evil. He appears genial, *but he's evil*. He beats my mother regularly, although he is careful to hit her where no bruises will show. He beats her because she is beyond bearing children, he beats her for the hell of it, and he beats her if he thinks in his twisted mind that she has somehow slighted him. He's been brutalizing her for years, and my sisters, brother,

and I can do nothing about it. But the violence doesn't end with her. He has never hurt Kiera, or Zachary. Kiera is his favorite, and he thinks Zachary is too weak and frail to be bothered with. But he abuses Chantal and me daily. His punishment is obscene and degrading, and both Chantal and I are caught, like mice in a trap. I have to get away from him. *I have to*. Do you understand at all what I'm telling you?"

"I'm not sure," Roddy said, appalled by her story. "Why would you be willing to leave Chantal with your father? If you married me, Chantal would still be left in his house, to be subjected to his . . . abuse."

Sascha shook her head. "Chantal has a better chance of marrying than I. She's popular in New York. I'm too independent. I don't care about attracting men, but Chantal thrives on it. You are my only chance. I have to get away from my father before it's too late."

"Too late for what?"

"If I have to be under his roof, if I have to take one more bit of abuse from his hand, or watch him hurt Chantal, or my mother, I will kill him."

Her words chilled him. "You mean that, don't you?"

Sascha took a deep breath. "I'm so sorry for threatening you. I would have given anything not to have this conversation, but when I saw Molly on the grounds the other night I knew it was my only chance to get away from my father. Otherwise, I'll spend the rest of my life in prison and my life will be wasted."

"I have to talk to my father about this," Roddy said thoughtfully.

"No, you cannot," she exclaimed. "He's certain to confront my father, I know he will. Then Papa will take out his rage on me."

He tried to calm her. "My father is very discreet, Sascha. If I ask him not to say anything, he won't. In fact, he would try to help you, I'm sure. Daddy abhors personal abuse in any form. He despises it, probably because of what he saw the British do to his own people in Ireland."

Sascha swallowed. "Roddy, I promise, if you marry me, I'll do anything you ask. I'll bear your children, I'll run this household when the time comes. I'll be the perfect wife, and you will never be sorry. I only have two requests of my own for a lifetime with you."

"What are they?"

Sascha lowered her head, trying to present herself as humble and docile as possible. "Please don't make me give up my reading. It's my only pleasure. It has been my salvation through the years of abuse from my father. I could always read, and escape my awful reality."

"What's the second request?"

"Your forgiveness. Please forgive my subterfuge. I want you to understand my reasons, which I think are more than valid. And, last, forgive me for not coming to your bed a virgin when and if we do marry."

"What?" Roddy exploded. "*What?* You sit there and pass judgment on my sister, who has never done you any harm, and tell me you are not a virgin? What kind of hypocrite are you?" He towered over her, red faced. "You threaten my family with shame when you yourself have a lover? How dare you?" He stood from the divan, but bent over to shout in her face: "*How dare you?*"

She cringed, tears in her eyes. "Please, you don't understand. *I do not have a lover*. My father . . . part of my father's abuse is . . ." She gulped a sob. "He . . . he beats us, rapes us

and then sodomizes me. My father is God-cursed and depraved, capable of doing anything in order to hurt me, and Chantal. Oh, God, do you understand now?"

Sickened, Roddy closed his eyes. If what Sascha was saying was true, McShane was a sodomite, an incestuous brute, a bloody monster. He opened his eyes and looked down at her, enraged by her mistreatment and her unhappiness. "*What does it matter which daughter I marry?*" he thought. "*I planned to marry one of them anyway. If I wed Sascha, my family's good name will remain intact, and that bastard Elliot will be satisfied that one of his daughter's has done her duty. Chantal is beautiful and accomplished; she will find a suitable husband easily in New York. I have to do my duty, and protect my family, especially Molly.*"

He took Sascha's hands and raised her to stand in front of him. "I will marry you. Dry your tears. As soon as my father returns from the village, I will speak to him privately and tell him I wish to propose to you."

"Oh, thank you, *thank you*. You will never have reason to regret it. I will make you proud of me as your wife, and I will never let you down. It will be my life's entire purpose to make you content and maybe someday you will even be happy with me."

Roddy looked into her pale eyes, sincere and grateful, and his heart went out to her. She was lovely and delicate, and had such unusual eyes. Although she and Molly did not resemble one another physically, Sascha's resolute personality, her bluntness, and her simultaneous serene calm reminded him of Molly.

He had made his choice. Next came the hard part. He had to talk to his father, tell him he had selected Sascha, and the reasons why. This also meant revealing Molly's secrets. Roddy prayed he was making the right decision.

* * *

AN OMINOUS SILENCE FILLED the study like a heavy stone. John Larkin sat at his desk, his brow furrowed, his lips pinched in a thin, angry line. Roddy had just left the study, upset but also relieved that a decision had been made. But John was furious. He stood abruptly and walked to window. His family and guests were awaiting tea in the next room.

"*Let them wait,*" he thought, and returned to his desk. Roddy had told him everything about Molly, and about McShane's abuse. John was sickened, and agreed that the best course of action all around was for Roddy to marry Sascha. Elliot hinted to John earlier in the day that he was prepared to offer a dowry of \$20,000 if Roddy chose one of his daughters. Using common sense and a desire to rescue at least one daughter from McShane's clutches, the problem was solved in John's mind. Roddy would marry Sascha, take the dowry, and in turn the McShane's would be the Larkin's ticket into New York society. It was all quite neat, except that McShane was a sick bastard who needed to be watched in the future. However, Roddy's future was assured and Sascha would be safe.

The problem of Molly remained. Was she having an affair with Sullivan? The thought hurt, because John adored her and hated to see her risk her reputation, but also because he respected Sullivan. The man was doing an exceptional job at the lighthouse, better than he hoped. It saddened and dismayed John that his daughter and his well-paid lighthouse keeper were carrying on right under his nose.

Knowing Molly as he did, John knew that Colm was not entirely to blame. Molly was headstrong, and she went after what she wanted. Colm undoubtedly never had a chance. If Molly had set her sights on him, Colm would have been rendered defenseless.

But John wanted solid proof that they were having an affair before he acted. Absolute, eye-witness proof . . .

A discreet knock brought him out of his thoughts. "Enter."

Nigel came in and shut the door behind him. "Sir, Mrs. Larkin asked me to tell you that tea is being served in the drawing room. She requests that you join her and your guests."

As John looked at the butler, an idea hit him. "Yes, in a moment. First, though, please sit down. I want to talk to you."

Nigel perched on a chair in front of the desk. "Yes, sir."

John smiled, sat forward, and put his elbows on the desk. Nigel regarded him calmly, expectantly. "Nigel," John began, his voice honeyed and careful.

Nigel was immediately alert. He knew the signs. John wanted something. Probably something secret, most likely subterfuge. Nigel resigned himself.

"I need to ask you a favor, Nigel . . ."

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is that important to Roddy?"

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

"You're lying!" he roared.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Molly paled. "Where?"

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

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

"To get you away from here, and from Colm." His anger was subsiding. "I know Roddy will keep an eye on you, and maybe you can learn some manners from Sascha. I suggest you think about what you have done while you're gone, and consider your future. I'm not cruel enough to cast you out, lass, but you have to atone for what you have done."

What will you do with your life now? What man would want you? You're sullied almost beyond repair, Mary Margaret. To make amends, you have to change. You have to re-learn all the things you knew as you grew up. Your mother and I taught you simple, Irish-Catholic values. It seems you have forgotten all of that in your lust for my lighthouse keeper. Your duty to this family comes first, and then your loyalty. You have destroyed both with your actions."

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

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

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

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

She shook her head. "No."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER SEVEN

COLM HAD NOT SPOKEN to a soul, or heard from Molly since her birthday twelve days earlier. He slept, ate and worked in a lonely muddle of confused misery. After two weeks, he gathered his courage and went to the mansion to learn what he could, pretending that he wanted to eat lunch in the servant's hall. He looked for Maureen, but could not find her in the hall, and no one seemed to know where she was. Frustrated, he went to the kitchen to find Claude.

"*Beauty!* I haven't seen you for many days. How are you? You are pale. You have been ill, *non?*"

Colm shook his head. "No, I've just been busy."

Taking him at his word, Claude wiped his hands on his apron and leaned against the counter. "My life has been a lot easier since the house guests left two weeks ago. Molly, Roddy and Mrs. Larkin are gone, too, so I cook only for the *Monsieur* and the servants."

So that's it! "Where are Mrs. Larkin and her children?"

"You do not know? You did not hear?" Claude began to see Colm's agitation.

"No." Colm frowned with impatience.

"*Monsieur* Roderick and Sascha McShane are engaged to be married," Claude said, glad to share good news. "The wedding is set for February, and they will be married here in the mansion. Roderick went to New York with his lady, and Mademoiselle Molly and Madame Larkin went with them. Molly is to be maid of honor, and she went along to buy new clothes in the big city. Madame Larkin went as a chaperone, I suppose. But they certainly don't need a chaperone, eh? Not with all of Miss Sascha's sisters and her parents."

"When are they coming back?" Colm asked, his throat dry. *Why didn't Molly tell him she was going? Why did she hurt him? She could have sent word with her maid.*

"Not until October," Claude felt Colm's turmoil. Why was *Beauty* so distraught? He was pale and tired, like he had not been sleeping. "What is wrong, *Beauty*? What is troubling you?"

Colm walked over to the table, slumped into a chair, and put his head in hands.

Claude took a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard, poured a drink for Colm, and set it in front of him. "Talk to me. You can trust me, *Beauty*. I will keep your secrets."

"What makes you think I have secrets?" Colm looked at him. The sympathy on Claude's face broke the dam, and he picked up the whiskey, threw it back in one swallow, choked as it burned his throat, and then lowered his head into his hands again.

"You are a man bereft," Claude observed, and then it hit him. *Molly and Colm*. Of course! He had seen it coming since they first met in this very kitchen. "You are upset that Molly is gone."

Colm looked at him with tear-reddened eyes. "Yes," he whispered.

Letting out the breath he had been holding, Claude said: "I knew such a thing, back when you first met here in my kitchen. Do you remember that, *Beauty*? I know passion and desire when I see it, and I saw it that day, between you and Mademoiselle Molly. I felt sorry for the both of you because I knew it was impossible from the beginning. It's unfair, but I knew only tragedy would come of your feelings for each other. I was right, wasn't I?"

"She left without telling me. Does that mean you were right?"

"Hmmm. Not necessarily. This departure may have been unexpected. *Oui*, I think it was. They left without warning, and *Monsieur* made the announcement of marriage

between Roderick and Sascha after the departure. Madame Larkin and her daughter are not, how shall I say, compatible. Their relationship is difficult, *non*? So, if Madame Larkin accompanied them that may reveal why the Mademoiselle left without telling you."

Colm did not know what to think, but he appreciated Claude's sympathetic understanding. "Did Molly's maid go with her to New York?"

"*Oui*. Little girl Maureen went with her."

Colm sighed. "I can only wait. Unless . . . is there any way to get word to Molly in New York? Do you know?"

"*Non*," Claude shrugged. "But I'm sure the *Monsieur* knows of a way."

"That's out, then." Colm stood wearily. "I have to get back to the lighthouse. Thank you for talking with me."

"My pleasure, *Beauty*. I wish I could help more. Perhaps it will work itself out when Mademoiselle returns in October."

"I hope you're right, but somehow I doubt it." With heavy steps, Colm walked down the path, leaving Claude to his kitchen.

Clucking his tongue, Claude returned to his stove. Despite what he told Colm, Claude was sure that the summer romance was doomed to end in tragedy. "So sad, so very sad. Love is so grand, and so destructive. And so very unfair."

* * *

COLM WANDERED AIMLESSLY IN his cottage, avoiding the artist's easel in his bedroom where the portrait of Molly stood finished with color, ready to frame. Since he could not afford to frame it himself, he was going to give it to Molly as it was. But she was gone and there it sat, abandoned.

He made tea and carried his cup out to the porch, where he could sit and watch the lighthouse beacon sweep the ocean. He tried to be calm, but part of him was numb, and part of him was angry. She left without a word. How could she do that to him? How could she treat him with such disregard? And how could he be so angry with her when he loved her so much? How was it possible?

He stood and started to pace. "Damn her! How dare she hurt me like this? I'm her lover," he said into the dark. "No one else will ever love her as much as I do. She must know that. I must have her. *I must*." He paced the length of the porch and back, and then stopped. "If I can't have her, no other man will ever have her. I'll make sure of that." Fists clenched, he turned and went into his bedroom.

He went to the shelf and took out a bed sheet, coming to stand in front of the portrait. It was good. She looked as though she was about to speak. In the bottom right hand corner of the portrait, Colm had inscribed:

*Mary Margaret Larkin
1880, Late Summer
In front of the Banshee Point Lighthouse
Painted by CMS*

Her face was so vivid, her eyes so black, her smile sardonic, exotic. She was about to raise the riding crop in her hand. The wind was about to stir the white ruffles on her beige

gown. By contrast, the lighthouse stood immovably tall and strong. Colm had to admit that it was a true work of art, and he was proud of his efforts and the splendid result.

He wrapped the painting in the bed sheet, and then slid it all under his bed as far as it would go. It would stay there until Molly had the courage to come to him and ask for it. She would have to come to the cottage, into his bedroom, and beg him to give it to her. Otherwise, it was his for as long as he wanted to keep it.

He returned to the porch, but his tea had gone cold. Sighing, he picked up the cup and returned to the kitchen to brew more.

It was going to be a long night.

* * *

A WEEK LATER, THE first day of September, John Larkin came to the lighthouse. The intense summer heat was easing and a strong sea breeze was bringing in dark storm clouds. Colm kept watch for sea craft, knowing it would soon be dangerous for any vessels on the choppy ocean and tide.

John cleared the last tower step quietly. He saw Colm bent over the keeper's logbook, making notes. Unnoticed, John stood watching Colm. Then he cleared his throat.

Startled, Colm looked around. He smiled at John and stood to greet him. "Mr. Larkin. How nice to see you. I was beginning to think I was all alone out here."

John walked over to the desk and shook Colm's hand. "Sorry, lad. I've been busy. I hope all is well with you?"

"Fine, sir. Fine. I've had no problems here."

"Good, good." Remembering the purpose for his visit, John handed a small package to Colm. "This came in the post today from the Lighthouse Service. It's their new manual. Just some general rules they want all the keepers to be aware of."

"Thank you, sir. I'll read it right away."

"No hurry. Just when you have time."

There was an awkward silence. Finally, Colm said: "I hear your son is engaged to be married. Congratulations, sir. You must be proud."

John was surprised. "I am. Roddy made a good match with Sascha McShane. How did you know about it?"

"I heard talk in the servants hall the other day when I went up for lunch." Colm wondered why he lied. What did it matter if John knew Claude told him about Roddy's engagement?

John watched Colm's face, marveling at his composed demeanor. Surely he had questions about Molly? Colm was not aware John knew about the affair between his daughter and lighthouse keeper, but a bit of apprehension on Colm's part wouldn't be out of place. Yet it was not forthcoming.

"I'll leave you then," John finally said. "If you need anything, or have any questions, please come and find me. I'll be quite alone at the mansion until the middle of next month. My wife went to New York with Roddy and Sascha for wedding plans, dresses, and so on, all of which Sascha is convinced she can only find in Manhattan. And Molly went with them, of course, since she is to be the maid of honor."

"Oh. Are they to be married at the mansion, then?"

"Yes, that's the plan. Roddy wants the ceremony to be held in the foyer or the drawing room." John knew Colm's did not care about Roddy's wedding plans. "They set the wedding date for February, in the midst of the winter season. I wish they would wait until spring, but Roddy seems quite anxious to be married, as does his bride."

Colm nodded.

"Mr. McShane has a house in upstate New York. Someplace called Westchester, I believe. I hear Molly is having a grand time at the parties Elliot throws every weekend. Perhaps she'll find a suitable man for a husband, too." John watched Colm again. "Then all of my worries would be solved. It would be quite an accomplishment to have both my children married in the same year."

John saw naked pain in Colm's incredible blue eyes before he replied. "Yes, sir. Then you could look forward to becoming a grandfather. That would be nice for you and Mrs. Larkin."

John sighed. "Yes. Well, I must be going. Remember, if you need anything, just let me know."

"Yes, sir. I will."

After John had left the tower, Colm sat down and began to read the new book of Lighthouse Service rules.

GENERAL ORDERS

The curtains, provided for hanging inside of the lantern glass of Lighthouses and Light-vessels, are not to be used for any other purpose, or in any other place whatever . . .

He threw the book on the desk in disgust. He would read it later, maybe, or not at all. What did it matter? Frowning, he returned to writing in the logbook, trying to control his shaking hand.

* * *

ON THE AFTERNOON OF October 15th, Colm heard the rumble of horse-drawn carriages clattering up to the mansion's front door. He hurried over to the tower telescope and focused the lens on the house. There had to be at least half a dozen carriages in procession. Six? He wondered, not for the first time, what was happening.

Then he saw Molly alight from the first carriage, with the driver's help. He zoomed the lens to see her face up close and was shocked. She looked pale, tired, and thinner than she had two months earlier. Was she ill? His anger toward her dissipated when he saw her physical condition. Something was wrong. "*I pray she visits me tonight,*" he thought.

As soon as Molly went in the house, he lost interest in the carriages and turned the telescope around again. *Molly was home!* Surely he could speak to her now. He would wait for her. If she did not come to him tonight, he would go to the mansion and find a way to talk to her or Maureen. He had to know what was wrong with her, why she neglected to tell him she was leaving, and why she stayed away so long without word. Surely, after the love they shared, she owed him that much.

* * *

TWO NIGHTS LATER, SHE came to the cottage alone. He was sitting by the hearth in his bedroom, looking into the flames, when she startled him by slipping in through the French doors. He ran to her. "You're home." He picked her up and buried his face in her neck. She did not move, but hung there like a rag doll.

He set her down. "What's the matter?"

She turned and pointed at the bed. "That's where you ruined my life," she said coldly.

"What are you talking about? What happened to you?"

Flushing red, she backed away. "I'm with child, you insufferable idiot. And you are responsible."

Overwhelming joy flooded him. She carried the fruit of their love. "Molly, this is wonderful news. We can be married and have a family of our own. Your father will accept me as your husband . . ." Suddenly the import of her words hit him and died in his throat.

"Stay away from me," she hissed, taking advantage of his stunned silence. Then her voice rose to shriek, similar to a banshee in his ears. "I will never marry you. You're a God-cursed peasant, for Christ's sake. You aren't fit to sit beside me at the dining table, you rutting bastard. You're dirt beneath my shoes. May God damn you!"

Shocked at her language and hysterics, Colm stared. "What about the love we shared. What about all the happy times we had together?"

Her laughter was acid. "*Love*. Lust and fornication are not *love*. I wanted to know about the physical act, nothing more. I don't *want* your baby . . . a common child . . . and now I have no choice. I've shamed my father because of you, and now I have to tell him I'm pregnant." Her fury made her dizzy. "And when I do, your head will roll. God, I hate you. Do you hear me? *I hate you!*"

"Your *father* knows about us?"

"Yessss! Why do you think he sent me away, you cur? He had someone spy on us. I don't know who, so don't ask me. I begged him on my knees and promised I'd never see you again if he let you keep your job here. I did that much for you. I wanted to start over. I wanted to redeem myself with him, but now I can't because I carry your seed."

Colm was silent. *She hated him*. His heart was breaking. Maybe she never really cared about him, but how was that possible? He was not as dumb as she thought, misreading all the signs. "I want the child," he said, startling himself. "No matter what you do, I want our child."

Molly snorted, tears of anger glittering on her face. "No one will give an unmarried man a child to raise, you moron."

"I'll marry anyone you want, if I can have our child to raise." Colm was serious. "If it takes marrying a stranger, taking vows just for the sake of it in order to raise my child, I will do so."

Molly was silenced by his words, as if her mind was spinning with the thought. She looked at him. "I'll speak to my father tonight and tell him the awful truth, that I'm carrying your spawn. There is no way to avoid having this monster inside of me. I will either give it away or have it killed. I pray I miscarry. That would solve all my problems. But if it lives, and I have to give it away, it might as well be to you. I'll discuss it with my father."

With that, she brushed past Colm and walked out. He stared after her.

How could he have been so wrong about her? Was he indeed an idiot, a moron? He thought she was different from other high-bred women, but she was no better than other

upper-class snobs. She was worse: she had used him, hated him, and told him so. Then he realized he had created an image of her and then fell in love with it. She had not changed. She had never been what he had created in his mind in the first place.

Fury rose in his throat. *Fury at himself. Fury at her.* She was a user, a heartless bitch, a rich whore hiding behind her father's wealth. Yes, he wanted their child. Why should an innocent child suffer because its mother was less than human? He could give his child love, and it would never have to know the mother's caustic bile. He could do it, and he could do it without Molly.

With a jolt, he realized he was fooling himself. Angry as he was, he knew he loved Molly. *Why had this happened to him?* He knew deep in his soul that he would always both love and hate her. The only happiness he might salvage now was the opportunity to watch their child grow, to carry on *his* family name: Sullivan, not Larkin. The past few months should count for something.

"*I will not let my time with Molly be meaningless,*" he thought. "*I'll make it matter. I swear it.*"

* * *

HE LIVED IN FEAR for the next few days, expecting retribution from John Larkin. He respected his employer, and his turmoil was as much about angering him as it was about his disgust with Molly. His main concern, however, was his unborn child's welfare.

John came after dusk, two days after Molly's visit. Colm lit several candles in the cottage, and was cooking an omelet for his supper when he heard a knock on the front door. Banking down the flames and moving the frying pan off the stove, he went to the front door and opened it to see John standing there, looking old and tired.

"May I come in?" John asked, carefully polite.

Colm nodded. "Come in, I've been expecting you."

"You have?" John said, surprised.

"Maybe not at this specific moment, but I've been expecting you for two days."

John walked over to the fireplace and stood staring into the flames. Colm shut the door and came to stand behind him. Before Colm could offer him a drink, John spoke abruptly, without turning around: "I want to assure you, Colm, that your position as the lighthouse keeper will remain the same, no matter what happens."

Colm was stunned. "Thank you, sir."

John turned to face him, his voice calm. "Yet I'm beyond disappointed in you and my daughter. I cannot fathom why the two of you conducted yourselves in such a lewd manner." His words were heavy with sadness, not anger. "You may have the child and raise it, Colm, as long as you stay on this estate, and as long as you marry a woman to make the arrangement respectable. I want no reflection on Molly. Not one whit of scandal can touch my daughter."

John's apparent feelings toward his unborn grandchild were a good sign. "As long as I can raise my child, I'll agree to anything you have to say." Colm paused. "But I'm curious, whom would you have me marry?"

"Maureen Kelly. Molly's personal maid."

Stunned, Colm sputtered: "I know who she is, of course."

"Maureen is of marriageable age," John said, pacing. "She is fifteen, and a good Catholic. She is pleasing to the eye, and Molly agreed to release her from service if you are amenable to the suggestion."

Colm thought about it, remembering Maureen's barely veiled hostility to him in the servant's hall months ago, when he had been looking for Molly, and of her quietness, and how bland she seemed in comparison to Molly. But considering how Molly turned out, Maureen seemed appealing at the moment. "Is Maureen agreeable?"

"Yes," he said crisply. "I have talked with her at some length, and explained the circumstances surrounding this proposed marriage for the sake of the child. Maureen is very aware of what is at stake here. She volunteered to marry you and raise the child when the time comes. She is also willing for your marriage to be a true one, eventually, and said she would be glad to bear you more children if you so desire."

Colm was baffled that Maureen would willingly offer herself into marriage with him, but did not say so out loud. If he could have his child as part of this strange bargain, he would do what was asked of him.

"I agree to your . . . proposal, sir. But I need to ask a question."

"What is it?" John sounded apprehensive.

"Is Molly even a little interested in our child? Doesn't she even want to see her own baby before she hands it over to me forever?"

John's sadness returned. "No. She has no interest in the child. When it's born, she wants you to take it. She will then look for her own life and her own husband. She wants to marry a noted man with money and position and move elsewhere." John hesitated. "I'm sorry to say that, even under such circumstances as these, I never thought my own flesh and blood would refuse her own child, but Molly is willing to do so. I abhor the behavior that has passed between the two of you, and the unfortunate result, but I would never turn away my own flesh and blood in private. I cannot acknowledge the child publicly, of course, but I will see to it that my grandchild wants for nothing."

Although outwardly accepting, Colm's heart was breaking. "I'll comply with your wishes. You can arrange my marriage to Maureen Kelly when you see fit, and I'll cooperate."

"It will be soon," John said, trying to get a hold of his torn emotions in order to sound businesslike and formal. "I'll have it announced in a few days that you and Maureen are to be married. Shortly after the ceremony, you'll tell everyone that she is with child. No one from the village will see either Molly or Maureen publicly for the months of Molly's confinement, so there will be no ill rumors spread about this quick marriage. When the child is born, I'll provide a doctor who will declare the baby to be legal issue of your union with Maureen."

Colm nodded, his eyes downcast.

"I have something of a delicate nature to tell you before I leave," John said.

"I think we are beyond anything delicate, sir."

John nodded. "For the first several months of your marriage to Maureen, you must live as brother and sister. It would not do to have Maureen become pregnant while she's reputedly already carrying your child. It is important that we succeed with this plan, that no breath of scandal touches my family."

"Of course," Colm agreed.

As he prepared to leave, John turned back to Colm and spoke softly. "I'll want to see my grandchild, lad, if you don't mind. I want to come down and visit quite often, although I doubt you will be seeing my wife. She does not share my feelings. The circumstances of this impending birth have horrified her beyond measure. That's her way. Anne is not interested in pursuing any kind of relationship with her grandchild, but the child will have some of my blood in its veins, and I don't want to be denied access to it. That being the case, I think it is very proper for you to address me as John when we are alone."

"Thank you, John." Colm's face and mood lightened considerably.

Then John Larkin was gone.

CHAPTER EIGHT

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Colm was at a loss. He had not thought of the sleeping arrangements with his new wife. "Well, there's only one bed in the cottage, so I suppose we'll have to share it." He saw a flash of dismay in her face. "I will not act the proper husband with you until the time is appropriate. I'm just being practical. There is but one bed, and I cannot sleep on the floor for the next several months, nor can you."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maureen, alone in the bedroom, looked around with interest. Even though she had been in the cottage before while chaperoning Molly, she had never paid attention to the bedroom. It was nice, she observed, very comfortable and airy. While it was cold outside, it

felt warm inside, with a two-sided hearth. Maureen set her nightgown and robe, both a drab green, on the bed. The quilt covering on the bed looked well used, but white and clean.

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

AFTER MAUREEN LEFT THE mansion, Molly suffered the ministrations of Clea Barton-Brooks. Clea was assigned to Molly because she was an experienced midwife and had helped birth several babies born on the estate. She was also not likely to brook the same foolishness from Molly that Maureen had. Anne reluctantly agreed to let Clea take care of Molly. She resented that she should suffer the loss of Clea's care because her daughter behaved like a common trollop and now had to bear her bastard child in secrecy and shame. Molly was confined to her bedroom on the third floor for the duration of her pregnancy, and not even allowed to take fresh air outside. John's explanation for his daughter's purported self-imposed exile, to those in a social position with the temerity to ask, was that she was preparing herself for a coming-out event on her eighteenth birthday in late summer of 1881. People seemed to accept the explanation, and if they had doubts, they did not dare voice them.

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

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

"I suppose so."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Ma'am."

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't mean that."

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

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

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

Rooted with shock, Anne stared at her daughter.

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

Anne backed away. *Was* Molly going mad? Whirling around, Anne ran from the room, closed the door behind her and leaned against it. What was the matter with her daughter? She had never been an easy child, but now she seemed demented. Was she really losing her mind? Suddenly, as though Molly heard her thoughts, Anne heard her daughter's laughter, an eerie, candescent sound that made the dim hallway feel more isolated. Then, accompanied by Molly's rising shriek, something smashed against the door and shattered.

Anne ran.

* * *

DARY O'QUINN CURSED HIS feeble body as he approached his 77th birthday in 1881. He was not dying. It was worse than that. His mind was fine, but his body was giving out. He was confined to a chair or bed, except for a couple of shuffling steps before he was forced to sit down again. It was all those years standing in his smithy shop, he knew, but there was no help for it now. On good days, Nigel carried him to a chair in the wildflower garden where he could breathe fresh air and see the sky. But it was winter now, and cold, so he had been in his room for many weeks without respite. Anne, bless her for being a good daughter, visited him regularly, usually in the afternoon, and Nigel would come right after to play cards with him. He liked Nigel, and did not mind relying on him, even though he was English. John rarely came. Dary figured John was afraid of illness and age because it made him aware of his own mortality.

Dary liked the visits from his grandchildren the best. Roddy came as often as he could, and stayed to play chess with him on most occasions. Dary was thrilled to hear of the approaching wedding between Roddy and Sascha McShane. Roddy even promised he would have Nigel carry him downstairs so he could attend the wedding ceremony. As the days passed, Dary wondered why he had not seen or heard from Molly in such a long time, and why in recent weeks no one even mentioned her name. Dary was particularly fond of Molly because she was kind to him, and she reminded him of his first daughter Maeve, who had died so many years ago.

Another of Dary's favorites was Claude, who tried to deliver Dary's dinner every day and then stay to visit for a few minutes. While the visits were brief, Dary usually heard all the latest gossip in the servants quarters, although of late there had not been one word spoken about Molly. The frivolous gossip gave Dary fodder for amusement when he was alone again.

One day in late January, Claude brought a tray with Dary's dinner and set it on the table in front of him. Dary leaned forward and smelled the plate of filet mignon, potatoes,

peas, and a dish of blueberry cobbler on the side, all among Dary's favorite foods. "Mmmmm. A bit of heaven, to be sure," Dary said, and smiled his appreciation at Claude.

"*Oui*, just for you." Claude set a glass of apple cider on Dary's tray.

"I've been meaning to ask you, how is Molly? I haven't seen her for weeks, and no one will tell me where she is. Be honest with me, Claude. Is something wrong with my granddaughter?"

"Mademoiselle Molly is fine." Then, mindful of Molly's increasingly demented state, he modified his answer: "She is as well as she can be."

"Then why has she stopped coming to see me? Anne won't tell me. Nigel won't tell me. Roddy just changes the subject when I ask him. Tell me what's wrong. I won't let on that you told me anything, and if it's bad news, I promise not to fall over and die with shock. Please, *tell me*."

Claude sighed dramatically, but scooted his chair closer, unable to resist sharing gossip. "I will tell you, but you must not get upset, Monsieur O'Quinn. Do you promise?"

"Of course I do," he said impatiently. "There's nothing wrong with my mind. I've seen a lot and I have done a lot in my lifetime, and there's nothing much that can shock me anymore. There's nothing new under the sun, is there?"

"I suppose not, *non*." Claude nodded and clasped his hands on his knees. "Molly is not exactly ill, you see, she is merely indisposed for the next few months."

"Indisposed? What the hell does that mean?"

Claude took a deep breath and glanced at the door. "Mademoiselle is with child. She is going to have a baby, and the *Monsieur* has ordered her confined to her room until she births the child. No one in the village is to know."

"With child?" Dary looked dazed. "The little lass is pregnant?"

"*Oui*." Seeing the confusion on Dary's face, Claude regretted his decision. "I told you not to become upset. *S'il vous plaît* - please - I will explain everything."

"Yes," Dary's eyes searched Claude's face.

"The *Monsieur* went to New York last June to hire more servants for the estate. That is when he also met Mr. McShane, and began to make the arrangement for a wife for Mr. Roderick."

"Yes, yes, I know all that, Claude. Please get to Molly."

"*Oui*. Mr. Larkin hired four Irishmen off the boat in New York. One of them was named Colm Sullivan, and he was the man the *Monsieur* chose for the job of lighthouse keeper."

"Roddy told me about him," Dary said thoughtfully. "He said the new lighthouse keeper was doing a splendid job. That was months ago, though."

"True. However, this Colm - I call him *Beauty* - and Molly took to one another very quickly. They met in my kitchen the day Colm arrived, when the *Monsieur* introduced the new servants to his family."

"Why do you call the keeper *Beauty*?" Dary interrupted.

Claude smiled. "That is very easy. Colm is, for a man, very beautiful, perfect. How do I say it? *C'est un beau garçon*. The other men call him *Pretty Boy*, and that is how I would describe Colm. You would have to see him to believe it, Monsieur Dary. The lad is physically perfect."

"Interesting," Dary said dryly. "Go on."

Claude continued for several minutes, sometimes searching for the right word in English, but Dary understood. He understood very well. When Claude finished, Dary's dinner was cold but he did not care.

"So, my little lass fell in love." Dary's voice was sad. "Why does life have to be so unfair? I wish John weren't so set on having his children marry for position and wealth. We came to America to escape that, and here we are aping what we tried to get away from. John should have let Molly marry her lighthouse keeper and be happy. Life is too short to waste it on unimportant . . ." Dary paused, his heart aching for his granddaughter.

Claude resumed the story. "The keeper, he wants the child when it's born. The *Monsieur* has agreed to that, and he arranged for a marriage between Molly's maid, Maureen and the keeper. They are married now, and the word is out that they are expecting a babe, which of course they are not. They will raise the child when the time comes, as if it is their own, which now it will be, *non*? Colm is the real Père to the babe, although no one is supposed to know that fact. You see, Monsieur Dary? Do you understand the drama and the dilemma? It is all too tragic."

"A tragedy," Dary agreed. "So sad, so sad."

"*Oui*," Claude said. "Sad and tragic in monumental proportion, like a Shakespeare play, *non*? Perhaps the only good to come of it will be that Colm and Maureen will raise and love the child, and it will never know the true circumstances of its birth."

"I remember her now," Dary exclaimed. "Yes, yes, Maureen is Jack Kelly's niece, isn't she?"

"*Oui*. The niece of the man who works at your forge in the village."

"Does Jack know about this?"

Claude shook his head. "*Non*. He knows that his niece is now married to Colm Sullivan, and that they are expecting a babe. That is all he knows."

"Just as well," Dary observed. "It wouldn't do for a lot of people to know the truth. This kind of thing could ruin my granddaughter's reputation, as well as John's social face in the village and in New York."

Claude stood. "*Oui*. You will eat now, Monsieur Dary? Please, I have to return to my kitchen soon."

"I'll eat now, Claude." He looked up at the Frenchman, his eyes misty. "Thank you for telling me the truth. I'll keep it to myself, although I'm sure someone else would have told me eventually."

"*Merci*, Monsieur Dary, for being so patient and understanding."

Claude hurried back to his kitchen. Dary sat staring at the dark window. His heart was breaking for poor Molly, and her predicament. What kind of future would she have now? Unmarried and bearing the child of a servant? If it were known, her life would be destroyed by all of the social climbers and the righteous pillars of the community. Dary could not abide the thought.

But, if John's plan worked, passing the babe off as the child of the lighthouse keeper and his wife might save Molly's future and reputation. Dary smiled. *If anyone can pull such a scheme off, it will be John. He has never failed before, so why should he fail now?*

Feeling better, Dary began to eat his cold supper.

* * *

JOHN LURED RORY MCGARREN, Larkin's only medical doctor, from Connecticut eight years earlier with a substantial amount of money. Then John built a medical facility near Larkin City Hall, complete with several examination rooms, two operating theatres, a waiting room and a hospital ward staffed by nuns from St. Patrick's Church. The apothecary came later. Rory lived in a cottage behind the clinic with his wife, Samantha.

Late in the day on Saturday, June 30, 1881, Dr. McGarren was fetched to the Larkin estate by a driver in a closed carriage, sent by John. When Rory climbed aboard, he was grateful for the protection from a cold wind that was bringing an early summer storm. The baby was about to be born. Rory had been waiting for the summons, knowing Molly was pregnant and that the birth record specifications had to be falsified. He did not like the subterfuge, but John Larkin was paying for his cooperation as well as his medical expertise. Besides, John had brought him to Larkin. He was happy in the seaside village and would not let a bit of dishonesty upset his comfortable life.

* * *

MOLLY FELT LIKE SHE was being torn apart, split in two. She knew she was going to die, because no human being could survive such pain. It had started the night before as a dull ache in the small of her back, and then in her belly. Now, eight hours later, the pain was unendurable, and she cursed the day she ever set eyes on Colm Sullivan. Her suffering was *his* fault. She was exhausted and she hated him.

She lay flat on her back in bed, covered with a sheet, her hair a sweaty, stringy tangle. Clea hovered over her, wiping her brow, murmuring soothing sounds of encouragement, but Molly absorbed none of it. The physical misery was her total reality. When pain took control of her body, she gripped Clea's hand with the strength of ten men. During a moment of awareness, she asked: "Did you send for Dr. McGarren?"

"Yes, miss. Mr. Larkin sent a carriage for him three hours ago, so the doctor should be here at any time."

If Molly had the energy, she would have chuckled. The maid, always so correct and elegant and cool, looked harried and upset. Her hair was escaping its net, there were dark smudges of exhaustion under her eyes, her sleeves were rolled up, and there were patches of perspiration on her dress. Although two windows were flung wide open, the room was oppressively hot. A large iron pot of water boiled over the fire, filling the room with humidity.

"How many babies did you say you've delivered?" Molly asked.

Clea glanced at Molly, her face passive. "Perhaps a dozen. All of them the children of servants in the estate."

"Did you ever lose one? Did any of them ever die?"

"None," Clea shook her head.

"Too bad," Molly grunted as another pain began. "What I wouldn't give to have this brat born dead. Then all of my problems would be over."

Clea was used to Molly's outbursts after all of these months, but she was still appalled by her cold, unfeeling references about her unborn child. Of course she never revealed her opinions because it was none of her business, and she was paid to do as she was told.

Dr. McGarren finally arrived. Molly watched him through her pain-swollen eyes. After a brief examination, he said: "It looks like you'll be bearing twins, Miss Larkin."

"What?" Molly tried to rise.

"Don't fret. Relax as best you can. It won't be long now. I can see a head."

"Get it out of me!" Molly shrieked, propping herself up on her elbows. "I can't stand it anymore. *Twins?* Jesus Christ! Was my sin so bad to deserve this? I thought it was horrible enough just to have *one* of Colm's monsters inside of me, but now I have to suffer through *two of them?* God Almighty, have mercy on my poor soul . . ."

McGarren's glance said: "*You made your bed with the lighthouse keeper, now lie in it and suffer. You have caused your family enough grief with your wantonness and your selfishness.*" Aloud, he said, "Push down hard, Miss Larkin. Breathe in and out rapidly, and *puuuusshh!*"

Molly strained, her screams coming loud and clear.

"Don't scream, just push. Screaming wastes your energy and accomplishes nothing."

Clea glanced at him approvingly, but Molly screamed louder. No one was going to doubt her rage and pain. With a small shrug that said *Do what you want, I am paid the same*, McGarren and Clea attended her. After an hour, the first baby was born, squalling and protesting. The doctor handed the child to Clea, who cleaned and wrapped it warmly. When she laid the child in the crib, she noticed the baby had blond hair and dark eyes.

After another hour the second baby was born, smaller, quiet, but alive. Clea received the baby and McGarren cleaned Molly as she laid half-unconscious and moaning.

"It's over now, Miss Larkin," McGarren said after Molly was cleaned and dressed in a white cotton gown. "You have two sons."

"Pox on them," Molly spat weakly, eyes closed.

"Would you like to see them before they are taken away, Miss?" Clea asked.

Molly turned her head away from Clea. She was drained and still angry. "Take them away," she whispered weakly. "I never want to see them. For all I care, you can throw them both off the cliff at Banshee Point."

Clea was shocked, but said nothing. McGarren shook his head sadly, hoping the next time he was called to the mansion it would be under better circumstances. He had attended the wedding of Roddy Larkin and Sascha McShane last February 12th, and he sincerely wished them well. Surely, when it came time for them to have a child, Sascha would not turn her back on her own child. But he knew Molly's babies were out of her hands, even before they were born.

McGarren turned to Clea. "Please fetch Mr. Larkin and tell him the news. I have to fill out the birth certificates, and then you can let him take the babies away."

"Yes, doctor."

Molly fell asleep gradually, glad it was over. She was rid of Colm's seed, and what happened to the babies now did not matter to her. They were Colm's responsibility now.

* * *

COLM WAS SURPRISED TO see John Larkin at the cottage. It was late, past ten o'clock. Colm's eyes widened when he noticed John carrying a baby swaddled in a shawl. Clea trailed him, another bundle in her arms. Behind Clea was her husband, Nigel, carting a large baby crib. The night was cool and windy, without stars.

After they came into the cottage, Colm asked: "Why do you have two babies?"

John grinned. Despite the circumstances, he was thrilled that he had twin grandsons, even though he could not claim them publicly. "You have twin lads, Colm. The first one is a bit bigger than the other, and he was born at eight-thirty tonight. The second lad is smaller, and he was born at nine twenty-five. They are both physically healthy, but I'm afraid the second one might have a few problems."

Through his delight, Colm heard John's last words. "What problems, sir . . . John?" He looked at the child John held.

"Let's put the children down first," John said. He nodded to Nigel. "Put the crib in the bedroom, then you may return to the house. Clea, I want you to stay for a bit."

Maureen stood in the bedroom doorway and watched Nigel place the crib. Clea and John followed with the babies. Nigel bowed slightly and went out the French doors. Clea stayed in the bedroom with Maureen, while John and Colm went to the living area.

They stood before the fireplace, where John came to the point. "Dr. McGarren said the second babe is slightly underweight, although physically healthy. However, the doctor thinks the child might grow to be mentally retarded."

Colm gaped at John. "Why?"

John shrugged. "He's not sure. The baby has malformed eyes, they are overly large, and his forehead protrudes. McGarren said he'd seen a similar situation when he practiced medicine in Connecticut, and that the children were stunted mentally. Physically healthy, but mentally inept."

Colm felt a fierce wave of protectiveness overcome him. "No matter. He is my child, too, and I will see that he is well taken care of."

John smiled. "That's what I was hoping you'd say. Now, I have a document I want you to sign."

Colm became wary instantly. "What sort of document?"

"Please call Maureen in here, and I'll show you."

Maureen joined them as John explained. "You both know I cannot publicly acknowledge these children as blood related to the Larkin's," he said, watching them. "But I will recognize them as my grandchildren privately, and in a way you can show them when they are older, when they will understand. All I ask is that you keep this to yourselves, and only reveal the truth to the children when the time comes."

Colm was touched by John's admission of heritage to his two babies. He chided himself for doubting the man.

John took papers from his jacket, handing them to Colm. "Please read this and make sure it's all in order," he said softly. "My wife has already signed it. She refused to come to the cottage tonight, but I did manage to convince her to put her name to the document. Please read it."

Colm and Maureen read the document together, and then looked up at John with tear-brightened eyes. "It looks fine, John," Colm said. "I will sign it." He got a pen from the kitchen cupboard. Both he and Maureen signed the document written on heavily embossed cream-colored paper.

Thursday, 30th June 1881

To whom it may concern:

I, John Kevin Larkin, do attest that the legally recorded offspring of Colm and Maureen Sullivan born today, are in fact the children of my youngest child, Mary Margaret Larkin, known also as Molly, and my lighthouse keeper, Colm Sullivan. The children born today are twin boys, named Michael Kevin and John Rory Sullivan. Molly gave birth to the children in her room in my home on the hill above Banshee Point.

This true parentage of the children will be withheld from public knowledge, and I declare it here so they may know their true heritage. It is legally recorded that Colm and Maureen Sullivan are the natural parents of the boys, but they are, in fact, my grandchildren. Since Molly has chosen not to see or raise her children, and since she is not wed or likely to be in the near future, I thought it best that these innocent children have a decent home. I also wanted them close enough so I could watch them grow for as long as I live. Deep in my heart I rejoice at my flesh and blood continuing in this fairly new world.

Witnessed this day of 30th June 1881 by myself, John K. Larkin, by my patient and understanding wife, Anne O'Quinn Larkin, and by Colm and Maureen Sullivan. May God assoil our souls.

The document was sealed with wax, impressed with a large "L" in the center.

"I will send you a copy of the document and the birth certificates in a few days," John said, receiving the signed declaration from Colm.

"I would like to give you something, John," Colm said suddenly. "Can you wait a minute before leaving?"

Returning the document to his pocket, John nodded. "Yes, I can wait." He nodded to Clea, who quickly left to return to the mansion.

Colm hurried into the bedroom and returned with a covered canvas. He set it on the floor in front of John, and unveiled it. "When Molly came to see me last summer, most of our time was spent on this. She asked me to do it for your birthday last October, but when everything got out of control, I put the painting away and forgot it until now."

Tears welled in John's as he looked at a likeness of his daughter, happy and carefree as she was before she was lost to him. "Thank you, Colm. This is the most wonderful gift I have ever received. It's extraordinary. You have amazing talent. The likeness is uncanny. It fairly breathes."

"And I thank you, John. Because of you, the children will know that they are part Larkin and part Sullivan."

John picked up the portrait. "I will hang it in my study," he said quietly. "Maybe someday I will be able to show it to Molly."

* * *

AFTER JOHN LEFT THE cottage, Colm and Maureen went into the bedroom to look at the sleeping babies, so peaceful and safe.

"How will you feed them?" Colm whispered.

"With a bottle," Maureen replied, smiling. "Mr. Larkin sent Nigel down two days ago with baby bottles, nipples, diapers, and even some toys. We have fresh milk, so all I have to do is warm it and put it into the bottles."

"How do you know all of this?"

"Clea gave me a crash course in motherhood," Maureen chuckled. "If I falter, all I have to do is ask Clea. Don't worry, everything will be all right. You'll see." She felt warm and happy, but did not know why. Maybe because the babies were born, the portrait was gone, and now she had her husband to herself. Molly did not have to be part of their conversation any more. They no longer had to discuss Molly or the impending birth because it was over and done with, and Molly made it clear that she wanted nothing to do with any of them. Maureen was free to feel relieved.

Colm looked at his babies, marveling at the differences in them. The larger baby had blond hair and dark eyes, while the smaller baby had dark hair and blue eyes. "Do you mind that Mr. Larkin named the twins?"

"No, not at all. I think the names are quite nice. Michael Kevin is named after you and Mr. Larkin's father, and John Rory is named after Mr. Larkin and Dr. McGarren. I find that very appropriate and very kind of Mr. Larkin."

"So do I," Colm agreed.

Baby Michael opened his eyes and stretched his tiny arm into the air, the miniature hand clenched and shaking. Colm reached into the crib to hold his son's hand. Michael opened his fist and curled his fingers around Colm's finger. Colm's heart melted.

"You'd better warm some milk." He looked at Maureen. "I think wee Michael is waking up, and I'm sure his brother Johnny won't be far behind."

Maureen laughed lightly and left the room.

Colm stood staring in awe at his twin sons, and made a vow: *I will protect and honor Michael and John with my life. They will have my name and my love for as long as I live, and I will never let them come to any harm or retribution from Molly Larkin. Especially poor little Johnny. This I swear on my life.*

With that vow, he felt a surge of unconditional love fill him body and soul.

CHAPTER NINE

*October 1886
Larkin, Maine*

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

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

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

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

"Two? One isn't enough?"

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

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

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

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

Maureen simply nodded, smiling at his silliness.

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

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

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

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

Mick nodded vigorously.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They laughed as they left the kitchen together.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clea sighed. "Birthing a babe."

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

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

"Who whelped today?" Molly demanded.

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

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

"Exactly."

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

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

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

"No. Colm is the sole lighthouse keeper."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

OCTOBER BLENDED INTO NOVEMBER, and still Johnny lay ill, his little body wracked with a relentless cough. Twice Dr. McGarren came to the cottage, and twice he told Colm and Maureen to keep the child warm and out of the icy winds blowing off the Atlantic. Colm set up a cot for Johnny in front of the fireplace, keeping the fire high night and day.

Colm slept on the hearth cushions every night to be with Johnny, while Mick joined Maureen in the big double bed in the bedroom, where the babe Aidan slept in his crib.

Despite the fact that Johnny and Mick were not her natural children, Maureen loved them deeply. They had no idea who Molly was, but they knew John Larkin, who came to visit them at least twice a week. Mick called John "Granfar," and Johnny followed suit, although he had a hard time saying *Granfar*, so the word came out sounding like *Grabter*. John was completely smitten with his two grandsons, but they were too young to understand how he could be their grandfather when he was not related in any way to their parents.

By the end of the second week in November, Johnny's health worsened. Colm was beside himself, and he sent for Dr. McGarren again. It took two days for the doctor to appear and then he shook his head and told Colm to prepare for the worst.

"What do you mean?" Colm demanded, not wanting to accept the doctor's words.

McGarren tried to be as gentle and compassionate as he could. "I'm sorry, Colm. The lad is just not strong enough to withstand all this sickness. He's never had a chance to get better because he's not strong. All you can do is keep him warm and be with him. The best hope I can offer you is that it can go either way: he'll make himself better, or he won't. I don't need to tell you what will happen if he won't. I'm sorry."

It was Tuesday, November 16, 1886, the longest night of Colm's life. Maureen took Mick to bed after putting Aidan in his crib, while Colm stayed by the fireplace. He put several blankets in front of the hearth, and then gathered shivering, coughing Johnny in his arms, and pulled more woolen blankets over them. He felt the child's every breath and cough. Colm prayed his son would make it through the night, as though it was a magic point of departure between life and death. Johnny moved all night, coughing, crying, snuffling, trying to breathe. It was a time of torture for both of them.

In the middle of the night, Johnny had a brief respite. He looked up at his father, his mouth trembling. He raised his thin arm and put his cold hand on Colm's face. Then Johnny smiled and whispered: "I love you, Daddy."

Colm stroked the top of Johnny's head gently. "I love you too, boyo. You're a good lad."

"Mick's a boyo, too? And Aidan?"

"Aye, son," Colm's voice broke. "All three of you are my boyos. But you're my favorite. Johnny, you're my special little boyo."

"Claude says I'm *le petite Jean*," Johnny's voice was becoming weaker.

"And so you are, lad. You're all of those things and more." Colm's heart was breaking. His dark head on Colm's shoulder, Johnny closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Colm tightened his hold on his son, feeling the frailty of his bones and hearing the labored breathing. And then Johnny was still. The coughing stopped, the breathing stopped, and those sad, blue eyes were closed forever. The trusting little smile was still on his face, and Colm was struck at how serene Johnny looked. He was peaceful now, and finally at rest.

Colm laid his head atop of Johnny's, hot tears scalding his cheeks. His little boy was gone. The poor lad suffered from the moment of his birth, but had always been so happy and curious and trusting. Colm wondered, numb with grief and exhaustion, *where was he now?* Was Johnny wandering alone in the mistiness and haze of heaven, looking for his father and mother? *Was this it?* The boy had only been allowed to live for such a short time. *Is that all there was to it?*

"Colm, love, let him go." Maureen stood over them, dressed in her robe, her hair in disarray.

"No," Colm choked, "I don't want to let him go, M'reen. He needs me."

"Colm, Johnny is dead. We have to send for Father Neeson."

"The priest can't have him!" Colm said violently, holding Johnny's limp body even closer. "I won't give my son to God, not yet."

Maureen sighed, tears filling her eyes.

"God took Johnny because of what Molly and I did. What we did was wrong, and this is God's way of punishing me. Molly's punishment is her own hell, her own insanity. I would have gladly given my life for that terrible sin. Why did God have to take my little boy? Why, M'reen, *why?*"

Maureen knelt down by Colm. "God is not to blame, nor are you. Poor little Johnny was born with a weak, sick body. It's not a punishment; it's just the way it is. He's with God now. Holding on to him will not bring him back. You wouldn't want him to stay in his sick body. He's in a better place now, where he won't be sick anymore."

"I can't let him go. Look at him. He's so sweet and lovely. How can you ask me to let him go?"

Maureen stood and prayed silently. "*Please don't let my husband go mad with his grief. Please don't let him end up like Molly Larkin, alone, depressed, and bitter.*" Then, more sharply than she had ever spoken to him before, she said aloud, "Colm, get up."

Startled, Colm looked up at her. "What?"

"Get up, I said. Stop acting like a hysterical child. You have to go to the mansion and let Mr. Larkin know his grandson is gone. Now is the time to be strong. You have to help Mr. Larkin through this, too."

Colm let go of Johnny slowly, easing his son's body onto the blankets and carefully laying his head on a pillow. Then Colm stood, wiped his face and eyes with the backs of his hands. He looked at Maureen with blue eyes so much like Johnny's, but bloodshot and stark with pain.

Maureen took his hand. "Come now, love. Go up to the mansion and wake Claude. He will help you."

Colm nodded, moving to the front door. "Aye, Claude. *Claude* will help me." He put on his wool coat, flipping the collar up around his neck. He looked back at Maureen. "Don't touch my boyo until I get back," he said, his voice flat. "He has need of me." Then he opened the door, and was gone.

Maureen crossed herself as she looked down at Johnny. He looked like he was sleeping. She caught her breath on a sob, kneeling down to touch his head.

"Go with God, John Rory Sullivan," she whispered. "Go with God."

* * *

THE CEMETERY IN LARKIN Village, designed and built by John Larkin, was now the final resting place for at least two dozen local residents who died since the village was founded in 1867. The burial site, amid pines and winter fields, was atop a slight incline outside the village, at the opposite end from the Larkin estate acreage. It was a long carriage ride from the mansion to the cemetery, especially in the cold winds of winter. On

November 19, 1886 a small flat-bed carriage made its way to the cemetery, bearing the oak casket containing John Sullivan's small body.

Colm did not know how he got through the service, but he was not alone. John Larkin was there, as were Claude and Maureen. They did not bring Mick because he was too young to understand, and the service might upset him further. Colm was grateful for Claude's presence. John appeared sad, having adored his namesake grandson, who had touched all who had known him with his sweet disposition and sunny personality. Colm could not see John's full grief as he hid his feelings well in typical fashion. Colm knew each person dealt with sorrow differently.

Colm thought of Molly only briefly, after Father Neeson finished the prayer by the gravesite. In a flash, he thought: "*Does Molly even know, or care, that one of her children is dead? That little Johnny did not even live to see his sixth birthday? Or is she so wrapped up in her own feelings that this is just another day for her?*"

Once back at the mansion, Claude accompanied Colm and Maureen to the lighthouse keeper's cottage. Maureen went into the kitchen to make a pot of tea, while Colm and Claude settled into the hearth cushions by the fire. Mick and the babe Aidan were at the mansion, being looked after by a kitchen maid. John had thoughtfully volunteered to keep the children for a few hours after the funeral, allowing Colm to settle himself and come to grips with his outward show of emotion. He had to maintain his strength for his other children now, especially Mick.

The wind howled outside of the cottage. Spatters of rain hit the windows as it whipped in sudden gusts. Over the whining of the gale, Claude heard the waves crashing onto the shore. Still wearing his coat, Colm sat staring into the fireplace flames. Claude watched him carefully, while listening to sounds of Maureen in the kitchen.

"Mr. Larkin holds himself in, doesn't he?" Colm said suddenly.

"*Oui*," Claude replied, relieved Colm had finally spoken. "The *Monsieur* has always been that way. He's very closed in to himself when he is sad."

Colm sighed. "I wish I could be that way, and then maybe I wouldn't hurt so much."

"Non, *Beauty*. You must not hold grief inside, or it will slowly drive you mad. That is the way of the *Monsieur*, but it is not the way for everyone. You have to express your sadness. To keep it bottled up inside is very bad for you."

"Spoken like a true Frenchman," Colm smiled.

"So I should know, eh? I still believe one of these days the *Monsieur* will explode with his grief. No one can keep it inside forever. It has to come out eventually."

Colm took off his coat, laying it next to him. "Does Mrs. Larkin know about my Johnny?"

"*Oui*," Claude said. "She knows. So do Roddy and his wife. Everyone knows."

"What did Mrs. Larkin say?"

Claude shook his head. "Nothing, but that is *her* way. She bottles up her feelings, too. This must be an Irish thing, *non?*"

"Not all Irish," Colm said, amused. "Mrs. Larkin never cared, anyway. As far as she is concerned, I don't exist and the children were never born. I'm surprised she even signed that paper of John's when the twins were born. You know, the one I told you about?"

"*Oui*. The paper that says John is the grandfather, and Miss Molly the mother. You showed it to me."

Colm was silent, and Claude knew what was coming next. Because he worked at the mansion as a cook, and Colm knew he saw Molly every day, Claude was certain that Colm would not let this day go by without asking if Molly knew *le petite Jean* was gone. Claude waited patiently.

"Does she know?" Colm finally whispered.

Claude nodded. "*Oui*. Mr. Larkin wanted to keep it from her, and he instructed Clea to say nothing. I didn't think it was right, so I told Mademoiselle myself. I took her lunch to the attic the day after *le petite Jean* died, and I told her."

"What did she say?"

Claude hesitated. What good would come of this, telling Colm about Molly's reaction to the death of one of her children? But Claude plunged ahead. "She said nothing, my *Beauty*. Not one word. She just stared at me, and then she looked away."

"The bitch," Colm said between clenched teeth. He kept his voice low so Maureen couldn't hear him. "The cold, heartless bitch."

Claude said nothing. Maureen came into the room carrying a tray with a teapot and cups, setting it on a small table by the hearth.

"I'm going to walk up to the mansion and get the children," she told Colm. "It's time they were home with us."

Colm agreed. "Yes, they have been in that house long enough" He looked at Claude. "Will you stay a while?"

"Of course," Claude said. "I would enjoy seeing my godson, Aidan. I will stay for as long as you like, *Beauty*."

After Maureen left, Colm said: "Thank you, Claude, for being here. I don't know how I would have managed . . ."

Claude felt the tears filling his own eyes. "We are friends, *non*? I will always be your friend, Colm, and I will always be here for you. That's what friends are for, *nez pas*?"

"*Oui*, Claude. That's what friends are for."

* * *

TEN DAYS AFTER THE funeral, Colm was alone in the lighthouse, working on the keeper's logbook and watching a dark day turn into a wet snow storm, which continued to gather force. The wind was strong, so he decided to spend the afternoon in the tower to watch for any ships in trouble.

He kept a fire burning in the small stove, with plenty of fresh wood piled beside it. The heat was steady and comforting. Because of the warmth, he abandoned his coat and gloves, but kept them near in case he had to go outside. Safe in his lighthouse cocoon, with the dark outside shrinking his vision, and the snow quieting noise from the storm, he was absorbed in his work and unaware when Molly stepped into the tower.

"Colm." Her voice was deep, silky and familiar. The hair rose on his neck as he spun around, eyes wide. Hollow-cheeked, pale and thin, her beauty was haunting. The pen fell from his fingers. His voice was stuck in his throat. The hood of her cloak covered all but her pale face, which was expressionless. She held the cloak close to her lower body with her hands. He looked down and saw that her hands were bony and blue-veined. What did he feel for her? *Sadness, impatience, anger*? He did not know. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to see you."

"Why?"

She shrugged. He waited for her to speak as she walked closer. He smelled the clean, floral scent that he associated with her, and his body reacted. He started to tremble.

"I owe you an apology," she said softly, watching him.

"For what?"

"For a long time I blamed you for my ill fortune. I've been punishing myself for years, but also blaming you."

"You had choices, Molly." His voice was steady. "You could have made a life for yourself. You could have married a rich man and had a good life. I didn't force you to stay hidden in the mansion. You did that to yourself, and you know it."

"The problem was, I could *not* choose." Her voice raised a pitch. "After the babies were born, I sank into a depression so low that I could not make any kind of decision. I'm still in that depression now, but the doctors have me loaded up on laudanum."

"I can tell. You aren't the same."

She smiled thinly. "Exactly."

"What does that have to do with me?" He felt her presence, something he never expected to feel again. He thought he was out of her reach, but he was a fool to think he could ever be immune to her.

"I tried to deny you and deny the existence of the twins." She went over to the telescope and put her hand on it, then turned to him. Her eyes were brimming with tears. "Did you know that when the babies were born, Clea tried to show them to me before Daddy took them? Do you know what I said to her?"

"What?"

"That I didn't care if she threw both of them over the cliff, because I never wanted to lay eyes on them."

Appalled, he said nothing.

"But it wasn't the truth." She moved toward him. "I didn't understand it then, but I was experiencing all the emotions new mothers have. I thought if I denied the babies, I could atone to my father for the shame I brought to him. And by rejecting the twins, I could also repudiate you, and erase you from my mind and my life. But it didn't work out that way. I never quit thinking about you, or the babies. It took me so long to realize the result of my actions."

She looked so sad that he almost felt sorry for her, but suddenly he was uneasy. He knew she was kept confined in the mansion because of her depression. *Why was she here, and how did she manage to get out?* He stood slowly. Molly watched him, from head to toe, as she used to.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Getting a cup of tea," he said, trying to hide his unease. "Would you like one?"

"Yes, that would be nice."

He walked to the stove and poured two cups of tea. He gave her one of the cups, his wrist brushing her cold hand. He drew away quickly.

She sipped the hot tea, looking at him. "My touch still bothers you, doesn't it?"

He hadn't fooled her. How could he expect to deceive her, when even after all of this time he still wanted her? He returned to his desk and sat. "You shouldn't have come out in this weather. You'll catch cold, Molly. You really should go back to the mansion."

When she replied, the acidity in her voice made his skin crawl. "In other words, you're wondering how I escaped the prison I created for myself?"

He turned to look at her. She stood holding the tea cup, staring at him coldly. "No one expects me to try and leave. They all think I'm drugged and scared, but they don't know I'm immune to the laudanum now, and I'm addicted to it. I control the dose, though, by pretending to take it and spitting it out after they leave. On the days when I want a clear head, I don't take as much. Like today."

"Who gives you laudanum?"

"The doctors prescribed it. Clea usually gives it to me."

"Oh."

"How did you feel when I told you a moment ago that I never quit thinking about you and our children?" Her voice was flat, and her eyes cold.

She blows hot and cold. It must be the narcotic. "I'm thankful you realized how important the twins are. And I pity you."

"Pity me? Why?" Her eyes flashed briefly.

"Because you never got to know Johnny. You let resentment and fear get in the way of your own children. Johnny was a gem, he was. He had problems from birth, he was never very healthy. But he was so special, so wonderful. Hard to believe, but I looked up to him. I thought of Johnny as my hero. No matter how bad he felt or how sick he was, he always smiled and tried to make everyone around him happy." She listened quietly, and then looked down.

"There is still time for you to get to know Mick," Colm said, wondering immediately why he had said it. The last thing he wanted was Molly to be around Mick. "Of course, you couldn't tell him you're his birth mother. He loves Maureen, and calls her Mummy. However, if you'd like to meet him, perhaps I can arrange something."

Molly looked up with a caustic smile. "Perhaps." He was covering up. She could read him as easily as she used to. It was too late for her to know her son. She did not want him contaminated with her instability, and she could not think of a better way to protect him. She changed the subject abruptly. "I left the house by the back way, the servants' stairs. Clea thinks she gave me enough laudanum to last until tea time, but I spit it out after she left."

Colm was alert. "You wanted to see me one more time?"

Molly sighed. "I think it best I never come here again. Don't you?"

"That's your decision."

She came over and stood in front of him. "What happened to my painting?" she asked softly.

"I gave it to your father the night the twins were born."

"You did? Why?"

Colm looked away from her intense stare. "It felt right at the time. He wanted to be a part of the twins' lives. I appreciated his interest, so I gave him the picture. He was touched and happy to get it."

"Where is it now?"

"He said he was going to hang it in his study."

"Oh. I haven't been downstairs in the study in years, which is probably why I haven't seen it."

Molly turned away again. "Daddy gave my horse to Sascha to use," she said absently, peering out the window at the blowing snow. "She likes to ride. You did know that Roddy married Sascha McShane five years ago?"

"Yes, I knew." The conversation was pointless, and he was uncomfortable with her presence in the lighthouse. He did not want her there. She was a slight on Johnny's memory.

She seemed to sense his withdrawal from her. It was time to go, but she had one more thing to tell him. She put down her tea cup and, smiling, went back to him. She studied his face as if trying to memorize it. *That incredible face, those blue eyes, and that sensuous mouth.* He had not changed much. He was as devastatingly good looking as he was six years ago, if not more so. How could she have thrown him away like she did? Where had it gotten her? "I want you to know one thing. I never told you, but I did love you. I think I loved you the minute I saw you. I know I hurt you by not telling you I loved you, and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about a lot of things, but it's too late for me now. I'm grateful that the love we had, however brief, created another soul in Michael. And in Johnny, may he rest in eternal peace. Michael will keep us connected forever, even if you don't like it. Our blood, the Larkin's and the Sullivan's, will be forever intermingled. Nothing can change that, not an edict from my father or a cold shoulder from my mother. I even forgive her now, as much as I forgive myself. She cannot help what she is, any more than I can, or you can, or my father can."

Colm felt a deep sense of longing fill him and he tried to fight it. This was Molly, the woman he once loved so deeply and violently that he thought he would never get over her. *She had loved him.* She had finally said the words. "I loved you, too," he choked. "It could have been so different for you and me, Molly. It didn't have to be this way."

"I know, but we cannot change the past. You are married now, and you have a new son. You have your family, and I have my life. We made our own choices, for good or ill."

"True."

Molly still wore her cloak with the hood up. She had not wanted Colm to see how old and grey she looked. If he thought of her at all after tonight, let it be of how young and beautiful she had once been. "I have to go," she said.

"Do you want me to walk with you to the top of the path?"

Molly smiled and shook her head. Sadly, at one time he would have begged her to stay, but now he could not wait for her to go. "I'll be all right. I've walked the path many times by myself."

He watched her silently.

Her luminous black eyes gazed at him from a calm and serene face. "Please don't judge me too harshly, Colm. Not even in the privacy of your mind. I never meant to hurt you."

He nodded.

"Goodbye, Colm."

"Goodbye, Molly." *Goodbye, my love.*

She turned and disappeared down the steps.

* * *

THE CLIFFS BELOW THE lighthouse were rough and cold, slippery from the falling snow. Molly edged forward. She had decided what to do with her life the day she heard Maureen had given birth to Colm's son, Aidan. Now all she had to do was act on her decision.

Molly stood on the edge, looking through the snow at the crashing waves. She shivered and pulled her cloak closer. The hood blew off. No one could see her now, so it did not matter.

Her life was all for naught. Or was it? She had given Colm the joy of knowing wee Johnny, and it had been one of the happiest, albeit shortest, times of his life. He still had Mick, and now he had Aidan. Colm loved her once, and that mattered a great deal to her, even though she denied it for so long. She prayed that her mental weakness would not fall to Mick, that it would also bypass any future generations.

When I close my eyes, I see Colm. Closing her eyes, she saw his face, smiling, laughing, sad, intent. That beautiful face. No one man should be that gorgeous. When I'm awake and miserable, I still dream about Colm. Even when my lips deny him.

She knew she would see him again. If she went to heaven, she would see him there with Johnny, and Colm's mother and sister from Ireland. She hoped she went to heaven, because it was the only place Colm would go when his life was over.

Molly jumped. She felt free, as never before, except when she had been with Colm. She exulted in the feeling, opening her eyes to see the water and the rocks and the snow. Her passion was no longer forsaken; now it was fully met and savored. *One last time.* Now Colm would pay in his own way with his own conscience. She had her answers and she would weep no more for the past and what might have been.

With her last consciousness she thought: *Remember me, Colm. Please remember me. Don't die without one more thought of me. I'll be back for you someday.*

The snow stopped. The ocean hissed its discontent as the red beacon light swept out from the lighthouse tower.

CHAPTER TEN

December 1920

Larkin, Maine

COLM SULLIVAN DROVE HIS black Model-T Ford proudly along Larkin Village's main street. It was a cold, clear day, one week before Christmas. Snow lay in the countryside, but efforts had been made to clear the streets and sidewalks in town. Electric lights managed traffic, which impressed Colm, as he drove his car through the green flash. His Model-T was one of the few luxuries he allowed himself, and he enjoyed it.

He was sixty years old, his fashionably styled hair now silver. Looking closer, one could see lines under his eyes and around his mouth, but his eyes were still an amazing blue, and his lips were still full and elastic. He was, in fact, more handsome than ever. But he never thought about his looks. As he drove along Main Street, he lit a cigarette and drove his car carefully at the speed limit. Larkin Village had changed much in thirty-four years. The population had grown to well over ten thousand. There were now several schools in the area, a full size medical facility, and a small university.

Colm drove by where the Amber Whale had stood until it burned down in 1904. In its place stood a dress shop called Phoebe's Boutique. The owners of the former tavern, Lizbeth and Adam Bisiker, had collected insurance money from the fire and then sold the property to Phoebe McGarren, oldest daughter of the late Dr. Rory McGarren. Adam built and operated a small bar elsewhere in town, naming it "Suds." Lizbeth Bisiker moved into the Larkin mansion after the fire to look after John. There was still talk that the Bisiker's had set fire to the Amber Whale just for the insurance money, but the allegations were never proven.

In 1906, John opened Larkin Lumber & Hardware on Main Street. It was managed by his grandson, twenty-five-year-old Patrick Larkin, the only child of Roderick and Sascha. The company provided more than two dozen well-paying jobs for city residents. In 1918, Patrick married Colleen McGarren, youngest daughter of Dr. Rory McGarren. Colleen had just given birth to their first child, a son they named Brian. The Larkin family was growing.

The old grocery store was still in operation, being the most popular shopping place among the locals. The tall, wooden sign which identified the store as Larkin Grocery was tattered but still in place. Colm was one of the many people who bought his food there on a regular basis.

Quinn's Forge closed in 1900. The building was replaced by a continental bookstore operated by a bespectacled Walter O'Toole, grandson of Barry O'Toole, one of Colm's shipmates on the voyage to America in 1880. The original bookstore was replaced ten years later by the Wee Book Shop, founded by Scottish immigrant Angus McFadden.

As Colm drove out of town toward the Larkin estate, he thought about his own little house in the city. He retired from the Banshee Point Lighthouse last year, handing the reins over to his oldest son, thirty-nine-year-old Mick Sullivan with John Larkin's full approval, and more importantly with the approval of the U.S. Lighthouse Service.

Colm bought a two-bedroom house in the village, where he lived alone with a spaniel named Henri, a gift from his oldest friend, Claude Mondoux, who was still the chef at the mansion. On a comfortable pension from the government, Colm spent his days

painting. He had a closet full of portraits and drawings, some unfinished, but most complete. Sometimes he drove out to Banshee Point to sketch the ocean, or the lighthouse, or the mansion. He figured he had at least fifteen drawings of the lighthouse alone, all from different angles.

Maureen had died of heart failure in 1910. Colm still missed her and visited her grave at the Larkin City Cemetery every few months. She was buried next to Johnny, so he always arrived with two bouquets of flowers to put on their graves.

Aidan, now thirty-four, was a priest serving in Timmins, Ontario, Canada. Colm rarely saw his youngest son, but received at least two letters a month from him. Colm often recalled Maureen's words the day Aidan told them he wanted to go into the priesthood. "Mick followed you and wants to be the lighthouse keeper. Let Aidan go his own way into the priesthood. He deserves his own happiness." And she was right. Aidan was happy as a man of God, and Colm was proud of him.

Colm chuckled, remembering the day Mick and Layla Barton-Brooks married in 1905. Mick always appeared to be in love with Layla, even though she was three years older than he. They had grown up together on the estate, and were inseparable. It seemed only natural when they married. Their son, Jean-Claude, now thirteen, was named after the redoubtable Claude Mondoux, whose life had touched so many on the estate.

Nearing the entrance to the Larkin property, Colm slowed his car and thought with a smile: "*Here I am again. It always comes back to this: Me and the Larkin's. Some things never change.*"

* * *

NIGEL ANSWERED THE DOOR and ushered Colm in with a slight bow. "It's just me, Nigel. You don't have to bow to me."

Nigel smiled, but he would always insist on propriety. At seventy years of age, it was an indelible part of his personality. Clea had died in 1914 from kidney disease. While his work and the joy of his only grandchild, Jean-Claude, distracted him from his permanent sorrow, he had never been the same since his beloved wife's death.

"Nice to see you, sir," Nigel said. "Mr. Larkin will be down directly. Claude is getting him into the wheel chair now."

"I'll wait in the drawing room. No need to bother yourself."

"Yes, sir."

Colm went to the drawing room and sat in his favorite chair, a rose-brocade antique John imported from Germany years before. He looked at his portraits lining the walls. He painted John in 1889, posing in his bedroom. There was a portrait of the late Anne Larkin, which Colm dated 1881 falsely as Anne would not consent to sit for him, considering him to be a devil. After her death in 1889, John commissioned Colm to paint her from memory to honor her. Molly's portrait hung among the others, but Colm avoided looking at it. The memories still hurt even though she had been dead for thirty-four years.

The house was wired for electricity now, and a system similar to a dumbwaiter was installed that began on the ground floor and went all the way up to the attic. It was the system John used to get around his home since a stroke put him in a wheelchair twelve years earlier. Nonetheless, at age ninety-one, John's mind was sharp as ever.

Claude wheeled John into the drawing room to meet with Colm. The two men played chess at least once a week, which served to cement a friendship that had grown for years.

"You see, *Beauty*," Claude said. "I bring the *Monsieur* for your silly game of chess."

Colm laughed as he stood. "About damned time, too."

John snorted. "Tell the frog to stop pushing me around in this chair. He goes too fast, and my head is spinning."

"You complain too much, *Monsieur*," Claude said, settling John next to Colm.

"I've earned the right to complain," John said crisply. Claude and Colm laughed together.

"I'll go fetch your tea from the kitchen," Claude said.

"Thanks for the warning," John bantered.

Colm watched Claude warmly, thinking Claude must be close to seventy although the Frenchman never revealed his age to anyone over the years. He was still tall and erect and healthy, and he still wore his little gold earring.

John pulled on Colm's sleeve. "Sit lad, and take a rest."

Colm sat and smiled at John. "How are you feeling today?"

"Cranky and sore, as usual. But I manage. You?"

"Well, thanks. How is Lizbeth?"

John rolled his eyes. "In bed with a cold this week. She still wants to get married, but I tell her I'm too old now. Can you imagine someone my age wheeling down the aisle?"

"Only if it makes you happy," Colm replied.

"Well, it wouldn't. But don't tell Lizbeth that. Once in a lifetime is enough of that torture." He glanced at Colm. "Are you going down to the lighthouse while you're here?"

Colm nodded. "Yes, after we have tea, and before we play chess, I thought I'd go say hello to Mick."

"I have something for Mick," John said.

"You do?"

John pulled what looked like a small wallet out of his pocket and thrust it at Colm. "Take a look at that."

Colm opened the leather cover. It was a bank book, from Larkin City Bank & Trust, Account 6738-12, for Michael Kevin Sullivan of Banshee Point. Account balance: \$250,000. Colm's eyes widened. It must be a mistake. Mick did not have that kind of money. "What's this?" he looked at John.

"A savings account I opened for Mick years ago. No one knows about it, except for my solicitor."

"But why did you do this?"

"Mick is my grandson," John said, stating the obvious. "Now he knows, thank God. It's all to your credit that you finally told him the truth last year. And he is smart enough to keep the information to himself. But even before you told him, he treated me with respect and affection."

"Mick will never accept this money," Colm protested. "He's too proud. You know that."

"By the time he knows about it, I'll be dead and so will you," John chuckled. "It's in my will. He doesn't get the money until you and I are both dead and buried. He'll have to accept it then, won't he? He won't have a choice. Who'll Mick have to argue with if we're both gone?"

Colm shook his head, feeling a chuckle rise in his throat. "You're still trying to run things, aren't you?"

John leaned forward. "Money is power, whether you're the King of England, or a royal Duke or a politician or a common croppie, like I was a long time ago. Without power, you cannot protect what you already have, or help those who are less fortunate than yourself."

"Why don't you give this to Roddy?"

"Because he gets everything else when I die. This money for Mick is nothing to me, Colm. It doesn't even make a dent in my fortune. Hell, Roddy is making his own money now too, and lots of it. What with the import warehouse he has in New York and all of the income from my holdings here in Larkin. Did you know Roddy is planning on building a luxury resort on the other side of town by the cemetery? He has already persuaded investors to pour in money for the project, and has drawn up tentative plans for the resort."

"Roddy is like you. He never sits still." Colm looked down at the bank book. "Do you want me to keep this for Mick?"

"Yes. Hold onto it, but don't let him see it."

"I won't," Colm promised, amazed.

Claude rolled in a tea trolley, so they switched to other subjects: the weather, their plans for Christmas, and who would beat whom at chess. After tea, Colm stood. "I'm going to go down and see Mick," he told John and Claude. "I'll be back, and then I can kick your arse at chess."

After he left, John looked up at Claude. "He's going to Molly's grave, isn't he?"

Claude nodded. "*Oui, Monsieur*. He always goes there, every time he says he's going to see Mick. He stops at her grave first."

"I made such a horrible mistake all those years ago, didn't I? I should have left Colm and Molly alone, and maybe their lives would have had a happier ending."

"*Non*," Claude insisted. "You did the right thing, *Monsieur*. It was your destiny, as much as it was theirs. Their love lives on in Mick, you see, and now in Jean-Claude. You mustn't tamper with fate or destiny. It is a *fait accompli*, and nothing can change now. Do you understand me, *Monsieur*?"

John grinned, and then mimicked his chef perfectly. "*Oui, Claude* my frog, it is a fate complete."

* * *

JOHN HAD BURIED MOLLY in a lone plot on the grounds of the estate, off to the left of the path to the lighthouse and beach. Hers was the only grave until Dary O'Quinn died in late 1886. When Anne died in 1889, John made a proper family cemetery embraced by a stone fence. Mother and daughter were buried well apart, given their distance in life. Anne was buried next to her father, Dary O'Quinn, who died three years before her, and just after Molly leaped out of life off the cliffs at Banshee Point.

Colm stared at her grave and the simple headstone.

Mary Margaret Larkin
1864-1886

Plain. Simple. He touched the stone as tears stung his eyes. He swallowed. He had stopped writing in his personal journal in 1890, and hid the volume in the roll-top desk in the cottage. Someday, he thought, someone will find the journal and learn the truth about us. Since he no longer wrote his feelings in his journal, he often spoke his thoughts aloud, and today was no exception.

"I think about you every day, Molly. I came to love Maureen in time, too. It was better that I married her, rather than you. She was calm and serene, and you were a great whirlwind. How can I not think about you, even after all this time? I see you every time I look into Mick's black eyes. He still pines for Johnny, you know, and remembers him. I finally told Mick last year the truth about you, and that John was his grandfather. He adores John anyway, but I told him you were his natural mother and not Maureen, and I think it hurt him. He truly loved Maureen, but I felt I owed him the truth about you and who he really was. I'm not sure if Mick understands it all yet, but I pray he will someday. Hell, I'm sixty years old, and I'm not even sure I understand what happened between you and me, Molly."

He stemmed the flow of tears, amazed he could still be moved by his emotions for Molly. "I love you, Mary Margaret," he whispered, backing away from the grave and wiping his eyes.

He left the family cemetery and went to the path to the lighthouse, and the keeper's cottage. Before he went back to the chess game with John, he wanted to see Mick and Layla, and Jean-Claude, who looked remarkably like his long-dead uncle Johnny Sullivan. Whether she knew it or not in her eternal sleep, Jean-Claude was Molly's grandson, too.

Mick Sullivan's face broke into a smile when he came out of the lighthouse and saw his father walking down the path toward him. "Dad!" he called, waving.

Colm saw him and waved back. Warmth enveloped his heart. He knew life did not get much better than family because the past and the future lived on in family. Father and son met in front of the lighthouse, where they embraced. Colm thought there was one lesson he had learned that he wanted to pass on to his descendants:

Memories of the past were permanent and enduring. *And never forgotten.*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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

Titles in the eight-part family saga include:

- *The Advent*
- *Quixotic Crossings*
- *The Twain Shall Meet*
- *Enthrallment*
- *The Keeper's Journal*
- *Hearts Desires*
- *The Twilight*
- *Megan's Legacy*

All books were released by Club Lighthouse Publishing.

Deidre is a native of Greenwich, Connecticut. She has also lived in San Francisco, Reno and Spokane, among other US cities. Her favourite authors and writing influences include Evelyn Anthony, Maeve Binchy, Elizabeth Byrd, James Clavell, Dorothy Daniels, Ken Follett, Marilyn Harris, Susan Kay, Stephen King, Norah Lofts, Colleen McCullough, Marilyn Ross, Edward Rutherford, Bertrice Small, Barbara Taylor Bradford, Leon Uris, Alison Weir and Kathleen Woodiwiss.

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

For more, visit Deidre's website: <http://deidredalton.com/>