

Excerpts from:
The Twain Shall Meet

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #3 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

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ABOUT "THE TWAIN SHALL MEET"

The Twain Shall Meet by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the third book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in January 2012. The paperback edition followed in February 2017, which includes new content, extra scenes and dialog.

An innocent meeting as children sparks a fateful yet perilous liaison between Shannon Larkin and Mike Sullivan. Will their romance follow the same tragic path forged by their mutual ancestors Colm and Molly?

Shannon Larkin and Mike Sullivan are presumably unaware of the long connection between their two families. Yet their love affair seems destined to follow the same tragic path as the one forged by their mutual ancestors, Colm Sullivan and Molly Larkin.

Mike, who bears an eerie resemblance to his great-great grandfather Colm, is committed to an insane asylum after he attacks Shannon at the Larkin mansion and savagely kills one of her friends. Even while confined, Mike is still obsessed by Shannon and schemes to escape his mental prison.

Although Shannon finds happiness with newcomer Scott Page and begins a family with him, she cannot erase the memories of Mike from her mind.

Madness has consumed this fourth generation in the guise of Mike Sullivan, and he will stop at nothing to make Shannon his own.

For more, go to:

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

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter One

July 1961

Larkin City, Maine

LARKIN CITY SUFFERED THROUGH a blistering heat wave during the summer of 1961. Accustomed to temperate weather even during summer months, residents of the harbor town went to great lengths to keep cool. As a result, regular power outages ensued as people ran their air conditioners day and night. Those less fortunate relied on electric fans or frequent trips to the community swimming pool. The Byre resort also had two public swimming pools on offer, along with ice-cold refreshments. Other locals made-do with quick dips in the harbor as summer wore slowly on.

Few shops on Main Street offered air-conditioning. Not only was it expensive, it was also unnecessary as Larkin City was not known to be a typical hot spot. Bruno's Café was one of the few places with indoor air, so the eatery did a brisk business all summer long.

Patrons of the local grocery store weren't so lucky. Despite being owned by the Larkin family, the former mercantile was devoid of cooling comforts and therefore remained blistering hot inside. The sight of people leaning into freezer cases to get relief became common, and on more than one occasion customers were known to faint from heat at the check-out stand.

One Saturday morning in mid-July, the old mercantile was filled with shoppers. The temperature had already soared to ninety degrees, but the store was oddly quiet except for the sound of squeaking wheels on shopping carts. Housewives wearily trudged along the tile floors with their children in tow. The air was laden with humidity, and expressions of bored annoyance as the heat of the July day continued to wear into the century-old market.

Five-year old Michael Sullivan followed his heavily pregnant mother through the store. The boy was blue-eyed with ash blond hair framing his face, his features strikingly unusual and beautiful for one of his age and gender. His eyes were spaced close together, giving him a cross-eyed look, but the darker lashes were thick and startling against his pale face.

Linda Sullivan glanced at her young son. "Come on, Mike," she said. "I just need a loaf of bread and then we can go."

Mike nodded absently and followed her into the next aisle. It was predictably crowded, and incredibly stifling. Linda tapped her foot impatiently as she waited. Half a dozen women were ahead of her.

"Awful hot, isn't it?" a slightly accented and cultured voice said next to Linda. "They simply must install air conditioning in here."

Linda looked at the woman who was speaking. She was tall and slender, smiling as if the heat was in everyone's imagination. She was also pushing a shopping cart, dressed fashionably in a crisp, white pantsuit. Her long, wavy light brown hair was pulled back into a tight bun, revealing her thin but elegantly shaped cheekbones and full lips. A little girl, perhaps nine or ten years old, stood next to the woman. The child was of a lithe built, with fair skin and a distinctively heart-shaped face, her nose was small and thin, cheekbones high and her lips full and pink. Her hair, ebony black, reached down to her waist in a tight

ponytail. Linda noticed the young girl's eyes in particular. They were almond-shaped and almost as dark as her hair.

The woman in the white pantsuit continued smiling. "My name is Mary Larkin, and this is my daughter, Shannon."

Linda returned the smile, momentarily surprised. "My name is Linda Sullivan, and this is my son Mike." She glanced at the crowded aisle. "If anyone can get air-conditioning installed in the store, it would be you."

Mary laughed at Linda's comment. "I've tried many times over the years," she said. "My husband's excuse is that summers in Maine are not long enough to warrant the expense of central air, but no one could have anticipated the current heat wave, could they?"

Linda liked Mary's open and friendly manner. She was certainly not what she expected a Larkin to be, assuming they were all reserved and above the fray. Mary was just the opposite.

Shannon was looking curiously at Linda's son. The young boy stared back at her. Their eyes held for several seconds. Then, shyly, Mike said: "Hi." Shannon blushed, but continued to look at him. She said "Hello" in return. As their mothers continued to talk, the children kept gazing at one another. Suddenly, Mike smiled. "You're pretty, Shannon," he ventured in a soft voice.

Shannon smiled back at him. "And you're cute, Mike," she giggled, ducking her eyes.

Mary finally made her way through to the bread display. She grabbed several loaves, turning to Linda. "At long last, now I can get out of this blasted heat. It was a real pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Sullivan. I'll badger my husband Brian to get central air in the store."

Linda laughed. "I'll be forever in your debt if you do."

As Mary and her daughter moved away from the bread aisle to the cash register, Mike's eyes followed Shannon. She did not look back at him. He was disappointed if not a bit annoyed. His facial expression took on a faraway look, as if he were daydreaming.

Linda nudged him. "You okay, Mike? Are you ready to go home?"

He nodded and followed his mother to the cashier. He sighed sadly, which his mother failed to notice. He again sought Shannon Larkin with his eyes, but she was nowhere to be seen. It was almost as if she had disappeared.

Mike's brain began to churn. "*That face, that sweet, beautiful face.*" He wished he could put her image in his mind permanently, but wondered vaguely in five-year-old fashion if it was damaging to think about one thing for too long. What did it matter? It couldn't hurt him *that* bad, could it? Besides, he was unable - no matter how hard he tried - to rid the image of Shannon Larkin from his mind.

* * *

GROWING UP IN LARKIN City was a combination of surrealism and delight. The old world charm of the town enchanted tourists, and the beauty of the surrounding landscape was a point of pride for the locals. The entire town and outlying vicinities were owned by the very wealthy Larkin family, but this rarely presented a problem for the populace. The Larkin's were fair-minded and honest people. They provided most of the jobs in the city, employing the largest number of people at Larkin Lumber & Hardware, the fish-packing

plant, the dozen fishing trawlers, and the lavish resort known as The Byre, as well as the various shops that lined the main street of town and along the harbor.

Linda Sullivan, one of Larkin City's less financially endowed residents, taught at the local elementary school. Having divorced her husband George shortly after the birth of their daughter Sara in 1961, Linda managed to support her children in modest fashion. The threesome lived in a mobile home a few miles outside the Larkin City limits. Linda could not provide every luxury in the world for Michael and Sara, but she was confident they were well-loved and content with their lives.

Mike had always been a bright, happy child, blond, tall and strikingly beautiful, almost too physically perfect for his age. He was helpful to Linda, looking after Sara possessively and assisting Linda with household chores when his age allowed. He was rarely depressed and smiles came easily to his lips.

The only thing Mike seemed to remember about his father were the few trips they had taken to Seal Harbor together, where they fished and explored hidden caves. The memories did not seem to traumatize Mike, so Linda did not worry about it unduly.

Around the time of his eighth birthday, Linda noticed a slight change in her son. Each time she went into town, he insisted on going with her. If she went to the market, he wanted to go inside with her, always wandering around by himself until she finished shopping. As he started kindergarten and middle school, and began mingling with other children his age, Mike became more gregarious. His school work was excellent, and Linda was justifiably proud of him.

When he was nine, Mike asked his mother if she had ever taught Shannon Larkin at the elementary school.

Linda glanced in surprise at her son. They were returning home from Larkin City. It was the beginning of summer, 1965. The weather was warm, and Linda rolled down the windows in the car. The hot breeze gushed in and out, whipping their hair around their faces.

"Why do you want to know if I taught Shannon Larkin?" Linda asked her son.

Mike shrugged, nonchalant. "Just curious. Do rich people go to regular schools?"

Linda laughed. "Of course they do. The Larkin's may be rich, but they're human like everyone else."

"Well, did you teach her?"

"Who?"

"Shannon Larkin," Mike reminded her irritably.

"Actually, I haven't taught any of the Larkin's, Mike. They always end up being enrolled with another teacher."

"So you've never talked to Shannon?" he prodded.

"No. Of course, I've seen her several times, along with her two older cousins and her brother. Her brother is her twin, did you know that? They look a lot alike." Linda paused, glancing at her son again. "I will admit, however, that the Larkin's don't take a bus to school like normal folks. They are always driven to school by their parents."

"Why?"

Linda shrugged. "I have no idea. I gather it's more convenient for the family. They all have jobs in town, and I suppose they drop the kids off to school on their way to work."

Mike was quiet for several minutes. Linda looked over at him as she continued to drive. He was staring pensively out the car window.

"Why this sudden curiosity about the Larkin's?" Linda asked him.

"No reason."

Linda thought no more of her son's questioning. She assumed he was merely curious about the people who founded Larkin City, nothing more.

Mike's secretive interest in Shannon Larkin continued to deepen with the years, although he kept it well-hidden from his mother. He memorized every scrap of news he heard about her, and on rare occasions he would see her from afar in Larkin City. She was obviously growing into a lovely young girl. Her hair remained long and black as night, and her small figure began developing curves and muscles, creating longings in Mike that he did not yet understand.

Mike never questioned his avid interest in Shannon. She was an image that refused to leave his mind for very long. In a sense, he was almost frightened of her. The thought of speaking to her in the flesh remained an unrealized fantasy. However, one of his favorite daydreams often repeated itself in conscious thought. In his mind, he played out running into her by accident, talking with her, somehow believing she would remember their first meeting in the grocery store years ago, that she would *remember him*. In reality, the idea of speaking to her scared him to death. What could he possibly have to say to someone like Shannon? What could they have in common?

Yet Mike continued to relish in the fantasy, hoping one day it would come true.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Three

*July 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

MIKE LOOKED ABSOLUTELY STRIKING that night. He wore tight-fitting dark blue dress slacks, beige boots and a light blue silk shirt which clung to his rib cage. His hair was freshly shampooed, and fell feathery light to his collar.

He waited for Shannon in front of The Coven. It was still raining, so he hovered under the front doorway alcove, shivering slightly, gathering his waist length windbreaker towards his body tightly.

Shannon drove up presently. She quickly alighted from the car and hurried toward him. "Hi," she exclaimed happily, kissing him on the mouth. He pulled her closer and buried his face into her hair.

"I've missed you," he said softly.

She looked up at him. "Didn't you bring any clothes with you?"

He nodded, reaching down to the ground and picking up a small overnight bag. "Yeah, I did. But I'm hoping I won't need any clothes tonight."

"You're a devil, Mike," Shannon teased him. "Come on, let's go inside and warm up for awhile."

They entered The Coven. Shannon's cousin Kevin discreetly seated them at a booth in the rear of the club. As soon as they sat down, Mike grabbed Shannon's hand underneath the table. "Can we get a beer?" he asked. "I've never tasted one before."

"Sure," she smiled at him. "You wait here and I'll go talk to Kevin."

Shannon walked to the farthest corner of the lounge and motioned Kevin over from the bar. Kevin's facial features were similar to those of his brother Liam, except Kevin didn't possess a cleft in his chin. He was also much taller, bulkier and kept his hair several inches shorter. Kevin lived at the mansion, working full-time at the lumber yard during the week and playing bartender at The Coven on weekends.

"Can we have two beers?" Shannon finally whispered into his ear.

Kevin grinned "What are you doing? Are you trying to corrupt that boy? How old is he, for God's sake?"

"Please, Kevin," she pleaded.

"Okay, okay," he conceded laughingly. "And here I thought I was the despoiler of our clan. Be damned careful. I'm taking a chance now as it is." He paused, glancing around the bar. "Wait a minute. Do you know where the employee break room is? Why don't the two of you go in there instead of sitting out in the open? There is some beer in the fridge, I think. That way you can have privacy and I won't be so nervous about having two children inside the bar."

"Thank you, you're so sweet," Shannon kissed him on the cheek.

Kevin snorted. "Just take it easy on the poor guy. Now go on with you. And while you're at it, leave by the back door when you decide to beat a hasty retreat."

Shannon nodded happily and made her way back to Mike. His eyes lit up when he saw her approaching. She sat next to him and related Kevin's suggestion.

Mike kissed her on the cheek. "Let's go to the break room then."

After they made their way through the bar, and into a rather dim, deserted break room, Shannon opened the small fridge door and hunted for the beer. Mike sat down at a kitchen table situated in the center of the room. There was also a couch against one wall, and several more chairs.

"I found it," Shannon announced. She brought over two frosty cans of beer and handed one to Mike. She sat down next to him. He opened his can and took a sip, a grimace coming to his face.

She laughed. "What's the matter? Don't you like it?"

He tasted it again, shrugging. "It's okay I suppose, but nothing great. It smells like cow piss. Can I try one of your cigarettes now?"

Her eyes widened. "Are you sure? You're too . . ."

"Don't tell me I'm too young," he said irritably. "You're only five years older than me, and *you* smoke."

She handed him a cigarette without another word. He grabbed her matches and lit it. Instantly, he went into a spasm of coughing. "*Yecchhhh!*" He spat, crushing the cigarette out in the ashtray. "That was *awful*. How can you smoke this crap every day?"

"Good for you," she said. "I wish I felt the same way. You'll be better off not taking up the habit."

He continued to sip his beer, growing used to its taste, gazing warmly at her.

"You'd better go easy on that stuff," she warned him. "I have some wine waiting for us back in my room."

"So?" Mike grinned. "It won't stop me." He scooted his chair closer to hers. "How can you manage to sneak me into your house *just like that?*"

Shannon sipped her beer, and took his hand. "Well, my house isn't like your place. The mansion has about eighty rooms, four stories, a cellar and an attic. It's very large, to say the least. All of the adults are usually in bed by eleven. My cousins, my brother and I . . . we sort of cover for one another."

"Eighty rooms," Mike said in awe. "I've heard about that, you know, I hear people talking about it locally, but it's for real? How do you manage to keep it clean? Don't you have to hire help?"

"No," she answered him. "We all pitch in. I'm assigned certain areas of the house that I keep clean regularly, and I do my own laundry. My brother Sean has made a full time job out of keeping up the grounds, and repairs to the house when needed. A few years ago, we all set aside a week and repainted the second floor bedrooms together. We do have a cook, though. She's been with the family for twenty years and lives in the mansion."

He shook his head. "I find it hard to imagine."

She looked at her wristwatch. "It's only quarter to eleven. Let's wait another ten minutes and then go."

He leaned back in his chair, gazing at her thoughtfully. She stared back, smiling. How was it he had the ability – like no other – to make her feel weak and unsettled inside?

"I have dreams about us all of the time," Mike said, his voice soft. "I dream that we live together in a little house in Larkin City. We sleep in the same bed. I always imagine us sleeping without any clothes. We make love before we go to sleep, and when we wake up." He leaned forward, his eyes boring intently into hers. "Do you think that will ever happen, Shan?"

She felt a wave of panic assail her. He was looking at her *too* intently, almost as if he wanted to devour her. "It could happen," she managed to say. "Maybe. Who knows? We have a lot of time, Mike. We're both very young."

"I know," he started to blush, groping for words. "I can't seem to remember what it was like before I met you. I honestly can't. Everything was so dull before. I never want to be without you."

"No, Mike," she said, alarmed by his words. "Please don't place your entire existence on me, or on our time together. I admit, I do think about you a lot, but I have other things in my life, too. You've got to have more than just me. I cannot - and will not - be everything for you. No one can carry a load like that."

"I don't want anything else in my life, nothing else interests me," he insisted, unmoving. "I don't care about anything else. Don't you understand?"

Shannon sighed. There was no use in trying to convince him of anything tonight. Hopefully, in time, his preoccupation with her would wane. But she wouldn't worry about that now. She didn't want to mar their first evening together. She grabbed his hand. "Come on, let's go."

It was still pouring rain when they went outside to her car. They hurriedly slid into the vehicle and slammed the doors shut. As soon as Shannon pulled away from The Coven, Mike spoke up: "How long can I stay in your room? All night?"

"Until dawn," she answered him. "My Dad is coming in from Ireland at about two in the morning, but I'll sneak you out."

He laughed. "I forgot to tell you, my Mom asked me a lot of questions about you."

"Like what?"

"She wanted to know if we're just friends."

"And what did you tell her?"

"I told her we were just friends, but then she said she could tell I was crazy about you. She said you seemed very nice and she liked you, but she thinks I'm too young for a romantic relationship."

"She's right, you know," Shannon teased. "You may meet someone in school this year that you like better than me."

"I doubt that," he said firmly. Then he asked: "Have you told your mom about me?"

"Yes. I told her I'd introduce you to her someday."

He grinned. "I like that. It means you must be sort of serious about me, at least."

As they approached the mansion, Shannon tensed. The time had finally come. It was just over two weeks since she first met Mike, and none of her strong feelings for him had waned. She was completely attracted to him, it was unexplainable. His perfect looks had something to do with it, of course: he was physically beautiful, not one outward flaw. She could not believe it was love, nor was it just lust for that matter. She felt very protective of him. All she knew for certain was that she wanted to know him; she had to be *one* with him. Maybe then her true feelings would become clear.

After Shannon parked in the garage, she and Mike made a dash for the back door of the mansion, which opened into the kitchen. She told him the back door was always left unlocked at night, in case someone returned home late without a key.

"Isn't it dangerous to leave doors unlocked?" he questioned her.

"Not really. We don't exactly broadcast the fact we leave the back door unlocked."

Until now.

The kitchen was mercifully deserted. A night light burned dimly over the stove. Shannon shut the back door gently as Mike whispered: "My God, your kitchen is as big as our entire house."

She grabbed him by the arm. "Quiet . . . Now come this way. One of these days I'll show you the whole place in daylight, but for now let's get upstairs."

She led him out of the kitchen and into a dim, walnut-paneled corridor. After several seconds, they came into the front foyer. A lamp burned brightly by the front door, but everything else was dark and quiet.

"Is everyone in bed?" Mike asked in a low voice.

She nodded. "It seems so."

"I'd like to be in bed, too," he snickered. "Let's hurry up."

They walked up the staircase quietly, and then down the shrouded hallway. Shannon heard voices coming from behind the first door on the right. It was Phoebe's room. Someone in the family must be talking with her, Shannon thought. She hurried Mike along the corridor and up the next three levels of the house until they finally reached her room. She opened the door, and then shut it softly after she and Mike scurried inside.

He stood still and looked around in amazement. "My hell, Shan," he said, his voice barely audible. "Is this your room?"

"Yes, it is," she replied. "I even have my own bathroom, although not until just recently. Take your jacket off, you're soaking wet. I'll pour us some wine."

She hurried into the bathroom and dug through the beverage cooler. She brought out a bottle of white wine and retrieved two glasses from the sink counter. She walked back out into the sitting room to find Mike seated on the couch. He had removed his jacket and shoes, and had turned the television set on, the volume turned down low. He smiled brightly when he saw her.

Shannon sat down next to him, placing the glasses and the chilled bottle of wine on the coffee table in front of her. Carefully, she poured them each a glass of wine, and handed Mike his. She set her glass down and lit a cigarette, watching him sip the wine, a slight smile playing about her lips.

She thought how crazy and unreal the situation was. She decided to go with the flow, and let happen what may. Mike was impressionable. She realized his emotions could turn the whole episode into a potentially dangerous situation, but she felt she could handle whatever happened.

"This wine is a lot better than beer," he told her after he drained his glass and refilled it. "It sort of makes me feel all warm inside."

She laughed. "If you like wine, wait until you graduate to the good stuff: rum, whiskey, tequila . . ."

"Hard liquor? Do you drink it?"

"Sometimes, but not often. It just gets you loaded faster."

Mike finished his second glass of wine. She watched him drink it quickly, and then she settled back on the couch and lit another cigarette. "Are you having fun, tonight, Mike? Are you glad you came here?" she asked him.

"Oh, yes, Shan," he said as he faced her, kissing her gently on the mouth. "I'm very happy tonight, and I'm glad I came. I've never been happier in my life. I live to see you every day. I'm afraid phone calls just aren't the same. I never dreamed you'd ever like me the way I like you."

"I like you a lot," she told him, being careful with her choice of words. "I have never liked anyone as much as I like you, even in college. I've never met anyone quite like you."

"Why me?" he whispered breathlessly, watching her in suspension, as if he expected a divine revelation.

"You're different from anyone else I've ever met," she admitted, touching his cheek with her hand. "Most men use incredibly stupid lines to get a girl. You don't use those lines, because you're too young to even know what they are. You're blunt and to the point, very honest. You want me and I want you. There are no games involved."

Mike watched her closely as she spoke. Then he asked her: "Did you have a boyfriend before me?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I dated a few times in college, but there was nothing steady or serious. Besides, none of them were like *you*."

He kissed her again. "I really do love you. It's not like loving my mom or my sister. It's very different, and it's better. I know I'm young, but I want you. Not just now, but forever. I mean it, Shan."

She felt a combination of thrill and panic at his words. She was made uneasy by his intensity, but at the same time it touched her heart and made her feel warm inside. He meant what he said, she could tell. He meant every word.

"Did you hear me, Shan?" Mike demanded. His voice was starting to sound slurred and uneven. Had he consumed too much wine?

"I hear you, Mike," she replied.

"Good," he gurgled. "Tell me that you love me forever so I can pass out."

"What?" Shannon exclaimed, looking at him.

He made a feeble attempt at laughter again. "I'm sorry, Shannon. I really want to kiss you, among other things."

She leaned towards him. "Really?"

He smiled sloppily, his lips uneven. "Yes, *really*." He planted his lips on hers, wrapping his arms around her waist. She drew closer to him, responding to his kiss with fervor. Slowly, she pulled away from him.

"Michael," she prodded him gently. "Let's go to the bed."

His eyes were glazed, mere slits on his face. "Let's go," he agreed hoarsely, unsteadily.

He stood up and staggered forward. She grabbed hold of him in a flash, breaking his fall. "Mike, are you okay?" she asked, concerned.

He groaned. "I feel sick to my stomach, Shan. Where's the bathroom? I think I'm going to throw up."

She led him hurriedly to the bathroom. He stumbled several times, moaning loudly. He barely made it to the toilet before he began to heave violently. She stood over him, stroking his forehead, talking to him soothingly. "You'll be okay, Mike. You'll be okay."

By the time Mike finally finished vomiting, Shannon came to the conclusion that the best thing would be for him to get some sleep. She hid her disappointment.

He eventually stood up from the toilet seat, clutching her arm. "I'm so sorry, Shan," he mumbled in dejection. "I feel so awful. You went to all of this trouble, but I just can't seem to steady myself."

"Be quiet now," she told him gently. "It's all right. You need to get some sleep, and you'll feel better in the morning. We have a lot of time, Mike. There is no use in rushing

anything. We'll just make plans for another time. Come on, let's go to the bed and lie down."

He was sound asleep as soon as she tucked him into bed. She gazed down at him for several minutes. She brushed the blond fringe from his forehead, touching his cheek. She thought: "*My poor boy, getting sick on his first real date.*" Maybe it was for the best, she decided. She walked over to the chair by the French doors and sat down, drawing her knees up to her chest. She continued to watch Mike sleeping in her bed.

In a way she was relieved the evening ended as it had. Everything between them happened so fast, and perhaps they weren't ready for the seriousness of a sexual relationship. It was hard to resist Mike in the flesh, but now that he was sleeping it was easy to ponder and judge. Or, deep down, did she know Mike was not the "right" one?

She shuddered. How would she ever know when it was right? After feeling so strongly about Mike, how would she know if the time was right when it finally came? Who could be next after someone as intense as Mike? It dawned on her that in a very short time her interest in Mike had turned into veiled reluctance. Maybe it was a sign. But how would he feel when he realized she was not ready to sleep with him, that she needed more time? It was what she feared the most - his reaction to her change of heart.

At length, Shannon rose from the chair and moved toward the bed. She lowered herself next to Mike cautiously so as not to wake him. She settled herself on top of the covers, listening to his steady breathing. After she closed her eyes, she managed to fall into an uneasy, broken sleep.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Seven

November 1970
Larkin City, Maine

FROM HIS POSITION AT the edge of the Larkin family cemetery, Michael Sullivan watched as three male figures emerged from the front doors of the estate, each one carrying a flash light. They were moving in the direction of the garages, which was opposite the cemetery.

Mike grinned to himself in the dark. His hair was plastered to his head, and his clothes were soaking wet. He had been standing in the rain since nine o'clock, having walked the two miles from his trailer to the entrance road of the Larkin estate. He had then walked another mile from the main highway to the house, making sure to remain obscured in the many bushes and trees off to the side of the long driveway.

As he saw the three figures vanish into the garages, Mike made his way to the back of the mansion, clutching a water-sodden paper sack in his hand. Suddenly he slipped and fell on the sloping lawn, sliding through the thick mud, the paper sack flying into the air. Cursing, he stood up and steadied himself. It was pitch black and miserably wet. The rain pelted on his face with such force it began to hurt. Where was his sack? Frantically, he dropped down to his hands and knees and started feeling around the ground. After several moments, he located the sack six feet from where he fell. Standing up once more, he made sure the contents were intact.

From within the package, he withdrew a gleaming, eleven-inch hunting knife he purchased at the Larkin Sporting Goods store that afternoon. He spent part of the evening sharpening the knife, and now it had a razor edge. He admired the blade with a half-smile on his face. He continued his descent to the back lawn. Most of the windows in the house were dark, except for a scattered few on the first floor. Mike also noticed the lights coming from Shannon's room since he arrived on the estate.

He remembered how to make his way to the back door, where the kitchen was. He sped across the back lawn, and scurried up the few steps to the back door. Taking a deep breath, he tried the door slowly.

His face lit up. *It was unlocked! Perfect!* Quietly, he stepped into the kitchen. A night light burned over the stove, just as it had the night he came with Shannon. The room was deserted. He shut the back door softly behind him. Water dripped from his clothes onto the floor, making slight dripping sounds in the room. Turning quickly, he tiptoed to the door leading to the corridor and the front foyer. He peered out into the corridor. *No sounds, no voices . . .*

Mike paused in the foyer. Then he made for the main staircase, the knife still clutched in his hand. He took the steps two at a time, his water-laden shoes making squishing sounds as he walked. He stopped and removed the shoes, leaving them on the first landing. He continued on through the corridors and flights of stairs until he reached the fourth floor. A strange, almost gentle smile crossed his lips. The game was almost finished. For the first time in months, he felt himself relax. He had Shannon where he wanted her now, and there was no way she could stop him.

Chuckling, Mike came to a halt in front of Shannon's closed bedroom door. His grip on the knife tightened as he reached for the door knob.

* * *

"I WISH YOU'D TOLD me sooner about this creep bothering you," David complained to Shannon. "He needs to be put in his place before he does some real harm."

David and Shannon were sitting cross-legged in front of her fireplace in the bedroom. After her cousins left the house to search the grounds, they went to her room with the decanter of brandy, where he built a roaring fire. He watched the play of light on Shannon's blue-black hair and smiled. Sitting with her was almost too much for his manhood to bear. His heart was beating faster than normal and he knew he was flushed. To create a diversion for himself, he began to scold Shannon over not telling anyone about Mike Sullivan.

Shannon grimaced. "I'm afraid it's not as simple as that. Who will put him in his place? His problem is in his head, I tell you. I really don't know how people define madness these days, but if I'm any judge I would say Mike is as mad as the March Hare."

"And you say all of a sudden his behavior returned to normal?" David asked skeptically.

"Yes, which makes the situation more difficult," she paused, groping for words. "How can I prove anything? I can say one thing, but he could simply prove me wrong by putting on his mask of normalcy again. For all I know, he could keep that mask on as long as it suited him. I wish there was a way of convincing him to seek professional help before it's too late."

"I won't beat around the bush," David broke in bluntly. "I think he's a bloody maniac."

She sighed, an unhappy expression on her face. "I know." She hung her head slightly, her mouth drawn into a tight line across her face. "Odd as it may sound, I could never stop thinking about Mike," she said softly, with a hint of regret. "Even in my darkest moods, even when I despised him for what he was doing to my life. Yet in the beginning I was really crazy about him, I *wanted* to go to bed with him. There were so many obstacles in our way. Then I realized I didn't want that sort of relationship with him, but it was too late." She raised her head and looked at David. "I should have seen the signs, Davey. I was so blind, so stupid. It wasn't until afterward that I recalled how he used to hang on my every word, my every expression. When I was with him he would tell me our relationship was the only thing that mattered to him." She hung her head again.

"Shan, don't torture yourself this way," David tried to soothe her, pulling her into his arms. "What's done is done. There is no use looking back now. You can't change anything."

Her eyes became moist. "Thank you," she murmured. "I needed to hear that. Believe it or not, it does help."

David looked at Shannon intently, adoring her with his eyes. He caressed her face gently, wiping away the tears that fell onto her cheeks. He kissed the top of her nose. She gazed up at him, her face warm and trusting. He bent closer, touching her lips with his.

Shannon decided she wanted to feel David. He was so sweet, so wonderful. She trusted him implicitly, and knew he would never hurt her. She needed to feel him *now*. She grasped him by the shoulders and pulled him down on top of her. He let out a moan and

began kissing her fiercely. She responded willingly and held onto the back of his head with her hands, pulling him even closer.

He began working the buttons of her blouse open. She offered no protest as he slipped his hand inside of her bra, caressing her taut breasts. He lowered his head, brushing aside her long hair, and fastened his mouth on her eager nipple. He rolled it around with tongue, and then sucked gently. Eyes closed, Shannon began to whimper, "David, David . . ."

Suddenly, her eyes flew open instinctively. She looked past David's shoulder and let out a scream of terror. Mike Sullivan was leering down at her, eyes glazed and wild. His hair was molded to his head like wet plaster, covered in mud and rain. In his right hand he held the biggest, sharpest looking knife she had ever seen. He brought the knife up, his eyes on David's head. Screaming louder, she pushed David from her forcefully, where he rolled onto his back.

"So *you're* the bastard!" Mike shrieked. "She is mine, you fucking pig! *She's mine!*" He flew on top of David, driving the knife into his rib cage. In horror, Shannon watched David's face - just a moment ago filled with loving passion - melt into disbelief and pain, his eyes bulging from their sockets.

"No, *no!*" Shannon cried, jumping to her feet. She looked around wildly. Spying the near-empty brandy decanter on the floor in front of her, she bent over and grabbed it. She turned to David and Mike, who were now engaged in a crazy battle of strength in front of the fireplace. Mike stabbed David again, this time in the arm. David struggled, trying to push Mike from him.

Shannon raised the brandy decanter and smashed it down on Mike's head. He acted as if she merely pinched him, despite the fact that blood was now streaming down his face, running into his eyes and mouth. Ignoring her, he raised the knife again and plunged it into David's stomach.

She grabbed Mike by his left arm and started pulling with all of her strength, hoping to free David from him. Mike shook her off, slightly faltering, and then he flung his head against hers with amazing force. Screaming, she was thrown half way across the room. She fell against a pointed corner of the bed, her hip receiving a painful blow. She landed on the floor with a thud, her hands smashed underneath her.

"God, no, no . . ." she moaned. She was dizzy and sick to her stomach. She managed to get to her feet, steadying herself. She turned around to see what was happening now.

She looked just in time to see Mike plunge the knife deep into David's throat. She watched mutely as David grew still. His eyes and mouth were open wide, the knife sticking straight up from his throat, swaying back and forth as if it were attached to a piece of rubber. David made no sound, no motion of breathing or resistance. Blood began to gush down the side of his neck to the floor.

Shannon covered her mouth with her hands, feeling the bile rise within her throat. She let out a sob. *David! David, David, David!* Her dearest David impaled with a knife that belonged to a madman, a real live madman . . .

"You're next, Shannon," she heard the madman's voice snarl. "You were about to give it to the bastard, weren't you? Well, now the bastard is dead, and I'm here. After I've taken what you owe me, you'll end up just like him. You don't deserve to live."

She uncovered her mouth, eyes uncertain and confused. She watched in shocked numbness as Mike pulled the knife from David's throat with one quick motion. Blood dripped from the weapon onto David's lifeless body as Mike held the knife up in the air.

Then he wiped the knife on David's pants. Shannon looked to Mike's face. He was flushed, licking his lips in anticipation like an animal. She sought his eyes with her own. His attention was not directed at her face, but to her open blouse. She looked down in dismay. David had undone the buttons of her shirt, and her bra was unhooked and sagging to her sides. Her breasts were open and free to Mike's greedy gaze.

"I guess I should finish what the bastard started," Mike leered triumphantly, waving the knife around and pointing it at her. "What is left of you is *mine*, Shannon, my darling, little two-faced bitch. No one else will ever have it."

She looked at him, still hesitant and unsure, which was quickly replaced by desperation as Mike lunged at her. She sidestepped the knife thrust and ran, hoping to put distance between them, but Mike quickly followed her. She stumbled to the fireplace, grabbing a wrought-iron fire poker to defend herself. He came at her again, steadily darting at her with the knife across the room.

The surreal skirmish carried through to the sitting room. Shannon positioned herself in between the couch and the coffee table, the poker still in her hand. Mike came to a stop in front of her, across the coffee table. His eyes were bright as he tried to soothe her. "I won't kill you until I've fucked you, Shan. Come on now, be reasonable."

Shannon shook her head violently. "Monster. Murderer," she spat at him hoarsely. "May God damn you where you stand. I hate you with all of my being, Michael Sullivan. You are a freak, a bloody monster. I hate you. Do you hear me? *I hate you.*"

In one swift movement, Mike smacked the knife against the poker, knocking it from her hand. In the next instant, he jumped across the table, pushing her down onto the couch.

"I have you now," he hissed, shoving her onto her back and sitting his body on her hips. "You've tormented me long enough. I'll get my due from you now, prick-tease bitch. You can be damn sure no one will want you after I'm done."

She struggled wildly underneath him as he grabbed her breasts roughly, squeezing them painfully. It was no use. He seemed possessed with super-human strength. She flung her head back and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

"SHUT UP!" he shouted. He swung his hand back and smacked her hard across the face. He kept slapping her until blood began to stream from her nose and mouth. She finally sat still, stunned from the blows.

"Mike, please stop," she whimpered. "Please, I'll do anything you want me to."

He laughed softly. "That's more like it." He reared back and began undoing her pants. She remained limp, watching him with dull eyes. He stripped her pants off, and then her underwear. He threw them in the center of the sitting room. Then he removed her gaping blouse and bra, flinging them into the air.

His eyes were livid with an emotion she could not read. He was breathing with difficulty, wheezing, staring down at her naked body. He brought his hand to her groin area, moving his fingers around the flesh of her opening. Suddenly, he rammed his two index fingers inside of her. Shannon winced in pain, her whole body stiffening.

"I always wanted to know what you felt like down there," he said thickly, moving his fingers in and out of her slowly. "Aren't you lucky I got to you before the bastard did?" He glanced over to David's inert corpse in front of the bedroom fireplace, grinning.

She felt hot tears behind her eyelids. How could Mike assault her with David's body not ten feet from them? "*I have to keep my wits about me,*" she told herself weakly. "*Kevin and Liam and Sean have to be back soon. I have to hold on a little while longer.*" She

wondered why no one else in the house heard her screams, but realized at the moment she was the only person on the fourth floor. The walls of the old mansion were thick and sturdy. For the first time in her life, she cursed the ancient structure.

Mike was slobbering kisses on her breasts, neck and face. She wanted to vomit, but forced herself to remain unresponsive.

How could she have found this maniac attractive? He had once been so young and beautiful - now he was repulsive, repellent, sickening . . . *a monster*.

* * *

SEAN KNEW SOMETHING WAS terribly wrong. Despite the cold rain, he was perspiring heavily. The feeling came upon him quite suddenly. Shannon was in trouble *right now* - there was no question about it.

Kevin, Liam and Sean were walking through the cemetery with their flash lights. Sean yanked Liam by the arm.

"What the hell . . ." Liam snapped, turning around.

"It's Shan," Sean gasped, his eyes frantic. "She's in trouble. We have to go back to the house."

Kevin overheard him. "What are you talking about?" he demanded.

"You know how it is between the two of us," Sean cried. "I'm telling you, she's in trouble *right now*."

Kevin and Liam nodded. They had enough experience with the strong connection between the twins to know Sean was serious, and probably right.

"Let's go," Kevin said. "I hope we get there in time."

As they ran back toward the mansion, tears streamed down Sean's face. He had never been as frightened in his life as he was right now. It was as if Shannon's fear was transferring itself into him. The thought seemed to give Sean an abnormal boost of adrenalin, and he sprinted ahead of his cousin's to reach his twin as soon as possible, if not sooner.

* * *

AS SUDDENLY AS MIKE was on top of her, he was gone. Shannon felt his weight pulled from her roughly. Her eyes flew open in surprise and she almost fainted with relief. Mud spattered and wet, Kevin had Mike by the neck, a purple rage flooding his face.

Liam and Sean, equally bedraggled, flew to Shannon's side. "My God, sis, are you okay?" Sean demanded, in a panic. "Did he hurt you? Where's David?"

Shannon let out a sob. She became aware of her nakedness. Liam noticed, too. He scrambled and retrieved her discarded clothing from the floor. She sat up and shrugged into her blouse and slacks.

Kevin was beating Mike to a pulp. He held the young boy to the floor, repeatedly driving his fist into his face. Mike's head was covered with blood. He was motionless, near unconsciousness.

"Kevin, stop," Liam shouted, running toward his brother. "He's almost out cold. Stop it! You'll kill him!"

Kevin finally paused, panting with exertion. He glanced over at Shannon. She stood

up shakily from the couch, gasping for air. "Kill him," she screamed hysterically. "*I said kill him!* He murdered David. He killed David, for God's sake, *killed him . . .*" She sank to the couch again, her sobs uncontrollable.

Liam raced up the two steps leading into the bedroom. Kevin dropped the limp form of Mike to the floor and followed his brother. Sean remained with Shannon, holding her, trying to calm her down. She stared at Mike, her whole body shivering. He lay still and bloody, his eyes closed. She vaguely heard her two cousins talking in low tones in the next room, but she could not see them. She felt lifeless, numb - trapped in a horrible nightmare that was all too real. David was dead, forever gone from her. She renewed her sobbing, but could not bring herself to tear her eyes away from Mike.

He started to revive slowly, shaking his head back and forth, a spray of blood spurting from his mouth. He turned his head toward Shannon. She noticed his eyes were almost swollen shut. Then his cracked and puffy lips broke into a mad, demented grin. Blood shaded his teeth red, although he was now missing several. He kept grinning at her, unmoving.

Shannon began to scream. She could not stop, even when Sean shook her roughly, telling her to calm down. Scream after scream left her parched throat. Her eyes flew to the door.

Brian Larkin burst into the room, his hands on the door frame. He was dressed in a dark brown robe, hair askew and eyes blurry. He looked at his daughter, his facial expression going wide with shock.

Shannon was up in a flash. She ran to her father, still screaming. "Daddy, Daddy, *please help me. Help me Daddy!*"

She flung herself into his open arms, the warm darkness overtaking her and dragging her into oblivion.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpts from Chapter Nine

*November 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

SCOTT PAGE WAS NOT normally an impatient man, but today he was exhausted and irritable. After spending a couple of days in New York City with a rather wild friend, he finally boarded his scheduled flight to Larkin City, Maine. The long hours of work, flying and partying were finally catching up to him. After spending several months in Ireland, working seven days a week, he was looking forward to a slower pace.

Scott was thirty years old, a considerably handsome man in seductively dark fashion. He knew people sometimes found his physical stance threatening. He assumed it was because he did wear a scowl most of the time, which was just his nature. His finely-chiseled features were heightened by slightly olive-tinted skin and high cheekbones, giving him an exotically European appearance. His toothy smile was dazzling when he chose to shine it on someone, which was rare. Paradoxically, he had no trouble attracting women, a fact he took full advantage of on a regular basis.

Stretching his long legs in front of him, Scott relaxed in a rear seat of the twin-engine airplane headed for Larkin City from Bangor. Closing his eyes, he leaned back against the head rest. The flight only took about thirty minutes, so he had time for a catnap.

He possessed a master's degree in geophysics from Bangor University. For several years he worked for a mining company in New York, where he met Brian Larkin in 1968. Brian offered Scott a job the following year in May, with a healthy salary and benefits. Scott accepted the job, and was on his way to Ireland a month later to supervise the Larkin Mines Keel Project survey in Ballymahon, County Longford. Scott enjoyed the work in Ireland immensely, keeping in constant contact with Brian by telephone. After a short period, Scott came to genuinely like and respect his employer. Brian was a fair and honest man who did not play favorites.

Scott fastened his seatbelt as the airplane took off. He was looking forward to spending the next few weeks in Larkin City. Brian told Scott he could stay at the family estate until he returned to Ireland in January. The thought warmed Scott. Having no family of his own, he had almost forgotten what it was like to celebrate momentous occasions with loved ones.

Born in Bangor, Scott had enjoyed singular attention from his parents for most of his young life. His father, US Air Force Major Dr. James Page, served in a medical capacity during World War II. Scott's mother, Italian-born Maria Theresa Amaretto, was a music teacher. The Page family lived in a modest base house at Naval Shipyard Portsmouth in Kittery, where Scott remembered his childhood as being settled and happy. Seven years after the war ended, Dr. Page took a position at the newly-constructed Landstuhl/Ramstein Air Base in Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany, where he worked at the military hospital. Scott, all of thirteen years old at the time, quickly learned the German language by integrating with students at Wiesbaden High School in nearby Mainz. The experience left Scott with a slight German diction, which he found ironic as his true heritage sprang from an Italian mother and an American-born English-Scottish father.

The Page family stayed in Germany for four years before returning to Maine. Shortly after his seventeenth birthday, Scott's parents were tragically killed in an auto accident. They had been driving home after having dinner at a nearby restaurant when they collided with a transport truck. Scott was left shattered and alone. His only living relative, his father's spinster sister Elaine, took him in following the accident, after which Scott began taking odd jobs to save money for college. Once he arrived at Bangor University as a student, he worked nights at a gas station to support himself. The feeling of making it on his own instilled a great deal of confidence in Scott. Shortly after he graduated from Bangor University, his aunt entered a rest home and passed away a few years later. To his surprise, Elaine Page left him a substantial inheritance of nearly two million dollars, which he promptly put into a savings account and rarely touched. He often wondered why his aunt didn't tell him about the money while she was alive, but assumed she wanted him to work for his education as to better appreciate it. He later discovered Elaine had gained her fortune through skillful stock market speculations, which was hardly surprising as she had made her living as an accountant.

Scott was outspoken and blunt, which often earned him the reputation of being rough and unapproachable. In reality, he was a sensitive man who hid his feelings well. He enjoyed the bachelor life, but frequently felt empty inside. He could not fathom the reason why. It was as if he was searching for something - or *someone* - but he didn't know *what* or *who* yet.

He frowned as the airplane began its descent into Larkin City. The flight was twenty minutes ahead of schedule. He wondered idly who would meet him at the airport. Brian, he hoped. Scott's frown deepened. Brian informed him that his daughter, Shannon, would also be going to Ireland in January, supposedly to run the computer for data interpretation. Scott had seen a photograph of the girl when Brian came to Ireland earlier that month, where he placed pictures of Shannon and her brother Sean on his desk in the office in Dublin. While Scott had spoken to Shannon on the telephone briefly when he called Larkin City to speak to Brian, he had formed no solid impression of her. She was very young, and probably a spoiled little brat who had no idea what she was doing. The idea of working with Brian's daughter displeased Scott. He felt it would be awkward at best, knowing he would have to tolerate the glaring nepotism in order to keep the peace. Although he hadn't met Shannon, he assumed the girl was more than likely immature and unskilled.

Scott sighed as the airplane landed. He would make the best of it, he supposed. What else could he do? He would accept the situation and work hard as he had always done.

* * *

SHANNON WAS DISTRACTED AS she drove to Larkin City Airport that afternoon. Her thoughts were revolving around the upcoming trip to Ireland. Her excitement was boundless, as usual, but her emotions were always held in check when, all of a sudden, she would think of Mike Sullivan or David Bonham. Would it never stop, she wondered? It seemed she could go through the motions of daily life for only a few hours before the horror came back to her again. Yet she knew it was getting better. Two weeks ago she thought of nothing else.

Shannon slowed her Gran Torino as she approached the airport. The majority of flights coming in were usually charter planes, or twin-engines from Bangor or New York

City. The airport building was painted a powder blue, surrounded by neatly-clipped foliage. As Shannon pulled into a parking stall, she glanced at her wristwatch.

It was four-thirty on the button. She hurried toward the terminal, making a striking picture despite her simple clothes. She wore white slacks and a cream-colored blouse, her long hair loose and shiny. She tried to recall the description her father gave her of Scott Page. She was supposed to look for someone who was tall and slender, with short black hair and a seemingly permanent five o'clock shadow. Brian laughingly told Shannon that Scott usually wore a scowl on his face. "He's not a grouch or anything - the glower is just his way. He can be a bit rough at times, but once you get to know him you'll realize he's a good man."

Shannon smiled as she remembered her father's verbal depiction of Scott. Brian was trying to create a favorable impression without outright lying, anxious she start out on the right foot with Scott as they would be working together in Ireland. For the first time, Shannon wondered what Scott was really like. She hoped they were compatible - it would be awkward if they were not.

Flight 368 had arrived at Gate 4 early, Shannon learned from the information desk, twenty minutes ago. She hurried along the polished floor of the terminal, down a short hallway, turning a corner that brought her to the right side of Gate 4.

Looking around anxiously, she noticed almost everyone was gone. An older woman was seated in the waiting area, reading a newspaper. Glancing to the other side of the room, Shannon frowned as she saw it was empty. Sighing, she walked to the check-in desk.

"Excuse me," she asked the bespectacled middle-aged man behind the desk. "I understand Flight 368 from Bangor arrived early. I was supposed to meet a man named Scott Page. Do you know if he arrived with the flight?"

The man smiled. "Let me check, miss," he said politely. He picked up a clipboard and glanced at it quickly. He looked back at her. "According to my schedule, he arrived with the flight. He should be in the terminal somewhere. Would you like me to page him?"

Shannon shook her head. "No. I'll go the luggage area. Maybe he went there." Smiling, she said to the man: "Thanks for your help."

She turned toward the hallway again. Suddenly she stopped short, spying a man across the hall with several suitcases and a map tube at his feet. He was leaning against the privacy hood of a payphone. She glanced at his face. He was staring at her, expressionless. She noticed his hair was as black as her own, cropped short but with slight bangs swept to the right side of his forehead. Small sideburns were neatly groomed at the forefront of his ears. His sleepy eyes were wide-set under a strong forehead, and his aquiline nose flared slightly at the nostrils. Even from a distance, Shannon could see he had thick eyelashes - perhaps the most bountiful she had ever seen on a man. At the moment, his mouth was formed in a frown, the full, sensuous lips curled unhappily. He looked as if he needed a shave as well, his black hair creating the proverbial five o'clock shadow above his lips and on his lower face. He wore a midnight-blue leather jacket that was zipped part way, the collar flipped-up and touching the base of his jaw. He also had on faded blue jeans, a dark blue tee-shirt and black leather motorcycle ankle boots. Shannon found herself admiring his unusual good looks - he was fairly breathtaking for a man - even though his scowl was rather intimidating.

She took a step toward him, and then hesitated. He was still staring at her, neither hostile nor friendly. Chiding herself, she walked over to him.

"Are you Scott Page, by any chance?" Shannon asked hopefully, while she cursed herself silently, recognizing the slight tremor in her voice.

He straightened himself, stepping away from the payphone, his eyes still on her. When his voice came, she was surprised to hear a richly deep yet still somehow composed quality she had not expected. She assumed he would simply growl at her by the look on his face. Although she had briefly spoken with him on the telephone before now, his voice was decidedly more potent in person.

"I'm Scott Page," he answered her. "And you must be Shannon Larkin."

At her startled look, he was quick to explain. "Your father had a picture of you in Ireland. He kept it on his desk, along with one of your brother. I recognized you from that."

"Oh," she laughed nervously. "Well, yes, I'm Shannon. I'm sorry I've kept you waiting. I didn't realize the flight was early."

"That's okay," he said easily, reaching down to retrieve his luggage. "I went ahead and got my bags."

"Can I help with your suitcases?" she asked as they started walking down the hallway.

"I can manage, thanks."

"Can I at least carry the map tube?"

He paused. "Sure, it's not heavy."

Scott held out the map tube by its plastic handle. She reached over to take it from him, their hands inadvertently brushing against each other. Startled by the brief contact, their eyes met for several seconds as they stood in the terminal. They might have lingered longer if an elderly couple hadn't stopped in the hallway, the older man tapping Shannon gently on the shoulder.

"Excuse me," he said. "We're looking for the airport coffee shop. Do you or your husband know where it's located?"

Shannon reddened slightly. The elderly man assumed Scott was her husband. She looked to Scott, who wore a slightly crooked smile on his face. Turning to the stranger, she said: "The coffee shop is near the front entrance into the airport. You can't miss it."

"Thank you so much," the man said. Taking his wife's elbow, the couple moved forward.

Scott and Shannon continued along the hallway with the baggage. She glanced sideways at him. He had to be at least six-foot-two inches in height. Compared to her small height of five-foot-three, he seemed to tower above her. He walked easily with the bags, appearing to be in good physical condition. He was a little on the thin side, but well proportioned otherwise.

After he deposited his luggage in the trunk of Shannon's car, she slipped behind the wheel of the vehicle. Scott got into the passenger side. As she pulled out of the airport parking lot, she asked him: "Do you mind if I smoke?"

"Go ahead. I was about to ask you the same thing."

The steady, deep timbre of his voice sent a shiver down Shannon's spine and a jolt to her stomach, but she wasn't sure why. Her brother Sean and cousins Kevin and Liam had deep voices, yet their tones never sent shockwaves through her body like Scott's just had. And why hadn't his voice had the same upshot on her over the telephone? Setting aside her confusion and discomfort, Shannon attempted to start a conversation with Scott as she drove toward the mansion.

"Do you plan to stay with us until we go to Ireland in January?"

"Probably," he answered casually. "But I might spend Christmas with some friends in New York City."

"So you'll be working at my father's office in Larkin City until then?"

He nodded. "Yes. I have a lot of data to go over with Brian."

Shannon turned into the one-mile drive that led to the mansion. "I think you'll like it here," she said, trying to sound cheerful. "You'll have plenty of privacy at the house. My mother readied a room for you on the fourth floor. Breakfast is served from seven to nine o'clock. To save on time and dishes, a buffet is set-up in the dining room and kept warm." She paused, glancing at him. "Am I boring you?"

He smiled slightly. "No. Please continue."

"If you're at the mansion during lunchtime, our chef Mae serves a meal at one o'clock. At four-thirty, my great-aunt and my mother have tea in the drawing room, and you're welcome to join them if you're around. At six-thirty we gather again in the drawing room, this time for drinks, and we eat dinner at seven-thirty in the dining room."

Scott stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "Are there any clubs or bars in Larkin City?"

"There are four," she answered him. "One is called The Coven Lounge, which is owned by the family. My cousin Kevin runs the place on weekends. Clyde's Billiard Hall on Main Street is a favorite haunt of Uncle Rory, my dad's brother. The Blue Fin Pub, usually frequented by college students, is on the west side of Larkin City. Suds Pub is on the north side - I think it was established right after the turn of the century. It's just a beer bar and kind of shabby, but it can be great fun, too."

He stared at her. "Aren't you too young to go into bars?"

She blushed. "I'm only nineteen, but Kevin lets me into The Coven once in awhile." She looked back at him. "How old are *you*?"

"Thirty," he replied succinctly.

Her eyes widened. "I took you for twenty-five, twenty-six at the most."

Scott said nothing, so she continued to drive in silence. Presently, she pulled in front of the mansion. He emerged from the car immediately to retrieve his luggage. Puzzled by his sudden abrupt manner, Shannon said to him: "Go ahead inside. I have to park the car."

He nodded, not looking at her. "Thanks," he said, and started walking toward the front doors of the mansion.

After Shannon parked her car in the garage, she entered the house through the kitchen. Her mother and Aunt Denise were sitting at the table, playing the card game *Spite & Malice*. Mae Jensen stood by the stove, dropping yams into a pot full of boiling water.

Mary glanced up as Shannon shut the door behind her. "Did you find Scott Page?" she asked.

Shannon rolled her eyes. "Oh, yes indeed. I let him off at the front. What a strange man he is."

"What do you mean?"

"He hardly says a word unless you talk to him first," Shannon replied as she poured herself a cup of coffee. "It was almost as if he couldn't wait to get away from me."

"Maybe he's just shy around new people," Mary suggested.

"Huh," Shannon snorted, leaning against the counter in front of the sink. "He's thirty years old. I thought men got over shyness at his age."

Denise laughed. "What would you know about shyness coming from this family?"

"I'm shy in my own way," Shannon defended herself. "But as I get older, I become less so." She shrugged. "Oh, well. It's no big deal, I guess." She set her coffee cup on the counter. "I'll go and see if he made it inside okay. Then I'm going to change for dinner."

When Shannon reached the foyer of the house, she noticed Scott's luggage by the front doors. Hearing voices in the drawing room, she walked toward the door and peered inside.

Brian and Scott were sitting on the couch facing the fireplace, each with a drink in their hands. They were laughing and talking together with familiar ease. Shannon frowned. How quickly Scott changed in demeanor. Stiff and sullen in her presence, now he seemed relaxed and jovial. Maybe her mother was right. He must be uneasy around strangers.

As if sensing her presence, Brian looked toward the door. He waved his daughter over. "Come on, kiddo. Pour yourself a glass of wine and join us."

She started to protest. "Thanks, but I have some things I need to do."

"Nonsense," her father insisted. "You can spare a few minutes. Please come in."

Refusing to look at Scott, she walked to the sideboard and poured herself a small glass of wine. Turning around, she went to the chair facing the couch. She finally looked up and was distressed to discover Scott staring at her, his eyes unreadable.

Blushing slightly, she sat down and said: "I think it's a bit early to start happy hour."

Brian made a face. "It's a holiday, Shan. Lighten up. I'm making an exception now, and I'll do the same at Christmas." He set his glass down. "Thank you for getting Scott at the airport."

She smiled wanly. "Not a problem," she said casually. "I had nothing else to do this afternoon." Why was she making herself sound so flippant, she wondered? Since she entered the room, Scott had fallen silent, the laughter gone from his face. *What was the man's problem?* And why did he keep staring at her?

Brian was talking again. "I think it's a good idea that Scott spends some time with us. Especially at the office with you, Shan, since you'll be working together in Dublin. It's better you both find out now if you can get along, rather than cross horns in Ireland."

Scott finally spoke. "I'm sure we'll get along just fine," he said quietly, but firmly. "I foresee no problems."

"Good," Brian said good-naturedly. He looked at Scott. "The thought has probably crossed your mind that my daughter is a bit young, but she has more than proven her worth to me. She knows the computer like the back of her hand and she's not afraid of hard work. In fact," he grinned. "She works *too* much. She hardly ever takes time for herself or goes out on dates."

"Oh *really*," Shannon snapped, embarrassed. "We don't need to discuss my personal life in front of Mr. Page." Feeling foolish, she rose from her chair. "I have some things to do before dinner."

To her surprise, Scott also rose. "Can you show me to my room?" he asked politely, still staring at her.

"I'll be glad to show you to your room," she replied, refusing to meet his eyes. "It's on my way."

Brian's eyes flickered over his daughter and Scott with concern. Scott had become uneasy and non-talkative when Shannon entered the room. She, too, seemed uncomfortable around Scott. For a fleeting moment, Brian wondered if he'd made a mistake by telling his

daughter she could go to Ireland. Then he brushed the thought aside. He knew Scott could be a bit gruff and rough at times, but he was a good, honest man. Shannon was stubborn and voiced her strong opinions freely, but she was also a good girl at heart. Brian felt things would work themselves out in the end.

Scott leaned over and shook Brian's hand. "Thank you for everything, sir," he said sincerely. "I'll see you again at dinner."

"At happy hour, I hope," Brian corrected, smiling. "If you care to join us, cocktails are served at six-thirty. Officially, that is."

"I'll be here. Thank you again."

Scott followed Shannon into the foyer and picked up his luggage by the front doors. Wordless, they climbed the many stairs and hallways to the fourth floor. She stopped at a door that was between her bedroom and Liam's. She entered and stepped aside to allow Scott to pass by with his bags.

He set his luggage on the floor and turned to look at Shannon. For the first time she noticed he had hazel eyes - like the eyes of a cat. The sleepy look he possessed seemed to be a natural one. Aware they had been observing one another longer than usual, she cleared her throat.

"You have your own bathroom," she said stiffly, turning away from him. "There are extra blankets and clean sheets in the closet. You'll most likely need the blankets because we don't have central heating on the upper floors. We don't have any maids, so you're responsible for cleaning up after yourself and doing your own laundry. There are laundry rooms on each floor." She paused. "If you run out of wood for your fireplace, tell my brother Sean. He'll bring extra logs to your room if you need them."

"Thank you," he said quietly, his eyes still on her in concerted fashion.

It was on the tip of Shannon's tongue to ask him why he was staring at her so intently, but she refrained. Instead, she said coolly: "Enjoy your stay." She moved toward the door and then stopped. "Will you need help finding your way back downstairs for dinner?"

"No, I think I can manage."

"Okay," she said. "I'll see you later." She turned and stepped out into the hallway, shutting the door behind her.

Shannon continued on to her own room. Perhaps it was a combination of his good looks, deep voice or rather intense regard of her, but Scott Page made her uncomfortable. She knew she had to learn to get along with him in order to make the trip to Ireland, whether she liked him or not.

Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to forget about Scott and enjoy the rest of the evening with her family.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Nine

November 1970
Larkin City, Maine

TWO DAYS AFTER THANKSGIVING was a Saturday, but Brian still wanted to spend a few hours at the office with Scott and Shannon. He was anxious to go over the data Scott had brought back from Ireland, and to decide the best way for Shannon to create computer reports from the information. Brian left the mansion early, inadvertently forcing Scott and Shannon to come into the office together.

"Do you mind if I drive us to work?" Scott asked as he and Shannon put on their coats by the back door in the kitchen.

She looked at him, a slight smile on her face. "Does my driving make you nervous?"

Scott shook his head. "No, not at all. I just haven't driven since I was in Ireland, and I'd like to get behind the wheel again."

She handed him the keys to her Gran Torino. "Be my guest."

It was a cold day, but the sun was shining brightly. Scott slipped on a pair of dusky sunglasses as they sped along Larkin Highway into the city. If anything, the shades emphasized the high cheekbones and straight angles of his handsome face, a fact Shannon couldn't help but notice. "*As do many women, I'm sure,*" she thought to herself rather waspishly.

As they came to the first stoplight on Main Street, Shannon became aware of people strolling along the boardwalk. A few of them paused to stare at her Gran Torino, but they weren't looking at her. A few women - young and older alike - were obviously trying to get a fix on who was driving her car. It was a man, clearly, his good looks not hidden one whit by the dark shades he wore.

Shannon chuckled under her breath. "And so it begins," she said with humor in her voice.

Scott glanced over at her. "What begins?"

She returned his glance. "The gossip mill has officially started. The people over there on the boardwalk are trying to get a good look at you. All they know at the moment is that you're with me and driving my car. By lunchtime, they'll have us married and expecting a baby - or vice-versa."

He looked to the boardwalk. "You're kidding, right?"

She sighed. "Welcome to life in a relatively small harbor town. While Larkin City is a wonderful place to live, one of the downsides is the local penchant for gossip, especially in regards to my family. They see you with me, and immediately assume we're an item. The worst of it will probably entail me summoning you from hell to be my demon lover at the haunted mansion we share with the rest of the devil-worshipping Larkin's, even though they know we're all baptized Catholics."

Scott laughed out loud, flashing his teeth. "It can't be that bad," he said, amused by her commentary. "Surely you're exaggerating?"

"You'll believe me by the end of the day, if not long before. Mark my words, and don't say I didn't warn you."

The stoplight turned green, so he pulled forward. "We could have some fun with this, you know," he informed her playfully.

Shannon eyed him skeptically. "How so?"

He grinned. "Leave it to me."

She crossed herself jokingly, looking up at the ceiling of her car. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph," she muttered.

Scott paid more attention to the locals as they traveled along Main Street. Sure enough, people on the boardwalk - and some even inside shops and cafes - were angling their necks to watch the Gran Torino make its way to Larkin Mines. "This place is unbelievable," he said in wonder. "It's very quaint and beautiful here, but don't people have anything better to do?"

"Apparently not," Shannon laughed shortly. "We're the preferred form of entertainment for many of them, whether it's based on fact or fiction."

"Let's get this show on the road, then," he told her as he parked the Gran Torino in front of Larkin Mines. "Don't get out of the car yet. Let me come around and get you, okay?"

She was struck by the happy grin on his face. "You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Aren't you?" he countered, winking at her.

Scott alighted from the car and made his way around to the passenger side. He slowly opened the door, bending down to take Shannon's hand. He helped her out, exaggerating his already resonant voice as he said: "Come along, my love."

She could barely suppress the smile forming on her lips. Glancing to her right, she spoke softly to Scott. "Here comes Mavis Donnelly with her daughter, Nelly. Mavis owns the stationary store up the street, and she's one of the biggest gossips in town."

He escorted Shannon to the entrance of Larkin Mines, holding the door open for her. He removed his sunglasses as Mavis and Nelly passed by. The two women stared at him with their mouths slightly agape.

Scott gave them a wide, toothy smile. "Good morning, ladies," he said in greeting, throwing the barest hint of salaciousness into his deep voice. His tone sent a shiver down Shannon's spine, so she could imagine the impact it was having on Mavis and her daughter. Refusing to look back in order to find out, Shannon hurried into Larkin Mines with Scott quickly following on her heels.

As soon as the door closed behind them, both Scott and Shannon collapsed with laughter. She leaned against her desk, unable to stop the fit of giggles overtaking her. Scott sat in the chair in front of her desk, hanging his head in his hands as he continued to laugh uproariously.

Brian came into the reception area from his office, a look of incredulity on his face. "What the hell is going on?" he wanted to know, watching his daughter and Scott with alarm. "Have the two of you lost your minds?"

Shannon took a deep breath, looking at her father as she tried to speak. "We were just . . ." But it was no use. She burst into laughter again, which accelerated Scott's guffaws further.

Brian crossed his arms as he stood there. It was difficult not to be infected by the humor which seemed to have swept over Scott and Shannon. Brian couldn't help but grin slightly as he continued to regard them.

Scott finally recovered himself, but he refused to look at Shannon at first for fear of setting off another round of irrepressible hilarity. "On the way in, Shannon was telling me

about how the locals like to gossip," he managed to say. "We saw several people staring at us while we were stopped at a traffic light. Shannon told me what the scuttlebutt might be by lunchtime because they saw me - an unknown male - driving her to work. She said folks would assume she'd summoned me from hell to live with her and the devil-worshipping Larkin's, or that we were already married and expecting a baby." Scott burst out laughing again, unable to help himself.

Brian snorted, but he was smiling. He was happy to see his daughter and Scott getting along, even sharing the jollity of the moment.

"By the way, people were gawking at Scott - not me," Shannon insisted, her voice still tinged with laughter. "Especially the women."

"So we decided to have some fun with it," Scott continued, looking at her with a twinkle in his eyes.

"*You* decided to have some fun with it," she pointed out with a smile. "I warned you."

"I take full responsibility," he said, returning her smile. He then went on to explain to Brian what transpired in front of Larkin Mines.

Brian chuckled. "Poor Mavis Donnelly. She speaks to me civilly when I see her on the street or do business with her, but I know she's convinced the Larkin's spring from the pit of Hades. Consider yourself initiated into the devil's clan by association, Scott, for better or worse."

Scott stood from the chair, a puzzled expression on his face. "Why do the locals associate your family with some sort of evil entity? It doesn't make any sense. You're such good people."

Brian shook his head. "It's hard to explain, really. It was the same way when Rory and I were Shannon's age. Gossip is a favorite pastime of the local folks, whether it's part-truth or completely imagined. I can only assume our long history in these parts plays a role in their connecting us to something iniquitous." He shrugged. "We *do* have a few scoundrels and scandals in our family tree. Remind me to tell you about it sometime."

Both Scott and Shannon took Brian's words as a signal to get to work. Scott spent the better part of the morning with Brian in the drafting room, going over data from the Keel Project in Ireland. Shannon stayed at her desk, typing a half-dozen letters Brian asked for and working on a batch of accounts payable. Just before nine-thirty rolled around, the first female visitor entered the office of Larkin Mines.

Kimi Gardner owned and operated the Larkin Arcade, directly across the street from Bruno's Cafe on Main Street. She was in her mid-to-late thirties, tall and slender with dark-streaked blonde hair, light blue eyes and gargantuan breasts. Shannon once heard Kimi had been a member of a biker gang before settling in Larkin City a few years ago, which seemed to reflect in her choice of clothing. Today Kimi was wearing a short black leather skirt and a tightly-fitting white turtleneck sweater, despite the cold temperature outside.

"Something I can do for you, Kimi?" Shannon asked politely from behind her desk, although she knew full well why the woman was there. She'd never paid a visit to Larkin Mines before now, so the appearance of Scott Page this morning must already be fueling the gossip mill at full speed.

"Sorry to be a bother," Kimi began in her raspy voice. "I went to make a pot of coffee a few minutes ago, but I'm all out of fresh grounds. Can I borrow a cup from you? I'll pay it back."

"*How original,*" Shannon thought to herself with a smirk. Aloud, she said: "Sure. Can you wait here while I go and get it? We use a breakfast blend that's quite good."

Kimi nodded. "I'll stay right here."

Shannon made her way into the drafting room, where she saw her father and Scott huddled at one of the tables, poring over maps. She scooped fresh coffee grounds into a plastic cup, and then went to the drafting table. Scott looked at her and smiled.

"Time to have some fun with the locals," she said with a slight snicker.

He appeared mystified. "Say again?"

"The first of the female horde has arrived," she told him, chuckling. She held up the plastic cup she was holding. "Her excuse is to borrow some coffee, although she's never been to Larkin Mines before in her life."

"Who is it?" Brian asked, peering at his daughter.

"Kimi Gardner from the Larkin Arcade," Shannon replied with a grin.

Brian laughed. Eyes twinkling, he turned to Scott and said: "You *have* to meet Kimi. I'm certain she'll make a *big* impression on you."

Scott stood from the drafting table, a smile playing about his lips. "I suppose I started this, so I'm game." He glanced down at Shannon. "Ready to play your role?" Without waiting for an answer, he took her by the elbow and led her back to the reception area through the swinging half doors.

Kimi was still standing in front of Shannon's desk, waiting. When she saw Scott, her mouth fell open. She looked to Scott's hand at Shannon's elbow, and then her eyes flew back to his face.

Shannon stepped forward, thrusting the plastic cup into Kimi's hand. "Here you go, Kimi. Don't let us keep you."

Kimi smiled prettily, her eyes still on Scott. "Thank you, Shannon. Aren't you going to introduce me to your new friend?"

Scott angled his head slightly as he gazed at Shannon. "Yes, my love. Do introduce us."

Shannon sighed softly. The charade was suddenly becoming more difficult than she'd anticipated. The big-breasted Kimi Gardner obviously appreciated Scott's good looks, and he was playing it out to the hilt. Even though she knew it was all in fun, Shannon found herself unexpectedly bothered by the attention Scott was receiving from the local female populace. It seemed he wouldn't have to go club-hopping to get a date in Larkin City after all - the women would come to him, apparently in droves. She felt a flash of irritation with herself - *why should she care, anyway?*

Scott increased the pressure on her elbow with his hand.

Shannon cleared her throat. "Kimi, this is Scott Page, my father's crew chief in Ireland. He's in Larkin City for the holidays. Scott, this is Kimi Gardner. She runs the arcade across the street."

Scott reached out his hand, his toothy smile making a reappearance. "Pleasure to meet you, Miss Gardner." Shannon heard Kimi's soft intake of breath as she felt the full impact of his physical attractiveness and seductively deep voice.

Kimi shook his hand lightly, her starry eyes taking in his face unabashedly. "Nice to meet you, Scott." She smiled again. "Since you're new in town, perhaps I can show you around sometime? Maybe we could also take in dinner and a movie?"

Shannon's jaw dropped. *The gall of the woman!*

Scott slipped his arm around Shannon's waist slowly, his fingers tightening as his hand made contact with her left hip. He leaned into her slightly, his head angling down so his lips could brush her temple. Without looking at Kimi, he spoke distractedly but clearly: "That's a kind offer, Kimi. However, my schedule is quite full for the foreseeable future. Thank you, though." He kissed Shannon's temple this time, lightly and briefly, keeping his gaze focused on her.

Kimi gasped at the blatant sensuality emanating from Scott, which was singularly centered on Shannon. Kimi glanced to Shannon. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll see you around." And then she made a hasty exit from the office, both Scott and Shannon feeling the cold draft of air from outside before the door closed.

Shannon was in shock. The touch of Scott's hands on her had left her breathless, although she tried to hide it. As soon as Kimi departed, he removed his hand from her waist. When he spoke, his timbre was characteristically deep but there was somehow an uneven quality to his voice now. "So, what do you think our encounter with Kimi will produce in the gossip mill?"

Shannon moved away from him, going to stand behind her desk. She tried to adopt a flippant tone. "If I were to guess, Kimi will spread the word that we were making out in the front office of Larkin Mines and elsewhere." She clutched her hands together, but was unable to stop them from shaking slightly. Scott's touch had roused her more than she was willing to admit.

Scott's eyes went from her hands to her face. "Let me know when my presence is needed again," he told her. Then he asked: "Are you having fun with this yet?"

She gave a short laugh. "Oh, sure. It's a bundle of giggles."

He smiled at her. "Good." He then turned and went back unto the drafting room through the swinging half doors.

Shannon sat in her chair, exhaling loudly. *What was wrong with her?* While Scott might see their game with the locals as harmless amusement, she was quaking inside as a result of their "pretend" interaction. His touch had sparked her nerve-endings, leaving her light-headed and flushed. She was probably behaving similar to most all women Scott encountered, and she didn't like it. She refused to allow herself to fall into a trap, especially with Scott who could likely have any woman he wanted and knew it.

"*I just have to remember this is a game,*" she told herself as she turned to her computer screen. "*I can't take any of it too seriously, or I'll find myself hurt. Scott's here to do a job, and so am I. If we have a little fun with the locals in the process, then so be it, but it ends there.*" She shook her head stubbornly. "*I'll play along with the game, but I'm definitely keeping my emotions out of it from now on.*" She groaned. "*Who am I kidding? I've only known the man three days, and I'm already falling for him.*"

With a vague sense of defeat, Shannon returned to typing letters for her father.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Nine

November 1970
Larkin City, Maine

WHEN SHANNON CAME downstairs early the next morning, Scott was already gone with her brother and cousins to help plow and shovel the estate grounds. Sean kept two motorized plows in a utility garage, which were used to clear the long driveway from the mansion to the highway. Whenever there was heavy snowfall, Kevin and Liam pitched in to help Sean. Walkways, steps and other areas also needed to be shoveled, so Scott volunteered to assist.

Shannon knew she wouldn't see Scott much today. Resigning herself to his absence, she began working on the data print-outs from the Keel Project. Spreading the print-outs on the kitchen table one at a time, she managed to finish highlighting data points on five out of six of them by eleven o'clock. By then, Dana had risen from her late sleep and joined Shannon at the table. She was carrying one of her Harlequin romance novels, which she read voraciously as several new ones were released each month.

"I knew you had some work to do, so I brought a book with me to kill the time," Dana said as she took a sip of coffee.

"I shouldn't be much longer," Shannon replied. "I only have one more print-out to highlight, and then I'm done." She pointed to Dana's book resting on the table. "So what romance novel are you reading now?"

Dana gave a short chuckle. "It's called *The Feathered Shaft* by Jane Arbor."

"No way."

"Yes way."

Shannon laughed out loud. "You'd better not let Kevin see the book. He'll tease you unmercifully for the rest of the day and into the night."

Dana took another sip of coffee, watching Shannon as she highlighted a print-out with a yellow marker. "Where's your buddy Scott?"

"Helping the guys clear snow from the estate grounds," Shannon responded. "We got more than twelve inches overnight, and it's supposed to snow again this afternoon."

"So we're well and truly stuck," Dana said, rubbing her hands together. "Good. We should play *Truth or Dare* tonight."

"Why?"

"Because it's fun, that's why." Dana drained her coffee cup. "It's more fun watching you and Scott interact, though."

"What do you mean?"

Dana sighed impatiently. "For someone who is so intellectually smart, you are unusually obtuse when it comes to reading other people. Last night when we were playing *Twister*, the man couldn't keep his eyes off of you."

Shannon shrugged. "He's stuck living here until we go to Ireland. I'm the only female anywhere near his age in range at the moment, so I'm likely a convenience. He stares at me because there's no one else to look at."

"You really think that?"

"I don't know for sure, but what else could it be?" Shannon reasoned. "He's accustomed to sophisticated women, Dana, which I'm certainly not. He's just too perfectly good-looking to trouble himself with me seriously. He could have anyone he wanted."

Dana sighed again. "And he wants *you*, Shan. Tell me, why hasn't Scott been out clubbing with Sean and your cousins? Liam told me they've asked him a few times, but Scott always declines politely, saying he prefers to stay-in at the house. And who's here at the house? *You*. I highly doubt he has a thing for your Aunt Phoebe." Dana paused. "I've seen with my own eyes how Scott looks at you, Shan. The man is besotted."

"So am I," Shannon whispered, a blush staining her cheeks.

Dana turned to Shannon, surprised by her admission. Before she could pursue the subject, the back door into the kitchen flew open. Kevin, Liam, Sean and Scott stomped in, all of them wearing snow suits and ski masks. They began peeling off the wet gear, hanging it on pegs by the back door to dry.

"What a bloody workout that was," Kevin declared. "And we're only half done." He sniffed the air. "I'm starving. Did Mae cook lunch today?"

"There's a big pot of clam chowder on the stove," Shannon told her cousin. "Mae also baked about twelve mini-loaves of zucchini bread."

"Thank God," Liam muttered. "Kevin's been grumbling about his empty belly for the last hour. I can't take much more of his whining."

"Plowing and shoveling is hard work," Kevin insisted. "You might like rabbit food, my dear bony-assed little brother, but I need real sustenance in order to go on."

While the brothers word-wrangled, Shannon moved her gaze to Scott. He pulled off his ski mask, pressing his hand over his hair to flatten it down. His eyes found her, a half-smile on his lips. Shannon felt the typical thrill rush to her stomach, generated solely by his focus on her.

When Scott began to remove his black turtleneck sweater, the equally dark tee-shirt he was wearing underneath moved slightly, revealing part of his bare stomach. Shannon's eyes took in the flat surface and slight abdominal muscles, but then she zeroed in on the thin strip of black hair that ran from just above his bellybutton down under the waist of the blue jeans he wore. Because he was in the middle of removing his turtleneck sweater, she assumed Scott couldn't see her staring at him, her mouth open slightly.

Dana whispered in her ear so no one else could hear: "Oh my God, Shan. He's gorgeous *everywhere*. Look at that line of hair on his stomach. You know where it leads, don't you? Doesn't it make you want to drag him into your bed and ravish him this very instant?"

Shannon made the mistake of looking at Dana. They both burst into laughter, unable to help themselves. Dana stood from the table and ran out of the kitchen. Shannon could hear her friend's laughter coming from the corridor leading to the foyer, which caused her to renew her giggles.

"What the hell is Dana's problem?" Kevin asked, mystified. He looked to Shannon. "Is that all the two of you do together? Whisper and giggle? And what's so damned funny?"

Shannon sensed rather than saw Scott take a seat next to her at the kitchen table. "Did I miss something?" he asked. She heard the humor in his voice and dared to look at him. He was grinning. "Your giggles are contagious, yes?"

How could she tell him she and Dana had been admiring his stunning physique when their fit of laughter came over them? Shannon's glance fell to the book Dana had left

behind on the table. She held it up so everyone could see the title. "We were laughing about this. Dana loves Harlequin romance novels, and the title of this one just pushed us over the edge."

Kevin grabbed the book from her. "*The Feathered Shaft?* Are you kidding me?" Then he threw back his head and laughed loudly, causing Liam and Sean to do the same. "No wonder Dana scampered off in hysterics."

Scott leaned closer to Shannon, whispering in her ear. "The black tee-shirt under my sweater is made from a cotton mesh material, which means it's essentially see-through."

Shannon looked at him, blushing profusely. "Oh?"

"I saw what you and Dana were *really* looking at," he continued softly.

Shannon was beyond embarrassed. Scott knew she and Dana had been admiring his body and wasn't going to let her get away with her subterfuge.

Taking a deep breath, she groped for words as she kept her eyes lowered. "Uhm . . . we just *happened* to look your way . . . and, well, you were right in front of us. It was hard to miss, actually, and when we looked at each other it just sort of set us off laughing . . ."

"So you liked what you saw?"

She nodded mutely, finally raising her eyes to look at him.

Scott was smiling at her. "It's nice to know you find *something* about me attractive," he told her dryly. "For awhile there, I thought you viewed me as some old geezer, over the hill and not worth a second glance."

"You're hardly an old geezer," Shannon managed to say. "Far from it." Then she thought to herself: "*If you only knew how I really felt about you and that body of yours . . .*"

"Hardly an old geezer, huh? That's good to know, Shannon. That's *very* good to know."

"I've never used the term 'old geezer' to describe you," she qualified, unable to resist teasing him.

"Oh?" he asked, eyebrows slightly raised. "How and when did you describe me? And to whom?"

"I described you to Dana a few days ago," Shannon answered him. "Before you met her. She wanted to know what you looked like, so I told her."

"And what did you say?"

Shannon hesitated, looking at him. He was staring at her, his expression neutral. "I told her you were tall, dark and handsome." She blushed. "I also used the term *gorgeous* in there somewhere, too."

A smile lit Scott's face.

"Don't let it go to your head," she warned him with humor.

"Old men need boosts to their egos once in awhile," he teased her in return. "I'm not exactly in my dotage yet, but every kind word you can throw me helps."

She grinned. "Happy to oblige."

Dana eventually returned to the kitchen, where she took Kevin's ribbing about her reading habits in stride. The group then had lunch together, enjoying the clam chowder and zucchini bread for dessert. Afterward, the men suited-up to go back outside.

"What's for dinner?" Kevin asked. "We've got another four or five hours of hard labor in front of us, so we'll need something substantial when we return."

"Me and Shannon are going to help Mae prepare a big batch of Shepherd's Pie," Dana replied. "You'll need all the brain food you can get for tonight. We're playing *Truth or Dare*."

"Anything is better than *Twister*," Liam muttered as he shrugged into his snow coat. "The blood rushed to my head so many times last night, I thought I was going to pass out."

Scott slipped on his black ski mask. Shannon looked at him, taking note of his green eyes through the two holes. She could tell he was smiling because his eyes were crinkled at the corners. He was staring back at her. After he put on his heavy black gloves, he subtly blew her a kiss by touching his mouth with the fingers on his right hand, and then gesturing toward her with them. She flushed pink, lowering her eyes.

After the four men left by the back door, Dana grabbed Shannon by the arm. "Did you see that? Jesus, Shannon, *he blew you a kiss* - right in front of everyone! Do you believe me now that he might be a bit besotted with you?"

"Or he's just playing with me," Shannon countered.

"I'm sure he'd *love* to play with you, but not in the way you're thinking."

Shannon stared at her friend. "Where did you learn to be so dirty-minded?"

Dana laughed. "Sex isn't dirty, Shan. Call it love or lust - or both - but you can't fight human nature forever. Whatever it is between you and Scott, it seems to be growing by leaps and bounds. It's either going to deflate, or it's just going to keep getting bigger until it explodes." She shivered with a sigh. "I truly envy you. To be on the receiving end of Scott's kisses, that spectacular chest and those big hands . . ."

Shannon covered her ears as she blushed red. "I can't hear anymore," she told her friend pleadingly. "It's bad enough I'm half-twitterpated every time Scott comes near me, but you're making it worse." She shook her head. "I've got to get a hold of myself."

Dana slipped her arm around Shannon to comfort her. "Sorry, Shan. I'll try not to tease you so much from now on. It's hard, though. You and Scott seem so *right* together somehow."

"We'd best get started on helping Mae with dinner," Shannon said lightly, rising from the kitchen table. "The guys will be coming back super hungry, and I know Kevin can demolish a whole loaf pan of Shepherd's Pie all by himself. We'll probably have to make at least four casseroles."

"I'll peel the potatoes," Dana offered. She watched as Shannon made her way to the main area of the kitchen, joining Mae at the stove.

"*Shan has it bad for Scott after only a few days*," Dana thought as she made her way to the stove. "*And Scott has it equally as bad for her*." She smiled to herself. "*It's definitely going to be interesting to watch as it plays out. I think we're in for some big surprises when it's finally all said and done*."

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Ten

*December 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

NEW YEAR'S EVE IN Larkin City proved, year after year, to be a well celebrated affair. The Coven bulged beyond capacity, and every motel, hotel and bed-and-breakfast were booked well in advance. Over the years, Larkin City gained the reputation of a party town on the last day of the year, with added benefits. Brian Larkin paid all local cab fares for the night, so drunken driving accidents were kept to a minimum. Police were also out in full force to insure no one went beyond their limit behind the wheel. Because of the combined efforts, car accidents due to drinking were rare, and very few people provoked an arrest by erratic behavior or violence.

Since Christmas day, Shannon grew flustered when Scott was near her. He was polite, not pushing himself at her or making suggestive remarks. It was as if he were waiting for her to make a move, no less. They were getting along very well, which seemed to please Brian tremendously. His respect for Scott's professional skills, combined with a personal liking for the man, made him ideal in Brian's eyes. He kept his thoughts to himself, however, preferring that his stubborn daughter make her own decisions.

Shannon threw herself into preparations for the New Year's party. Friends of the family were being invited, as well as working associates of the two Larkin brothers from the lumber yard and the mining company. Several guest rooms were made up on the second and third floors. Shannon helped her mother and Aunt Denise prepare snacks and hot dishes for the gathering. The cabinets were well stocked with liquor and other beverages, and the house was cleaned from top to bottom: polished, dusted, scrubbed, swept and vacuumed. Shannon persuaded Dana to spend the night, giving her a room on the fourth floor.

Early in the afternoon before the party, Scott approached Shannon in the kitchen as she arranged a tray of cheese and crackers. She looked up at him, an expectant smile on her face. "Hi," she said. "Want a cracker?"

Scott accepted the snack and sat down next to her at the kitchen table. "Do you have any free time this afternoon?" he wanted to know.

"I'm just about done. Why? What do you have in mind?"

"Sean told me he took a couple of the snowmobiles out of the garage this morning," he replied, meeting her gaze. "Would you like to go for a ride with me?"

She brightened. "I'd love to, what a marvelous idea." Wiping her hands on a tea towel, she said: "In fact, I'm ready now. I'll put on some warmer clothes and meet you outside."

"If I'd known you'd be so eager for my company, I'd have asked sooner," Scott teased her, his sleepy eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Don't be so sure of yourself, Mr. Page." Shannon said lightly, standing up. "I'm just going along for the ride, nothing more."

His face fell. "Really?"

She laughed at his expression. "I'm kidding, honest. I really *do* enjoy your company, being that you're so mature and all. I'll be ready in ten minutes."

Scott watched her leave the room hurriedly. He continued to sit at the table, a warm smile on his face.

Shannon donned a pair of ski pants and a sweater, on top of which she put a heavy coat. She swept her hair up under a wool ski cap, tucking the strands inside. Inspecting herself in the bathroom mirror, she decided to add a touch of make-up to her eyes, but not too much. Satisfied, she went downstairs to meet Scott.

"You look like a polar bear," Scott exclaimed as they climbed onto the snowmobile, which was parked in front of the garages. "How many layers of clothes do you have on?"

"Just three," she giggled, sitting behind him.

Looking over his shoulder at her, he asked: "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then hang on to me," he warned. "I like to go fast."

She wrapped her arms around his middle section and pulled closer. "Please don't go *too* fast," she pleaded. "It scares me."

He chuckled. "If I go fast, you might hang onto me that much tighter." He started the motor of the snowmobile, revving the engine loudly to emphasize his words.

She blushed behind him, not missing the meaning of his statement. As he took off, she did indeed hang on tighter. She rested her cheek on the side of his arm and watched the direction he was taking.

He propelled the snowmobile behind the mansion and started climbing a hill behind the house. He revved the motor again and picked up speed. Shannon squealed and hung on closer to him. She felt the vibration of laughter in his body.

She was exhilarated, the clean, fresh air overwhelming her senses. The sky was blue and clear, the sun shining brightly over the entire estate. Despite the cold, Shannon felt warm inside. *Warm and content*. It seemed whenever she was around Scott she felt secure. He was self-assured and confident, so he made her feel that way, too. His consideration and kindness toward her made her heart flutter. Whenever he stared at her with his sleepy hazel eyes, her knees went weak, almost like jelly.

Her thoughts continued to wander as the snowmobile labored up the hill. She had to be cautious about her burgeoning feelings, she warned herself. She once felt the same way about Michael Sullivan and David Bonham. And look where *they* were now. The thought chilled Shannon to the bone. Was that to be the pattern of all her relationships with men? One goes insane and kills the other one? What could befall the next person she cared for? Would the next one be Scott Page? The prospect did not displease Shannon, much to her surprise.

But she was not being fair to herself or Scott. He *was* different. He was nothing like Mike or David. He was stronger than either of them, perhaps because he was older or maybe because he was such a perfectionist in so many ways. He had a certain magic about him. He was dedicated to his work, often so absorbed in his profession that nothing else existed in his mind. Shannon smiled wryly. She knew she was much the same way.

However, when work was over, Scott completely changed. It was then Shannon noticed he focused most of his attention on *her*. She wondered if it was indeed because he never went out and saw other women. Was she just a convenience for the time being? The thought nagged her. What right did she have to expect anything else? She had no claim on

him, although he fascinated her. Putting such complex issues from her mind for the moment, she decided to enjoy each day as it came, no more and no less.

Scott parked the snowmobile on the hill overlooking the estate. He shut the motor off and stepped to the ground. He turned to her. "It's beautiful up here," he told her.

Shannon, her cheeks a rosy red from the cold, agreed. "It seems farther away than it actually is." She stood up and stepped onto the crunchy snow. Rubbing her nose, she laughed. "But my face is numb."

He pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his coat pocket and offered one to her. They stood together, looking at the view from the hill. She saw smoke billowing out of the many chimneys at the mansion. Beyond that, to the right and much farther away and harder to view was the city of Larkin.

She tossed her half-smoked cigarette to the ground. Glancing at Scott, she asked: "Are you ready for some exercise?"

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

Grinning, she reached over and snatched the wool hat from his head. With a gleeful shriek, she took off running toward the opposite end of the hill.

With a good natured oath, Scott started after her. "Come back kitten," he shouted without thinking. "I'll make you regret this."

"Kitten?" he thought to himself. *"Where did that come from? I must have been thinking it all along, because it fits her: my little, sweet, sometimes viscous kitten."*

Shannon laughed over her shoulder and continued running. All of a sudden, she was grabbed from behind and whirled around. The movement caught her off guard and she fell back, landing in the snow. Scott fell on top of her with a thud, taking her breath away.

Both of them were laughing uncontrollably. Scott jerked Shannon's ski hat off of her head. Her ebony tresses fell about her in the snow. He grabbed a handful of the mass and brought it to his face, inhaling deeply, his eyes on her.

"Your hair smells wonderful," he said in a low tone. The laughter left both of them. Now they were serious, staring at one another intently, as if frozen in time. She was acutely aware of him on top of her, although with all the clothes between them it was impossible to feel the hard leanness of his body. Her breathing became shallow as she stared at him. She simply could not will herself to move away.

"I've wanted to hold your hair to my face for a long time," he said hoarsely, his eyes unflinchingly on her.

"Have you really?" she whispered, watching him inhale the fragrance of her hair.

He nodded gravely. Then he dropped her hair back into the snow. Reaching up, he ran his hand gently over her mouth and chin, tracing his finger to her cheeks, nose and eyes. She remained still, unable to move. She felt an incredible burning in the pit of her stomach, like a dozen butterflies were fluttering around inside her. It was pleasurable and painful at the same time. Her heart started to beat faster, making her light-headed and weak.

"You know I'm going to kiss you, don't you?" he asked softly.

She nodded slowly, unable to reply. Her mouth felt leaden, almost frozen in anticipation.

He bent his head down and began kissing her, very gently at first, almost as if he were testing her reaction to him. Feeling her acceptance, he pulled her closer, his hands in her hair. His mouth seared her, burning hotly as his tongue met hers. She closed her eyes

and abandoned her will. She wrapped her arms around his neck, responding with all the passion she felt for him. She had a sense of being lost, of floating in a misty place, but Scott was holding her tight. The security he provoked in her was warm and overpowering. He was there, and so strong. She could smell his male scent, clean and appealing, and entirely his own. She ran her hands through his hair, wanting to touch him, wanting to know how he felt

Scott was gradually losing his self-control. Shannon's eager response took him aback at first. He didn't expect her to welcome him so passionately. Her mouth was warm, her tongue soft and caressing. He sensed all his energy draining away. This was too incredible, even for him . . . he heard a roaring in his ears. Annoyed, he reluctantly pulled his face away from Shannon's, her kiss branded on his mouth. He stared down at her, his sleepy eyes glazed alight with bright flames. Her mouth was red and swollen from their kissing. She returned his gaze steadily, without reservation.

"I think someone is about to join us," she said at length, her voice trembling.

Scott groaned. "Damn them to hell, whoever it is!"

She giggled. "We'd better get up. It could be my father or brother, or worse, my cousins Kevin and Liam."

Slowly, Scott pulled himself up, not able to tear his eyes away from her. Offering her his hand, Shannon took hold and stood up, brushing the snow from her backside.

"Don't hide your hair under the hat," he said urgently.

"Okay," she replied uncertainly, pulling the cap over her head but leaving the black tresses falling to her waist. Taking her hand, Scott led her back to the snowmobile.

Peering down the hill, she said: "I think it's Sean."

Scott growled. "He has a habit of interrupting us, doesn't he?"

She looked at him, but he was smiling. He still had a hold of her hand. Now he pulled her toward him until her face was only an inch away from his. "You're beautiful, Shannon," he said huskily. "You're a witch who has cast a spell on me." He kissed her quickly but gently on the lips.

She laughed nervously, moving away from him. He was *too* intent on her, and it was beginning to scare her. Trying to adopt a light tone, she quipped: "Witch, am I? I thought I heard you call me kitten. So, which is it, Page? Witch or kitten?"

He lightened. "You're both, I think," he teased her. "You've been sent to test my masculine control."

"Is that so?" she retorted, eyes twinkling. "Masculine control, is it?"

He nodded. "Yes, kitten, *very* masculine."

Shannon blushed at his suggested meaning. "Well," she said, looking at him innocently. "I'm just a poor little kitten teenager being pursued by a dirty old man. I haven't done a darn thing."

He rolled his eyes comically. "You haven't done anything intentionally, no." He paused, his eyes holding a far away, almost sad expression. "I have to admit it's my fault. You've crept up on me, woman."

He sounded so serious. "How have I crept up on you?" she wanted to know.

Scott tried to evade her question. "It's nothing, really. I think the cold air has gone to my head."

Shannon had no chance to pursue the subject as Sean roared over the top of the hill and came to a stop next to them. After he turned off the snowmobile, he removed his leather gloves and ski shades.

"Sorry if I'm butting in," he said cheerfully, looking at his sister.

"You're not," she said quickly.

"Yeah, I'll bet," Sean said with a hint of amusement in his voice. "I drove all the way up here to tell you I'm going into Larkin City to get Marianne for the party. Would you like me to pick up Dana while I'm in town?"

"Oh, would you, Sean? I'd really appreciate it," Shannon said, trying to make her voice sound casual.

Apparently, her attempt to sound normal failed. Sean looked at her with a gleam in his eyes. "Okay, I'll pick her up," he said. "I should be back home around five o'clock. Hold the drinks for me." He started the snowmobile. Winking at his twin, he shouted over the motor: "Carry on!"

Shannon watched him roar off down the hill. Turning to Scott, she noticed he was again staring at her in his intent fashion but was also looking sheepish.

"I'm sorry," he said with difficulty. "If I offended you earlier by kissing you . . ."

"Is that what you think? That I was offended?" she demanded.

He shrugged. "I'm not sure. Whether you realize it or not, you're a very hard person to read."

She walked over to him and took his hand. "I was *not* offended," she assured him softly. "I kissed you back, didn't I? I'm not sorry in the least."

Scott smiled, slightly embarrassed. "I'm glad. I'm not really sorry, either. See what you've done to me?" Inside, he was a quivering mass although he did well to hide it from her. Her affect on him was astounding. He made her feel like a clumsy school boy on his first date. Strangely, the thought did not irritate him in the least.

"Oh bother," she said. "I'm just a punk kid. A kitten, you said. I don't do anything to you." Tugging at his hands, she suggested: "Let's go back to the house and get something warm to drink."

"Okay, okay," he replied, light-hearted again. "But *you* do the fixing."

She smiled broadly. "I'll be glad to."

The ride down the hill was uneventful. Scott maneuvered the snowmobile into the garage. He parked alongside Sean's snow vehicle, which rested between the estate pick-up truck and the wall of the garage. After Scott shut off the motor, she stepped gingerly to the ground. She flattened herself against the truck to make room for him to pass by. Instead of going past her, he sandwiched himself between Shannon and the snowmobile. His body was against hers, his knees pinned to her thighs.

She drew in her breath, looking at him. He appeared to be serious, his face like granite stone, his eyes wide and staring into hers. Suddenly, a moan escaped his lips, and he buried his face into her hair, his hands grasping her hips.

She wrapped her arms around him. He raised his head, looking at her in wonder. He started kissing her again, this time roughly. She reveled in it, but in the back of her mind she was becoming frightened. "Oh, Shannon, Shannon," he mumbled into her lips, pulling her hard against him, his mouth penetrating hers savagely.

Suddenly, she pushed away from him. In a breathless voice, she pleaded: "Enough, Scott. I can't handle . . . I mean, it's too much for me to take in at the moment. I've never felt anyone desire me the way you do. It's so . . . *overwhelming*."

He apologized at once. "I know, Shannon. I lost my head for a minute." He straightened himself. "It's just . . . you have to realize I find you very desirable. I'm a man, and it's not easy." Faltering, he cleared his throat. "I'm sorry."

She touched his face with her hand. "You have nothing to be sorry for, Scott. I'm just not ready for all of this. You overwhelm me. I'm trying very hard to understand what's happening, but it hasn't come to me yet. I'm a bit confused. I honestly don't have the slightest notion how to go about this . . ."

He smiled softly. "Don't worry, Shannon. I'm a very patient man. I'm not some kid out for a bit of fun, I'm a *man*. Just do what you have to do until you're comfortable. That's all that matters."

She sighed with relief. He was so understanding, so mature, so unlike anyone she had ever met. Putting a cheerful smile back on her face, she said: "How about that hot drink?"

"That sound good," he said warmly. "Let's go."

She followed him out of the garage. As they started walking toward the house, Shannon noticed he was keeping a safe distance from her. With a playful smile, she reached over and grabbed his hand.

"Hand holding isn't so mind-boggling," she told him teasingly. "Do you mind?"

He gazed at her softly. "Not at all, kitten, *not at all*."

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Eighteen

June 1975

Larkin City, Maine

MIKE SULLIVAN HAD perfected his plan now. Everything was set. As he waited in his room at the mental hospital in Bangor, he watched the small bedside clock closely. At eight-fifty he would proceed to relieve the ward watchman of his keys, providing he was drunk and passed out. Keeping himself icy calm, Mike smiled slightly. He had waited a long time for retribution. He was determined not to lose his cool now.

At exactly eight-fifty, Mike left his room and entered the ward. Most patients were in bed by eight, and tonight was no exception. He made his way down a short hallway to the watchman's station. The nook was partially hidden by a half-door, of which the part top was open. Mike peered inside cautiously and gave a sigh of relief. Sure enough, the watchman was slumped in a chair before a desk, chin lolling on his chest. The man was snoring loudly. Mike sniffed the air. It reeked of hard liquor.

Mike reached inside to open the half-door, knowing it was locked on the outside. He stepped inside the small enclosure. He moved toward the man, noticing the key ring around his waist. Working quickly but silently, Mike managed to remove the ring from the man's belt, starting for a second when he groaned. But the watchman did not awaken.

Holding the keys in his hand tightly so they wouldn't make any noise, Mike left the watchman's station, shutting the door softly behind him. He walked farther down the hall, where orderlies kept their uniforms in a small closet concealed by a plant. Moving the plant noiselessly, Mike opened the closet and found a uniform that fit him. He slipped it over his clothes and shut the closet door, returning the foliage to its former position.

Over the course of time, he memorized which keys the orderlies used to open various doors. Now he used the knowledge to let himself out of the ward, locking the door behind him. He quickly walked down another hallway to a stairway that led to the first floor. Pulling himself erect, and brushing his hair back out of his face, he tried to take on a self-assured persona. Being credible was crucial to his plan.

It was easier than he thought it would be. He walked through the first ward without being stopped. A couple of orderlies nodded at him as he passed, as if in recognition that he was an employee of the hospital. Mike wanted to shout with glee, but kept himself in check. He had come too far now to spoil everything.

Then, finally, he was out the front door. There were no guards outside. Obviously he had timed his escape perfectly. He ran lightly down the front entrance steps of the mental hospital, obscuring himself behind a cluster of shrubbery. He looked toward the guard station on the outside of the building.

The second and third shifts gathered together at the station for a few brief moments, not even paying attention to the front of the hospital. In a flash, Mike was off and running. He raced out of the front gates without hearing the words he dreadfully imagined: "Stop! Catch him!"

But no one called to him, no one saw him. *He made it! He was free!* Mike continued running, however, as far away as possible from the place he had lived for the last four-and-

a-half years. Two blocks away from the hospital, he skirted the edges of a shopping mall. Then he walked casually through the parking lot, scouring around for an unlocked vehicle. He had known how to hot-wire a car since he was thirteen years old, thanks to the instructions given to him by his friend John Young so long ago. Mike silently blessed his old pal for the knowledge. It was certainly coming in handy now.

At last, Mike found a car with the windows rolled down. It was a 1971 Mach I Mustang. He slipped behind the wheel, trying not to waste a moment of time. It only took him thirty seconds to start the car. Grinning, he put the vehicle in gear and roared off. He put his hand in his pocket, assuring himself that the large kitchen knife he stole from the hospital two weeks ago was still there. It was, of course. He found the knife on a meal trolley after dinner one evening, as the orderlies were putting patients to bed. He pushed his foot to the accelerator of the Mustang.

As the car sped into the night, Mike laughed softly to himself. Half of his plan was complete. With patience and cunning, he had pushed himself closer to one singular ideal: to wrest Shannon from her home and her happiness, as she had once done to him. He would show her what she missed by rejecting him. Before the night was out, all of his threats to her in the past would become a reality.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Nineteen

June 1975
Larkin City, Maine

SHANNON HAD JUST PUT Angie and Jamie to bed when Scott called at eight-thirty. She raced for the telephone and picked it up on the third ring.

"Hi kitten," Scott's deep voice gave her a thrill.

"Hi. How is everything going?"

Shannon could hear him sigh over the telephone line. "Anita won't last much longer, I'm afraid," he said gravely. "I almost didn't recognize her."

"Oh, Scott, I'm sorry," Shannon exclaimed. "It must be awful for you."

"It's not very pleasant," he agreed. "I figured I'd stay on a few days to see how things go. Is that okay with you?"

"That's fine."

He cleared his throat. "Anita made a request of me."

"What?"

"She asked me to attend her funeral alone."

Shannon was surprised. "Really? She doesn't want me there?"

"No."

"She has a right, I suppose," Shannon admitted. "She *is* dying, and it will be her funeral."

"You don't mind?"

"No. If it were me, I wouldn't want her at my funeral, either."

He chuckled. "That sounds like you. Listen, I'll call you tomorrow night. Or if I know anything sooner, I'll call then."

"Okay. I'll be here."

"I love you, kitten," he said gently. "Think about me tonight in your dreams, will you?"

"Always."

"Give my love to the kids, and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Good night, love of my life."

Scott made a kissing sound over the telephone. "Good night, kitten."

After she had hung up the telephone, Shannon poured herself a glass of wine and sat down on the couch to watch television. She was sitting only a few minutes when the telephone rang again. Groaning, she went to answer it.

"Hello."

"Hi, sis," Sean said to her. "What are you up to?"

"I'm just watching television."

"Why don't you come to the mansion?" Sean suggested. "Liam and I are playing cards. You could join us and spend the night."

"No, I don't think so," she replied. "I just put the kids to bed, and I don't want to wake them. Besides, I feel like being alone tonight."

"Are you missing Scott?"

"Yes. He called a few minutes ago. He told me Anita is really going fast, and that it's only a matter of time before the end comes."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Sean said sincerely. "Is he going to stay until the end?"

"Probably," she answered. "She told Scott she didn't want me at the funeral - she only wants him there."

Sean was surprised. "You're kidding?"

"No. I suppose she's entitled to her last wish. I won't begrudge her that."

"I guess you're right," Sean agreed. "Well, if you change your mind, we'll probably be up late playing cards. Liam is kicking my ass. Come anytime you want."

"Thanks for asking," Shannon said. "But I think I'll just stay home."

"Okay. Take it easy, sis. Good night."

"Good night, Sean."

Shannon returned to the couch and continued to watch television. Eventually she began to doze. It was with some surprise when she awoke to the sounds of someone knocking loudly on the front door. Sitting up, she rubbed her eyes. She glanced at the kitchen clock. It was eleven o'clock. Who was knocking at this late hour?

She walked to the door, thinking it was Sean to keep her company. She flipped on the outside light from a switch on the wall. She unlocked the door, and opened it.

In a split second, she tried to slam the door shut again, but it was too late. Mike forced his way in, pushing her back into the house. She fell on the floor from the force of his push, sitting stunned. She gazed up at the person she never thought she would see again. He was grinning at her, his hair falling into his face. In his right hand, he clutched a large kitchen knife. He was slightly wet from the rain.

Memories crowded into Shannon's mind. It was the same as it had been that rainy night in November almost four years ago. Mike was standing there like a madman, wet and holding a knife. Only this time he was here to get *her*. Shannon stifled a sob in her throat, not daring to move.

"You never thought you'd see me again, did you?" he asked gleefully. She was shocked by how deep his voice had become. Then she thought, almost hysterically, that he was no longer fourteen years old. He was nineteen now. And he was a man, no longer an impressionable boy.

"Why are you here?" She finally managed to spit out, her voice shaky.

"I told you we weren't through yet," he said to her, as if reminding her of the obvious. "Jesus, Shannon. Did you think I was kidding? You never did take me seriously, and that was your stupid mistake."

"How did you get out of the hospital?" she asked. Maybe if she kept him talking, she could figure how to get away from him.

"I escaped," he said simply. "I've been planning to escape ever since I found out you married some other bastard."

"How did you find out?"

Mike snorted. "The dumb bitch nurse of mine left a newspaper in my room, just a short while after you got married. Mom never told me, and I never let on that I knew. I'm pretty clever, huh?"

"Did you expect me to wait forever for you?" Shannon asked weakly. She had to keep him from finding her children. She prayed neither Angie or Jamie awakened, asking for a glass of water as they were prone to do.

"Yes," he answered her. His eyes began darting around. "Where is your bastard of a husband?"

She stared at him, silent.

Mike shrugged. "I don't think the bastard is here. If he was, he'd be trying to protect you right now. I think you're alone, and that makes it a lot easier for me."

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, unable to keep the fear from her voice. "*Mike doesn't know Scott and I have kids,*" she thought wildly. "*Or he'd be looking for them, too. I've got to get him out of here before one of them wakes up.*"

Mike laughed. "I'm taking you with me. Then I'll do what I've wanted to do all along."

"Which is what?"

He bent down, crouching next to her on the floor. His face loomed over her menacingly. "I'm going to have you," he said softly. "And then I'm going to kill you, so no one else will ever have you again."

Shannon took a deep breath. "If its sex you want, let's just do it," she said with more bravado than she felt. "I'll let you take me to bed, Mike. But why do you have to kill me?"

He stood again, pulling her roughly to her feet. His grip on her wrist painful and strong. "I have to kill you," he said, eyes bright. "I wanted to kill you four years ago because you were with some other bastard, rejecting me. Now that you've gone on to yet another man and married him, I have no choice but to cut your lying throat. Just how many men have you been with since they locked me up? *Bitch!* You betrayed me, led me along, and made me believe you really loved me, but all you did was use me. And I want revenge for that humiliation. First, however, I want to taste what you have given so freely to God knows how many others."

She swallowed, trying to hide the pain he was inflicting on her wrist. "I never led you on," she said, her breath shallow. "I really cared for you, Mike. But I realized my feelings toward you were that of a friend, and nothing more."

"That's what I thought," he sneered at her. "Now the choice is no longer yours to make. It's my choice now, and I *will* have you." He pulled her to him. "We're leaving. Say goodbye to your loving home." He drew back his hand and struck her across the face several times. Sobbing, she fell against him, the pain making her dizzy. The slaps left a stinging sensation on her face, burning her cheeks and mouth.

"That's more like it," Mike said coldly. "My quiet little bitch. Now, come on. We're leaving."

Shannon did not fight him as he dragged her out of the house. She wanted to get away from her children so Mike wouldn't find them. She closed her eyes and hoped Angie and Jamie did not awaken, or fall down the stairs. Her hope rested on the fact that someone from the mansion would find them before they were left alone too long.

Mike shoved Shannon into the front seat of the Mustang. He got into the driver's seat and fiddled with the wires underneath the steering wheel. The engine roared to life. She remained limp, but her mind was working furiously. If he stopped at an intersection along the way, or a red traffic light, she could jump out of the vehicle and make a run for it.

As if reading her thoughts, he snarled at her. "Don't even think of trying to jump out of the car. If you do, I'll drive back to that fucking mansion you used to live in and start killing your family off, one by one. It's not them that I want. *I want you.* But if you try to escape, I will go back and kill them."

Shannon sagged her weight against the car seat as Mike drove away from her home.

She could see the lights at the mansion, and wondered if Sean was awake. Suddenly she wished she had gone to the mansion to play cards with her twin and Liam. Then it dawned on her Mike's escape was perhaps the reason she felt uneasy all day. Something wasn't right, and *this was it*. Mike was here, taking her away from her family and her home. *To kill her once and for all*. She wanted to laugh, but she restrained herself. The laughter was being fueled by hysteria, she knew, but she had to stay strong. Someone was bound to discover her missing, surely, and soon. But where would they find her? Mike had not given her a hint to where he was taking her, so how could anyone find her?

"It's up to me," she thought grimly. "I have to remain calm and lucid, and think of a way to escape. It's my only option now."

She glanced over at Mike. The lights on the car dashboard reflected on his face. He looked so much older than he really was, and crazier than he'd ever been. In the midst of all his dysfunction, Shannon could still detect an air of innocence about him. In some ways, he was still the same boy she knew years ago. Shaking, she turned her head away. She once thought that no matter what happened, she and Mike would always be connected somehow, aside from their distant blood relation. He thought the same thing. And they were both right. Despite all her efforts to block him out of her mind, he never really left her. Their connection was destiny from the start. Nothing either of them did changed the fact.

And now the time of reckoning had finally come.

* * *

SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, SEAN decided to walk down to his sister's cottage. Following his telephone call with her earlier in the evening, he felt Shannon was disturbed about something. She sounded depressed and distant, not entirely herself. Perhaps it was because Scott was away, or maybe she was concerned about her husband seeing his old lover again, even if she was dying. Looking out the window of the drawing room of the mansion, Sean noticed the lights in the cottage were on, so he figured Shannon must still be awake. Slipping on a light jacket, he began the descent down the driveway to his twin's home.

Sean's alarm increased when he received no answer to his knock. Carefully, he opened the front door of the cottage and stepped inside the kitchen. He was made uneasy by the silence. It was not natural. Walking through the kitchen to the living room, he looked around. The television was on, the sound low. A half-empty glass of wine was on the coffee table, next to Shannon's cigarettes and lighter. Sean called out his sister's name: "Shannon, are you here? Are you awake?"

Silence. Sean peered into Scott and Shannon's bedroom and saw the bed had not been slept in. Taking the stairs two at a time, Sean checked the children. Both Angie and Jamie were sleeping peacefully, oblivious to the absence of their mother. Puzzled, Sean returned to the living room. Maybe Shannon had gone for a walk, but he quickly rejected that idea. She would never leave her children alone.

As he stood in the living room, Sean's brow furrowed deep into his forehead. Something was wrong. He could feel it in his bones. Shannon was in trouble somewhere, and he was powerless. She was gone from her home in the middle of the night, and her children were alone. Suddenly, he was brought out of his reverie by the sharp ringing of the telephone. Leaping at the instrument, he picked up the receiver midway through the

second ring.

"Hello?" he said hopefully. "Shannon?"

"No, no!" a female voice screamed hysterically. "This is Linda Sullivan. I have to speak to Shannon. Where is she?"

"This is her brother Sean," he spoke, fear in his voice. "Shannon isn't here."

"For God's sake, where is she?" Linda demanded.

"I don't know. I came down to see her, but no one is here. Her kids are asleep in their beds."

"Oh my God," Linda wailed. "He's got her! We've *got* to find them . . ."

"What's going on?" Sean shouted. "Who has my sister?"

"My son has her," Linda fairly screamed. "I *know* he does. I just got a call from the hospital. They did a surprise bed check half an hour ago and Mike is gone. They can't find him anywhere in the hospital or the surrounding area."

Sean closed his eyes. He wanted to believe it was a nightmare, that he would wake any minute and realize it wasn't real. He could not imagine Shannon having her worst fear become a reality, not after all these years. Trying to sound calm, Sean spoke to Linda again. "We can't assume Mike has her just because she isn't here."

"Where else could she be at this time of night?"

Taking a deep breath, Sean asked: "How long ago did Mike escape?"

"The hospital told me they think he made his escape somewhere between eight-thirty and eleven-thirty," Linda told him. "All the patients are put to bed at eight o'clock, and Mike was there then."

Sean tried to control his growing panic. In a voice strangled with self-control, he told Linda: "I have to call Scott. Give me your phone number, and I'll get back to you."

Linda gave him the number, her voice calming down a bit. She pleaded with him: "Call me if you hear anything at all. I won't go anywhere."

"I'll call you," Sean promised. "And if you hear anything, let me know."

After Sean hung up the receiver, he looked around for Shannon's address book. She always kept important numbers in the front. Finally, he located the small black book on the stand beside her bed. Flipping it open, he breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted the telephone number to the Carlton Hotel on the first page. With trembling fingers, he dialed the number, wondering how he was going to inform Scott that his wife was missing, along with Mike Sullivan.

At length, Sean was connected to Scott's hotel room. He sounded sleepy when he answered the telephone, his voice groggy and confused. "Hello?"

"Scott, this is Sean. You have to come home."

There was a split second of silence before Scott demanded in a more alert voice: "What's wrong? Has something happened to Shannon?"

"I don't know yet," Sean replied. "I came down to the cottage tonight and she wasn't here. The kids are asleep, but Shannon is gone. Linda Sullivan just called. Her son escaped from the hospital in Bangor, and no one can find him. Linda thinks he came after Shannon."

Sean could hear the fear in Scott's voice as he asked the next question: "Are you sure? I mean, maybe Shan went for a walk or something."

"I thought of that, but you know she'd never leave the kids alone, even to take a walk. I'm telling you, she's gone and I think Sullivan has her."

"Call the police," Scott said tersely. His voice was suddenly cold and directive. "Tell

them what you told me. I'm leaving right now. If I have to, I'll charter a plane home."

"Okay." Sean was scared. "Hurry, Scott. I'm terrified something is going to happen to Shannon if we don't find her soon."

"I'm on my way, Sean." And he hung up.

Sean quickly dialed the number of the police. He reached Detective Mark Balsam and related the story to him. Balsam remembered Mike's case from 1970, and told Sean he would be right over. Next, Sean called the mansion. Kevin answered the telephone. Sean told him everything, adding: "You have to let everyone else know. I can't leave here in case Linda calls back. And Scott is on his way home now."

After conversing with a distraught Kevin, Sean slumped onto the couch in the living room. He felt void of any emotion but pure terror. He was sure Shannon was feeling the same way at the moment, and his soul cried out for her. He knew how strong she was, but the thought of Mike Sullivan had frightened her for a long time. Closing his eyes, Sean prayed desperately that Shannon retained her strength and didn't let that bastard Sullivan wear her down.

* * *

MIKE NEVER IMAGINED HE would find the cave at Seal Harbor so easily. His memory of the location had not failed him, even after all these years. For the last stretch of the drive from Bar Harbor to Seal Harbor, Mike ceased his inane chattering. He fell strangely silent, all of his concentration on the road.

Shannon glanced over at Mike uneasily as they sped along. His silence was somehow more frightening than his endless rambling. The rain began to pelt down from the sky, and she was slightly chilled. This was due in part to her predicament, she knew, and her fear had not lessened. Rather, it had increased. She was no longer in control of *anything* anymore, much less her own destiny. Her very life rested in the unsteady hands of Mike Sullivan now, whether she liked it or not.

At length, he pulled the car off to the side of the road. Shannon tried to distinguish where they were, her eyes searching into the darkness and torrent of rain. She could vaguely see they were parked on the edge of a small cliff that allowed a view of the beach and rocky terrain.

"Why are we here?" she asked.

Mike looked at her. "I have a special place for us," he answered, observing her closely as he spoke. "I used to come here with my father. The spot I have in mind is very isolated and dark. I think you'll like it."

She was still, feeling her throat's dryness. Trying to conceal her nervousness, she said faintly: "It sounds like a nice place - very romantic."

"Cut the shit, Shannon," Mike said. "You don't give a rat's ass. Don't even try to humor me with your double talk. When have you ever felt romantic toward me?"

"I did at one time."

"That's the problem," he said bitterly, glaring at her. "You did at one time, but what about now?"

"I'm married now, Michael," Shannon said, looking directly at him. "I married the man I love, but that doesn't mean I quit caring about you."

He stared at her, his stony silence long and intense. Then, suddenly, he grabbed

Shannon by the wrist and dragged her across the seat toward him. He flung open the car door and stepped out into the rain, taking her with him. She stumbled out of the car, falling against him as she tried to steady herself.

"Don't appear too eager, Shan," he said sarcastically in her ear. "We'll be in a dry place in a few minutes."

It seemed like hours to Shannon as he led her down the rocky cliff path to the beach. She was drenched to the skin, and terrified. The path was muddy and slippery. Every so often she missed her footing and fell. Mike helped her to her feet, and then they would continue down the path again. The journey seemed endless to her, and every moment she feared of falling to her death.

Finally, however, they reached the comparative solidness of the beach. Shannon glanced around, squinting her eyes in the darkness. A far away lighthouse shed little light on their surroundings, but enough to make out a few shapes. To the left was a long stretch of high rocks, some of which were embedded into the side of the cliff. She figured they were caves. She had seen many of the same throughout her childhood, mainly in Bar Harbor on family outings with her brother and cousins. Then it dawned on her. Mike was taking her to a cave - a dark, cold cave, away from any civilization, out of hearing distance from a living soul.

The realization set off a new wave of hysteria within her. Suddenly, she felt the strong urge to flee. Jerking away from Mike, she ran in the opposite direction of the caves, fear giving her an abnormal boost of adrenalin of which she had not thought herself capable. She ran blindly, not caring about anything except getting away from Mike.

She barely went twenty feet when he jumped her from behind, knocking her face down in the sand. He pulled her head up by her hair, screaming over the din of the ocean waves and the rain.

"How dare you run away from me? Didn't I tell you what I'd do if you got away from me? I'll go back to Larkin and kill your family. Do you hear me? *I'll kill them all!*"

Shannon looked at him through the wet hair plastered to her head, eyes dull and submitting. "I give up," she cried. "Take me where you want."

Mike pulled her roughly to her feet, dragging her behind him as he walked back in the direction of the caves. His face was hard-set and determined. She watched the expressions on his face closely. She learned it was a good way to anticipate what his next move might be. At the moment, he was angry and his only aim - for the time being - was to get her inside a cave, out of the rain and away from the openness of the beach.

She suffered through another treacherous path, this time going uphill into the rocks. It was pitch black. She wondered how Mike kept his footing and sense of direction. He obviously remembered the area well, despite the length of time he had been away. She had no choice but to clutch his hand tightly, for fear of slipping and hurting herself.

Finally, he came to a halt. She peered over his shoulder. They were at the mouth of a small cave. Mike bent over slightly to avoid bumping his head on the alcove, and led her inside. Suddenly, they were free of the pelting rain. The noise of the waves seemed distant now. She could not see and clung to Mike's arm as he fumbled inside his jacket. He brought out a pack of matches and lit one.

In the dim illumination, she could see the cave was very small, perhaps the size of an apartment living room. The walls were wet and slimy, the floor sandy and damp. Twigs and pieces of wood were scattered in all directions.

Mike turned to her. "Can I trust you to stay here while I make a fire?"

Shannon nodded, wordless.

"Promise me," he pressed her.

"I promise I won't move," she replied, frustrated. "God, Mike, I don't even know where we are. How can I go anywhere?"

Mike set about to build a fire. She watched him curiously. At the moment he didn't look insane. He was cold and tired, just like she was. He was dripping wet, which emphasized his thinness as his clothes clung to him. He had changed so much, physically. Now he was obviously very much a man, but seemed unaware of the fact. In his mind, he was still fourteen years old. His whole realm of thinking centered on puberty. What else had he ever known?

She shivered at the thought.

Mike glanced at her. "You can come over to the fire," he said, his voice almost gentle. "You must be cold."

Shannon stepped toward the fire, rubbing her hands in front of her, letting the warmth seep into her. She looked up to find Mike staring at her intently.

"What is it?" she asked uncertainly.

His smile was soft and genuine. "Even wet and bedraggled, you're still beautiful to me."

She stared back at him, her mouth slightly open in unexpressed shock. The cave fell silent as Mike and Shannon locked eyes with one another. According to him, their fate was decreed long ago and now their time had come. She felt a wave of despair, and then weary acceptance. There was nothing more she could do to stop Mike now. He was in control, and he knew it. Her well-being or death was in his hands. His determination and patience were paying off. She was helpless to prevent him from carrying out his insane, barbaric fantasy.

SPECIAL HOLIDAY EXCERPTS FROM "THE TWAIN SHALL MEET"

Shannon Larkin loves the holidays.

Experience Shannon's first kiss with Scott Page under the mistletoe at Christmas . . .

And hear Scott's declarations of love on New Year's Eve . . .

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Special Holiday Excerpt from Chapter Ten

*Christmas 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

CHRISTMAS DAY DAWNED BRIGHT and clear, with snow covering the grounds of the Larkin estate. The exterior of the house resembled a painting from a different age, with long icicles hanging over windows and doorways, and smoke billowing from the many chimneys. The air was bitter cold, but the sun was shining without a cloud in the sky.

Shannon stretched drowsily in her bed, burrowing deeper under the covers. She wondered idly what fashionable outfit Aunt Phoebe decided to give her this year. Every Christmas, Phoebe gifted Shannon with a chic outfit from her old boutique or from a trendy store in New York City, trying to convince her that "one must dress and act with the times." Convention and fashion were important factors to Phoebe, but Shannon wasn't inclined to be a devotee of high style.

She finally rose from her bed and hurriedly dressed in dark blue slacks and a gray turtle-neck sweater. Running a brush through her hair and scrubbing her teeth, she donned a pair of snug-fitting slippers and went downstairs.

No one was up and about yet, so Shannon started a pot of coffee in the kitchen and built a fire in the hearth in the drawing room. Rubbing her hands together, she stood before the blaze seeking warmth. She gazed at the Christmas tree that stood twelve feet high in the opposite corner of the room. Presents were crammed underneath. Curiously, she walked over to the tree and began examining the gifts carefully. Each package had a to-and-from tag taped on it. She glanced at several of them and then stopped short. A medium-sized package, gaily wrapped in green and red paper, was addressed to her. It was from Scott. She picked it up and shook it gently, trying to determine the contents. It must be something solid, she thought, feeling the slow movement inside as she shook it.

"You're as curious as a cat," a deep, unmistakable voice said teasingly from the doorway of the drawing room.

Shannon turned, blushing profusely as she looked at Scott. He was dressed casually in blue jeans and a blue-gray flannel shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He was particularly handsome this morning, his green eyes sparkling at her.

"I confess I'm a curious person," she admitted sheepishly, walking back to the fireplace. "When we were little kids, Sean and I used to sneak downstairs in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve. We'd open every gift addressed to us, then re-wrap them before going back to bed."

Scott laughed as he joined her at the fireplace. "Didn't your mother ever find out?" he wanted to know.

"She knew all along," Shannon grinned. "Here Sean and I thought we were so clever, but Mum never let on she knew. I grew out of it about six years ago."

He chuckled. "I keep forgetting you're still a teenager."

"And I keep forgetting you're over the hill," she returned, but with a smile on her face.

Presently, they were joined by the rest of the family. Irish coffee was freely

distributed, as well as eggnog laced with rum. The gift opening began.

Predictably, Phoebe's gift to Shannon was a designer gown. It was a maxi-skirt dress, deep burgundy in color with a slightly plunging neckline.

"I bought it from a designer in New York," Phoebe said. "The line is simply called *Chic by Anita*."

Shannon thanked her for the present. She glanced at Scott, who was staring at her with a puzzled look on his face. The expression vanished as he retrieved her gift to him from underneath the tree.

She grabbed the package addressed to her from Scott. Grinning, she said to him: "Now my curiosity will be appeased." Un-wrapping the gift, she was careful to preserve the paper. (This was a trick taught to her by Phoebe - "*If you save the paper you can use it again next year*," she once said, "*no use in wasting perfectly good wrapping paper*").

Shannon gasped in surprise when she viewed the gift from Scott. It was a small figurine of a Japanese woman in a kimono, fanning herself. It was exquisite. The kimono was black with a red dragon embroidered on the sleeve. "It's lovely, Scott," she exclaimed. "Thank you very much."

"My pleasure," he smiled at her. "Now it's my turn."

From her chair by the Christmas tree, Phoebe winced as Scott ripped the wrapping paper carelessly. "Oh, well," she sighed. "That paper has seen three seasons, so I guess it doesn't matter."

Shannon flashed a smile at her great-aunt, and then returned her attention to Scott. He was gazing in wonder at the gift she had given him. It was a black turtle-neck sweater with a red dragon silk embroidered above the right breast.

He looked at her, his eyes warm. "Thank you," he said softly. "It seems we both had the same thing in mind - red dragons."

She flushed with pleasure. "It will look great with your coloring." She then continued watching the rest of the family open their presents. The morning progressed swiftly. Soon, the coffee and eggnog ran out. Shannon offered to make more in the kitchen. Mae Jensen was always given Christmas off so she could spend time with her daughter and grandchildren in Larkin City, leaving kitchen duty to members of the Larkin family.

Scott insisted on helping Shannon, so he followed her to the kitchen as she pushed the tea trolley that doubled as a holiday refreshment cart. He put on another pot of coffee while Shannon started to mix an eggnog recipe in the blender. She had already consumed one Irish coffee, which made her feel warm and content inside.

Scott wandered off in the direction of the back door, leaving Shannon in the main area of the kitchen. After a brief moment, she heard his voice. "Shannon, can you come here for a second?"

Wiping her hands on a tea towel, she walked to the back door. She came to a stop when she faced him.

"Where did that come from?" he asked her, pointing upward to the mistletoe tacked on the wood beam spanning out from the back door. "I saw it earlier and meant to ask you about it."

Shannon looked up and then laughed. "Aunt Denise enlists Kevin's help on Christmas Eve to place mistletoe above random doorways. Then Denise goads people to kiss when she catches them standing underneath it. She's a romantic at heart."

Scott's eyes darkened suddenly. "Then we have to honor tradition, don't we?"

Before she could speak, Scott stepped closer. Placing his finger under her chin, he gazed directly into her eyes as he lowered his head to take possession of her mouth. She dropped the tea towel, putting her hand on his chest as they kissed. He touched her hand and then moved it up around his neck, holding her waist with his other hand. He pulled her closer against him, where she felt the hard leanness of his body. She gasped involuntarily. He increased the pressure of their kiss, his tongue entering her mouth, caressing her with its touch. She moved her other arm around his neck, and he lifted her from the floor slightly as they continued to kiss. While his lips were gentle yet firm at the same time, it was also obvious he would not be denied. Mutual desire pulsed between them, the incinerating kiss causing her to tremble.

Shannon felt as light as a feather. Was it the Irish coffee making her feel weak at the knees? Strangely, she had no reservations about Scott's kiss. Her body seemed to take on a will of its own. She welcomed his probing tongue and hard body. For that moment, she felt secure and warm in his embrace, and suddenly very aroused.

When Scott finally released her, she was breathless. He was smiling at her, almost serene in his regard. She was struck by the look that passed between them. It was lust, certainly, but she sensed he was feeling something else. They were staring at one another as if there was a high energy charge in the room, connecting them. She felt it to her very soul, as did Scott. He could not take his eyes from her face.

"What in hell is taking so bloody long?" Sean demanded as he strode into the kitchen. He set his coffee cup on the kitchen table with a thud. "Isn't the coffee ready yet?"

Sean noticed Scott and Shannon by the back door, where they quickly moved away from one another. She bent down to retrieve the tea towel, and then smiled sweetly at her twin. "What am I? The maid of Larkin House?"

"No," Sean quipped. "You're the Madwoman of Chailiot - *La Folle de Chailiot* - or rather, the madwoman of Larkin House."

"Thanks a lot," she retorted teasingly. She glanced at Scott and asked: "Do you think me the madwoman of Larkin House?"

"No, no," he said gently, his eyes still warm. "You just have the amazing ability to drive certain people around you mad."

Sean laughed. "My thoughts exactly," he declared. "Now, come on, where's the brew? The whole family is grumbling for it."

Shannon placed the eggnog and coffee on a large tray. "It's ready," she informed him. "Just don't drink it all by yourself on the way."

Scott walked over to Shannon and took the tray away from her, placing it on the tea trolley. "It's a bit heavy," he said. His eyes sought hers. She was still flushed, a smile playing around her lips. She simply could not bring herself to look away from him.

Sean watched them, his eyebrows raised in question. *What was going on?* Both his sister and Scott were so subdued, so thoughtful. Something was definitely happening here, he decided. Shrugging, Sean took his coffee cup from the kitchen table, and then led the way back to the drawing room.

* * *

WHEN SCOTT AND SHANNON returned to the drawing room, Sean darted in front of them so they were forced to pause in the doorway. From her place on a divan, Denise

Larkin pointed to the couple with a wide grin on her face. "You're under the mistletoe," she said with glee. "Come now, honor the tradition and kiss each other."

Both Scott and Shannon looked upward. Sure enough, there was another sprig of mistletoe tacked in the doorway arch. "Is this for real?" Shannon muttered under her breath. "Sean maneuvered us to stop here on purpose. If we let him get away with it, he'll contrive to get us under all the doorways with mistletoe as the day goes on."

Scott laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "It doesn't sound like such a hardship to me. In fact, I can't think of a better way to spend Christmas - or any day, for that matter."

Rory's voice boomed from his place next to Denise on the divan. "Kiss, kiss, kiss . . ."

Soon, the rest of the family took up the chant. Embarrassed beyond reason, Shannon turned to face a grinning Scott. "You do know they expect a chaste kiss?" she told him in a quiet tone so no one else could hear her. "It's supposed to be all in good fun."

"Of course it is," he answered her, reaching over to take her hand. He leaned in slightly and gave her a closed-lip kiss for about five seconds. As he started to pull away, he suddenly leaned back in and gave her another quick kiss, squeezing her hand as he did so.

Refusing to look at her family members, who were clapping with delight, Shannon felt her face flaming as she came into the room with the tea trolley. Scott wasn't far behind her. He seemed perfectly composed, a half-smile on his lips.

"I hate all of you," Shannon hissed at her family with irritation, her face still flushed. She moved to the sideboard, placing the coffee and eggnog on the surface. She was blessedly out of earshot from the family now. Within seconds, Liam and Sean were by her side. Sean refilled his coffee cup, while Liam whispered in Shannon's ear. "The two of you haven't done it yet, have you?"

Shannon looked at her cousin with brows furrowed. "*Done it? Done what, Liam?*"

"You know - *done it*. Gone all the way?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but no, we have *not*. I've only known the man for one month, for chrissakes."

"You should do it already," Liam urged her with a smirk. "Every time you and Scott occupy the same space, it's like the room is on fire. The heat is plain as day, and I'm not the only one who's noticed, obviously."

"Mind your own affairs," Shannon replied crisply. "Your personal life isn't above reproach, so I'd be careful how you judge mine."

"Fair enough," Liam acknowledged sheepishly. He leaned over and kissed Shannon on the cheek. "You're like a little sister to me, Shan. I'm just thinking about your welfare."

"By pushing me into bed with Scott Page?" she returned quickly, one eyebrow raised.

Liam shrugged. "You're a young woman now, Shan, not a little girl. I don't think Scott is after a one-night stand or a brief fling. The man really has a thing for you, pardon the expression, and I think you feel the same way about him."

Scott was suddenly by her side, his voice low and smooth as he asked: "Did I hear someone mention my name?"

"Yes," Shannon glanced at him, her cheeks pink. "Your ears must be burning."

He smiled at her, the warmth reaching his eyes as he returned her gaze. "Why don't you tell me about it?"

Both Liam and Sean left the sideboard, re-joining the family in the main area of the drawing room. "Cowards," Shannon muttered under her breath. "They pick on me without fear, but the second you show up they scurry away like petrified little mice."

Scott chuckled as he refilled his coffee cup. "C'mon, Shannon. Tell me what Liam said to you."

She sighed, and then related her conversation with Liam word-for-word.

With one hand on his hip and the other resting on the sideboard, Scott glanced down at her, cocking his head slightly. "So what do you think about it?" he asked softly.

"About what Liam said?"

He nodded, watching her face.

"He has his opinion, just like anyone else."

Scott straightened himself slightly, but his gaze still rested on her. "Do you think I'm after a one-night stand or a brief fling?"

She met his eyes. "I can't read your mind."

He exhaled quietly. "I'm after neither from you."

"Oh?" She was surprised. Their kiss in the kitchen - just moments ago - was by no means chaste, so what was he really playing at? If he wasn't angling for a one-night stand or a brief fling, then what did he want from her?

"I want to get to know you better," he said calmly, as if reading her thoughts. "You intrigue me, Shannon. To be honest, I can't resist you and I'm weary of fighting it." He shrugged. "Contrary to what you might think about me, I'm not some sort of primitive brute who wants to drag you by your hair into my bed."

Shannon regarded him, a challenge in her eyes. "The first time you were here at the mansion - on Thanksgiving night - you told me you came and went as you pleased. You said that's the way you like your relationships." She shook her head. "I'm just not into that."

"I've changed my mind since then," he admitted without hesitation.

"Why?" she prodded.

He looked at her. "Because of you."

"How can a leopard change its spots in such a short time?" she asked suspiciously. "Especially after years of preferred habit?"

"I'd like to explain myself in detail, but later, please - when we have more privacy."

She sighed. "Okay. But trust me - I'll remind you."

"I'm sure you will," he responded dryly, then continued: "Your cousin Liam is right about one thing, though." Scott removed his hand from his hip and touched Shannon's arm. "I really do have a *thing* for you, like it or not."

She smiled. "I think I like it."

"Good." He took a sip of coffee, watching her. "Now, to the last point."

"Last point?" she repeated, puzzled.

"Should we just go ahead and *do it*, as Liam suggested? Or should we wait and *do it* when the time is right for both of us?" Scott glanced down at her again, his face serious and unreadable as he waited for her answer.

Shannon held her breath, thrilled by his gaze and steady, deep voice. "We should wait until it's right for both of us," she finally managed to say.

He smiled. "So, you agree there will eventually come a time when we'll . . . *do it*?"

"You tricked me," she accused him. Then her eyes sparkled. "Or we could just keep kissing until the house bursts into flames."

His smile widened, revealing his even white teeth. "There's that, too."

Brian approached them at the sideboard, empty coffee cup in hand. "Uh, can I get a refill?" he asked, the mirth barely hidden in his tone. "Or is this a bad time?"

Scott was quick to take the older man's cup. "Here, allow me." He refilled Brian's cup with the steaming brew on the sideboard.

Brian took the cup, taking a brief sip. "Is everything okay between the two of you?" He glanced between them. "Any problems I should know about?"

"We're good," Scott responded strongly. "Couldn't be better."

"No problems whatsoever," Shannon reassured her father.

"Nice to hear it," Brian stated with a knowing smile. Lifting his cup slightly in their direction, he turned and walked back to his seat on the divan.

Scott and Shannon looked at one another for a long moment, and then joined the rest of the family.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Special Holiday Excerpt from Chapter Eleven

*New Years Eve 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

SHANNON DRESSED WITH SPECIAL care that night. She wore her best pair of black slacks, and donned a black silk shirt she had recently bought in Larkin City. She left her hair long and flowing, with a bright yellow carnation tucked behind her left ear. Abandoning the idea of wearing high-heeled shoes, she chose instead a pair of flat-soled Japanese dress slippers with red dragons embroidered on each big toe.

"I must have a fetish with red dragons," she thought to herself as she put the finishing touches on her make-up. She rarely wore heavy cosmetics, but tonight she used eyeliner and blush. With a smile at herself in the mirror, she added a touch of rust-colored lipstick to her mouth.

She went to Dana's room, which was three doors down on the same side of the corridor. Dana usually slept in Shannon's room when she stayed over, but for New Year's Eve she'd requested her own suite. "Just in case I get lucky," she joked.

Dana had on a pair of cream-colored pants and a beige sweater, her black hair pinned behind her head and a small amount of silver shadow applied to her eyes. Shannon was surprised by how lovely Dana looked when she made the effort.

Grinning, Dana said: "Since your foxy brother found himself someone worth keeping, I decided to make a play for your cousin Liam instead. Or maybe Kevin will be open to suggestions."

Shannon laughed. "You're impossible. Why do you want a Larkin male? They're a lot of trouble, I warn you."

Dana snorted. "I'm not out to tag one permanently, make no mistake about that. However, Liam - or Kevin - are more than likely good in bed. Rumors do float in Larkin City about their individual prowess, you know."

Shannon reddened at her friend's remark. "Dana," she reprimanded. "You're shameless. Is sex all you think about?"

"It sure is," Dana replied bluntly. "When you don't get it very often, you do tend to think about it a lot."

"Well, I don't."

"I know, you're weird," Dana teased. "I've said it before. You have to be the only virgin left in Larkin City, but from what you've told me about Scott, your purity will end soon."

"It's not like that," Shannon protested. "I really like him a lot, but I just can't . . . well, you know. *Not yet.*"

Dana shook her head. "You baffle me. Scott is absolutely stunning, Shan. He's great, in fact. Are you crazy? Don't you know older men know all sorts of erotic things? He seems like a man of experience to me. I don't imagine you'd be too disappointed with him, even for your first time."

"Don't you dare tell anyone what I've told you about him," Shannon pleaded. "You know, that I think he's gorgeous and how well he kisses." She leaned her head back. "He

thrills me to my toes." She righted herself again, the frantic tone in her voice returning. "Promise me you won't say anything."

Dana looked hurt. "You know me better than that."

Shannon put her arm around her friend and apologized. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm just so awfully confused by Scott. One minute I'm positive he's showing me attention because there are no other women around to catch his eye. Then the next minute I'm thinking he really does like me because of the way he stares at me all the time. I don't know." She shook her head. "Oh, Dana, I do know that his embrace is so warm I could melt away in it."

Dana grabbed her friend by the arm. "I'll tell you what. Since I'm the outsider, I'll play the role of observer. I'll watch how he acts and talks with you as compared to others in the room. I may look like a dumb country maid, but I'm pretty damned accurate when I observe someone close enough."

Shannon's eyes brightened. "You'd do that for me?" she asked hopefully.

"Of course I would," Dana said. "After all the crap you've been through the last little while, part of which is my fault, I owe you one."

"Don't start on that," Shannon said. "You are not to blame for Mike's behavior. If you hadn't introduced us, he would have found some other way to meet me. Let's just forget about him tonight. I want to put that episode of my life to rest for good. Okay?"

"You've got it," Dana replied, her eyes watering. Composing herself, she said: "Come on, let's go downstairs. I don't want to miss anything, especially Liam and Kevin."

Laughing, the two girls left the room.

* * *

BRIAN LARKIN TURNED OVER the drawing room to the younger crowd for New Year's Eve. The elder party-goers chose the living room as their designation. Gleefully, Liam placed a record by a new rock and roll group named *Led Zeppelin* on the stereo in the drawing room, turning the volume loud. The house was decorated gaily with party favors, and every fireplace downstairs in the mansion was lit, casting a warm glow over the festive crowd. Liquor flowed freely, and boisterous laughter and talk echoed throughout the corridors.

Shannon noticed with pleasure that Scott chose to wear the black sweater she gave him for Christmas. He also wore dark dress pants and comfortable shoes. He was clean-shaven, looking completely refreshed. She giggled as she walked up to him. "People probably think we're both in mourning," she whispered in his ear. "We're the only ones wearing black."

Scott flashed a wide smile at her. "As long as people think we're together, I don't care. At least our minds are on the same wavelength regarding clothes." Leaning toward her, he added in a quiet voice: "Actually, I hid in your closet earlier and watched you dress, so I'd know what to wear to match you."

Her eyes widened. "You did?"

"No, silly," he scoffed at her, laughing. "I'm just kidding. If I'd seen you dressing, you wouldn't have gotten very far, kitten."

Blushing to the roots of her hair, she scolded him. "You're just like Sean and Dana. They only have one thing on their minds."

"With you around, what else could I possibly be thinking of?" he countered.

Deciding to ignore his remark, Shannon led Scott to the sideboard and made him a whiskey sour. He accepted it gratefully, winking at her.

Dana approached them. "You ought to see who just arrived," she said in wonder. "I've never seen her before. She looks like a model."

Shannon glanced toward the drawing room doorway and drew in her breath. There stood one of the most beautiful women she had ever seen. She was tall and slender, with feathery blonde hair that fell to her shoulders. She had high cheekbones and an aristocratic manner about her. She was wearing a blue mini-skirt with knee-high black boots, a white mink coat draped over her arm.

Scott went pale. Shannon noticed he was suddenly uneasy. She looked at him. He was staring at the strange woman, his eyes flashing with anger.

"Do you know her, Scott?" Shannon asked him.

He nodded stiffly. "Yes, I do. She's an old friend of mine from New York, but I certainly didn't invite her to the party."

The woman walked across the room, her eyes on Scott. She glided with style and elegance, not hurrying her steps for anyone. Her gaze flickered to Shannon, but then went back to Scott.

"Hello dear," the woman said enthusiastically as she came to stand in front of him. "Are you surprised to see me?" With one step she leaned forward, hugging him and planting kisses on his face.

He disengaged himself from the woman's arms with one quick movement. She stepped back, her mouth open in dramatic shock.

"Scott," she said hesitantly. "Aren't you glad to see me? I thought you would be, since you missed Christmas. I brought a present for you."

"Did I invite you?" Scott asked the woman through clenched teeth.

She looked confused. "Well, no, but I thought . . ."

"You thought wrong this time," he broke in abruptly. "If I'd wanted you here, I would have asked you."

Shannon stepped forward. "Please, Scott, it's okay," she said. "We have plenty of extra rooms. It won't be a problem if she stays."

Scott looked at Shannon in surprise. "No. Absolutely *not*."

"Why don't you introduce us, then?"

Shaking his head, Scott said politely: "Shan, this is Anita Howard. Anita, this is Shannon Larkin."

Shannon froze. Was this the "A. Howard" who wrote Scott from New York several weeks ago? Meeting the woman's eyes, she was shocked to see resentment lurking there - directed at *her*. Shannon looked closer at Anita. She was obviously older than Scott, although the age lines around her mouth did little to detract from her stunning beauty.

Forcing herself to smile, Shannon said civilly: "How do you do, Miss Howard?"

"I'm just fine, thank you," she replied coldly. "I imagine you've been keeping Scott occupied, but you don't have to worry about it now. I'll be taking good care of him tonight."

Shannon felt like she had been slapped in the face. Scott's eyes grew narrow and dark with rage. "Anita," he barked. "I'm not your property. I've gotten along quite well without you."

"I'll bet you have," Anita said with a hint of sarcasm. Her spiteful gaze fell upon Shannon. "I'm sure you've been quite entertained by this child. She's much too young for

you, Scott. I thought you'd like to have a real woman for a change."

Scott was so angry he looked ready to explode. Shannon was stunned by the woman's verbal assaults. She felt as if her insides were being torn out. Anita must be Scott's girlfriend. Shannon was furious. Scott *had* been playing with her. Since his flashy girlfriend lived in New York, he'd whiled away his time with her to ease the boredom, hoping she would fall into bed with him, another easy conquest.

Shannon was humiliated. She had to get out of the room, away from Scott and the hateful woman. She wanted to hide. Swallowing hard, she mumbled: "Excuse me, I have to leave for a minute. Please enjoy yourselves." She brushed past Scott and hurried out of the room, ignoring his calls after her.

She made her way directly to her bedroom, avoiding other guests. Once inside, she shut the door behind her and leaned against the frame. Tears streamed down her face, unchecked. How could she have been so stupid? She fell for Scott's charm like the eager virgin she was. He was probably laughing at her right now. Her only consolation was that she had *not* gone to bed with him.

Sniffing, Shannon walked over to the couch, sinking down on the cushions. She wiped the tears from her eyes, smearing mascara all over her cheeks. She could never face him again. *Never*. He had shamed her – betrayed her, hurt her. *How could he do this to her?*

Then she sat straight. *What was the matter with her?* She was acting like a child. She had no claim on Scott Page. She thought there was something special between them, but she was wrong. It was all in her imagination. She almost laughed out loud. She was feeling hurt and betrayed by something she *wished* had happened. Scott had not committed himself to her, said nothing of love in her ears. She was hurt because of it, she reasoned. She had developed a teenaged crush on him, nothing more.

Feeling a bit better, Shannon went into the bathroom and fixed her make-up. She would go back downstairs and join the party. It was a night to celebrate the New Year, not a night for depressing recriminations.

She heard her sitting room door open and close. She walked out into the bedroom. It was Dana.

"Are you okay, Shan?" Dana asked in a concerned voice, walking toward her friend.

Shannon nodded. "I'm fine. I was just on my way back downstairs. I had to fix my make-up."

Dana sat on Shannon's bed, rolling her eyes. "You missed quite a scene in the drawing room."

"What happened?" Shannon asked quickly.

"After you left the room, Scott tried to follow you," Dana began. "He was really agitated, but that woman - Anita - grabbed him and started shouting. She demanded to know if Scott was sleeping with you. She was absolutely livid. Scott tried to get free of her, but she kept yelling at him. She said if he valued their relationship he'd go back to New York with her. He told her to go to hell, and tried to leave the room again. That's when Anita stood right in front of him and shrieked: 'You're in love with that little bitch, aren't you?' Scott was dead silent for a long time. Then he said, in a real quiet voice: 'I believe I am. I think it took seeing you again to make me realize her feelings are more important to me than yours.' Well, Anita went wild. She was red in the face, in a real rage. She started slapping Scott, screaming that he was a heartless bastard. Scott grabbed her by the arms and flung her back into a chair."

Dana paused, out of breath.

"This sounds like a scene straight out of a soap opera," Shannon snapped. "Are you sure you're not making up the whole scenario in your head?"

"I swear it, Shannon," Dana insisted. "I'd never lie to you."

Shannon looked sheepish. "I know. I'm sorry. Well? Then what happened?"

"By this time, your father came into the room to see what all the shouting was about," Dana started.

Shannon grabbed her head with her hands. "Oh my God, not Daddy. Oh, Jesus."

"Let me finish," Dana said. "Scott was embarrassed. He apologized to your father and introduced Anita to him. Then he said he was taking Anita back to the airport, that he was sorry for the entire disturbance. Your father accepted the explanation, and even offered to take Anita to the airport himself. Scott declined the offer and said he would do it, that he had some things to discuss with Anita. Your father said fine and left the room. Then Scott turned to me and said: 'Please tell Shannon not to go anywhere. I have to talk to her when I get back.' I said okay. He then took Anita by the wrist, half-dragging her out of the house. She was crying and pleading with him to forgive her. He told her to shut up, that he was sending her back to New York. I heard him say, 'If you've driven that girl from me, I'll strangle you with my bare hands!' That's when they went out the front door and were gone."

Shannon sat on the bed with Dana, her face thoughtful. How easy it would be to believe Scott was in love with her. She shook her head. *No*. She refused to accept it. She would never let him betray her again.

She rose. "I've heard enough," she said quietly. "Let's go back downstairs and get drunk."

Dana touched her friend's arm. "Remember I said I'd watch you and Scott together? Well, I *was* watching you until that creepy bitch made her appearance. Do you want my opinion on the entire matter?" Before Shannon could protest, Dana held up her hand and continued. "I think Scott Page is crazy about you - which I've thought all along, anyway. When that woman arrived, he didn't exactly welcome her with open arms. He totally rejected her and is even sending her back home as we speak. Do you think he loves her?" Dana shook her head. "I don't think so. If he did, he wouldn't have treated her that way. Just look at the way he treats *you*, Shan. He is warm and gentle and considerate. His eyes never left your face for two seconds tonight if he could help it. I'm telling you, Virgin Mary, the man is in love with you. And it ain't a *wham-bam* kind of love, either."

Shannon squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't want to hear anymore," she said firmly. "I refuse to believe it, Dana. So let's just drop it, okay?"

"But, Shan . . ."

"Drop it, Dana," Shannon snapped. "I don't want to listen to any more. I'm going back to the drawing room to get completely bombed. Are you coming with me?"

Dana nodded agreement, a sad look on her face. She felt it wiser not to talk about Scott with Shannon, at least not tonight. She stood. "Let's go, then," she tried to sound cheerful. "I still have to corner Liam - or Kevin."

Shannon smiled faintly at her friend. "Maybe someone will get lucky in this house tonight."

* * *

SCOTT WAS ANGRIER THAN he had ever been before. He simply could not believe Anita had done such a thing to him. It was out of character for her. After leaving the mansion, he practically shoved her into the rental car she had driven from the airport. She was sobbing, pleading with him to listen to her. Instead, he got into the driver's seat and started the engine. He rammed his fist onto the dashboard furiously, cursing her. "God damn you. What right did you have, coming here uninvited? I told you not to come, for Christ's sake. Are you just plain stupid?"

"Scott, listen to me," Anita begged. "Remember all the times I visited you on job sites in the states? You never seemed to mind then. Why should I think any differently now? Why are you so upset?"

"All those other times I invited you to come and see me, didn't I?" he asked coldly.

"Yes," she stammered. "But I . . ."

"Did I invite you this time?"

"No."

"Why in the hell are you here then?"

When Anita did not answer him, he shoved the car in drive and pulled away from the house. He had not bothered to grab a coat in his haste, and he was cold. He flipped on the car heater.

Anita started sniffing. In a timid voice, she finally asked him: "Don't you want to see me anymore?"

Scott glared at her. "No, I don't, Anita. Not in the way you want."

She gasped, taken off guard by his response. She wasn't expecting him to fully reject her. True to her nature, she recovered quickly. "If I ask you something, will you answer me honestly?"

"I'll try," he replied curtly.

"Are you in love with Shannon Larkin?"

"Yes, I am. Like I told you, I finally realized it tonight."

"Does she know how you feel?"

"No," Scott snapped. "And thanks to your performance, she may never let me talk to her again." He hit his hand on the steering wheel. "Damn it, she has to listen to me."

Anita hung her head. "I'm sorry, Scott. I really am. I didn't realize what was going on at first, but when I walked into that room tonight and saw you with her, I could tell right away she was different for you. I was jealous, Scott."

He sighed, glancing at her. "Why in the hell were you jealous? We've had an open relationship for years. Why the jealousy now?"

Anita shook her head. "It's not the kind of jealousy you think it is. What caused my envy was the way you were *looking* at her, Scott. You've never looked at me like that, or anyone else I've seen you with. It wrenched my heart. I knew anything you felt for me was nothing compared to her." Pausing, she bit her lip, her voice cracking. "It's the kind of look I haven't seen too many times in my life. It was like nothing else existed for you except *her*. And she was looking at you the same way. I just cracked up. I saw everything I ever had with you dissolving before my eyes."

He grimaced. "Look, Anita, I'm sorry," he said uneasily, not really caring about her feelings at the moment. "I didn't plan any of this. I didn't leave you in New York last November with it in my head to come here and fall hard on my ass for a nineteen-year-old

girl. It happened, that's all I can say. And I'm sorry if it hurts you."

She was smiling now, despite her tears. "Somehow, I'm elated you've found her. At least I know you'll be happy. I was just hoping for a little more time with you."

Scott groaned. "You say I'll be happy? I just pray Shannon will listen to what I have to say without throwing something at me."

Anita looked lovingly at him. "If she doesn't listen to you, she's crazy. I'd give anything to hear you say you were in love with me. I think she'll listen, Scott. She's probably going to be angry for awhile, but she'll listen. What is so ironic about this situation is that you are the only man I've ever really loved. You're a stud in bed and you have a wonderful personality to go along with it. Plus you're a good friend. I've always valued you above anyone else. I'm going to miss you."

Scott was silent as he parked the car at the Larkin City Airport. He helped Anita with her baggage, and walked her through the airport. "There's a flight to New York City in one hour," he told her. "That's not too long for you to wait by yourself, so I'm going back to the mansion."

Anita touched his arm as they walked into the waiting area at Gate 4. "Thank you, Scott," she said, her eyes misting. "I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused. Please tell Shannon that, too. If you ever feel like talking, you know my number."

Scott hugged her lightly. "I'll see you. Take care." He turned on his heel and walked away from her.

Anita watched him go, her face sad. He was walking out of her life and she knew it. She sat down wearily in the waiting lounge. Setting her own feelings aside for a moment, she had a hunch that the depth of emotion running between Scott and Shannon was bigger than both of them put together, and neither of them realized it yet.

* * *

SHANNON WAS GETTING PLEASANTLY drunk with Dana, Kevin, Liam, Sean and Marianne Chamberlain. They were sitting around the fireplace in the drawing room. Kevin persuaded a friend to manage The Coven for the night so he could celebrate the New Year with his family.

When Shannon and Dana returned downstairs, everyone was studiously tactful in not mentioning the scene between Scott and Anita Howard. Shannon said nothing of the matter, and threw herself into the party with vigor. However, every time she heard the front doors open and close she jumped. So far Scott had not returned. *What did she care anyway?* She asked herself angrily. But she *did* care, which angered her further.

At ten-forty-five, the front doors opened and shut again. Shannon stiffened. She glanced at the doorway of the drawing room and felt a rush flow through her stomach. *There he was!* And he was staring directly at *her*. Scott looked cold, rubbing his hands together for warmth and then blowing into them. Without a word, he strode to the sideboard and poured himself a generous helping of brandy. He walked over to the group and stood with his back to the fire. He took a large gulp of brandy and looked at the silent faces in front of him, who were watching him warily.

"Don't stop talking on my account," Scott said mockingly. "I'm freezing to death. As soon as I've warmed myself, I'll be more sociable." He turned to Sean. "Can you follow me to the airport tomorrow in your truck? I need to return the rental car I drove back here."

Sean nodded. "I'll be glad to. Just say the word."

Awkwardly, the group started talking again, except for Shannon. She kept her eyes riveted on Scott. He was looking back at her over the rim of his brandy glass, his eyes expressionless. He drained the rest of the brandy and set his glass on the mantle.

"Shannon," he said gruffly. The German diction seemed more pronounced in his voice at the moment, which made him appear especially intimidating.

She raised her eyebrows, refusing to be cowed. "Yes?" she replied, her voice leaden with sarcasm. "I'm right here as you can plainly see."

Scott's eyes darkened. "I need to talk to you privately. *Right now.*"

"I'm sorry," she said, with exaggerated politeness. "I'm rather busy at the moment."

"*Now!*" he growled, his eyes flashing dangerously.

Shannon glared at him. The group fell silent again, their attention focused on the couple. For once, neither Sean or their cousins were coming to her defense. They refused to meet her eyes.

"Do you need your brother or your cousins to talk for you?" Scott snapped, sensing her thoughts. "I'm not a monster, Shannon. I have to explain a few things to you."

Her eyes squinted in anger. "I told you, I'm busy. Now leave me alone."

Without a word, Scott strode over to her swiftly. He grabbed her by the wrists and dragged her to her feet. He then proceeded to pick her up in his arms.

"Let me down at once," she hissed into his face.

"My kitten has her claws out," Scott stated flatly. "You're going to hear what I have to say, whether you like it or not. If I have to force you to listen, I will."

Shannon ground her teeth together in annoyance. Because of the way he was holding her, his face was barely an inch away from hers. His sleepy hazel eyes never left her for a second. It was a struggle of two very strong wills, she realized. Finally, she ground out: "Put me down and I'll listen to you. We don't need another scene tonight. Let me down, I tell you. I'll listen to what you have to say."

Scott set her down promptly. She grabbed her drink from the coffee table, her eyes defiant. "Well? *Talk,*" she demanded.

"I want to talk to you in private," he grated. "Let's go upstairs."

She started to protest, but thought better of it. Turning to her twin and her cousins, she said scathingly: "Thanks a lot, guys. You'll have to excuse me for a minute."

Liam looked sheepish, while Kevin refused to meet her angry gaze. Sean dared to look at his twin sister. He shrugged his shoulders. "Scott is a bit too intimidating for us," he told her frankly. "Besides, he's not going to harm you."

With a look of disgust on her face, Shannon turned back to Scott. "Where would you like to go?" she asked.

"Upstairs," he said curtly, taking her by the hand and dragging her behind him. She was growing more furious by the moment. Scott did not stop until he was on the fourth floor. He went into her sitting room, slamming the door shut behind them. He let go of her hand.

"Sit down," he commanded.

"I don't . . ."

"I said sit down," he repeated, his tone steely and unmoving.

Shannon decided to obey him. She sat down on the couch, watching him with a frown on her face. He stood in front of her, hands on his hips. He looked so angry . . . *what*

right did he have to be angry? She had done nothing to him. *He* was the one at fault for the evening's muddle.

"Are you ready to listen to me?" he asked her.

"All ears," she quipped.

"Don't be a god damned smart ass," he warned her. "You're still young enough and little enough for me to take you over my knee and give you a good whacking."

Her eyes grew large. She did not doubt he would do just that if she antagonized him further. She leaned back into the couch and propped her feet on the coffee table. "Sorry. Go ahead," she said quietly.

Scott started to pace in front of her, occasionally glancing at her. "I want to tell you about Anita."

"God almighty," Shannon swore. "You dragged me here to talk about your girlfriend?"

"Anita is not my girlfriend - not in the way you think. She's only a small part of what I want to talk to you about. For chrissakes, just *listen to me*."

Shannon crossed her arms in front of her, a bored expression on her face. "Whatever you say," she said wearily.

"I've known Anita for about four years," he told Shannon, beginning to pace again. "I'll be honest and tell you we've slept together. I'm a man of thirty, and you won't find many chaste men around my age, unless they're priests. But it's not what you think with Anita. The only time I saw her was when I passed through New York. A few times she visited me on job sites in the states. Shannon, I have never been in love with her. We have more of a friendship than anything else."

Taking another deep breath, he continued: "Lately, however, she's been hinting toward a more permanent relationship with me. I told her I wasn't interested in making any changes to our arrangement. It sort of drove her to desperate measures. When I didn't go to New York to be with her for Christmas she really panicked, and that's why she came here. When I drove her back to the airport a little while ago, she told me to tell you she apologized for her behavior. She said she realized when she walked in here tonight that it was over for her."

Shannon raised a questioning eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

Scott groaned, bringing a halt to his pacing. He stood in front of her again. "Why do you think I didn't go to New York for Christmas?" he asked her patiently.

"I'll be damned if I know. Why?"

"Because of you, kitten."

She was still puzzled. "Because of me?" she asked, amazed. "I still don't understand."

With a weary sigh, Scott came over to the couch and sat next to her. He positioned himself so that his hand held fast against the back of the couch, his knees touching her thigh. She did not move her feet from the coffee table, steeling herself against the tingling sensations in the pit of her stomach. *What was he going to say?*

Scott leaned toward her. The intense look in his eyes frightened her. The green color had darkened, and his expression was serious. She began to tremble slightly.

"Shannon," he said softly. "I'm new at this. I've never done it before, so if I screw it up, be patient with me." He paused. "Can't you tell that I'm crazy about you? Can't you sense how much in love with you I am?"

Her mouth dropped open. *In love with her?* Her mind simply could not soak it in. She

wasn't certain if he was being honest, or if he was playing some sort of cruel game with her. She wanted so much to believe him, but his words terrified her into speechlessness. His declaration also made her question her own feelings. How did she feel about *him*? Was it a passing fancy, or was it real? Would she forget about him in a month? She had her doubts. He was much too impressive to forget. She closed her eyes to escape his intent gaze. *Was he really in love with her?* She could not understand what he saw in her. He was older and much more experienced. Surely he preferred mature women - like Anita - and not some nineteen-year-old girl. The notion was crazy.

"Shannon," Scott said. "I can see you analyzing this, like you do everything else. Why can't you just accept it?"

She looked at him blankly.

"Are you okay?" he asked in concern.

Her eyes filled with fear. "I don't know," she stammered. "I can't really believe . . ."

"Don't you believe what I just told you?" he asked sternly.

"I'm not sure."

He grabbed her gently by the shoulders. She dropped her feet to the floor from the coffee table. "Please believe me," he pleaded. "I meant every word I said. *I'm in love with you*. I didn't realize it until tonight. I find myself thinking about you constantly, even when I try to work. That's never happened to me before, never in my life. Tonight I discovered what my feelings are all about. When Anita walked into the house, my mind was completely on you, not her. I could have cared less she was even here. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

Shannon looked at him again, confusion in her eyes.

Scott drew back from her. "I think I've frightened you. You look like you've seen a ghost. Have I done all this too fast for you?" Peering at her, he added softly: "How do you feel about *me*, kitten?"

She moistened her lips nervously, her eyes darting around the room. "I'm not sure I can explain it to you so you'll understand . . ."

"Try me," he prodded her.

She glanced at him. "Okay. Do you promise you won't laugh at me?"

"I promise."

She began softly, as if she were afraid to speak. "Every time you kiss me, I feel so funny inside. Like . . . Like . . ." she groped for the words she wanted to use. "Like a warm rush. It leaves me feeling so weak. But that's not it. I really enjoy talking with you, and I think you're funny and smart. I really admire the way you work. You take it seriously, but then afterward you're so much fun. I love your smile. I can't wait to see you every day, and I think about you constantly, too. How do I say this? *You really matter to me*. I can't imagine not having you in my life."

Scott was silent for a moment, his eyes seeming to assess her. Finally, he asked: "Do those feelings tell you anything?"

"I don't know," she said desperately. "It's all so crazy. I have no idea what it means. Honestly, if I did, I'd tell you."

He reached out a hand and caressed her jaw bone. "I think what you need is time," he told her. "You need to think about things and decide for yourself what they mean. Only you can decide what you want, but at least you know how I feel about it. Do you believe me?"

"I do believe you," she said slowly. "I really do, but I can't understand why."

Scott put his finger to her lips. Smiling, he said: "I'll tell you why someday, but not right now. I'm not crazy enough to expose my feelings to you entirely – not just yet, anyway."

"Thank you, Scott. I'm sorry I acted so stupidly."

"I probably would have reacted the same way if an old boyfriend of yours did what Anita did tonight," he admitted. He took hold of her hand and looked at her wristwatch. "It's two minutes after twelve," he said. "Can I kiss in the new year with you? I promise to behave."

Shannon smiled shyly. "Yes, you can kiss me."

With tenderness, he drew her into his arms and pulled her close. He lowered his lips onto hers, kissing her gently and slowly. She responded in kind, closing her eyes. True to his promise to behave, Scott moved away from her after a moment.

"Thank you, Shannon," he said, his voice husky. "Why don't we go downstairs and join the others?"

She smiled. "Sean probably thinks you've dishonored me. He may be lurking out in the corridor waiting for us right now."

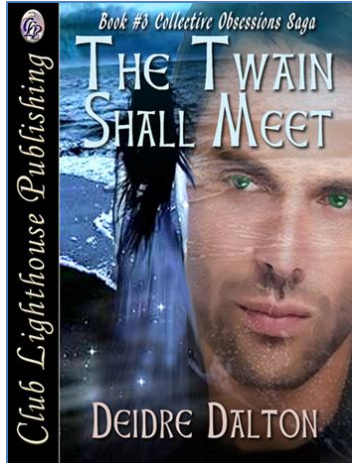
Scott laughed. "I'll have to have a serious talk with your twin brother one of these days," he declared, helping her stand. "He's like a mother hen around you."

She grabbed his hand. "Let's go down before they drink all the liquor."

Scott allowed Shannon to precede him out of the room. He sighed as he walked along the corridor. He felt so much better, having told Shannon how he felt about her. With a frown, he realized it was up to her to make the next move.

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EXTRAS:

Collective Obsessions Saga @ Facebook:

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

"Collective Obsessions Saga" website:

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

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

For more, visit Deidre's website: <https://deborahotoole.com/deidredalton/>