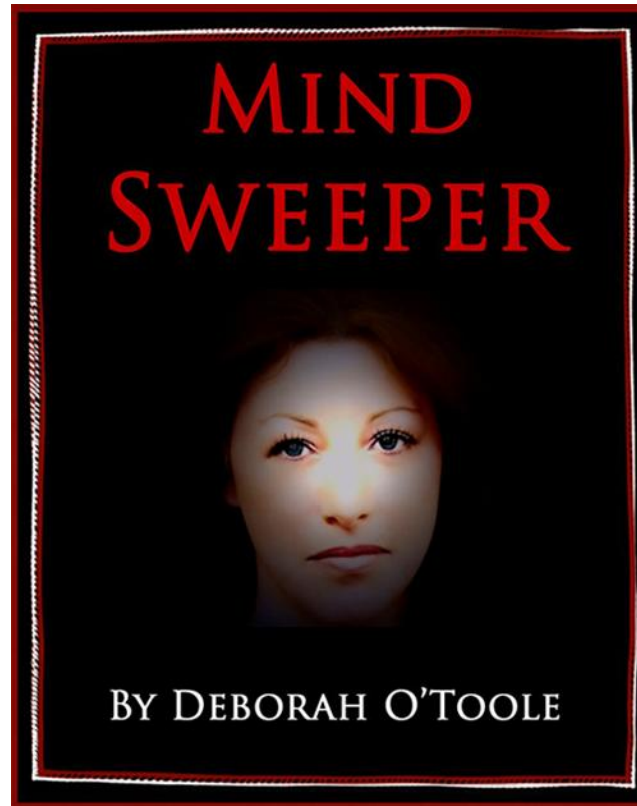


Excerpts from:
MIND SWEEPER

By Deborah O'Toole



"Mind Sweeper" is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental and beyond the intent of the author.

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ABOUT "MIND SWEEPER"

Mind Sweeper by Deborah O'Toole is a uniquely haunting mystery/suspense novel now available in Kindle, Kobo and Nook editions.

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

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**MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter One**

June 2007

Timely Cataclysm

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let me take you," he suggested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bethany and Aaron were a familiar sight in Ivytown. They regularly attended church services and community events, typically holding hands and conversing freely with the locals. Aaron was a native son of Ivytown and highly thought of as a natural leader and a man with a highly compassionate nature. He volunteered countless hours of personal time

to the Community Center, often with Bethany in tow. His loss was a great blow to the close-knit mining town.

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

"Aaron was such a wonderful man..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Five**

June 2007

Nightmare Inauguration

THE NIGHTMARES BEGAN the week after Aaron's funeral.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

There was a fat streak of mud under her feet, the combination of two very large footprints. A faint sprinkle of black dust surrounded the prints, spread on each side. Then she detected the faint stench of *Aqua Velva*, barely a wisp of scent but unmistakably present.

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

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

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

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

**MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Eight**

*January 2001
Life in Ivytown*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beth said nothing, turning her head away slightly. How could she tell Roger there would be no more children? That Aaron didn't want kids because he was afraid she would become fat? Or was Roger already aware of Aaron's peculiarities, having the good grace not to mention them?

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

He leaned closer. "Sorry?"

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

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

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

Roger was silent for a moment, an expression of confusion flickering across his face. "Then what happened?" he asked her at length.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ever begin to possibly forgive him? How can I stay with him now, knowing the kind of monster he truly is?"

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

**MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Ten**

2002-2003

Life in Ivytown

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The crowd "oohed" and "ahhed."

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beth trained Gaby, although she had no formal guidance to help her. The puppy was a naturally loving and curious companion, who grew to be protective of Beth and mildly accepting of Aaron. For his part, Aaron occasionally gave Gaby a pat on the head, or a bloody steak bone. Beth began to relax somewhat, seeing their little family as complete, but never lost her ability to see the warning signs that usually precipitated an attack by her husband.

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

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

**MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Thirteen**

*August 2007
Hidden Traces*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Drat!” she muttered. “I don’t have a change of clothes for tomorrow.”

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

“I think I’ll take a shower just the same.”

“I’ll go and order us dinner from the café downstairs. Do you have any preferences?”

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

“I’ll be back before you know it.”

After he left, Beth took a long shower, washing away the tumultuous events of the day. She dreaded putting her old clothes back on, so she wrapped herself in the large terrycloth robe provided to guests by the Lodge. She ran her hands through her short hair to remove the tangles, and then stepped out of the bathroom.

Morgan was sitting at the table by the window, unpacking food from a large brown paper bag. He set two white take-out containers on either side of the table, and then placed

napkins and plastic utensils in the middle. There was also two styrofoam cups in the middle of the table, which she assumed held water or soda.

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

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

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

"You shouldn't have..."

"Go try them on," he urged her.

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

"Thank you," she said when she joined Morgan at the table. "They *do* fit – how did you know?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you nervous about going inside?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I do."

"But I haven't worked in years..."

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

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

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

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

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

"I trust you," she said emphatically.

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

"Good night, Morgan."

He left the room, closing the door behind him.

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

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

MIND SWEEPER:
Excerpt from Chapter Fourteen

August 2007

One More Aaron Night, with Feeling

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Bob shook his head. "How would anyone else know the work schedule? I set the timetables, after which they are maintained by shift supervisors. The actual workers don't

know where they're going in the mine from day to day, at least not until they report for their shift."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I have no intention of *not* cooperating," Bob told Gibson. "I want answers just as much as you do."

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

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

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

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

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

It was simply inconceivable.

"MIND SWEEPER" INFORMATION

Mind Sweeper by Deborah O'Toole is available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Kobo Books.

Amazon (*Kindle edition*):

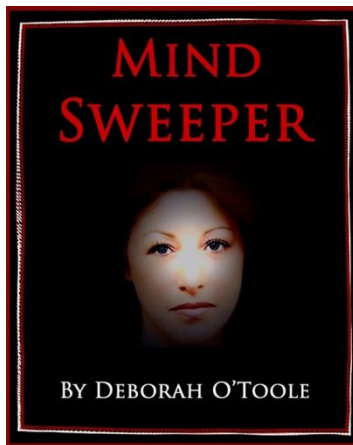
<http://www.amazon.com/dp/B0053HHIKU/>

Barnes & Noble (*Nook edition*):

<http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/mind-sweeper-deborah-otoole/1102802196>

Kobo Books (*multiple formats*):

<http://www.kobobooks.com/ebook/Mind-Sweeper/book--R4gSpiUTUyCIFxn55AlyA/page1.html>



BOOK DETAILS

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Mind Sweeper (official web site):

<http://deborahotoole.tripod.com/msweeper/index.htm>

Mind Sweeper @ Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mind-Sweeper/318244838202188>

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

In addition, she writes short-story Juvenile Fiction (*Short Tales Collection*) and darkly abstract Poetry, and is the author of a series of historical essays, articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and dark obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a magnificent seaside mansion in Maine. Books in the eight-part family saga include *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*.

Also writing as Deidre Dalton, she is author of the "Bloodline Trilogy," which follows the mysterious and magical journey of one family through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*.

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, she also writes for the cooking/recipe web site Food Fare. She is writer and co-editor of the *Ambrosia Cookbook*, *Breakfast Cookbook*, *Community Garden Cookbook*, *Food Fare Cookbook*, *Furry Friends Cookbook*, *Larkin Community Cookbook*, *Quirky Snacks Cookbook*, *Recipes-on-a-Budget Cookbook* and the *Soups & Stews Cookbook*, along with more than forty titles in the exclusive *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.



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