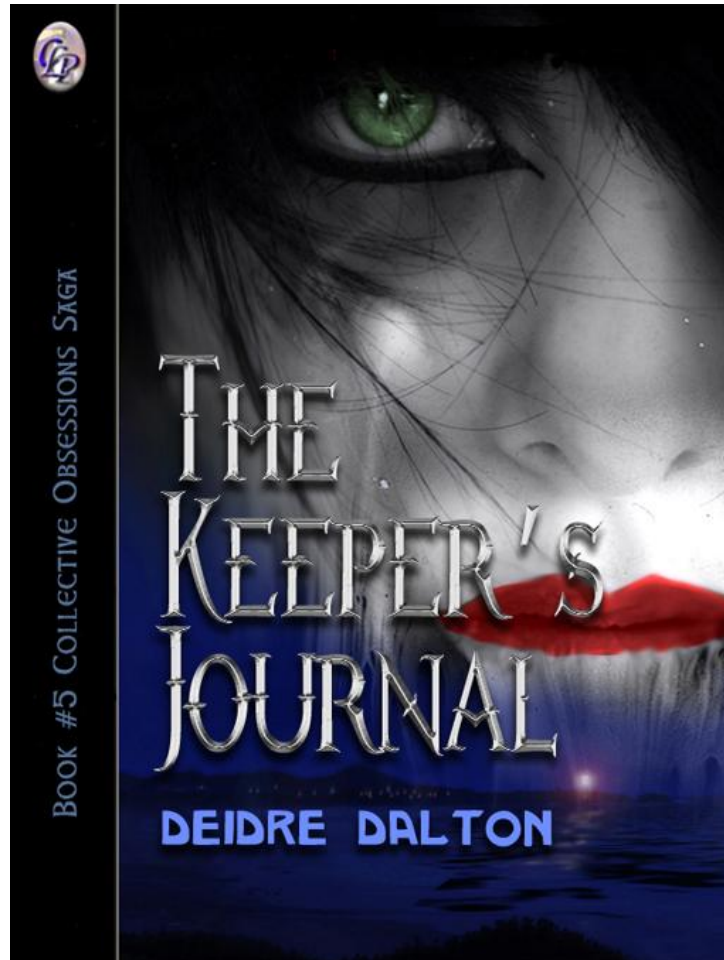


Excerpts from:
The Keeper's Journal

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #5 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Publishing/Historical Romance Edition

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ABOUT "THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL"

The Keeper's Journal by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the fifth book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in December 2012.

Shannon Larkin is forced to confront demons from her past, while her daughter Angie discovers Colm Sullivan's journal in the old lighthouse keeper's cottage. The diary sheds light on the history between the Larkin and Sullivan families, but may be too late to stop the sisters of Mike Sullivan from wreaking vengeance on the Larkin family for sins and tragedies of the past...

Shannon Larkin is forced to confront demons from her past. Her yearly visit to Mike Sullivan's gravesite strains her marriage to Scott Page, but she finds herself unable and unwilling to forget Mike's memory.

Shannon's daughter Angela Page finds love with her new boss Tom Cimorelli, a New York City newspaper editor.

While on assignment, Angela discovers Colm Sullivan's journal in the old lighthouse keeper's cottage. The diary sheds light on the history between the Larkin and Sullivan families, but may be too late to stop the sisters of Mike Sullivan from wreaking vengeance on the Larkin family for sins and tragedies of the past.

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL: Excerpt from Chapter One

December 1994
Larkin City, Maine

SHANNON PAGE STOOD ON the balcony, drinking in the spectacular view that met her eyes. She never tired of looking out across the vast expanse of her family's estate, or beyond to Larkin City. It was best seen at night, with the winking conurbation of lights growing closer as the city grew larger. It was a sight she beheld her entire life, and she marveled at her good fortune. She knew, when the time came, she would die here, too.

She was now forty-four years old, but had changed little over the last twenty years. Her hair was still dark and long, although she kept it in French braids most of the time, with a few strands of gray at the temples. Scant age lines appeared under her dark eyes, and of late she had taken to wearing glasses while reading or sewing. However, spectacles seemed to accent her good looks rather than detract from them.

She stepped forward and leaned over the balcony railing. Through the morning mist, she could see the lighthouse on Banshee Point. She kept her eyes on the lighthouse, noting its beauty and singular simplicity. Logistically, the lighthouse covered eight miles of shoreline. Besides rocky pathways, the structure was also surrounded by tall weeds, blueberry patches, cedar trees and large pine stands. It was also a lookout point for whale watching and birding, usually Puffins common to the area. Now that the lighthouse was automated, the old bronze bell once used sat encased on the lawn of the keeper's cottage. It had an excellent view from its perch on the crest of a hill.

She turned and walked back into her bedroom, closing French doors that led to the balcony. It was cool inside the mansion. She hurried over to her closet and grabbed a light sweater.

Every morning, Shannon and her husband Scott Page awoke early in their private suite at the Larkin mansion. Since their two children were grown, they were able to take their time as they readied themselves for the day. The couple shared a large bedroom, with an adjacent bathroom well equipped with a Jacuzzi, glassed-in shower and several closets. The counter, which housed double sinks and a long mirror below a porthole window, also left room for the makings of a fresh pot of coffee - the first order of the day for them.

Shannon kept it simple. She preferred the drip method of brewing, so she used a ten-cup Mr. Coffee machine. A long-time devotee of *Chock Full o'Nuts*, she ground the coffee beans fresh every morning. Underneath the sink was a small refrigerator, and from here she removed a cream jug full of whole milk. Soon, the sound of lightly boiling water and the aroma of fresh coffee filled the room.

When the brew finished, she removed two large breakfast cups from another small cupboard under the sink with saucers to match. She placed them on an antique pewter tray, along with the glass coffee pot and cream pitcher. With everything set on the tray, she carried it back into the bedroom.

Shannon set the tray on the table in front of the French doors, opening the sheer curtains. She poured two cups of coffee, adding cream to each. She turned around and went to help Scott make their bed, neatly and quickly, as they did every morning by rote. Scott

was already dressed in blue jeans and a cream colored Irish knit sweater. He lit the pine logs in their fireplace, which gave the room a warm glow. Shannon glanced at the clock over the mantle of the fireplace. It was six-twenty.

It had been snowing for days, but this morning a light mist blanketed the estate. From a short distance away, the foghorn sounded at Banshee Point. Momentarily, the sweep of the lighthouse beam went across the lawn. It shined as it had in the past, to warn approaching ships of dangerous fog.

Scott sipped his coffee appreciatively. "Delicious as always, kitten," he said to his wife. "It beats trooping downstairs for my first cup of joe."

Shannon smiled. "You see, not all great traditions are Italian."

He grinned, enjoying her playful stab at his maternal heritage. "Don't forget," he pointed out good naturedly. "We have two children who possess Italian blood."

"So you remind me every day," she responded dryly.

They were quiet for a minute before Scott spoke again. "Angie has a job interview in New York the day after tomorrow."

"I know, she told me. Our little baby is headed for the Big Apple."

He laughed. "Shan, Angela just turned twenty-three, no longer a baby."

"She will *always* be my little baby," Shannon said stubbornly, finishing her coffee. She reached across the small table and poured herself another cup. "It's not as if she's a woman of the world, Scott. New York is a big place."

"If she gets a job at the *Manhattan Daily Journal*, she can live in our apartment near Central Park," he soothed his wife. "I've already talked to her about it. She loves the flat, anyway."

"Some flat. It has six bedrooms, for heaven's sake."

"But she'll be safe there," he pointed out. "Besides, we don't know if she'll even get the job, kitten."

"She'll get the job," Shannon predicted. "Angie is unique, and it shows in her writing. Trust me, they'll hire her."

The couple was quiet again. They continued to sip their coffee and watch the rolling mist outside their window. The mantle clock over the fireplace struck seven o'clock. She set her cup on the table. "I'll go downstairs and start breakfast," she said. "What would you like this morning?"

Scott stretched. "What I'd *really* like is to crawl back into bed with you," he teased. "But if you insist on real food, I'd love a Denver omelette with toast."

She smiled. "Easier done than said. I'll go and get started. On your way down, wake up the kids, will you? Angie loves my Denver omelette."

The foghorn sounded loudly again. Shannon stood up and removed the tray from the table. "We should go outside after breakfast," she suggested to her husband. "Let's walk down to the lighthouse in the mist."

He chuckled. "You want to visit the lighthouse keeper's cottage, don't you?"

She grinned. "It's still supplied with candles and firewood, along with a few bottles of brandy. Doesn't that sound like a wonderful way to spend the rest of the morning?"

Scott stood up. "You're a sick woman, Mrs. Page," he said, reaching over to touch her arm. "But you have a date."

She looked over her shoulder as she left the room. "You taught me everything I know." She winked at him. "I'm a creature of your own making."

He laughed as she left the room. Then he walked over to stand in front of the French doors. He could see the outline of the A-frame cottage in the distance, where he and Shannon lived for two decades and raised their children. They returned to the mansion seven years ago, resuming occupancy in Shannon's old room. Scott didn't protest, feeling compromise was one of the main ingredients of a successful marriage. Shannon agreed to live in the cottage to make him happy around the time Jamie was born, and now it was her turn. She spent most of her days at the mansion, anyway. The house was so big it was easy to achieve a great deal of personal space.

Scott turned away from the doors and went to stand in front of the fireplace, rubbing his hands together for warmth. Some things never changed, though. There was still no central heating on the upper floors of the mansion, the cost being prohibitive, even for the wealthy. He didn't mind that, either. The fireplace provided adequate warmth, as did the bed. He loved to huddle under the blankets with his wife every morning, and he never tired of being close to her on a daily basis. They were emotionally inseparable on almost every level, as if they were one person with one mind and one body. She seemed able to fixate on what he needed and when. It had only gotten better as the years passed. The feelings of love grew stronger instead of waning with time.

Stepping forward, he grabbed the wrought-iron fireplace poker and stoked the blaze in the hearth. The fire leapt up for a moment, and then settled into a steady flame.

But there was one ubiquitous element in their marriage that remained a sore point, a constant bone of contention although they rarely spoke about it. One small detail that always stood between them, however slight it seemed at times. It was one bridge they had been unable to cross - the only one in their long relationship of unconditional love.

"Mike Sullivan," Scott thought to himself as he stoked up the fire again. *"Why is it, after all of these years, his ghost still haunts us? Shannon rarely talks about it, but it's always there. Like an image one cannot touch, or eliminate. It's a part of herself she will not share. She might talk about him off and on, but she never goes deep to tell me how she felt about him, how the events from that time affected her. That is the part of her she keeps to herself, and I hate it."* He paused, the irony striking him all of a sudden. *"If it's true, and there is life after death in heaven, then that son of a bitch has probably enjoyed a good laugh all these years. The attention Sullivan craved from Shannon while he was alive has wrecked havoc on those he left in his wake for more than twenty years."*

Scott stepped away from the fireplace. Dismissing Sullivan from his mind, he decided today was for him and Shannon. They would breakfast with their family, and then take a walk down to the lighthouse. He was alive and Shannon was his wife, the mother of his children. Those were things the past, or the ghost of Mike Sullivan, could never take away.

Smiling, he replaced the poker in the stand by the fireplace and left the room. The mist continued to swirl outside, accentuated by the blasting foghorn and the sweeping sea beacon. The pine logs in the hearth crackled, while bits of wood and ash fell under the grate, making a hissing sound.

THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL: Excerpt from Chapter Nine

July 1995
Larkin City, Maine

SHANNON DECIDED TO CUT fresh roses to put on the dining room table that evening. She was sorry Tom had to leave so suddenly, but was confident he would be back soon to continue his work with Angie. Shannon was highly pleased by the obvious closeness developing between her daughter and Tom. He was absolutely perfect for her, not only physically, but intellectually as well. They thought the same way, were interested in the same things. Whereas Angie could be impulsive at times, Tom had the steadying hand of maturity and experience. *"Just like Scott and me,"* Shannon thought. *"When we met, I was young and emotionally unstable. And here came Scott - mature and wise, and definitely highly sexed."*

She smiled as she walked onto the terrace. She stooped in front of one of the larger rose bushes, setting her basket and clippers down on the cobblestone walkway. She looked at the roses, parting some of the branches to get a better look at the healthiest blooms. She loved roses at the dining table. In fact, she loved them anywhere in the house. Their scent was heady, and their stark red beauty was as intense as the color of blood.

She paused in her inspection. Why in the world had she made such a comparison? *That the red of the roses was like blood?* But they were, she reasoned, continuing with her inspection. The roses were the color of blood. She reached down and retrieved her garden clippers. She snipped off a few stems, placing them in her wicker basket. She felt light-headed all of a sudden. She clipped off a few more rose stems, taking a deep breath. A phrase kept pushing itself into the forefront of her thoughts, making her suddenly uneasy.

"Blood and roses," she thought slowly. *"Why am I thinking that? What is blood and roses? What does it mean? Blood. Intertwined blood. Intermingled? What is the word I'm trying to find? Nothing makes any sense."*

She clipped a few more stems, and then stopped. Her wicker basket was full of roses. She took the last stem and accidentally pricked herself with one of the thorns. She dropped the rose in the basket and stared down at her finger. There was a dot of blood forming where she punctured herself. *Nothing serious.* She brought her finger to her mouth and sucked gently. The bleeding stopped quickly, so she bent over to pick up the basket.

She paused, hearing footsteps on the cobblestone path. The breeze was blowing the rose branches lightly about, making a rustling sound as they moved. She glanced back toward the open French doors that led into the drawing room. She could hear voices. It sounded like Scott and Sean, talking. The soft glow from the lamps in the drawing room cast a shadow in front of the French doors on the terrace. Then she heard footsteps again, as if someone was walking on the cobblestone path nearby.

Rather than becoming frightened, Shannon was angry. She walked toward the sound of the noise, rounding a curve in the path that led further into the garden. She only went a few steps before coming to a halt in front of a rose bush planted off the path. Her eyes widened in shock as she looked at the bush. *"Oh, God, not again,"* she thought. *"Who keeps doing this?"*

The rose bush had been completely hacked down, its branches scattered on the path. It looked like someone had taken an axe to do the job - just like they had the first time. Shannon glanced down at the path to see if she could detect any footprints, but there were none. The walkway was clean.

"Who's there?" She demanded out loud. "Come out and show yourself to me."

The only sound was the breeze wafting through the garden. She set her jaw. She wanted the blatant vandalism put to a stop. Someone was invading the private property of the Larkin estate, and she wanted them found. She was furious.

Both Scott and Sean looked up when Shannon entered the drawing room through the French doors. Neither man could mistake the anger present on her face. Sean knew from one glance, having been close to his twin all of his life. She was absolutely livid about something. Scott could tell more by his wife's body language - she was rigid and extremely irate.

She walked over to the two men by the sideboard. Each of them had a drink in their hand, watching her as she approached, their mouths slightly open. She set her wicker basket down on the sideboard and then poured herself a glass of wine. She took it down in one swallow.

Scott set his glass down. "Shannon, what's wrong?"

She glared at him. "Someone has been hacking up the rose bushes again."

"What do you mean, *again*?" Scott asked.

"A week ago Shannon went out into the garden and found one of the rose bushes destroyed," Sean explained.

"The rose bush I just found was *fine* earlier," Shannon snapped, pouring herself another glass of wine. "I watered the garden this morning. Everything was in order then."

Scott glanced at Sean. "Do you have any idea who is doing this?"

Sean shook his head. "No. Whoever it is, they appear to be using a rather sharp axe. The cuts are clean. I just don't get it. I can't figure who'd want to do something like this. I'm sure it's not one of the kids. It can't be a maid, either, Shannon, if the rose bush was in one piece this morning. The maids left yesterday."

Shannon sat down on a divan nearby, her wine glass in hand. "I know. That's why it's making me so damned mad. Someone is doing this deliberately."

Scott looked puzzled. "But who else is there? Who could be so viciously destructive?"

"I don't know," Sean said. "I'm going to go and take a look. I'll clear up the mess after dinner, Shan. Maybe I should look into a sensor alarm system for the rose garden on Monday. Do you think?"

"Yes," Shannon replied, sipping her wine. She was still irritated. "I'll even pay for it. I put too much work into the garden to just let some wing nut come in and hack the bushes down one by one."

Scott agreed. "We should have some sort of alarm outside of the house, anyway. I'll go with Sean on Monday and we'll find something." He looked at Sean. "Let's go and take a look in the garden."

Sean nodded, making his way toward the French doors. Scott paused to give his wife a kiss on the cheek. "It's okay, kitten. We'll put a stop to this, one way or another."

She had calmed somewhat. "Thank you," she said, touching his hand. "You go ahead with Sean. I'm going to go check on dinner, and put the roses on the table."

Scott left the room by the French doors, but Shannon remained seated on the divan. The incident in the rose garden irritated her, but she was also disturbed by the thoughts that ran through her mind while she was alone in the garden. They came to her from nowhere. *Blood and roses?* She thought hard for several minutes, staring into the contents of her wine glass. Gradually, her face began to pale, as if the blood was draining from her face one drop at a time. Her eyes grew wide with fear. Her skin started to tingle, and it was decidedly not a pleasant tingle. It was very *unpleasant*. Images flashed in her mind, past remnants coming forward from where they had been hidden for so many years. It held her mobilized, the wine glass still in her hand. She stared straight ahead, her eyes fixed. The eerie wisps kept slamming through her, almost making her sick to her stomach. It was as if the sensations were taking her to a different place, and her physical presence on the divan in the drawing room almost seemed secondary. She felt like she was looking at herself from some other location, desperately wanting to get back. But her thoughts were holding her, and even though she tried to will herself to shake the mood, she was unable.

Her eyes travelled to the portrait of Molly Larkin, to the left of the cold fireplace. Molly stared out from the gold frame holding her image, riding crop in hand as she sat on a large rock, the lighthouse in the background. Shannon's eyes grew unfocused as she stared at the picture of her ancestor. Through the blur of her own making, Shannon felt as if Molly was staring at her from behind muted light. She looked angry, her dark eyes hatefully furious.

"Destiny," Molly hissed through clenched teeth. She was a portrait after all. How could her lips be moving? And then Shannon saw Mike, coming from behind Molly in the portrait, young and handsome but with a look of pure evil on his face. He was angry, too. But why? Molly and Mike functioned in the same frame, seemingly unaware of each other. Shannon felt pressure building in her head, as if her brain was about to explode.

"This isn't happening," she thought hazily. *"It can't be. Have I lost my mind?"*

Then Mike began to fade from Molly's portrait, retreating behind her toward the lighthouse. He looked over his shoulder at her, laughing and calling her name.

"Shannon," he entreated. "Don't forget our destiny. It's all about the blood, and the roses..."

Blood and roses. They had been destined from the start. Their destiny was bound to stay on its course. They were tied together by blood. *And roses?* The past was the past, but nothing in the future could change the events of history. It was a spiraling nightmare that was speeding out of control, and Shannon could not find the brakes. Mike always had the last word, and she felt a flash of anger in her dream-like state. *That damned letter.* He was like a moth to the light, forever trying to get to the radiance even though it would kill him when he finally got close enough. But he knew that all along, too, and it didn't stop him. He kept pushing and pushing, never giving up. And he had reason not to surrender, she told herself stubbornly, because he knew the truth of what tied them together. She tried to bury it with him, but he never let her do so. He was always there, reminding her, whether he was dead or alive.

She shook her head, coming out of her reverie. She finished the wine in her glass and set it down on the coffee table. She closed her eyes, Mike's letter flashing in her mind. She recalled the end part of the letter, word for word, as he had written it:

I cannot apologize for what I have done. I just can't help it. I would do it over and over again if I could. But, like I said, if you are reading this, I am in a place where I cannot get to

you. At least, not yet. It seems like when my eyes are closed, I still see you. When I'm wide awake, I still dream about you. It never changes...

"And is never forgotten," Shannon whispered to herself on the divan.

She heard Sean and Scott walking on the terrace. They were coming back into the house. She quickly stood up and went over to the sideboard, refilling her wine glass. She felt a bit weak, physically, but she could sense the color coming back into her face. Blood was returning to her face. *The intertwined blood.* Sipping more wine, she returned to the divan, sitting back down.

When Scott and Sean entered the drawing room, Shannon was reclining on the divan, watching them as they approached.

"Did you see the rose bush?" she asked them.

"Yes," Scott replied, going over to the sideboard. "Whoever is doing this knows how to handle an axe. Those cuts were clean, like they were aimed from an angle. There is not a jagged, rough cut on any of the branches."

"I'll clear it up after dinner," Sean told his sister. "We'll get a sensor alarm installed as soon as we can."

She nodded. "Thank you, Sean. I appreciate it."

Shannon watched her husband and brother from under her lashes as they refilled their glasses at the sideboard. She felt almost fully recovered from her mental confusion. She convinced herself that was all it was - *temporary mental confusion*. There had been too much talk of Mike Sullivan in the last few days, and it was getting to her whether she liked it or not. Tom and Angie had very little left to investigate, so the dredging up of the past should be over in a few days.

"*Thank God,*" she thought to herself. "*Angie can have her story and we can all get back to normal. Maybe after this, we'll never have to mention Mike's name again. Perhaps it's time I stopped the yearly visit to his grave, too. I'll tackle that issue with Linda next year. I don't want to go to his grave anymore. I've had enough. Besides, Mike is long dead. There is nothing left in this world he can do to me. It's over.*"

She felt a chill go up her spine. It might be over, she concluded, sipping her wine again. But it was not forgotten.

THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL: Excerpts from Chapter Eleven

July 1995

Larkin City, Maine

TOM AND ANGIE ENJOYED their second sojourn to the keeper's cottage as much as their first. They made love in the bedroom, and again had a leisurely lunch on the porch.

"I could get used to this," he said as they finished the salmon quiche Shannon made for them. "My God, I feel like I'm in heaven."

"You are, Cimarelli," Angie told him. "You have me, and you *are* in Larkin."

He smiled. "I've never felt so good. It must be your tender loving care."

She blushed slightly. "I didn't think it was *that* tender." She was recalling the night before when she snuck into his room. It seemed like the more she had of him, the more she wanted. Last night she pushed him down on his own bed and rode him like he had her, watching the expression in his eyes darken into stark lust. She felt herself tingle all over as she thought about it.

He watched her, a slow grin spreading across his face. "You're thinking about last night, aren't you?" he said, his voice low.

She nodded.

"Me, too. You're going to drive me wild, woman."

"I'm sure it isn't anything you haven't done before," she said flippantly.

Tom guffawed. "I beg to differ, lady. No woman has ever taken control of me like you did last night."

"I'm a lady now, not a kid?"

"Every inch a lady. *My lady* - perfectly well-mannered to the outside world, but nastier than hell in the bedroom," he snickered. "You're going to ruin me."

"How so?" she asked, thrilled that he called her *my lady*.

"I can never see past you again, Angela," he replied, suddenly serious. He looked at her intently. "No one else will do but you. I'm afraid you're stuck with that fact."

"You can't stick a volunteer," she said softly. They regarded one another warmly for several minutes, anticipating the rest of their day together.

"We should do some work, you know," she finally pointed out.

"I know, but I can't seem to concentrate on work." Tom looked out over the ocean again, feeling peace within him. He noticed waves bounding higher in the distance. He forgot his camera in his hurry to get Angie back to the cottage. Then he had an idea.

"Is there a pair of binoculars handy in the cottage?" he asked her.

"Yes, I believe so," she said. "In the roll top desk. Why?"

"Look at the waves," he enthused. "I'd like to take a closer look at them."

She laughed. "Oh, the fickleness of men. A minute ago you were thinking of dragging me back to bed, and now you want to look at some old waves."

"Never fear, lady," he told her strongly. "This night will not be a restful one for you, if I have my way."

Angie stretched her arms above her head, watching Tom's eyes flicker over her breasts. She smiled in satisfaction. "Okay, buster. I'll go and get the binoculars."

"And I'll pour us some more wine."

She kissed him before she went back into the cottage. He grabbed her hand, squeezing it gently before letting her go.

Once inside the cottage, Angie went directly to the living area. She knew there was a pair of binoculars in the desk as she and Jamie used them when they were younger. She opened the desk, revealing little cubby holes underneath. She spied the glasses in one of the holes. As she removed them, the scope of the lens bumped into the side of the cubby hole, making a scraping, hollow sound.

"Hollow?" she thought. *"That's strange. The desk is supposedly made of solid wood."* She set the binoculars on the desk top, and then felt around the suspicious cubby hole. There was definitely something wrong. She knocked at the back of the slot, and it was indeed hollow-sounding. Intrigued she pushed gently on the back wall of the hole to see if the wood was movable. Within seconds, the wall of the cubby hole came loose in her hand. Amazed, she looked down. It was a false partition, apparently put in place to conceal something inside the desk. Putting the piece of wood next to the binoculars, she went into the kitchen in search of a flashlight.

She found a flashlight in a drawer in the kitchen. Hurriedly, she returned to the desk, switching the light on. She shined it into the cubby hole and gasped. The hiding place was deeper than the hole, suggesting it went further down inside the desk. Reaching her hand inside, she felt around carefully, fearful she might run across a spider. Almost at once, her hand grasped a book. Putting the flashlight down, she used her other hand to help pry the book out of the small hole. After a few minutes, she was able to bring it forth.

Angie gasped audibly, her hands starting to shake. She could not believe her eyes, but there it was, in legible English. She read it three times before it finally registered:

*The Private Journal of Colm Michael Sullivan
1st Keeper of the Banshee Point Lighthouse
June 1880 to January 1890*

She stared at the cover of the book. *"What the hell is this? Colm Sullivan?"* Questions began running through her mind. *"Was Colm related to Mike Sullivan? What's the connection, if any? And what does it mean?"*

The sound of Tom's voice brought her out of her reverie.

"What's taking you so long, Angie?" He called from the porch.

"Tom," she raised her voice. "You have to come here."

There must have been something in her tone, because Tom was at her side in seconds. He looked askance at her, and she handed him the book. He glanced down at the cover, and his eyes widened. He then looked at the desk, and the gaping cubby hole.

"You found this in there?" he asked her.

She nodded. "I found the binoculars first, but the wood inside the hole felt hollow. That's when I found the book. Tom, what the hell does this mean? What do you think is *in* that book?"

"The only way to find out is to read it," he answered her grimly. "This is very interesting. Colm Sullivan? Good God, Angela, are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"What are you thinking?" she asked weakly.

"That there is more to the Sullivan's and the Larkin's than just your mother and Michael," he said. "This story might reach back for years. Do you think anyone else knows about the journal?"

"I don't know. I've never seen it before. No one has ever mentioned it, though. Not even Mum, or Grandpa and Grandma Larkin." She shuddered. "Maybe we should just put it back. There might be things in there better left unknown."

"Angie, this is part of our story," Tom said. "Let's just take a look at it. If it's really damaging, we'll put it back. You never know - it might shed more light on the story surrounding Michael Sullivan. We have to read the journal. *We have to.*"

She seemed uncomfortable. "Not here, though. Put the book in the beach bag. Let's go back to the house. Tonight, after everyone is in bed, we'll read. I'll come to your room. Keep the journal there."

He stopped short, concerned by her apparent agitation. "Angie, what's wrong? Does this book scare you?"

"Yes, in a way."

"Why?"

She crossed her arms, rubbing her hands on her elbows in a nervous gesture. "I'm half scared there will be something in the journal that will hurt my mother again. That somehow there is more to the story of Mike Sullivan than anyone knows. You remember the tape in Detective Balsam's office? Mike kept saying there was a tie between him and my mother that no one knew about but them. What if the key to *that* mystery is in *this* book? How can I ask my mother about that?"

Tom set the book on the desk. He took her by the arms gently. "We'll read the journal," he said quietly. "If you think it contains anything that might hurt your mother or upset your father, we'll put it back in its hiding place and no one will ever know about it. It will be between me and you."

She stared up at him. "Are you sure?"

"I swear to you, Angela. I give you my word."

She hugged him. He held her tightly, kissing the top of her head. Tom's mind was in a whirl. He knew all along with a publisher's instinct the story was more complicated than it appeared, and he was right. However, he wasn't willing to compromise his relationship with Angie. If she decided the book was too sensitive to bring to light, he would honor his word and return it to the cubby hole, never to speak of it again.

"I want to read it," she said firmly. "Let's go back to the mansion. The sooner we read the journal, the sooner we'll know what's really going on."

He nodded. "Okay. Remember, whatever you decide, I *will* keep my word."

Angie smiled wanly at him, reassured by his words, but she still had a feeling of fear and dread in the pit of her stomach. She knew it was time to unravel pieces of the puzzle surrounding the relationship between her mother and Mike Sullivan.

THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL: Excerpt from Chapter Fourteen

July 1995
Larkin City, Maine

AFTER THE MAIDS FINISHED their lunch, Shannon retreated upstairs to her bedroom. She was tired all of a sudden, and felt like taking a long, hot bath. The rooms she shared with Scott were a haven where no strangers were allowed, and every so often Shannon craved the privacy they afforded. Just sitting and looking out the French doors was at times tranquil in itself. It gave Shannon a sense of peace, as if she were re-charging herself with the aloneness she frequently desired.

Entering the bedroom through the sitting room, Shannon went first to the French doors and opened them. A fine drizzle settled over the beauty of the estate. She breathed deeply of the fresh air, deciding to clip more roses after her bath for her tea with Mariko. The roses brightened any setting, and the woman surely deserved it. Mariko worked her heart out, and was the absolute soul of discretion. As far as Shannon knew, Mariko never discussed her work at the mansion with anyone, therefore eliminating gossip and heresy. More and more, Shannon valued the loyal quality. She realized the people of Larkin City loved to talk and create stories where there were none, but it was also the end result of enjoying a relatively crime-free town where there was not much to talk about. Hopefully, it would stay that way.

Leaving the French doors open, Shannon went to her closet and pulled out a dark beige dress and dark brown belt. She fished in her shoe rack and retrieved a pair of flat pumps, which she matched to brown knee-high nylons. She was looking forward to taking a bath and dressing up a bit. She thought: *"I think I'll take a bubble bath. I haven't done that in ages. And I'll listen to the radio. I think there is some wine in the fridge under the sink, and my book is by the bed. I can relax for a good hour."*

She laid out her clean clothes on the bed she shared with her husband. Pulling out the terra cloth band from her hair and letting her mane flow freely down her back, she walked toward the bathroom to start her bath. Shaking her head, she ran her hands through her hair to rid some of the tangles. She walked into the bathroom and headed toward the Jacuzzi-style tub that was in the far left corner of the massive room. The door to the bathroom was open and partially blocked view of the two sinks and the mirrors above them. She turned on the water to fill the tub, adjusting the taps to make the water hot. Satisfied by the comfortable temperature, she walked back toward the door of the bathroom. She reached out her hand to close the door slightly so she could get under the sink to retrieve her bubble bath crystals. Grasping the small box, she straightened and closed the cupboard door. Her eyes glanced over the mirror above the sink, and she froze, the box of bubble bath still clutched in her hand.

Shannon never knew what prompted her to look at the mirror, but her actions rendered her immobile with fear. Her eyes centered on the mirror, unflinching. An overwhelming sense of uneasiness filled her being, and she began to tremor slightly. As if she could not believe her eyes, she kept staring at the mirror, taking in the words and the

meaning, over and over again. The fact that the message was left in red lipstick with a drawn heart did not seem to matter at the moment. Only the message mattered:

Greetings, Shannon! Did you think you could ever forget me? Remember, nothing is ever forgotten. Our day is coming soon. Our blood is intermingled, and the time has come.

She continued to stare at the red letters on the mirror. Her ears blocked the sound of running water as the tub overflowed onto the bathroom floor and began seeping toward her slowly. She dropped the box of bubble bath without realizing it, the powder spilling onto the small rug under her feet. A feeling of numbness overtook her, much as it had the other day in the drawing room when she discovered the last batch of roses destroyed in the garden. Her mind was in a whirl as memories crashed into her brain, of a past she thought completely put behind her. But here it was again, intruding upon her, fringing her life. She looked down at her empty hands and wondered idly what happened to the bath crystals. She frowned. She remembered getting them out of the cupboard under the sink, but where were they now?

Unsettled, Shannon remained standing where she was, her eyes going back up to the mirror over her sink. *Her sink.* She and Scott had their own sinks and mirrors in the large bathroom, and it worked quite well over the years. *Scott, her husband. Where was he,* she asked herself silently. *Why wasn't he with her when she felt so strange?* She needed him right now, to tell her that none of this was happening, that everything was fine and normal. But it was not normal. Something - or someone - was making sure she felt the fear and terror of the past, and she could not understand why. Mike was dead, for God's sake. She must be dreaming about the writing on her mirror, it was unreal.

As if to satisfy herself, she reached out and touched the red lettering. Her finger traced the drawn heart, and the redness smeared slightly under the pressure of her fingers. She pulled her hand away and looked down at the stained digits. She felt a well of laughter bubbling up inside her. It was *real* - the color smeared from the mirror onto her fingers. Who was doing this to her, and why? Or was it Mike back from the grave, tormenting her in death as he had in life?

She stared at herself in the mirror, taking in her pasty face and hollow eyes. As with Molly's portrait before, the muted apparition of Mike Sullivan slowly began to emerge. Only this time he was standing behind her instead of Molly, looking into the mirror to meet her disbelieving eyes. He didn't say anything, but continued to stare at her with singular intensity, as if willing her to read his mind.

She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, as if to blot out the sight she saw in the mirror. Maybe if she kept her eyes closed long enough, Mike would disappear along with the red lettering. It was all a dream. She would awaken refreshed and happy, with none of the past haunting her waking moments - such thoughts were for introspection and sometimes slumber, but never for conscious thought and waking hours. And then the ghosts of the past began to seep into her mind, like a fog enveloping the Banshee Point, slowly curling their way through every crevice and settling with stubborn proclivity.

Suddenly, Shannon saw herself as she had been: young and unknowing, but with a positive confidence in the future. Her hair was long and black, her eyes bright and unlined - not a care in the world but her family and her job at the mining company. Another image crowded into her mind, this one of a tall, blond-haired boy. He looked more like a young man than a boy, but for some reason the description of *boy* included itself in her mental image of him. He was smiling, and she was taken aback by his sheer physical beauty and

blue eyes. He was visually perfect, as none other she had ever seen in her life. And he regarded her with his eyes, warm and adoring. His face was lambent as he looked upon her slowly and with leisure. This feeling was so familiar, like it was currently happening and not in the past.

But there was another feeling from the past, and it was not as pleasant as the first one. She shuddered, her eyes still closed, as she recalled the other face of this perfect person, with the large, big-tooth smile and innocent stare. The second countenance was sinister and evil. Even his eyes changed as he regarded her coldly. The image was angry with her, almost beyond pure rage. It was a mixture of hatred and desperate love. The odium is what drove the second image along, gave it fuel to continue. *Obsession and steely determination.* And then the image was talking to her, the tone of his voice clipped and forceful. His mouth was moving, and the impression of his lips resembled a snarl from some wild beast. He hated her, but what drove the hatred was a mind certain that destiny involved the acute love he thought he felt for her, and he would not let go.

Shannon came out of her reverie. She opened her eyes and stared at the mirror. The red lettering was still there. It glared at her, as if challenging her to deny its existence, but Mike's ghostly image was gone. She was slowly coming back to reality, and in the background could hear running water and splashing noises. Turning toward the tub, she gasped when she saw the water overflowing onto the floor, traveling as far as her feet. She was standing in a puddle of water. Running over to the tub, she turned off the faucets and then stepped back to survey the damage. She groaned. *What was the matter with her?*

She paused for a minute, a terrifying thought entering her mind. Was she like her grandfather Patrick Larkin? Had his madness trickled down to her from two generations ago? Was she doomed to end her days hiding in the attic, obsessed with images from the past? "No," she whispered. "I will *not* be like him. I'm simply tired and saturated with tales of Mike Sullivan," she reasoned with herself. "That's all there is to it."

Walking over to a closet, Shannon pulled out several large towels and slapped them onto the floor, soaking up the water. She got down on her hands and knees to swirl the towels around, trying to gather the moisture. She had to get another stack of towels to completely dry the floor and the bathtub before the room returned to its former look of neatness and elegance. Except now there was a pile of wet towels on the floor.

Feeling a slight panic rise up within her, she began to gather the soaking towels, hurrying out of the bathroom and through the sitting room to the corridor of the fourth floor. She looked both ways, assuring herself no one was about, and then scurried down the hall. She stopped at a door near the stairway, entering quickly. The small room contained a washer and dryer and several hanging racks. Each floor of the mansion had a similar laundry room. Shannon dumped the towels inside the washer, pushing them down. Then she went back to her bathroom to gather the remaining wet towels, and these, too, went into the washing machine. She added soap and started the load. Going back to her bedroom, she decided to take a quick shower rather than filling the tub again. She glanced at the clock above her fireplace and widened her eyes. It was after three o'clock. She had to hurry in order to get downstairs to prepare tea for herself and Mariko Woods.

Once again in the bathroom, Shannon stood in front of the mirror. The red writing was still there, mocking her. Someone was playing a trick on her, a cruel trick that forced her to lose her mental balance if only briefly. She decided not to tell anyone about the message on her mirror, even Scott. She took several sheets of toilet paper and tried to rub

out the red writing, but it only smeared. Searching in the cupboard underneath, she found window cleanser and sprayed it liberally on the glass. She reeled more toilet paper off of the roll and began scrubbing. The mess finally cleared itself, but to satisfy herself it was completely gone, she repeated the process with the cleanser and the paper. She then replaced the cleaner under the sink, and flushed the paper down the toilet. She cleaned the bubble bath from the floor, and returned the container to its place under the sink.

She took a quick shower. She dressed in the clothes she laid out on her bed, and applied make up to her face. She slipped on her shoes, and then walked over to the open French doors. The rain was still a steady mist, and it had become cooler. She stepped back and shut the doors. Taking a deep breath, she left the bedroom and made her way into the corridor again. She closed her bedroom door and locked it, putting the key in the pocket of her dress. She looked up and down the hall. There was no sound, no movement. She glanced up through the large windows in the long corridor, now gleaming from the recent cleaning. The darkened skies and rain seemed much more spectacular from here. She stared at the sight for a long moment. She felt herself slipping away again, as if she were going to relive something from the past once more, but she was not ready to go *there* again.

Turning, she walked down the corridor toward the stairs. She stopped at the laundry room door and went inside. She put the towels from the washer into the dryer, setting the time for two hours. She would take care of the towels later, after tea and before dinner. No one would know what happened - except, of course, the person playing tricks on her.

As she descended the stairs to the main floor, Shannon listened as the sounds of thunder rumbled and the rain became heavier. Her mood was strange. She was no longer frightened, but she was leery of reliving another memory from her past. It was unnerving. She was afraid the sojourns back to when Mike was alive would start becoming more and more frequent, and she was determined to fight it with all of her mental strength. It had simply gotten away from her this afternoon, but she would not let it happen again. She would not let Mike Sullivan control her from the grave.

But how could she control human hands playing tricks on her? Frowning, she stepped into the foyer of the mansion. She would just have to be more careful, more watchful. *Trust no one, tell no one.* Smoothing down her hair, Shannon continued across the foyer to the door that led to the kitchen. She made up her mind, and for the moment it pacified her, pushing everything else she experienced today into the background.

After she left the foyer, the thunder struck across the sky once more, bringing with it a fresh torrent of rain. The foyer fell into dimness as clouds passed overhead. It was a typical summer storm. It would pass, like all other seasons. Like all other memories, the past had a way of renewing itself - over and over again.

THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL: Excerpt from Chapter Sixteen

*August 1995
Larkin City, Maine*

SEARSPORT, MAINE FOLLOWED THE shore of Penobscot Bay, approximately fifteen miles from Larkin City. Searsport itself was a miniature Larkin, full of quaint shops and seaside restaurants. The major source of employment came from the fish canning plant, which did a brisk business with vendors on the east and west coasts. With its sheltered harbor, Searsport had at one time been a major shipbuilding area. In the center of town was the Penobscot Marine Museum, which highlighted the town's history with the sea. A multitude of sea captains lived in Searsport in the 1770's, which resulted in an abundance of old mansions lining the stretch of Route 1. Nearby was the public state park called Moose Point. It was open to the public from May until October, and boasted picnicking facilities with some barbeque pits. There was also a large area of evergreens, dense with foliage, part of which overlooked Penobscot Bay.

It was a humid, warm Saturday as Carly O'Reilly drove her shiny black Camry from Larkin to Searsport. She passed through the busy part of the town, turning onto Elm Street. She had been here many times, but had never stayed long enough to appreciate the quietness of the place. Carly was not one to notice that sort of thing, anyway. She had one purpose in mind, which did not let her stray from her course of action. Something had to be done about Marianne Dobson. Her drunkenness had always been a problem, but now it was becoming a damned nuisance as well. Carly wished Sara didn't harbor warm feelings for the liquor-sodden woman, but it could not be helped. With Sara safely at work at the animal clinic in Larkin, Carly felt it was the best time to visit Marianne and explain to her that she would no longer be involved with "the plan." Hopefully, the former Mrs. Sean Larkin would not raise too much of a fuss, or Carly was prepared to take drastic measures to end her interference.

Carly pulled into the driveway of Marianne's small home. Walking to the front door, she noticed the screen was latched but the main door was open. Someone was home. Carly rapped on the frame of the screen door and called out: "Hello. Is anyone here?"

After a few seconds, Carly heard the shuffle of feet coming from somewhere in the house. Momentarily, Marianne appeared at the door.

Carly looked at her and felt an immediate disgust well up within her. Once stunningly beautiful, Marianne had no pride in her looks anymore. She was wearing a faded housecoat of reddish color, and her hair was piled high on her head, tendrils escaping down her neck. Her face was bloated, as usual, and there was the ever-present cigarette dangling from her hand. She looked surprised to see Carly, smoothing her free hand down the front of her housecoat.

"Fancy seeing you," Marianne said, unlatching the screen door and opening it wide. "I wasn't expecting a visit today."

"Neither was I," Carly responded. "May I come in?"

"Of course. I just put on some water for a bit of tea, unless you'd care for something stronger this time of day?"

Carly stepped into the house. "No, thank you. I just had lunch. I'm fine."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll have some bourbon with my tea," Marianne was saying as she waddled toward the back of the house where the kitchen was.

Carly followed her and could not hide a shudder of distaste as she noticed the untidiness of the place, the sheer drabness of it. Having been used to the Larkin mansion for some fifteen years now, Carly found most other places lacking. But this house was a veritable mess from entrance to kitchen. Clothes were flung over chairs, ashtrays lay unemptied on tables, and there were empty drinking glasses everywhere. It was a pig sty. Carly was relieved that Marianne could not see her sour expression as they made their way to the kitchen.

Marianne sat down at the table, motioning for Carly to join her. Gingerly, Carly sat in a chair across from the coarse woman. In her rather expensive dress suit and leather shoes Carly seemed out of place, a fact Marianne did not ignore.

"I used to be fancy like you, too," Marianne said, her voice almost in a sneer. "I lived in that mansion, and my name was Larkin. So don't look so high and mighty when you come into my home, thinking you're better than me. If I can end up like this, so can you - in a blink of an eye. The Larkin's *take care of their own*. If you don't watch your step, you'll find yourself out in the cold, just like me. Without a dime to your name and without the benefit of seeing your child grow into an adult."

"I am certainly *not* like you," Carly said haughtily. "I have my own business. If I were put out tomorrow, I would not end up like *you*. I make my own money, thank you, and I could live very well by myself if I had to."

Marianne laughed, taking a mouthful of her bourbon tea. "You forget," she said, leaning forward over the table. "The Larkin's *gave* you that catering business. They, or rather Liam, gave you the money to begin with. You're just lucky that it took off and made its own money. Before you met Liam, you were *most certainly* like me. By the time Liam came along, you were a bar-hopping fly looking for sex like I was when I met Sean. I messed up my chance real bad, but at least you've made it fifteen years without completely screwing up. That's the only difference between you and me. It can go either way now, depending on what you do."

Carly regarded the other woman coldly. She was really quite detestable, a mockery of what she used to be. Deciding to ignore her remarks, Carly said: "Maybe I could use a cup of tea. Only tea - none of that bourbon you're having. Do you mind?"

"Not at all. I thought for a minute there that you thought you were too good to drink out of one of my cups." Grinning, Marianne stood up. "What do you take in your tea?"

"Sugar, please."

Marianne turned around to face the stove, lifting the kettle and pouring the steaming water into a chipped coffee cup. Carly watched the back of her head, and then her eyes slid lower, and her lips once again curled into disgust. Over the years, Marianne had let herself go, and it was most apparent in her hips and thighs. "*I don't need this fat-assed bitch being involved in my life,*" Carly thought suddenly, with rising anger. "*Who does she think she is? She's a nobody, and who would care if she disappeared off the face of the earth? The Larkin's - not even Brose - would care. She is a sloppy, drunken pig, and the world would be better off without the whining whore.*" Amazed at her own crude thoughts, Carly caught herself. It was not like her. It was only bringing her down to Marianne's level, and that was the last thing she wanted.

Marianne returned to the table and handed Carly a cup of tea. After she sat back down, Carly said: "Thank you. Now I need to talk to you seriously for a moment. That's why I'm here." She sipped her tea. It wasn't bad, but it was not like the great high teas at the mansion.

As if reading her thoughts, Marianne laughed harshly. "Sorry it isn't like those fancy teas Shannon gives. Remember, she has that nice spring water. All I have here is the crap coming out of my faucet."

"The tea is fine," Carly said crisply.

"Okay, then, what do you want to talk about?" Marianne asked.

Carly set her cup down on the table carefully. "The situation we're in. You, Sara, and myself."

"What about *our* situation? Aren't things going like you wanted? Isn't that bitch Shannon scared out of her wits yet?"

Carly shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Shannon is very hard to read, and she has never considered me someone she could talk to."

"She treated me the same way," Marianne said, sipping out of her cup again. "The rich and snooty bitch. She never accepted me, not from the start, and I think that's what put the first seeds of doubt in Sean's mind. That bitch tuned him against me."

Carly sighed. "Marianne, we're not here to rehash your past glory. There is too much at stake to take any risks. I'd rather you weren't privy to all of the actions Sara and I take. The less you know the better."

"What do you mean, the less I know the better?" Marianne asked harshly, sitting up straight in her chair. "Just what are you trying to pull on me?"

Carly reached over and touched Marianne's hand resting on the table. "Calm down," she said gently. "I'm not trying to pull anything on you. I'm just saying, I think it would be better if you remained ignorant of some facts. It's for your own protection. You don't need to know every step that Sara and I take to insure our future. You're not involved with that part of it, anyway. The Larkin's know you, they would recognize you."

"You don't trust me," Marianne said petulantly, drawing her hand away from Carly's touch. "What have I done to make you not trust me? I haven't breathed a word of this to a soul, and that includes my husband. How do you think I feel, keeping things from Joe? I *am* involved in all of this, Carly, and I don't see why you want to shut me out."

"I'm not shutting you out, so to speak," Carly said quickly, returning her hand to her lap. "The deal still stands as we all agreed. The only thing I'm suggesting is that you not be aware of the stunts we plan to put into effect on the Larkin's."

Marianne stared at Carly for a moment, her eyes hostile and untrusting. Marianne was not a stupid woman, by any means, but she was not in the league of Carly O'Reilly and she knew it. There was something going on, and Marianne did not like it. As Joe would say when something was untoward: "*There is something rotten in the state of Penobscot Bay.*" Finally, Marianne spat out at Carly: "Whatever you do, you are *not* going to cut me out of my share of the money. If you even *try* to hoodwink me, I'll run to the nearest cop and spill my guts. Better yet, I'll run to Angela Page and tell my story, her being a reporter and all. Don't mess with me, Carly. I won't make it easy for you."

Carly held up her hand as if to stop the flow of the vulgar words. "Don't talk like that," she said, almost in a whisper. "For God's sake, Joe could walk in and hear you. You have all of the windows open, and the front door. Will you please keep it down?"

But Marianne would not be stilled. "I can't help that all my windows are open," she fairly shouted. "I can't afford an air conditioner, like you. I'm getting fed up with waiting for some money to get nice things, and now you tell me you don't want me involved? The hell with you, Carly. I want an answer *now*. Are you trying to screw me out of this deal?"

Carly closed her eyes, mortified by the other woman's tone and her loudness. This would not do. They needed to go somewhere else and talk. She had to calm Marianne down somehow, to assure her that she would not be cut out of the financial deal, but rather the planning of events to make Shannon go crazy. Carly didn't think Marianne could handle the truth - that she was an unreliable drunk, and more than likely one day would let something slip in one of her liquor-driven stupors.

"Can you leave for a short while?" Carly asked the Marianne, noticing the woman's breathing had become labored in her excitement. "I don't want to talk here. It's not safe."

"Where do you want to go?" Marianne asked.

"I don't know. Anywhere but here. Can you leave?"

"I'll need to change," Marianne said, looking down at her attire. "It wouldn't do for me to be seen in a posh car with you, and me in my grubbies."

"*Hopefully we won't be seen,*" Carly thought. She said aloud: "Then change your clothes. We'll drive through Searsport and get an ice cream or something, and then we can park in a quiet place and talk."

Marianne stood up. "Let me change, it will only take me a lamb's shake. I'll be right back." As she left the room, Carly watched her with a stunned expression on her face. The woman was not to be believed, and not to be trusted. The idea hit Carly like a thunderbolt. She had to rid herself and Sara of the greedy and all too knowledgeable Marianne Dobson. And who would miss her, besides her simpleton of a husband? Maybe *he* would not even miss her.

Carly stood up from the pathetic excuse for a kitchen table, horrified by her own thoughts. What was wrong with her that she had to resort to ridding herself of a person so unpleasant and unstable as to be described? Was she becoming so desperate that she was willing to do anything? She managed to stay within the confines of Larkin morality for years now, what was a little while longer? And why lower herself to do this trashy woman over? Would it be worth it?

She sat down again, her mind in a whirl. In all of her forty-six years, she thought of herself as an educated and stable person. Her mother raised her to be a lady to some degree, and she had been blessed with extreme good looks. She used those looks to full advantage when she met Liam Larkin, and it worked. Sighing, Carly put her head in her hands, resting her elbows on the surface of the table. All of a sudden she felt so very tired.

"*Whatever I do now will serve Liam and his damn family right,*" she thought. "*I can be free and wealthy at the same time if I play my cards right. And father will be none the wiser.*" Despite George Sullivan's fount of information about the blood ties between them, he never once insinuated they try and benefit financially from it. He felt it was a matter of heritage, not to be used in any unscrupulous way.

But Carly had other ideas.

Marianne re-entered the kitchen, now wearing tight black slacks and a short-sleeved pink blouse. Carly blotted her eyes from the sight. Marianne looked like a walking fashion disaster. Folds of skin hung from under her arms, and the tightness of her slacks

accentuated the thunderous thighs and stomach. *"God help me if I ever end up like her,"* Carly thought contemptuously.

Puffing on her ever-present cigarette, Marianne said: "I'm ready. Let's go."

"Do you feel like having an ice cream?" Carly asked her, forcing a tone of civility.

"Sure. Beats a slap in the face, you know?" Marianne laughed at her own phrase, snorting as she inhaled a drag on her smoke.

"We won't be long," Carly assured her. "Are you certain you aren't expecting your husband? Do you need to leave him a note?"

"No. Joe doesn't get off until six tonight," Marianne said, grabbing her cloth purse from the kitchen table. "I'll be back way before then."

As they walked toward the front door of the shabby house, Carly thought to herself: *"That's what you think, you stupid, ugly bitch."*

THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL: Excerpt from Chapter Twenty

August 1995
Larkin City, Maine

CARLY SAT AT HER desk early Monday morning, sipping hot herbal tea out of her favourite mug, which was white with a pretty pink floral design. She used her computer mouse to click on her email messages. She deleted the junk mail, but one message heading caught her eye. It was dated early that same morning. She read the subject line with some interest:

GUESS WHO??!!

Curious, she opened the message. It was brief, but the words put a cold fear into the pit of her stomach:

I know who are you are, and I know what you've done.

Carly stared at the message for a long time. Then she deleted it. Someone was playing a trick on her, and she didn't find it the least amusing. The words hit too close to her conscience, but she was not about to start pondering her bad moments now. She had no enemies to speak of, not counting her husband's rather cold family.

Then she thought about Jack Sansovino, her catering sous chef. Five years ago she drank too much at the staff Christmas party, somehow ending up in Jack's apartment. What happened from there was still a mystery to her, although she recalled waking up disorientated and bruised in her Camry in the middle of the night. Not quite sure what actually transpired, Carly never confronted Jack about the evening. She couldn't remember details, so she never fired him, either. He was still in her employ, polite when spoken to, yet she remained vaguely uncomfortable in his presence. Jack was a superb chef, so her business sense wouldn't allow her to dismiss him. She didn't have just cause, and she knew it.

Could Jack possibly be the email perpetrator, playing tricks on her? She didn't think so. She had a strong feeling Jack wasn't the type to be bothered with computer shenanigans, despite her misgivings about him.

Dimming her computer screen, Carly left the office. She lunched at the small French restaurant called Pepe's Café inside Brickyard Square, ordering salmon mouse and lobster salad. She drank sparingly from a glass of wine, and was back to work by one-thirty. Retreating to her office, she sat at the desk and lightened her computer screen to check for messages. There was only one, sent at 12:30 p.m. It was from ***GUESS WHO??!!*** again. Annoyed, she clicked open the message and read the few lines:

Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. Your secret is safe with me for the time being. Have a nice evening with your family.

A grim expression on her face, Carly deleted the message. Intent on busying herself with paperwork, she reached into her top desk drawer and removed several handwritten orders for the following week. She would simply work away the rest of her day, and not check her messages again.

Clouds began gathering late in the afternoon. Carly paused in her work to gaze out the window and was surprised to see the willow trees swaying in the wind. The clouds

overhead darkened Main Street, and several street lamps went on automatically. Checking the time on her computer, she saw it was four o'clock. If she left now, she could probably arrive at the mansion before it rained. After she entered one more catering order, she reached for the mouse to click out of the vendor software program but then paused. Should she check her messages one more time? If she didn't, she might miss an opportunity for more business. She went to her email messages and was dismayed to see only one. It was from **GUESS WHO??!!** yet again. She contemplated deleting it without reading it, but her curiosity got the better of her and she clicked on the single message:

Done for the day, are you? Kept busy, did you? I'll bet not as busy as you were the other night in the graveyard. I'm sure that was hard work, physically that is. Well, like I said, your secret is safe with me for now. Have a wonderful evening, and make sure to give your daughter a hug. Until tomorrow.

Carly was still. Someone knew what she'd done, and they were letting her know about it. A tight fear gripped her insides. She racked her brain for clues as to the identity of the message sender. No one saw her that night, not even after she returned to the mansion and went to bed. She was sure of it. *Then who was this sending her messages?* She quickly deleted the third message of the day. Leaning back in her chair, she stared at the computer screen as if it was a dire enemy, and then her thoughts became clear:

"Whoever is doing this, wants something. They are just trying to scare me - and doing a good job of it, I might add - and then they'll tell me what they want. I'll have to wait and remain calm. No sense in panicking, because no one on this earth knows what I've been up to. I've seen to that." Shutting her computer off, Carly stood up from the desk and grabbed her purse. She wanted to beat the storm to the mansion. Besides, she'd had enough of the quirky messages for one day. She could wait this person out for a long time, because she was very patient when she needed to be, when it counted.

Walking downstairs, Carly told her receptionist Julie Rooney she was leaving for the day. Then she left the building, stepping out into Brickyard Square. It was already starting to drizzle, so she put her purse across the top of her head, dashing for her car parked on the street. A clap of thunder rendered the sky at that moment, startling her. Reaching the car, she unlocked it and slipped inside, out of the wet and wind. She started the engine and pulled away from the curb.

A man walked out of the court and stood on the sidewalk, watching Carly drive off toward the direction of Larkin Highway, and the mansion. There was a smile on his face as he stuck his hands in his jacket pocket and started whistling. He turned on his heel, and started walking the along the sidewalk, to the lumber yard a few blocks away.

* * *

THAT EVENING, CARLY WAS quieter than usual, but of course no one noticed. At the dinner table, she saw Liam drinking more than he was eating, and concern gnawed at her. She was afraid if he drank too much he would try and have sex with her, and she just wasn't up to it tonight. Her admiration of his body a few days ago seemed like a distant memory now. Her nerves were stretched tight, and she was in no mood to fight off his drunken advances in the privacy of their bedroom. Liam's awareness of her watching him probably added fuel to the fire, but she was determined to stay calm tonight, to get her rest. The

computer messages she received at work were bothering her more than she cared to admit, and she felt a violent headache coming on, despite the wonderful food and elegant wine.

Right after the conclusion of dinner, Carly beat a hasty retreat upstairs. She had barely kicked off her shoes when she heard the main door the bedroom's sitting room open and close.

It was Liam. She could tell he was a bit tipsy as he strolled casually into the bedroom. He came up behind Carly as she sat in a chair, reaching down to touch her shoulders. She closed her eyes, her head pounding worse than ever. Her dread of confronting her husband was becoming a distinct possibility now.

"What is it, Liam?" she asked, without opening her eyes.

He bent over and touched his mouth to her ear. "I thought you might be in the mood."

She opened one eye and craned her neck to look up at him. "In the mood for what?"

Liam stood straight again, a smirk on his face. "For what you once gave my Daddy. Come on, Carly, you know you want to. I saw you looking at me the other day in your mirror."

The reference to Liam's father outraged Carly. She jumped up from the chair, whirling around to face him. Her teeth were clenched as she said to him: "Either you leave the room, or I will. I'm not sleeping with you tonight."

Liam took a step toward her, but the chair was in his way. He glared down at the chair, and then looked at her again, his words slurred: "What's the matter, dear wife? Did you have a hard day at the office?"

"As a matter of fact, I did," she spat. "I wouldn't expect you to understand that. You've never taken my work seriously."

He snorted. "The hell I haven't. I paid for the building you're in, and I helped you start your business. I just want a little pay back now, that's all." He grinned at her. She curled her lips in disgust.

"If it's payback you want, I'll give you the money. My business has done quite well, thanks to you," she was quick to add. Stepping back a pace, she continued strongly: "But I will *not* sleep with you. You're drunk. I watched you at dinner. All you did was guzzle wine, you didn't eat a thing. I'm tired of you coming to me when you're shit-faced."

Liam gasped, mockingly putting his hand to his face. "The great lady has used foul language. May the earth stand still as I speak!" He grinned again. "So, you were looking at me during dinner, huh? Like what you see, do you? Come on, Carly, give it over. You like me in bed, and you know it. You can't fool me."

She quickly put space between her and Liam by walking toward the bed. She stopped on her side, and turned to him. He stood by the chair, watching her. "Please leave," she pleaded. "I have an awful headache, and all I want to do is go to bed and sleep. Please, Liam."

"Please Liam, please Liam," he mimicked her, coming toward the bed now. "A good screw will get rid of your headache."

Carly flushed a deep red, angered by his crudity. "Leave right now," she fairly shouted. "Damn it, I mean it. I will *not* sleep with a drunken idiot."

"Drunken idiot?" Liam repeated, his eyebrows wagging. "I'll show you a drunken idiot, and you'll be better off for it." He made a lunge from his side of the bed, his intention to grab her by the arms, but she stepped back quickly. He tumbled face-down on the bed,

unmoving for a moment. Then he started to laugh, the sound muffled by the comforter. She watched him warily, unsure what to do. Then he rolled over on his back, still laughing. He looked over at her, and laughed harder when he saw how apprehensive she was, standing next to one of the bed posts. His words were garbled as he spoke and laughed at the same time. "Go on, then, you stupid bitch. I don't need you. I can get it any time I want, but I don't need it from the likes of you."

Carly backed further away, disconcerted by his laughter. Then she went to the closet and grabbed her nightclothes from a hanger, slamming the closet door loudly. All she wanted was peace and quiet tonight. Leave it to Liam to pull one of his drunken stunts, which seemed to be more frequent lately. She walked back to the bed, where Liam was still laying on his back, his eyes open and watching her, a lopsided grin on his face.

She looked down at him contemptuously. "You had a good thing once and you ruined it," she said coldly. "All you had to do was pay a little attention to me, Liam, and I wouldn't have strayed on you. The fact that you place yourself, and your entire family, above our marriage is unforgivable."

He looked at her from the bed, his fading grin replaced with an expression of disgust. "*You're* the one who ruined a good thing," he said, his voice now oddly devoid of slurs. "I treated you like a queen. You threw it back in my face and took advantage. *That* is unforgivable." He propped himself up on his elbows, glaring at her. "Go on then, go and slink off to another room. Enjoy your peace and your sleep while you can. I don't know how you can stand yourself."

"The thing I can't stand is *you*," she said coldly. She turned away and left the room, shutting the outer door with a loud noise.

Liam remained where he was, a slight smile returning to his face.

"THE KEEPER'S JOURNAL" INFORMATION

The Keeper's Journal by Deidre Dalton (*aka Deborah O'Toole*) is available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Club Lighthouse Publishing.

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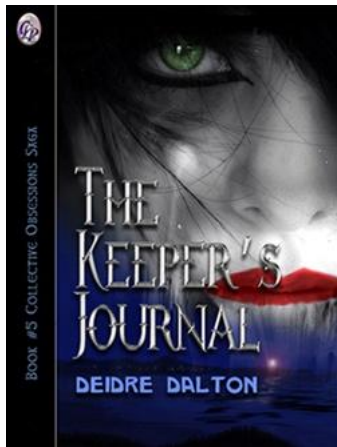
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ABOUT THE COLLECTIVE OBSESSIONS SAGA:

The *Collective Obsessions Saga* chronicles the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one-hundred-forty years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

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

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one hundred years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

Also writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Bloodline Trilogy," which follows the uniquely magical journey of one family through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*. All titles will be released through 2012-17.

Deborah writes short-story Juvenile Fiction and darkly abstract Poetry, and is the author of a series of articles and book reviews for *Ambermont Magazine* and *Class Notes*.

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