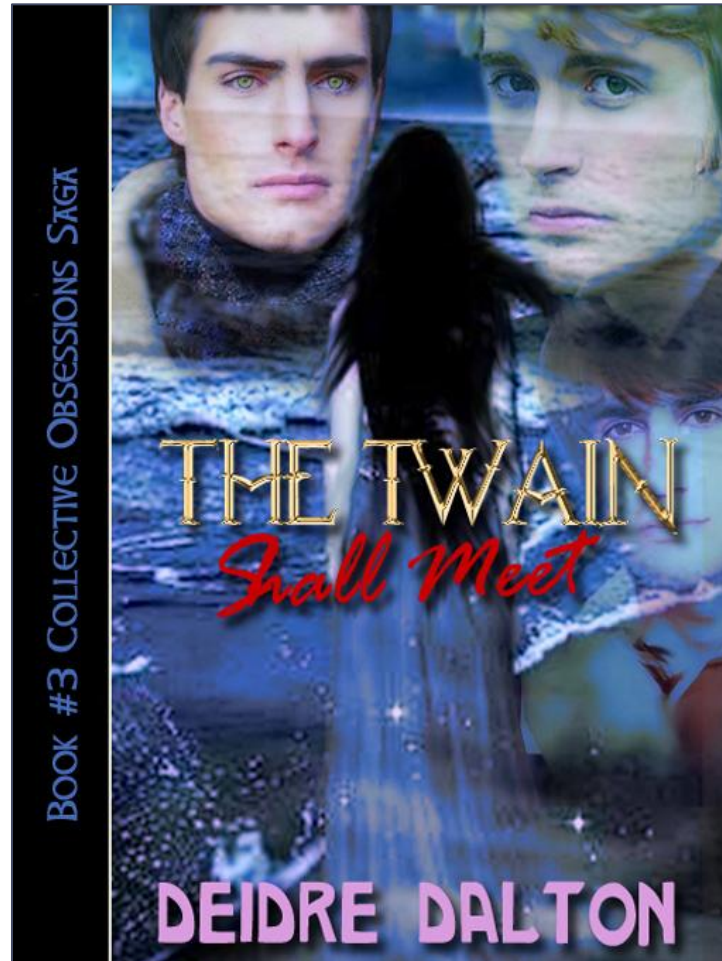


Excerpts from:
The Twain Shall Meet

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #3 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Publishing/Historical Romance Edition

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ABOUT "THE TWAIN SHALL MEET"

The Twain Shall Meet by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the third book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in January 2012.

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

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

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

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

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

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Three

July 1970
Larkin City, Maine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Shannon walked up to the farthest corner of the lounge and motioned Kevin over from the bar. Kevin looked very much like his brother Liam, except Kevin was much taller, bulkier and kept his hair several inches longer. He also lived at the mansion. He worked full-time at the lumber yard, but spent his Saturday and Sunday evenings at the Coven.

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

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

"Please, Kevin," she pleaded.

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

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

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

Shannon nodded happily and made her way back to Mike. His eyes lit up when he saw her approaching. She sat next to him and explained what Kevin told her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Like what?"

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

"And what did you tell her?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Until now.

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

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

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

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

She nodded. "It seems so."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Hard liquor? Do you drink that?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I hear you, Mike," she replied.

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

"What?" Shannon exclaimed, looking at him.

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

She leaned towards him. "Really?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Be quiet now," she told him gently. "It's all right. You need to get some sleep, and you'll feel better in the morning. We have a lot of time, Mike. There is no use in rushing anything. We'll just make plans for another time. Come on, let's go to the bed and lie down."

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

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

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

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

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Seven

November 1970
Larkin City, Maine

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpts from Chapter Nine

*November 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

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

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

Scott was in his early thirties, a considerably handsome man in dark fashion. At times, he had the impression people found him threatening. He assumed it was because he *did* wear a scowl most of the time, which was just his nature. His finely chiseled features were heightened by olive-tinted skin and high cheekbones. His smile was devastatingly brilliant when he chose to shine it on someone, which was rare.

He possessed a master's degree in geophysics from Bangor University. For several years he worked for a mining company in New York, where he met Brian Larkin in 1969. Brian offered Scott a job the following year in May, with a healthy salary and benefits. Scott accepted the job, and was on his way to Ireland a month later to supervise the Larkin Mines survey near Dublin. Scott enjoyed the work in Ireland immensely, keeping in constant contact with Brian by telephone. After a short period, Scott came to genuinely like and respect his employer. Although rather aloof, Brian was a fair and honest man in any situation and did not play favorites.

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

Raised an only child in Bangor, Scott enjoyed singular attention from his parents for most of his young life. His father, James Page, was an English professor at Bangor University. His mother, Italian-born Maria Theresa, was a music teacher. The Page family lived in a modest suburban area of Bangor, where Scott remembered his childhood as being settled and happy.

Shortly after his sixteenth birthday, Scott's parents were tragically killed in an auto accident. They were driving home after having dinner at a nearby restaurant when they collided with a transport truck. Scott was left shattered and alone. His only living relative was his father's spinster sister, Elaine, who took him in following the accident. Scott began taking odd jobs to save money for college. Once he arrived at Bangor University as a student, he worked nights at a gas station to continue supporting himself. The feeling of making a life for himself instilled a great deal of confidence in Scott.

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

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

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

* * *

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

Shannon slowed her Gran Torino as she approached the airport. The majority of flights coming in were usually charter planes, or twin-engines from Bangor or New York City. The airport building was painted a powder blue, surrounded by neatly-clipped foliage. As Shannon pulled into a parking stall, she glanced at her wristwatch.

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

Shannon smiled as she remembered her father's description. He was trying to create a favorable impression without outright lying, anxious she start out on the right foot with Page since they would be working together in Ireland. For the first time, Shannon wondered what Page was *really* like. She hoped they were compatible. It would be awkward if they were not.

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

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

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

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

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

She turned toward the hallway again. Suddenly she stopped short, spying a man across the hallway with several suitcases at his feet. He was leaning against one of the pay phones. She glanced at his face. He was staring at her, expressionless. She noticed his hair was as black as her own, falling to his collar. Short, black sideburns went down the forefront of his ears. His eyes were wide-set and sleepy-looking. His nose was slim, slightly flaring at the nostrils, and his mouth was formed in a frown, the full lower lip and thinner upper lip curled unhappily. He looked as if he needed a shave. He wore a light blue jacket that was zipped up part way, the collar flipped up, touching the base of his jaw. He also had on faded blue jeans and white sneakers. Shannon found herself admiring his unusual good looks, even though his scowl was rather intimidating.

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

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

He straightened himself up, stepping away from the payphone, his eyes still on her. When his voice came, she was surprised to hear a strongly firm and deep quality she had *not* expected. She assumed he would growl at her by the look on his face.

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

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

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

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

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

"I can manage, thanks."

She glanced sideways at him. He had to be at least six foot three inches in height. Compared to her small height of five foot three, he seemed to tower above her. He walked easily with the bags, appearing to be in good physical condition. He was a little on the thin side, but well proportioned otherwise. He looked straight ahead, not saying anything unless she spoke first.

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

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

As she drove, Shannon attempted to start a conversation with Scott.

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

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

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

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

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

He smiled slightly. "No. Please continue."

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

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

"There are two," she answered. "One is called the Coven Lounge, which is owned by the family. My cousin Kevin runs the place on weekends. There is also a bar at the other end of town. It's just a beer hall and kind of shabby, but it can be great fun, too."

He glanced at her. "Aren't you too young to go into those places?"

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

"Thirty three," he replied.

Her eyes widened. "You don't look thirty three. I took you for twenty five at the most."

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

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

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

"Maybe he is shy around new people," Mary suggested.

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

Denise threw back her head and laughed. "What would you know about shyness coming from this family?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She smiled wanly. "It was nothing," she said casually. "I had nothing else to do this afternoon." Why was she making herself sound so flippant, she wondered? Since she entered the room, Scott had fallen silent, the laughter gone from his face. *What was this guy's problem?* And why did he keep staring at her?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brian's eyes flickered over his daughter and Scott with concern. Scott seemed to become uneasy and non-talkative when Shannon entered the room. Shannon, too, seemed uncomfortable around Scott. For a fleeting moment, Brian wondered if he'd made a mistake by telling his daughter she could go to Ireland. Then he brushed the thought aside. He knew Scott could be a bit crude and rough at times, but he was a good, honest man. Shannon was stubborn and hot tempered, but she was also very honest and a good girl at heart. Brian felt things would work themselves out in the end.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It was on the tip of Shannon's tongue to ask him why he was staring at her so intently, but she refrained. Instead, she said coolly: "Enjoy your stay." She moved toward the door and then stopped. "I'll see you later," she said, and then left, shutting the door behind her.

Shannon continued on to her own room. There was something odd about Scott Page. He made her uncomfortable. Shrugging her shoulders, she decided to forget about him and enjoy the rest of the evening with her family.

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Ten

*December 1970
Larkin City, Maine*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

His face fell. "Really?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're not," she said quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE TWAIN SHALL MEET: Excerpt from Chapter Eighteen

*June 1975
Larkin City, Maine*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But no one called to him, no one saw him. *He made it! He was free!* Mike continued running, however, as far away as possible from the place he had lived for the last four-and-a-half years. Two blocks away from the hospital, he skirted the edges of a shopping mall. Then he walked casually through the parking lot, scouring around for an unlocked vehicle. He had known how to hot-wire a car since he was thirteen years old, thanks to the instruction of his friend John Young. Mike silently blessed his old friend for the knowledge. It was certainly coming in handy now.

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

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

"THE TWAIN SHALL MEET" INFORMATION

The Twain Shall Meet by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon (Kindle), Barnes & Noble (Nook) and the Club Lighthouse Publishing web site.

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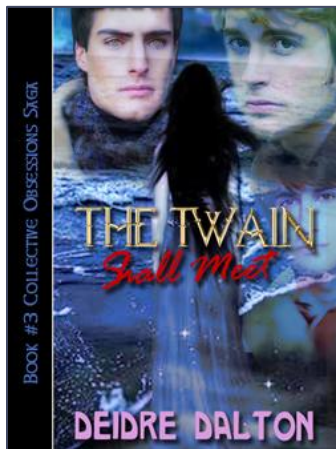
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Amidst murder, madness, perverse self-indulgence and avarice the two families struggle to free themselves from a dark legacy of secrets and obsessions.

More than twenty years in the making, *Collective Obsessions* is a unique family saga set in the combined genres of mystery, the paranormal, historical romance, and dotted with a touch of the macabre and hints of classic Gothicism.

The eight-part family saga includes *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight* and *Megan's Legacy*.

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*.

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*, *Community Garden Cookbook*, *Food Fare Cookbook*, *Furry Friends Cookbook*, *Larkin Community Cookbook*, *Recipes-on-a-Budget Cookbook* and the *Soups & Stews Cookbook*, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*.