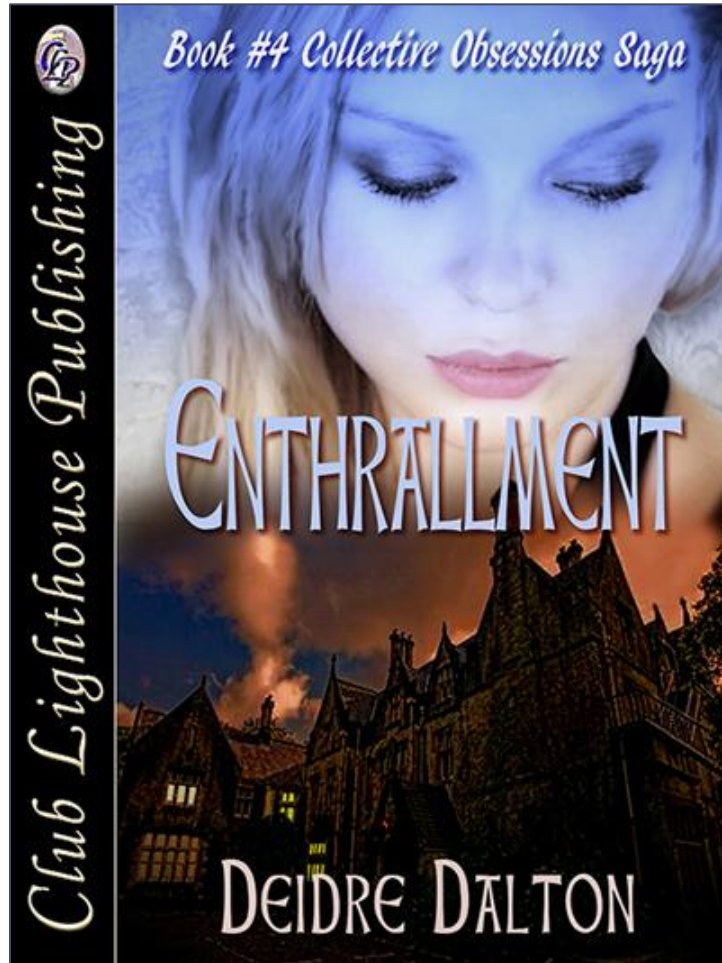


Excerpts from:

Enthrallment

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #4 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

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ABOUT "ENTHRALLMENT"

Enthrallment by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the fourth book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in June 2012. The paperback edition followed in March 2017, including a new book cover designed by T.L. Davison.

George Sullivan reunites with long-lost love Susan O'Reilly. Their daughter Carly enters into an unholy alliance to secure her position as Liam Larkin's wife. As secrets unfold and more madness takes root, Carly plots a fatal and twisted scheme to exact revenge on the Larkin family...

Wary after a miserable marriage to the beautiful but empty Marianne Chamberlain, Sean Larkin finds new love with Shannon's best friend, Dana Maitland. Their union yields another set of twins, Derek and Diana, and provides Sean and Marianne's son Brose with a happy home.

Too late, George Sullivan reunites with his long-lost love Susan O'Reilly. Their daughter Carly, who is also Mike Sullivan's half-sister, works her way into the Larkin family unknowing she is related to them by blood. Her marriage to Liam Larkin is a happy one at first, but she enters into an unholy alliance his father Rory when she discovers Liam cannot father a child.

As secrets unfold and more madness takes root, Carly plots a fatal and twisted scheme to take revenge on the Larkin family with her sister Sara Sullivan.

For more, go to:

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

**ENTHRALLMENT:
Excerpt from Chapter One**

*October 1980
Larkin City, Maine*

THE COVEN LOUNGE WAS a landmark in Larkin City. It was established by Roderick Larkin in December 1933, a few weeks after the repeal of prohibition. It began as a public house, but was transformed into a private club by his son Patrick ten years later. He renovated the inside, laying down red carpets, dark oaken walls and tables, and plush furniture. He also made additions to the club, building a second level that included an intimate restaurant and a poker room with a half-dozen rounded tables.

Patrick's son Brian abolished the private club policy in mid-1960, opening The Coven Lounge to anyone who had a mind to walk through the front door. The pub and eatery was a popular place in the city, and was typically full to capacity any night of the week. Fridays and Saturdays were particularly festive, most patrons enjoying the end of a work week by having a few drinks and a game of pool in the billiard room.

Kevin Larkin usually tended bar on weekends, taking a break from his position at the family lumber and hardware store. He enjoyed the interaction with locals and meeting new people. Being a bachelor in the environment was also beneficial as Kevin met many women during his weekend sojourns as bartender, loving and leaving several of them along the way.

Liam Larkin often joined the fray on Saturday nights, mingling with his friends and hoping to find a date or two among the throng. October was especially brisk in Larkin City, so Liam arrived at The Coven dressed in tight black jeans, a white polo shirt and his favorite dark green leather jacket. His dark hair was a bit long, but he kept it styled off his face.

Liam went directly to the bar to visit with his brother Kevin. After ordering a beer, Liam asked: "How's business tonight?"

Kevin began to fill another order from the lounge, setting up a tray and glasses. "Two of the waitresses called in sick, so I had to pool my vast resources of local talent to fill in."

Liam laughed. "In other words, you conned a few of your old flames to come in and work. What did you promise them this time? A romantic dinner for two followed by a movie? Or perhaps you lured them with a promise for a rendezvous at the Amber Whale for the night?"

Kevin grinned. "A bit of both, I'm afraid. Jane likes dinner and a movie, and she tends to invite me in when I take her back to her apartment. Beatrice, on the other hand, likes to go straight for the sex. Since her husband is at home, she prefers meeting at the Amber Whale. At my expense, of course."

"Naturally," Liam snorted as he took a sip of beer. "One of these days some jealous husband is going to beat the hell out of you. Try sticking to single women."

"Nah," Kevin replied. "Most single women want a commitment. Married ladies are safe; they want nothing more than a tumble in the hay. Besides, I don't know of one man in Larkin City who can take me on."

"True," Liam admitted. "You're bigger than an ox."

Kevin began mixing drinks for the order. "Yes, I took after Daddy while you have Mum's delicate frame."

"I'll thank you to keep your barbs to yourself," Liam retorted.

Kevin glanced up from his task to reply, but then suddenly stopped short. "Holy Moses," he whistled. "Look at the piece of work that just walked in the front door."

Liam swiveled in his barstool to get a better look at the entryway to the pub. There was a small landing by the door, with a half-dozen wide steps that led into the lounge area. Liam spied the woman Kevin was referring to at once. His eyes widened in surprise and then appreciation. The woman was tall and slender, at least five-foot-ten-inches tall with blonde hair that fell just past her shoulders. Her bangs were overlong, obscuring a clear view of her eyes. She was wearing a dark red dress that came up to her thighs, with a wide gold belt fastened around her slim hips. Her legs were bare, but her feet were encased in pair of high-heeled dark red shoes. Liam noted her breasts were high and firm, but not over-large. The clothes might appear cheap or gaudy on anyone else, but somehow the woman managed to carry herself with an air of reserved austerity.

"I have *never* seen anyone that beautiful in all my life," Kevin declared from behind the bar. "And she's not alone."

The woman appeared to be with a group of girlfriends. As they descended the steps into the lounge, all eyes went to them. However, none of the group held a candle to the blonde woman. As she walked by the tables, not one soul had the temerity to approach her. Her height also made her appear intimidating. There were few men able to muster the courage to address her directly. She carried a small half-purse under her arm, occasionally brushing her hair behind her ears. Leaving her friends at a table in the middle of the lounge, she made her way to the bar and sat next to Liam. She did not glance his way, but he was highly aware of her presence and the scent of her musky perfume.

"What can I get for you?" Kevin asked the woman.

"A margarita, please, with a slice of lemon."

"Coming right up," Kevin replied. "By the way, my name is Kevin Larkin, and this is my brother, Liam. We own The Coven. I haven't seen you in here before. Are you new in town?"

Liam rolled his eyes. Leave it to Kevin to get the conversation going with small talk. Yet his brother had a way of drawing women into inane discourse in which they revealed more about themselves, more so than they normally would in front of a stranger.

And it worked.

The woman glanced at Liam briefly, and then retuned her eyes to Kevin. "My name is Carly O'Reilly. My friends and I started out this morning on a day trip along the coast. We've hit every town between here and Bangor, but as soon as we saw Larkin City we decided to spend the night. We have rooms at the Amber Whale."

"Interesting choice," Kevin said as he handed Carly her drink. "The Amber Whale was destroyed by fire in 1904 and was later re-built into a dress shop. Last year my family tore down the dress shop and constructed the Amber Whale from the original 1870 specs. With added modern conveniences, of course."

Carly smiled, and both Kevin and Liam were stunned by the brilliance of her teeth and the full curve of her lips. She had what they called a "barracuda" smile, full of white teeth and a sensuous mouth. She brushed the bangs away from her eyes, and for the first

time Liam noticed their dark blue color and the heavy black eyeliner that framed her under-eyes.

While observing her beauty, Kevin was nagged by a feeling of familiarity. Had he met her before? He didn't think so. He would have remembered someone with her face and body. Yet she struck a chord with him, as if he knew her from another place and time.

Kevin's attention was called away by a waitress with an order, so Liam took the opportunity to take over the conversation with Carly. He watched her take a bite of lemon and then a healthy sip of the margarita. She removed a pack of cigarettes from her purse and was just about to strike a match when Liam flicked his lighter in front of her.

Carly glanced at him. She took in his features, meeting his coal eyes. His hair was as dark as his eyes, and he had a noticeable cleft in his chin. By the looks of it he was as tall as she was but not by much. His lips were full and slightly parted.

She accepted the light, thanking him after exhaling smoke.

"You're welcome," Liam replied. He was not at all intimidated by her as he sensed she wanted him to be, which he supposed came from years of practice and rounds of endless dating. Despite her mysterious and exotic allure, Liam was certain he could literally charm the pants off Carly O'Reilly.

"You made quite an entrance into the lounge, didn't you?" Liam observed, keeping his tone casual. "A fine performance, if I do say so myself."

"If you say so," Carly responded a trifle coolly, not sure if she liked Liam's insight into her operating techniques. He was apparently immune to her charm and beyond any misconceptions of ambiguity, and he was obviously not overawed by speaking to her on an equal footing.

"What prompted you and your friends to take a trip along the coast?" Liam asked.

Carly looked away from him. "We like to get together and go off on spontaneous excursions now and then. We all work at the Bella Catering Company in Bangor, and this was one of the few weekends we didn't have an event scheduled. We decided to make the most of it."

"Have you ever been to Larkin City before?" Liam pressed.

She shook her head. "This is my first time here. It's quite lovely, if not a bit small and quaint. Have you lived here long?"

Liam laughed. "All my life. My great-great grandfather founded the city."

"Oh really?" Carly said, her interest piqued. "Is that how you and your brother came to own The Coven? Is that how you make your living?"

He drained his beer. "Actually, I come here to relax but Kevin mans the place on weekends. During the week we're both working stiffs just like everyone else."

Carly flicked her cigarette in the heavy glass ashtray in front of her. "Oh? Where do you work during the week?"

"We work at the local lumber company," Liam answered her. "I do purchasing, while Kevin supervises the staff. We also fill in where we're needed."

Carly bit into her lemon again, taking another quick drink. "I love the catering business," she said with enthusiasm. "I like creating original ideas and new recipes. Right now I'm just an assistant to Bella's owner in Bangor, but someday I hope to have my own company."

Kevin returned to the bar, noticing Liam and Carly were enjoying an easy conversation. Liam was making progress, but it didn't bother Kevin. His brother deserved a

beauty like Carly O'Reilly. Someone with her looks and obvious style did not come along too often, and Kevin was glad to see Liam with a lady of class rather than the needy women he cavorted with on occasion.

Liam tapped his beer mug. "Can I have another, brother?"

Kevin gave him a fresh mug filled with frothing beer. He looked to Carly. "Are you ready for another?"

"Please," she replied. She swallowed down the rest of her drink, handing the glass to Kevin. She flashed a smile at Liam. "The tequila is going to my head."

Kevin winked at his brother, but Liam ignored him. "Have you eaten dinner?"

"No. We had a late lunch on the road around four o'clock, but that was hours ago."

"Let's have dinner," Liam suggested.

Carly's eyes lit up. "I would enjoy that."

"We can eat at the restaurant upstairs, or we can go to the Amber Whale and have fresh seafood in the tavern," he told her.

Carly tilted her head slightly, smiling again. "Which would you recommend?"

"The food upstairs is good," Liam admitted. "Kevin brought in a chef from Boston last year, who mainly specializes in Irish food with a few French dishes thrown in. On the other hand, the Amber Whale has the best seafood, steak and pasta in the state of Maine."

Carly was no fool. She knew where Liam was going with his adroit invitation to dinner. He wanted to maneuver her back to the Amber Whale where he knew she had a room for the night. By now Carly found the idea rather appealing, so she acquiesced. "The Amber Whale it is, then," she said softly, her eyes warm as she looked at him.

Liam felt a strong sexual thrill from Carly's gaze, something he had not experienced in a long time. Over the years he had entertained plenty of women, but there were few in his memory that made him feel like Carly did now. The desire seemed to be pitted deep in his stomach, winding its way through his entire body. There was something magical about Carly, something undefined and mysterious that he was suddenly desperate to uncover.

"What about your friends?" Liam asked.

Carly glanced over her shoulder to her friends in the lounge. "It looks like they're having fun," she said. "I'll tell them we're leaving, and I'll see them later at the Amber Whale."

"Good. We can leave in my car." Liam motioned to his brother. Kevin nodded and came over. "We're going to the Amber Whale for dinner," Liam told him, dropping money on the bar. "That's for our drinks. See you later at home?"

Kevin watched as Liam and Carly made their way through the lounge, stopping at her friends table briefly and then moving toward the door.

Kevin took their glasses from the bar and placed them in a sink underneath the counter. He wiped the bar with a small white towel, watching his brother and Carly disappear from the lounge. All of a sudden Kevin had an uneasy rush in the pit of his stomach, but he tried to quell it. The familiar feeling he had about Carly persisted, but he could not put his finger on the reasons why.

"*Liam needs to enjoy himself,*" Kevin thought as he washed glasses under the counter. "*Hell, as long as he doesn't run off and get married, he'll be just fine.*"

ENTHRALLMENT:

Excerpt from Chapter Four

Spring 1981
Larkin City, Maine

LESS THAN SIX MONTHS after her wedding, Carly was the proud owner of her own catering company. She mulled long and hard over a name for the business, deciding to eschew with a typical moniker such as using her own name exclusively or that of the city in which she lived. Because Larkin City had its own harbor, she finally settled on calling her company Harbor View Catering. Her office window afforded a clear view of the harbor, so she thought the name was fitting.

Harbor View Catering was housed in a pleasant business court called Brickyard Square on Main Street in Larkin, a few blocks away from the lumber yard. The court was fairly new, having been built by the Larkin Construction Company five years ago. There were several other businesses in the court, including a boutique, a printing company, an architectural firm known as Bennett Blueprints, a pizza parlor, an aerobics studio and a French restaurant named Pepe's Café. Willow trees were abundant in the center of the court, wafting over pink brick walkways and buildings. Several wooden benches were situated under the willow trees, where locals sometimes took lunch. It was a tranquil setting.

The catering company was on the left side of the court. The front window had white shutters and sparkling clean glass. A large wooden sign, painted light pink to match the brick, rested above the entry door. Black lettering imbedded into the wood announced her business: *Harbor View Catering. By appointment only. Carly O'Reilly, Proprietor.* It was rather old-fashioned and antiquated, but Carly loved it.

The first floor of the building contained light gray carpeting and elegant cherry wood furniture with embroidered cushions. Carly envisioned clients waiting for her in the chairs as she appeared to greet them from her office upstairs. Glass and wood coffee tables were in between the pieces of furniture, on top of which rested tasteful picture books depicting the different parties Carly serviced while working for Bella Catering. The photographs showed the elegance of the decorations used as well as the sumptuousness of the food served. Sample menus printed on parchment paper were also scattered on the tables, listing dishes she used while at Bella, recipes of her own and a few she garnered from the Larkin family chef, Mae Jensen.

The kitchen was on the first floor, in the rear of the waiting area. There was alley access in the kitchen, where vendors delivered supplies and where the catering company left with their party arrangements. A few weeks before the grand opening, Carly hired six employees through the locally-owned Clamshell Employment Agency, where she chose a chef, a secretary and four others to help prep food and deliver the goods. Liam purchased a custom-built van for her use, pink in color with black company lettering on the sides.

Carly's large office was up the carpeted stairs above the main floor. The upper level also had a conference room and a small cafeteria, as well as several storage closets and smaller offices. Vendors had already been trying to sell her their food and decorative products, and she had closets full of their free samples, which she intended to make good

use of in the future.

The office was built into the corner of the building, with a huge picture window that straddled both Main Street and the entry to Brickyard Square below. The view was lovely, and she often sat at her desk and looked out both sides of the window, appreciating the sight of the harbor and the street below. There were several large indoor trees in wicker baskets around her office, a few of them near the edges of the window.

The days, weeks and months leading up to the grand opening was frenetic for Carly. She was enjoying the first flush of her marriage to Liam, which at times swerved her from her business course. Her husband enthralled her – he was handsome, passionate, humorous and adoring of her. Her life was idyllic, very nearly perfect.

On occasion Carly would drive to Bangor to see her mother, usually without Liam, when they would have lunch and do a bit of shopping. Susan O'Reilly was heartened to see her daughter so happy, and doubly glad she had not told Carly of her family relationship to Liam.

One day in early March 1981, Carly and her mother met for lunch at Governor's Restaurant in Bangor. After finishing their meal, they sat at their table drinking coffee until it was time to leave. Susan took in Carly's rich attire, pleased by her appearance. Carly's blouse was pure white silk, which was tucked neatly into a lime-colored cashmere skirt. Her nails were well-manicured and her hair was straight and shiny.

"I'll say it again," Susan observed. "Marriage agrees with you."

"It's not just the marriage," Carly stated with a smile. "Being with Liam agrees with me. He is so wonderful, mother. I have never felt so loved and cherished by a man. And the house! I've lived in the mansion for three months and I still haven't seen every room. It's endless, but so beautiful. The view from our room overlooks Banshee Point, and on windy days I can actually smell the sea."

"And what about Liam's family?" Susan wanted to know. "How do you get along with all of them?"

"I adore Liam's father Rory," Carly enthused. "He's sweet and funny, but can be as hard as nails when he has to be. Denise is a bit of an airhead, though. She's harmless, really. Brian and Mary Larkin are kind to me, as is Sean. I like Kevin well enough, too, but I don't care for Shannon. She's as cold as ice, and her husband Scott is barely civil to me in front of her. When she's not around he's a bit friendlier, but he knows where his bread is buttered."

"So, all in all, you like Liam's family?"

"Apart from Shannon, yes," Carly agreed. "I couldn't have wished for a better group of people."

"What about Phoebe McGarren?" Susan asked.

"She's so old she rarely leaves her room," Carly replied off-handedly. "I've only seen her about a dozen times since our wedding. Aunt Phoebe is perhaps one of the classiest people I've ever met, but I'm not sure what she makes of me. She's nice, but very reserved. Liam visits her in her room at least four times a week." Carly wrinkled her nose. "That's the only drawback, I think."

"You resent the time Liam spends with Phoebe?" Susan was surprised.

Carly looked embarrassed. "Yes, I *do* resent it. He has some sort of blind loyalty to her, an immense respect he reserves only for her."

Susan finished her coffee, taken aback by her daughter's insecurity. "Perhaps if you get to know Phoebe you'll understand and appreciate Liam's devotion to her."

"I don't think so," Carly dismissed the idea.

Susan was dismayed. "You're making a mistake, my dear. Phoebe is like a matriarch in the Larkin family."

Carly stared at her mother. "How did you know that?"

Susan recovered herself quickly. "Despite the fact that it's obvious, I've also heard enough from you and I boned up on the Larkin family history before you married Liam. I wanted to know what my daughter was getting into."

Carly seemed to accept the explanation. She dabbed at her mouth with a napkin, smiling prettily. "I have to get back to Larkin, mother. Oh, I almost forgot to ask you – there's going to be a family dinner at the mansion on St. Patrick's Day. Can you come?"

"I'd like nothing better."

Carly stood from the table. "Good. Why don't you come around four o'clock? That way you'll be just in time for tea." She leaned over and kissed her mother on the cheek.

"I'll see you then," Susan said, grasping Carly's hand briefly before letting go.

Susan watched her daughter leave the restaurant, emotion constricting in her throat. Carly was already one of the Larkin's after three short months. While she still saw the mansion as breathtaking and luxurious, it was becoming commonplace to her the longer she lived there.

Carly was being grafted into the Larkin way of life without being aware of it. Susan hoped her daughter remained true to herself and did not allow her natural persona and identity to become swallowed up by her husband's family.

ENTHRALLMENT: Excerpt from Chapter Five

January 1985
Larkin City, Maine

MEGAN CHARLENE LARKIN ENTERED the world on the first day of the New Year, 1985. She was born healthy in St. Patrick's Hospital, with a head full of dark blonde hair.

Liam was spellbound by his daughter. He held the infant in Carly's hospital room, standing by a large window that overlooked the front of the facility. He gazed into Megan's sleeping face, awe etched into his features. Carly watched him from the bed, highly satisfied she had given her husband a child and pleased by his reaction to her.

"She looks like you apart from the hair color," Carly said at length.

Liam glanced at his wife, his hopeful expression almost making her laugh. "Do you think so?" he asked eagerly, looking down at his daughter again.

"Yes, look at that small cleft in her chin," Carly replied. "That's all *you*."

"I suppose you're right," Liam agreed. Then he grinned. "It's hard to stifle the strong Larkin genes."

"Don't forget she's an O'Reilly, too," Carly said softly.

Liam laughed. "Megan has a double-whammy of Irish, doesn't she?"

Carly leaned her head back on the pillow. She was still tired from the labor required to birth her daughter, but she was happy. She lowered her eyes and continued to watch Liam with Megan at the window. They were the perfect picture of father and daughter together. She tried to ignore the vague guilt that started to wash over her, refusing to accept she had done anything wrong. The truth that Liam wasn't really Megan's father did not concern Carly. The child was a Larkin by blood and that was all that mattered for the time being. She stubbornly ignored indications of her own moral ineptitude by sweeping aside the knowledge that Liam and Megan were actually half-siblings rather than father and daughter.

Carly dozed briefly. She was startled awake when Liam placed the bundle that was Megan into her arms. "I think she's hungry," he said quietly.

"Oh?" Carly looked down at the waking child. "Can you call the nurse then?"

Liam appeared puzzled. "Why do you need the nurse?"

"The nurse brings in the baby formula," Carly replied.

"Formula? Aren't you breast-feeding Megan?"

Carly shook her head, annoyed by her husband's assumption. "No, of course not. I asked the doctor to give me *Bromocriptine* to stop lactation so Megan could have baby formula."

"What the hell is *Bromocriptine*?" Liam asked, anger in his tone.

"It's used to stop lactation," she replied defensively. "If you care to learn more about it, I think the brand name of the medication is *Parlodel*. Ask Dr. Wilbourn, he'll tell you it's a safe drug."

Liam was stymied. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell his wife he wasn't concerned about the medication but rather her lack of interest in breast-feeding their child.

"Why don't you want to breast-feed Megan?" he finally asked.

"I've heard it causes – how shall I say? – lack of tone in the breast muscles," Carly replied stiffly, none too pleased by her husband's reaction. "I don't want to lose my figure, Liam. Surely you can understand that."

He was glimpsing another side to his wife's personality, and he wasn't sure he liked it. "Worrying about your figure as opposed to what's best for our daughter is ludicrous," he muttered, turning away from the bed.

Carly was irritated by his remark, and wasted no time in displaying her own anger. "Of course you would say that, you're a *man*," she spat out. "You aren't the one who went through months of discomfort. You aren't the one who suffered in labor for hours. You aren't the one with twenty extra pounds hanging on your frame. Baby formula is perfectly safe, Liam, and Megan won't be physically or mentally scarred because she takes her meals from a bottle rather than at my breast."

Liam kept his back to her, gazing out of the large window. It was a cold day. A fine white crust of bristly frost touched the ground, and the skies were overcast. He observed cars in the parking lot of the hospital, and saw Larkin's Main Street moving along at a bustling pace despite the cold, frozen snow and ice.

Just a few minutes ago he had been deliriously happy by the birth of his daughter, but now he was rankled by his wife's disinterest in being hands-on with Megan. He took a deep breath to rationalize his thoughts, trying to see the issue from Carly's perspective. She was inordinately proud of her figure, and he admittedly appreciated it as well. Was it such a crime for her not to want to breast-feed? Of course not, but he was still disappointed by her choice.

He turned back to her, pasting a smile on his face. "I'm sorry, darling. I'm making much ado about nothing. You're right. Megan will be fine taking the baby formula." He stepped toward the bed, sat in a chair and took her hand. It was time to change the subject. "Your mother and my parents are waiting to see the new arrival. Are you up for more visitors?"

"*Another battle won*," Carly thought with relief. Aloud, she said: "Please, fetch them from the waiting room. It's time Megan met her grandparents."

She watched Liam leave her side, seeing his footfall on the shiny hospital corridor outside her room. As soon as he was out of sight, she gazed down at her baby daughter. Megan's blue eyes were open, staring at her mother. Carly smiled at her. She let the child take her pinkie finger, which she clutched with all of her infant strength.

"You have nothing to fear, my darling daughter," Carly whispered. "You're a Larkin, and nothing can hurt you. *I'll make sure of it.*"

* * *

TRUE TO HER WORD, Carly returned to work just four weeks after giving birth to Megan. While she was enthralled with her daughter, she was near stir-crazy after one month confined at home. She wanted to be out amongst her contemporaries, in the thick of her business in all its brisk direction. She missed being in command of her staff, of giving instructions that she expected to be followed to the letter.

She felt in charge of her own little family that included Liam and the baby, but there was always the specter of Liam's *other* family hovering about. Rory and Denise were harmless enough, as was the aged Phoebe, but Shannon rubbed Carly the wrong way. The

woman seemed to be quietly judging Carly's worth as a wife and mother, although Shannon had yet to speak a word of criticism. Carly could see it in Shannon's eyes: the disapproval, the dislike, the obvious inferior regard in which she held her cousin's wife.

Liam did not protest when Carly returned to work. After their ruction in the hospital, he decided to let his wife have her way. Besides, it gave him more time with his baby daughter. Megan was the apple of his eye, and he realized with some guilt that he preferred being alone with her rather than having Carly nearby, fidgeting and restless.

But he had a responsible job as well, and could not very well become a stay-at-home father. A few weeks after Megan was born, Liam set about looking for a day babysitter. He went through Mariko Woods' employment agency, but she had trouble finding a qualified sitter with references in the Larkin City area.

"The older women are too severe, and the young ones are too flighty with no experience," Mariko told Liam with regret.

Both Shannon and Dana offered to look after Megan during the day, as did his childhood nanny Bridget Maloney. Liam thought it was an excellent plan. He broached the subject with Carly as they were getting ready for bed three weeks after Megan's birth.

After they settled under the covers, Liam spoke. "I haven't been able to find a qualified babysitter for Megan in the Larkin area. Any ideas?" He was irritated that his wife had not concerned herself with the particulars of finding someone to look after Megan during the day, but he held his tongue.

Carly sighed. "I'd suggest my mother, but she lives too far away." She turned her head on the pillow to look at her husband. "Are you sure there isn't one soul in Larkin City qualified to help us?"

"For the time being, there is no one," Liam replied. He sat up, fluffing the pillows behind his back. "You know, we're overlooking the obvious here. Dana and Shannon are home all day, and both of them have agreed to look after Megan until we can find someone to come in. Bridget even volunteered to help."

Carly grew still. She wouldn't mind Dana looking after her daughter, but she did not want Shannon wielding any kind of influence over Megan. Choosing her words carefully, Carly said: "I think Dana would be more suitable as she has young children. And I think perhaps Bridget might be too old to take on the demands of a baby. Shannon's kids are basically grown, and she might be out of touch."

"Out of touch with *what*?" Liam wanted to know.

Carly shrugged. "She's not used to little babies, whereas Dana is."

"Shannon and Bridget have helped Dana with the twins all along," Liam argued, keeping his voice even with effort. "Jesus, Carly. What's the harm in having three sitters – at no cost, I might add – rather than one? Besides, Shannon and Dana are family. They're more trustworthy than some stranger from an agency."

She pushed her head back into the pillow, closing her eyes. She wanted to blurt out her hatred of Shannon, but she instinctively knew this would infuriate Liam and perhaps alienate him from her. Again, she chose her words carefully. "I'm not sure Shannon is the right person to look after our daughter," she whispered so that Liam had to lean close to hear her.

"Why ever not?" he demanded. "She's one of the most level-headed people I know."

Carly rolled over, propping her head on her elbow so that she could look at her husband. "That's the thing," she began with forced hesitation, knowing the tone of her voice

would draw Liam in. "I don't agree with you. I think Shannon is unstable. All that stuff she went through with Mike Sullivan would leave anyone unbalanced, and she's also a bit of a hermit. I really do think she hates me, although I've given her no cause to dislike me."

Liam stared at her, made incredulous by her words. Uttered, they were so removed from reality and he could not fathom how she formed them. "You're wrong," he said. "Where do you get your ideas, Carly? Shannon has never treated you badly, nor has anyone else in the family. Shannon is no way unstable. My God, she's the sanest of our lot, if the truth is known. I think your ideas and fears are groundless."

Carly lowered her eyes, looking at her hands on the sheets. *"I don't want that bitch looking after my child, enforcing the notion that I'm an unfit or disinterested mother,"* she wanted to scream. Instead, she murmured: "I can't help how I feel, darling. I cannot imagine the stress of going to work and worrying about Megan, whether you agree with me or not."

Liam wasn't buying it. "Then stay home and look after Megan yourself," he snapped. "Problem solved."

She had pushed him too far. He would brook no slur against his family, even if it meant throwing her aside in the process. She did not think he would literally throw her aside, but he would distance himself from her emotionally which would only serve to lessen her hold on him, and therefore his family and their fortune. She loved Liam, but the possibility of losing the prestige and the financial backing of his name was enough to shake her innate hatred and distrust of Shannon, and to let the bitch mind her child.

Carly reached over and stroked her husband's face. "Please accept my apology," she said softly. "I've been emotional and somewhat irrational since Megan was born. The doctor says it's natural. He called it a shifting of hormones. I think if I can get back to work I'll return to normal, feel more like my old self."

Liam peered at her. "Are you sure?"

She nodded, still touching his face. "Yes, I'm sure of it. You'll see. Give me a week or so back at work and I'll be the wicked woman you married."

He grinned. "Promise?"

They kissed, and then Liam drew her into the circle of his arms. After several minutes she heard his even breathing, which signaled his descent into sleep.

Carly remained motionless in his arms. She was burning with fury inside, angry that Liam had won the first round about the care of their daughter. She knew Megan would be safe in Shannon's company. Despite her hatred of the woman, she was aware Shannon would never harm a blood relation. That Liam won the argument was as if Shannon had won, too.

"The bitch," Carly thought sourly as she rolled away from Liam to find her own slumber.

**ENTHRALLMENT:
Excerpt from Chapter Six**

*Autumn 1988
Larkin City, Maine*

PHOEBE MCGARREN WAS DYING. She wasn't consumed with a fatal disease or a slippage of the mind but rather she was simply *tired*. She was weary of the daily struggle to move about, of the aches and intolerable pains in her bones. She never left her rooms anymore, spending her days in a wheelchair by the picture window in her suite. She liked looking out over the Larkin estate as she sipped her first coffee of the morning. She nibbled on toast dipped in a soft-boiled egg, drinking a second cup of coffee by mid-morning.

Five years before the birth of Megan Larkin, Shannon hired a nurse from Larkin City to help Phoebe dress, serve her meals and to keep the older woman company during the day. Claire Colby was middle-aged with short, steel-gray hair and piercing green eyes. She was small-boned, and always wore a light-gray frock with a dark red belt cinched at the waist. Despite her rather stern appearance, Claire was a kindly woman who quickly became protective of her charge. The two women became fast friends, more than patient and caregiver as the years passed, and Phoebe grew to trust Claire implicitly as she settled into her dotage.

Claire had worked as a nurse at St. Patrick's Hospital for many years, but after early retirement she took on patient home care by signing with the Clamshell Employment Agency. At first, Claire juggled Phoebe with a few other elderly clients in Larkin City but as time progressed she realized Phoebe needed her full attention. While the still-elegant older woman was mostly incapacitated, she expected undivided care and required the finer things in life on a daily basis. Claire did not begrudge Phoebe her peculiarities as the former dress shop owner could well afford all the frills. Claire was only too happy to oblige as she was fond of Phoebe, admiring and respecting her rather fascinating journey through life.

Claire's younger brother Martin was the night manager of the Amber Whale, and she often told Phoebe about Martin's escapades with tourists and locals alike. Phoebe delighted in the gossip, even snickering at the more promiscuous tales involving well-known Larkin City residents.

"I cannot imagine our Mayor taking a room at the Amber Whale in order to dictate letters to his secretary," Phoebe laughed after one of Claire's gossip sessions. "Surely there is sufficient room in city hall office space for such activity."

While she had an apartment in Larkin City, Claire arrived at the mansion every day at eight o'clock in the morning and left after eight o'clock at night. Her only day off was the first Sunday of each month, which was of her own device rather than by any demands made by Phoebe or the Larkin family. On occasion Phoebe would tell Claire to take more time for herself, but Claire was firm in her stance. Phoebe was more than just another patient to her. She felt a true kinship and love for the older woman.

The devotion was not lost on Phoebe or the Larkin family. After a few years, Claire was asked to move into the mansion permanently. She demurred at first, hesitant to surrender her apartment in Larkin City and unwilling to give up her black cat, a tom by the name of Newton (as in "Fig Newton" because the feline loved the little cookies). When

Shannon assured her the cat could live at the mansion, Claire relented. Phoebe also insisted that Claire be given security in the form of a contract, which stated if Claire had to leave her employment at any time, the family would help her pay for new lodgings off the estate or in Larkin City.

Claire took a comfortable room next to Phoebe's suite in the mansion, where Newton made himself at home. The cat loved sitting on the sill of the large picture window in Claire's room, and he favored snoozing in the sun rays that splashed across the carpet in the morning. Claire still took one Sunday each month for herself, when she went into Larkin City to visit her brother.

Phoebe and Claire slipped into a predictable routine. After breakfast, Phoebe took a bath with Claire's assistance and then watched television in her sitting room. She loved talk shows and soap operas, but by lunchtime she was ready for a change. Phoebe typically dined on fresh fish with vegetables and white wine for the noon meal, and afterward allowed herself to be tucked into a blanket on the couch by Claire, where she attempted to read her current subscription of fashion magazines. Although she would never admit it, Phoebe also snuck in a brief nap or two before teatime.

Dinner was served in the sitting room and usually consisted of beef or chicken, with more vegetables, potatoes and an extra decanter of wine. Phoebe enjoyed brandy before bedtime, which she shared with Claire before being tucked into her bed for the night.

However, teatime was Phoebe's favorite part of the day. Once or twice a week Shannon would leave the tea service downstairs and visit Phoebe in her rooms, bringing Dana, the twins Derek and Diana, and little Megan. Angie and Jamie, now sixteen and fifteen years old respectively, typically skipped tea altogether. They were too busy with their teenaged friends and various high school activities.

Phoebe adored the children. They made the gloomy old mansion seem more alive, more vibrant. She often wondered if the young ones found her old and boring, but Megan especially seemed to take a liking to her great-great aunt.

Derek and Diana Larkin were nearly identical, both possessing black hair and the blue eyes of their mother. At five years old, both were precocious but very different in personality. Derek was quiet, more apt to keep to himself, while Diana was loud and gregarious, curious about everything in her path. The twins reminded Phoebe of Shannon and Sean when they were small, with Shannon being the more aggressive of the two.

Megan Larkin was only three years old but already displayed an unusual beauty and grace. Phoebe was struck by the child's pale, translucent skin framed by dark blonde hair and large, dark-lashed eyes that seemed like burnished almonds set in her face. The girl was small and frail for her age, somehow defied by her natural curiosity and intelligence, which successfully mingled with a quiet introspection Phoebe found astounding in such a young child.

"She is a perfect physical combination of her mother and father," Phoebe observed of Megan as she sipped her tea from the divan in her sitting room. "There is no mistaking the child is a Larkin, but there is something quite unique about her that sets her apart from the rest."

Shannon glanced at Phoebe from her place on the divan. "Megan is a dear, sweet girl," she said quietly. "Nothing at all like her mother in personality, thankfully."

The children were playing a game of *Go Fish!*, sitting in a circle in front of the fireplace in Phoebe's sitting room. The smoky etched-glass screen shielded them from the

open flame in the grate, as it burned steadily on the cold autumn day.

"Megan is a Daddy's girl," Dana spoke from the chair opposite the divan. "She and Liam have an exclusive admiration society. Every night he comes home from work, she runs laughing into his arms."

"Hardly the same reaction she displays when her mother walks through the door," Shannon murmured from behind her tea cup.

Phoebe frowned in warning. "Shannon, it wouldn't do if Megan overheard you."

"I speak the truth," Shannon responded firmly. "But never fear, aunty, I wouldn't scar little Megan with such poison. I'm sure she gets enough of that from Carly, even though mother and daughter don't seem to spend much time together."

Dana set her tea cup on the coffee table between the chair and divan. "I'm just glad Carly gave up on the idea of getting a permanent sitter so we could continue to look after Megan," she said. "Being raised with my twins will surely benefit her, rather than being isolated with a nanny in her room."

Shannon leaned forward. "The only reason Carly gave up on hiring an outside sitter was because the search was cutting into her precious work schedule," she snapped. She lowered her voice. "I'm telling you, the woman doesn't give one whit about her own child. It's a pity, and a shame. Poor Liam has finally realized it, but of course he's stuck in the marriage now unless he wants to hand over half his fortune in a divorce settlement."

Phoebe was startled. "Where did you hear that? Is Liam considering a divorce?"

Shannon shrugged. "He hasn't said so, not in so many words. But I know Liam. He's not happy in his marriage. He adores Megan of course, and she makes it all worthwhile." She sipped her tea, glancing at the children engrossed in their card game. "Carly rarely gets home before seven at night anymore. To her this is a good thing because it means her business is booming, but it leaves little time for her husband and daughter. Liam bathes Megan at night, he feeds her, and he tucks her into bed. Carly is so tired by the time she gets home she eats dinner and falls into her own bed, often without two words for Megan. Then she's off again early the next morning."

"What about weekends?" Phoebe wanted to know. "Doesn't Carly spend some time with Megan on the weekends?" Being a virtual self-imposed prisoner in her own rooms gave the older woman little insight into the daily routine of the mansion these days.

Shannon snorted while Dana replied to the question: "She works Saturdays, too. Sundays – well, on Sunday she sleeps in and then drives over to Bangor with Megan to have lunch with Susan O'Reilly. So at least they spend one day a week together."

"That's something, then," Phoebe said uncertainly.

"Ask Carly what Megan's favorite cartoon is," Shannon whispered. "Ask her what the child likes for lunch, or what her favorite book is. Carly doesn't have a clue. She has no interest in the development of her own child, but rather treats her like a little trophy. Trotting off to Bangor every Sunday is just a gesture, trust me."

"What makes you so sure?" Phoebe asked. "You've never liked Carly, dear. Are you positive your judgment isn't clouded?" The older woman appeared thoughtful for a moment. "Granted, I've never really cared for Carly either, but she is a member of this family and we have to make allowances."

"I can read Carly," Shannon insisted. "I knew she was wrong for Liam the minute I met her. She reminds me of Marianne Chamberlain, actually. If Liam's money were to disappear tomorrow, so would Carly. She enjoys the prestige of being a Larkin more than

her marriage. I can't prove it, of course, but I think Liam is a means to an end for her. You know as well as I do how fast she got her own business going after Liam married her, all of which was made possible with his money."

"Perhaps Carly feels the hostility from you," Dana noted. "Maybe that's why she feels the need to stay away from the mansion."

Shannon raised an eyebrow at her sister-in-law, surprised Dana would defend Carly. "Why would you say something like that?"

Dana looked sheepish. "Everyone is always down on Carly, no matter what she does. It's not fair. We are not great friends, her and I, but I feel bad for her when everyone finds fault with her every action."

Shannon sighed. "You're right, I suppose, yet I can't help how I feel. Call it intuition if you will, but I don't think Carly is the genuine article."

Their conversation halted when the children came forward, asking for pastries from the tea cart.

Shannon smiled at Megan, who stood in front of her. "And what would you like today?" she asked. "Let me guess – a blueberry muffin?"

Megan nodded happily, holding out her hands. "Yes, please, Aunt Shannon."

Shannon glanced over the child's head toward Dana, who watched in return.

The two women smiled at one another, knowing that no matter what was said between them they would never lose their deep and lasting friendship.

* * *

June 1989

Larkin City, Maine

PHOEBE WASN'T SLEEPING WELL. She didn't mind, because she knew deep in her heart she would be in the eternal state of sleep before too long.

She spent her time daydreaming. She remembered her past with surprising alacrity, preferring to focus on the happy points in her life and skimming over the unpleasant. She pondered on what wisdom to convey to her family, and struggled with parts of her life that were left well enough alone. She felt certain aspects had no bearing or benefit for those in the present or the future.

Although she told herself she dwelled little on the sins of her past, in fact Phoebe obsessed over what she perceived to be her part in Colleen Larkin's death. She felt monumental guilt for her long-ago affair with Patrick Larkin and the subsequent result of her sister's stroke some years later when she learned the truth.

"*No one else needs to know the truth,*" Phoebe told herself as she dozed in her bed one early June morning. "*What purpose would it serve for the family to know that I caused the death of their grandmother, and my sister? No good could ever come of it, and therefore it shall remain unspoken.*"

But her perception of the truth continued to gnaw at her. The Larkin's had shown her nothing but kindness, love and complete acceptance since the start, some seventy-one years ago. How could she not tell them the whole story, including her affair with Patrick, the resulting pregnancy, and the knowledge of which caused Colleen to have a massive stroke that led to her death?

"*They will hate me if the truth was known,*" Phoebe thought fearfully, her eyes wandering around her bedroom. She lovingly took in every detail, from the large picture window, to the white marble fireplace, the small table and chairs which used to be her favorite place for early morning coffee, and the various pictures depicting seascapes and flower gardens that adorned her walls.

"*No one will ever know,*" she continued to ponder drowsily. "*There is nothing written down on paper, no untoward conversations that might lead someone to think I had a hand in Colleen's death. It's all in my head now, which is where it will remain.*"

Phoebe fell into a light, fitful slumber, her swaying decisions weighing heavily on her mind.

She dreamed about Patrick Larkin at first, reliving their affair with every excruciating detail. She saw herself as a young woman in her dreams, with tall coltish legs, rich brown hair and lively green eyes. Then she saw her beloved Niles Wharritt, smiling and holding out his hands to her. "*I'm waiting here for you,*" he whispered. "*It's been such a long time, Phoebe, please don't make me wait much longer.*"

Her vision dimmed for a moment. When it cleared she saw Niles again, but this time Colleen was standing behind him. Phoebe felt herself turn rigid with fear, her eyes going over Niles' head to rest on her sister.

It was not a comforting sight. Colleen was as she had died – mismatched eyes from the stroke, and a menacing twist to her lips that made it impossible for her to speak. Her eyes were wide and staring, accusing in their regard. Beyond Colleen was another figure, that of Nicholas Bertrand, standing motionless and appearing as he had also died: head lolling to one side in near decapitation where Patrick slit his throat, and one eyeball dangling down to his cheek.

Patrick Larkin stood behind all the characters in Phoebe's mind. The bastard was laughing, crossing his arms and leaning forward. She saw the rope burns on his throat, a reminder that he hung himself rather than face the consequences of his deeds. His voice came mockingly, using her nickname as a wicked epithet: "*I'm waiting for you too, Pheeb.*"

She felt horror grip her like a vise, cutting off her breath. She touched her throat, sensing the perspiration that covered her entire body.

"Phoebe," she heard a voice as if from far away. "Phoebe, wake up. You're having a bad dream."

She opened her eyes, looking upon the concerned face of Claire Colby. The woman's visage was framed in a cloud-like halo, as if she were part of the dreams that haunted Phoebe's mind. Instead of being menacing or judgmental, however, Claire's appearance was soothing, a declaration of complete trust and selfless devotion.

Phoebe reached over and took Claire's hand. "I was dreaming about people in my life who have already passed," she murmured, without fear this time. "Niles, my fiancé; my sister Colleen, and the family chef Nicholas Bertrand, who was so brutally murdered. I also saw his killer, Patrick Larkin. The dream started off well enough, but the end was less than pleasing." She paused briefly. "I also saw myself as I once was, young and lithe and beautiful."

Claire leaned over the bed, letting go of Phoebe's hand. She pulled the comforter closer to Phoebe's shoulders, and tried to adjust the pillow under her head. Newton came into the room, jumping lightly on the bed. Phoebe regarded the black cat fondly, suddenly recalling her own Siamese feline Lady Sam from many years ago.

"Do you want me to shoo him from the bed?" Claire asked as Newton sniffed the air from his place on the comforter.

"No let him be," Phoebe said as she watched Newton settle down next to her, leaning against her arm. The cat began to clean himself, the rhythmic motion of his paw circling his face with exact precision. She smiled. "I think Lady Sam and Newton would have liked one another."

"Who is Lady Sam?" Claire asked with some trepidation, fearing Phoebe was slipping into dementia.

Phoebe glanced at Claire. "Lady Sam was my Siamese cat. I had her when I owned the dress shop in Larkin City. She was my dearest companion until you came along."

"What about your sister Colleen?" Claire queried. "Wasn't she close to you?"

Phoebe was quiet for a moment. "Yes, we were close, but that goes without saying because we were blood-related. What I meant to say was Lady Sam was my dearest companion on a daily basis, like Newton is for you."

"Of course," Claire said. She took the chair next to the bed, gazing at Phoebe as the older woman rested her head against her pillow. "Would you like some tea? If I brought you a bowl of soup, would you take a few spoonfuls?"

Phoebe sighed. "Not yet, dear. First, there is something I need to tell you." She wasn't sure if it was the dream prompting her to change her mind again or if her own guilt was the cause, but Phoebe decided she had to confide her sins to *someone*. Rather than burden the Larkin's, she decided to unload her conscience to Claire instead. At least Claire could be trusted to keep family secrets that were of no concern to the village gossipmongers and busybodies.

"What is it, Phoebe?" Claire asked.

"You must never repeat what I'm about to tell you," Phoebe insisted.

"I would never betray your trust," Claire said, a trifle hurt. "Surely you know that by now."

Phoebe dismissed the remark in her mind. She had one more important requisite to ask of the woman.

"Most of all, never repeat anything I'm about to tell you to a member of the Larkin family."

Claire nodded. "I understand, Phoebe. I promise, I'll never repeat a single word of what you tell me in confidence."

Phoebe felt herself relax. She closed her eyes, summoning the physical strength to confess her sins. It had been a long time in coming, and she was more than ready to vocally unburden herself.

She turned her head and opened her eyes, looking at the expectant Claire. "I am responsible for the death of my sister Colleen," she began softly, tears forming in her eyes. "Because of my sins, Colleen suffered a stroke and passed away unable to speak and accuse me of my terrible deeds . . ."

ENTHRALLMENT: Excerpt from Chapter Seven

November 1990
Larkin City, Maine

GEORGE SULLIVAN KNEW HE would experience a deep sadness at the death of his mother, more so than when Jean-Claude passed away, because he felt closer to Jennifer Sullivan despite her faults. They had reconnected in the five years since he reappeared on her porch, having tea most every afternoon and eating Sunday dinner together. It was as if they had never been apart.

Jennifer's death was sudden. She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer just after Labor Day 1990, and by the dawn of Halloween she was gone. George stayed by her side almost around the clock, with Sara stopping by once a week to visit her grandmother. George took the opportunity to become reacquainted with his daughter, although he asked her not to let Linda know he was back in town and living under an assumed name. Sara took the request in stride, not seeming to be overly concerned by the cloak-and-dagger routine. It wasn't hard to do, seeing that Linda lived in Ellsworth with her second husband Richard Miles.

However, Linda did return to Larkin City to attend her former mother-in-law's funeral. George skipped the service to avoid her, instead waiting for Sara at Jennifer's house on Curry Street. He wandered around, looking at the various rooms and shaking his head at the vast collection of cat figurines his mother kept. *What was he going to do with all of her stuff?* And the house? Should he sell the house, or give it to Sara? Or maybe sell the house and give the money to Sara?

"I'll ask Sara what she wants to do," George said to himself as he walked into Jennifer's bedroom. He glanced at the bed, now neatly made after weeks of being the scene of Jennifer Sullivan's last days on earth.

George kept staring at the bed, seeing his mother there as plain as day. She had accepted the fact she was dying without much fuss – as was her way – telling her son: "I'm just glad you came back into my life, and that we had a chance to be a family again." She seemed to have no regrets or recriminations of what her life might have been.

He sat on the bed, feeling the firmness of the mattress. *"A good, hard mattress is better for your back,"* Jennifer had told him once. *"If you sleep in a cushy bed, you'll have back troubles for the rest of your days."*

"Maybe I should take the bed," George thought to himself as he bounced his frame on the mattress lightly. "And perhaps I'll sell the cat artifacts to the local antiques shop, and give the money to the local animal shelter. That would be quite fitting."

He stood up, and then bent over to test the heaviness of the mattress by lifting it slightly. "Not bad for a queen-sized bed," he said aloud. "Not too heavy, but certainly comfortable. It should fit in my bedroom nicely."

He started to leave, but paused in mid-stride. He glanced around again, seeing nothing else of any real value. Jennifer was as neat as a pin, so there was little in the way of clutter in the house aside from her cat collection.

He looked in a few drawers, but found only clothes, tidily folded of course. The bed

stand only contained a small tiffany lamp and a black cat figurine. The feline face was twisted into a hiss, the front paws perched and drawn as they rested on the base of the statue.

"Where on earth did she find such a thing?" George wondered. "Who sells hissing cat sculptures, for chrissakes?"

He began to turn away, but stopped when the tip of his shoe came against a hard object under the bed. "What the hell . . .?"

He dropped to his knees and looked under the bed. He saw a strongbox, made of gray metal with a black latch. He slid the box from underneath the bed and to the floor in front of him.

It wasn't locked. He flipped the lid open, peering at the contents inside. There was a small stack of papers and a few envelopes tied together with a red bow. He shuffled through the papers, noting the title to the house, a savings passbook and a life insurance policy worth \$25,000 with "Ben Webb" listed as the beneficiary.

He picked up the bound envelopes, untying the red bow to get a closer look.

The first envelope was marked with his mother's own handwriting: *Last Will & Testament of Jennifer Sullivan*. He withdrew a sheet of paper and read the contents quickly, noticing his mother had updated the will just six months before. She left the house on Curry Street to Sara and the singular sum of \$120,000 split between "my dear friend Ben Webb" and "my darling granddaughter Sara Sullivan."

"That answers my question about what to do with the house," George thought. *"No problems there."*

He picked up the second envelope, reading his mother's handwriting again: *To be opened by Ben Webb only upon my death.*

Expecting an emotional thesis about their last five years of family togetherness, George was therefore surprised to find something completely different.

It was a long time before George finished staring at his mother's last words to him, and the 1948 letter from Susan O'Reilly he had never seen before now. It was longer still before he was able to rise from the floor.

* * *

SARA SULLIVAN PARTED COMPANY with her mother Linda and stepfather Richard Miles at the Larkin City Cemetery. The funeral service for Jennifer Sullivan was over, and Linda was anxious to return to her home in Ellsworth before dusk.

"Are you going to be okay?" Linda asked her daughter as they walked toward the driveway leading to the burial plots.

Sara nodded. "I'm fine, mother. Grandmother was sick for a few months, so I've been expecting the worst. She was wonderful and I'm going to miss her, but I'm okay otherwise."

"What are you going to do now?"

Sara shrugged. "Steve and I are going to grab dinner at Bruno's Café, and then head back to Bangor."

"Oh dear," Linda said before she could stop herself.

"Mom?"

"I just shudder to think of you on the back of Steve's motorcycle all the way back to Bangor," Linda said quickly. "One of these days you're going to come down with

pneumonia."

"I'm as healthy as a horse," Sara assured her mother. "Don't worry about me."

"Call me next week just the same, darling."

After Linda and Richard left the cemetery in their blue sedan, Sara trained her eyes on her third and newest husband, Steven Halloway. He was sitting on the back of his Harley-Davidson Electra Glide, circa 1985, parked at an angle in the driveway next to Jennifer's burial plot.

Steve was as different as night and day from her first and second husbands. He was tall and slender, and no matter the occasion always wore tattered black jeans, a short-sleeved black tee-shirt with a sleeveless black leather jacket, black fingerless gloves, black work boots with scuffed heels, and darkly shaded eyeglasses. A silver cross necklace adorned his neck and one small diamond stud pierced his left ear lobe. His hair was streaked blond and spiky, coming to points all over the top of his head. He had short sideburns, and a thin strip of blond hair ran straight down from under his bottom lip and over his chin.

"Ready to go, bumblebee?" he asked, his voice surprisingly high-pitched despite his ultra-masculine appearance. He called her "bumblebee" because when he met her he claimed she stung his heart and "buzzed" his brain like a queen bee.

Sara smiled at him, flashing her white teeth. At the age of twenty-nine, she was a beautiful woman. Her legs were long and slender, her eyes such a dark blue that they appeared violet in color, and her naturally blonde hair hung straight to her waist with twiggly bangs cut across her forehead.

"I'm ready," she said, climbing behind him on the Harley. "We need to swing by Grandma Jennifer's house first. I told George I'd meet him there. Then we can go and have dinner at Bruno's."

"Okey-dokey," he replied, revving the engine of his motorcycle with adroit flicks of his wrists. "I hope George has some beer in the cooler."

As they pulled away from the cemetery, Sara glanced over her shoulder to look at the mound of dirt that was the final resting place of her grandmother. Next to Jennifer Sullivan was the headstone of Sara's brother Michael, where she placed a single rose after her grandmother's service.

Turning her head back, Sara wrapped her arms around Steve and held on tight. She was enthralled by her new husband, even though they were an unlikely pair. He was a motorcycle mechanic with his own business in Bangor and a "biker" in the truest sense of the word. He was also a kind and decent man, with a loving nature and an infectious smile.

After graduating from high school in 1979, Sara attended St. Joseph's College in Standish, Maine, where she obtained her Bachelor of Science degree in nursing. While at college she met her first husband, fellow nursing student Frank Hardy. They married in 1982, but shortly thereafter Sara began an affair with her chemistry professor, James Standish.

James was somehow related to the founder of Standish Village, and was twenty years her senior. Sara left her first husband for James, filing for and receiving her first divorce in 1985. She married the professor the same year, and then moved with him to Boston where she worked at Massachusetts General Hospital. They lived in a spacious house in Cambridge, where James began teaching again.

Their life together was very nearly perfect. On the outside, James was a strikingly

handsome man with iron gray hair and the genteel air of a learned professor. It wasn't until a few years after their wedding that his strange behavior began. At first it was odd sexual games – such as handcuffs, whips and leathers – and then he started to bring other young women into their home to participate in what he called "tasteful orgies."

Sara went along with the romps for awhile to make her husband happy, but she found his new perversions repulsive. She assumed he was attempting to relive his youth, but as they neared their fifth wedding anniversary she realized she'd had quite enough. She left James and filed for her second divorce, taking a job at the Eastern Maine Medical Center in Bangor, where she worked in the pediatric ward.

Within weeks she met Steve Holloway at a horseshoe tournament at the Whig & Courier Pub in Bangor. Sara liked to unwind and relax in the company of her fellow nurses. They loved nothing better than to play competitive horseshoes after work and on weekends.

Sara and Steve only knew each other for six weeks when they married at Bangor City Hall on Harlow Street near the end of July 1990. It was a rather spontaneous wedding, so Sara did not invite her mother or stepfather but instead showed up on their doorstep in Ellsworth for Sunday dinner with Steve in tow. Surprisingly, Linda liked Sara's new husband, declaring in private that "he was more level-headed and polite than the other two."

The new couple bought a small house in Glenburn, a short distance from Bangor, and continued on with their lives: she as a nurse and he as the mechanic and owner of his own motorcycle shop dubbed Knightshades, which employed ten people.

Before Grandmother Sullivan became ill, Sara only went to Larkin once every few months. However, when Jennifer was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer she made the effort at least once a week, often accompanied by Steve.

As Steve slowed the Harley near Curry Street, Sara thought there was no reason to come to Larkin City anymore. She was sadly ambivalent about her father, glad he was back in her life but not anxious to upset her routine to accommodate him.

* * *

GEORGE WAS WAITING FOR Sara, sitting on the front porch of the Curry Street house just as his mother used to do. He was sipping from a snifter of peach brandy in honor of her. In his other hand he held her last letter to him and the letter from Susan, now both read more than a hundred times. On the table next to him rested several bottles of Geary's Autumn Ale, kept cool by the early November wind coming from the harbor.

He watched as Steve Holloway parked his Harley in front of the house. George liked Steve, although he did not know him well as yet. Despite his rather unconventional appearance, Steve seemed to be a down-to-earth man who loved Sara and had her best interests at heart.

As the couple came up the walkway toward the porch, George waved. "I had just about given up on the two of you."

As they stepped on the porch, George noticed Steve eying the bottles of ale on the table. "Help yourself," George said generously with a grin.

Sara crossed her arms. "If you don't mind, I'd rather go inside and make some coffee. I'm freezing."

Steve retrieved the ale bottles one at a time. "I can drink inside as well as outside," he said jokingly, although Sara knew it to be all too true. It was her husband's only fault as far as she could determine – he liked his beer and ale a little *too* much.

The threesome traipsed into the house, where Sara prepared coffee in her grandmother's percolator. She handed Steve a tall glass from the cupboard above the sink, and then sat next to him at the rounded kitchen table. He twisted the red cap from the amber bottle of ale and poured it slowly into the glass at an angle.

For the first time, Sara noticed the pieces of paper in George's hand. "What have you got there?" she wanted to know.

George took a sip of peach brandy and slid the papers across the table toward her. "See for yourself," he said lightly. "Read the one on top first."

Puzzled, Sara took the paper and began reading. After a moment her eyes went wide, then darted in the direction of her father.

"I have a sister?" she whispered.

"It appears that way," George replied, refilling the snifter with more peach brandy.

"Do you know this Susan O'Reilly woman?" Sara asked.

"I used to know Susan, many years ago. The last time I saw her was in 1948, when I was told she ran away from home. Apparently my own mother lied to me, and didn't think I could handle the truth until after she was laid to rest."

"What are you going to do?" Sara was curious. *She had a sister!* "Are you going to try and find Susan again, or the child you had together?"

"Yes," George said without hesitation. "My mother left out information regarding Susan's whereabouts, but I'd still like to find her and explain what happened."

Sara agreed. "It's the only decent thing to do. Do you need my help?"

"Not yet. I think I'll start by looking for birth records in Perry, and by paying a visit to the Sisters of Mercy Convent."

Sara shook her head, setting the letters down on the table. "It's just unreal. To think grandmother hid the facts for all these years. Why would she keep that kind of information from you? What purpose did it serve?"

George shrugged. "I thought mother liked Suz back in those days, but I guess I was wrong."

Steve finally spoke up, turning his head toward Sara. "If you have a sister and she's still alive, then she'd be about forty years old now."

Sara stood from the table and poured herself a cup of coffee. "My mother would have a fit if she knew."

"Whatever you do, don't tell Linda about this," George warned his daughter. "I'd rather she not know or become involved. It would probably upset her. I'm sure by now I'm just an unpleasant memory from her past, so she doesn't need to know I had a child before I married her."

Sara sat back down at the table, coffee cup in hand. "I won't say anything to her." Inside, however, she rebelled. She thought: *"I just discovered I might not be an 'only' child anymore and George wants me to clam up. We'll see about that."*

"I do have some brighter news," George said, sensing his daughter's anxiety. "Jennifer left this house to you, and we get to split her \$120,000 savings account. How does that grab you?" He stubbornly refused to mention the \$25,000 life insurance policy Jennifer left to him alone.

Steve seemed to come alive. "What?"

Sara laughed, patting her husband's hand. "Don't get too excited, Stevie. We have to pay for grandmother's funeral, you know, and pay taxes on the portion of her estate I receive."

"Yeah, but your half – which is sixty thousand by my calculations - is an awful lot of money," he pointed out. He slapped his forehead. "Holy smokes!"

Sara ignored him, instead glancing around the kitchen. "I have no intention of living here, so I'll probably sell the house, too. What do you think I can get for it, George?"

"The house is close to the harbor and it's in good shape," he replied. "You could probably sell it for \$75,000 or up to \$100,000. I don't really keep current on the property markets, but I'm sure any realtor would be glad to help you."

Steve listened to George and Sara converse back and forth, sipping his second bottle of ale. While he was surprised by the amount of money his wife was suddenly coming into, Steve was rather taken aback at the callous way in which Sara and George were discussing the spoils of Jennifer Sullivan's estate. He knew Sara to be a kind and loving woman, so her abrupt coldness puzzled him.

The older woman was barely in the grave, but it seemed her only kin had already dismissed her relevance.

* * *

GEORGE WOULD LATER FIND it ironic that Susan O'Reilly had been living in Bangor for more than forty years.

He didn't have to visit the Sisters of Mercy Convent in Perry after all. The day after his mother's funeral, he went to the Larkin Public Library and combed through telephone books available in the area. He found what he was looking for almost immediately in the current Bangor directory:

O'REILLY Susan

179 E Downing Road BANGOR 04401 (207) 942-0099

"It couldn't be that simple," he thought. "All those years I lived in Bar Harbor and Suz was just forty miles away in Bangor."

He held the information close to his vest for several days, not telling Sara about it and fighting the urge to jump in his car and race to Susan's doorway.

Should he call her first? No, she might run away, make herself scarce. *Should he send her a letter?* No, she still might run away and make herself scarce.

There was only one choice left to him.

George would simply show up on Susan's doorstep and hope for the best.

* * *

November 1990

Bangor, Maine

IT WAS RAINING ON the day George decided to pay Susan a visit on Downing Road

in Bangor. It was mid-November, and the colorful orange foliage was already falling into slick, leafy heaps on the roads and sidewalks.

He was a nervous wreck, like a teenage boy waiting for his first date. Going to Susan was similar to being transported back in time to when he last saw her forty-two years ago. Thereafter both had been left with the impression that their relationship was over, thanks to Jennifer Sullivan, who falsely portrayed her son as a homosexual to Susan and Susan as a fortune seeker to George.

If George was honest with himself, he knew Susan was the only woman he had ever truly loved. He once held great affection for his ex-wife Linda, but theirs had never been a deep, gut-wrenching type of passion. Their sexual romps had also been less than satisfying. Linda never seemed to like the physical aspects of marriage, although she adored being a mother.

To be fair, Linda had been a good wife in all other regards. She had cooked his meals, cleaned his house and washed his clothes. She never raised her voice in anger to him; in fact, she rolled with the flow without complaint. George likened it to living with a semi-robot, which he grew to resent in short order. He realized then that he wanted a woman who spoke her mind, who challenged him on a daily basis and who enjoyed coming to his bed without reservation.

The marriage with Linda never had a chance, not with the memory of Susan O'Reilly poised over them from start to finish.

George slowed his Buick Regal as he turned onto Downing Road from Union Street. A few minutes later he saw Susan's house, a white brick split-level, with the numbers "179 E" stenciled on the curb. He parked in front of the house, his eyes going to the tall windows that overlooked the lawn. The blinds were open, but he could see no activity within.

"It's now or never," he muttered, getting out of the car.

Inside the house, Susan O'Reilly walked into the living room with her afternoon cup of latte in her hands. She had spent the morning designing a marketing campaign for Panda Software, one of the new clients just acquired by her advertising firm, Impression Media Works. Since her office was only a short distance away on Union Street, Susan often worked from home. She found the peace and quiet more conducive to her creative flow, and since she was the boss no one questioned her.

She sipped her latte as she walked toward the tall windows in the living room. It was a dreary day, the pelting rain now turned to a drizzle, but the sky was leaden gray and threatening more to come. The weather aggravated her recently diagnosed arthritis, but thankfully her condition was not dire yet. She felt only mild stiffening and discomfort in her hands.

"*Maybe I should retire,*" Susan thought as she looked out the window. "*I'm in a good place financially, and if I had more time on my hands I could spend it with Carly and Megan.*" She paused. "*Well, at least Megan might have time for me but I'm not so sure about Carly.*"

She could hardly blame her daughter for her work ethics. Carly was driven and ambitious, just as Susan had been in her younger years. After giving birth at the Sisters of Mercy Convent in 1949, Susan had taken the money give to her by Jennifer Sullivan to make a new life for herself and her baby daughter.

Susan had rented a small house in Bangor, and then worked as a waitress while attending business classes at Eastern Maine Community College. She was fascinated by the mechanics of marketing, and since she was a fairly good illustrator she finally decided to

major in advertising. The program offered instruction on the creation and execution of commercial "messages" in various media to promote and sell products, services and brands. She studied advertising theory, marketing strategy, advertising design, campaign methods, media management, and related principles of business management.

Because of the era in which she found herself, Susan was the only woman in her class. At first none of her fellow male students took her seriously, but when her grades and techniques put her ahead of the rest, they began to fight over being her partner in the various labs and workshops.

After graduating with a master's degree in advertising, Susan took work where she could find it. She started low on the totem pole because she was a woman, but her skills and natural instinct made her stand out amongst her contemporaries and her peers. She was promoted to junior partner at Gould & Bachman, where she worked for more than sixteen years. In 1970 she finally took the plunge and opened her own ad agency - Impression Media Works - and now, twenty years later, she was a veteran of the business with an impeccable reputation of extraordinary success.

No, money was not a worry. She could not use poor finances as an excuse to avoid retirement now. Aside from her ad agency, Susan had also inherited her father's seafood restaurant chain, The Sand Trap, when he died in 1978. She sold the company for nearly \$2 million, having neither the time nor the desire to take over a slew of eateries. While she reconciled with her parents shortly before Sam O'Reilly's death, she did not want to carry on her father's business legacy. It simply did not interest her.

Susan finished her latte as she continued to look out the front window. *"That was a nice break,"* she thought. *"Now it's back to work."*

Before she could turn away from the window, she noticed a car parked at the curb in front of her house. She paused, taking in the dusty plum color of the Buick Regal. The car was of an older make, probably about ten years old, with tinted windows. She groaned out loud. She was not in the mood for a traveling salesman or a lost tourist.

She watched as a man alighted from the car, locking the door behind him. He was tall, with a slight paunch. His hair was close-cropped and gray, but he had a full beard that appeared well-kept although it covered the lower half of his face. He wore a dark purple windbreaker and jeans, with blue-striped sneakers. She saw him glance at the house, and then he began to make his way up the walkway towards her front door.

"I'm going to nip this in the bud before he utters a word," Susan thought angrily as she strode to the door. *"His sales pitch will be wasted on me."*

She flung open the door before he had a chance to ring the bell or use the knocker. "Can I help you?" she snapped.

He stared at her, momentarily speechless.

"I said, can I help you?" Susan repeated irritably.

He found his voice. "Suz?"

She knew his voice. It might have been decades ago since she last heard it, but the lilt and tone of his voice had not changed.

"George?" She was dumbfounded.

He grinned. "Hi, Suz. How have you been?"

She thought she might faint, but George quickly stepped forward and took her gently into his arms.

"We have a lot to talk about," he whispered in her ear. "Don't faint on me now."

ENTHRALLMENT: Excerpt from Chapter Eight

*December 1990
Larkin City, Maine*

IT WAS STILL DARK when Carly awoke fully dressed in the front seat of her Camry. At first she thought she was coming out of a horrific nightmare, but then she felt pain and sticky wetness all over her body, and the pounding throb of an enormous headache.

She tried to adjust her eyes to the inky darkness. The street lamps on Larkin Highway helped bring her vision into focus, and then she knew where she was.

Her Camry was parked on the soft shoulder of the highway, underneath an awning of pine branches one-quarter mile from the entrance road to the mansion. She could smell the clean freshness of rain in the air even though her car windows were closed.

She found her voice, which was working now. "How on earth did I get here?" she wondered aloud. "What did I do? What in the hell happened to me?"

Bits and pieces began to flood her memory as she sat there. Despite the chill in her car, she felt the heat of shame rising in her body and flaming her cheekbones. She saw Jack in her mind, and two other men, taking turns on her body and then joining with her all at the same time – something she had never thought possible even in her wildest fantasies.

She rested her forehead on the steering wheel. Certainly it was a nightmare. *It had to be a nightmare.* Jack Sansovino was her trusted sous-chef, in her employ for more than a year. He would never harm her, or expose her to danger. *Or would he?*

Carly considered the possibilities. Did she get so drunk at the HVC Christmas party that she didn't remember her own actions? Did she seduce Jack, and then agree to go back to his flat with him? Did she invite trouble upon herself? Or did Jack take advantage of her in a weak and unguarded moment? Worst yet, did someone slip her a roofie at the party? Is that why she was having difficulty recalling the evening that had just passed behind her?

But how did she get *here*, barely a quarter-mile from the mansion? If she had been intoxicated, how did she make it this far alone? Did she pull over to the side of the road of her own volition, realizing her limitations and unwilling to stumble drunk into the bedroom she shared with her husband?

She lifted her head and glanced at the dashboard clock. It was four-thirty in the morning. If she hurried, she could make it into the mansion before anyone detected her, and slide into bed with Liam before he noticed her early-bird arrival.

Her keys were in the ignition. She started the Camry, letting it hum for a few minutes before she flipped on the heat switch. Her brain still felt a bit foggy, and her headache had reached a new level of raw, but she was not experiencing the epic dizziness that seemed to mark much of the previous night.

Taking a deep breath, Carly shifted the Camry gear into drive and slowly pulled out onto the highway.

* * *

CARLY MADE IT THROUGH the lower regions of the mansion without running into a

soul. She entered through the kitchen, hoping everyone was still abed. She half-expected to find the bitch Shannon standing there, brewing a pot of coffee, but she was nowhere in sight.

The mansion was eerily quiet as Carly made her way upstairs. Grateful, she moved swiftly to the fourth floor, slipping into the bedroom she shared with Liam.

Her husband wasn't in their large king-sized bed, but she could hear the water running in the bathroom shower. Her heart sank. How was she going to explain herself to Liam? What must he be thinking of her now?

Before she could formulate a plan in her mind, Liam was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his middle. His hair was wet and flat on his head as he regarded her coldly, but his eyes were clear and alert.

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked crossly.

She sat on the end of the bed, trying not to wince from the pain. "That damned Christmas party," she said lightly. "I drank too much wine. I slept it off in my car for a few hours."

He said nothing, but continued to glare at her.

"You know it's not like me to drink too much or stay out all night," she said nervously, avoiding his accusatory stare. "I guess I was swept up in the gaiety of it all - you know, celebrating HVC's tenth anniversary and handing out bonus checks."

"You'd better go and look at yourself in the mirror before you spew out any more lies," Liam finally said, his eyes hostile.

"What do you mean?" she asked indignantly.

"Go look in the mirror," he repeated.

She flounced past him into the bathroom, stopping in front of the mirror over the sink. She gasped.

Her hair hung lank and greasy. Her eyeliner was visibly smudged, giving her the look of a hollow-eyed junkie. Her lips were swollen and red, and her face was dirty with what appeared to be dried saliva and semen at the corners of her mouth and on her cheeks. At least her clothes were in place, although it did little to detract from her shabby countenance.

"Oh my God, I look awful," she said aloud.

"Yeah, you do," Liam agreed behind her. "I'm going to ask you again - *what happened to you?*"

She whirled to face him. "I don't know. I'm not sure why my make-up is melting or why my face is so filthy. I do know there was dancing at the party and the room seemed overly warm, so maybe I did a few turns too many." she bit her bottom lip for affect. "Good grief, I must've made a fool of myself. The only thing I really remember is waking up in my car."

Liam regarded her silently for a moment, almost believing her. *Wanting to believe her.* "Why didn't you call me?" he asked, some of the hostility gone from his voice now. "I would've come into town and picked you up."

Carly shrugged, relieved that he seemed to believe her but not wanting to push the issue. "I don't even remember getting into my car, much less having the presence of mind to call for help."

"Why don't you take a shower and get some sleep?" he suggested. "I'll bring you some breakfast later, and I'll take Megan to school."

She brightened considerably. "Oh thank you, Liam. That sounds like just the ticket."

He nodded and turned away, going back into the bedroom to dress.

Carly stripped off her clothes, leaving them in a heap on the floor. She stepped into the still-wet shower, anxious to wash away all the real or imaginary traces of the men who ravaged her body inside and out. She took her time, leisurely soaping her sore muscles and hair, and allowing the warm water to rinse and cleanse her perfidy.

Finally, she finished and stepped out of the shower. She did not see Liam as she reached for a towel on a nearby rack.

"You lying, whoring bitch," he spat.

She jumped, startled by his voice. "What in the hell is wrong with you?" she cried out.

"With *me*?" he raged, pointing at her. "Have a glance at your body, Carly. You look like you've been manhandled by the New England Patriots."

She stepped in front of the full-length mirror next to the shower towel rack, her eyes widening in sick horror when she saw the bruises on her thighs, buttocks and breasts. There was no way she could explain-away the marks, no matter how hard she rummaged around her brain for an excuse.

"Don't go and tell me you fell down drunk in the parking lot of the Amber Whale," Liam snarled at her. "I know those kinds of bruises when I see them. Hell, I used to give you those kinds of bruises once upon a time, granted on a smaller scale. Who's your lover, Carly? And how long have you been screwing around behind my back?"

Something snapped in her then. Whether it was a culmination of her husband's choice to view her as the guilty party without the benefit of doubt or the knowledge she may have been brutally raped, she wasn't sure. She suddenly felt as if she had the weight of the world was on her shoulders, and instead of taking her side Liam was castigating and accusing her.

She spun around to look at him, fury written on her face. "How dare you stand there and talk to me like that?" she cried angrily.

"Because I'm witness to your whoredom," he shouted over her, his eyes flashing dangerously. "You avoid me like the plague in our bed, and yet you think nothing of spreading your legs for another man. Or is it *men*, I wonder? What kind of woman are you?"

"And what kind of man are you?" she screamed, losing the control she always prided herself in maintaining. "If you were a real man, I wouldn't have to take a lover. If you were a *real* man," she spit in contempt. "I wouldn't have been forced to sleep with your father in order to get pregnant and keep bloodline in the family."

She wept openly as Liam stared at her in shock. Her body began to shake violently, the hysterical sobs reaching into her belly. She stumbled to the towel rack and wrapped herself, keeping her back to Liam. "*There's no going back now*," she thought in despair. "*Liam might forgive me for having an affair, but he will never forgive me for the immoral lengths I went to have a child.*"

"Don't you ever repeat one word of what you just said to me," his voice came as cold as ice. "If you do, I'll make sure you end up like Marianne Chamberlain, without a cent to your name and with no hope of seeing Megan again. I will destroy your business – and don't think for a minute that I can't or won't do it. I'll file so many liens and lawsuits against you and your company that you'll be lucky to limp out alive with the clothes on your back. Don't forget, *Charlene*," he sneered. "We're in Larkin City and there is no way you can win a

battle against me, or my family. We'll crush you like the whoring little pissant you are."

She hung her head. "What do you want from me?"

"You'll stay here and play the part of wife and mother until Megan is old enough to understand what divorce means," Liam said callously, not a wisp of compassion in his voice. "We're probably stuck in this marriage roughly another ten years. If you can keep your mouth shut and do as you're told, I'll give you a divorce and make sure you leave here with your little company intact. However, you will also give up all rights to Megan when you leave. I will never allow you to take her, or wield your noxious influence over her."

Carly's nose began to run. She sniffled loudly, knowing she had but only one choice to make. "I'll do as you say," she said quietly. "I'll stay until Megan is old enough, I won't try to get custody of her, and I will leave with my company free and clear."

"Good," Liam said, not surprised by her lack of concern over Megan. "And don't worry – your dramatic role as my wife will not include the physical aspects of marriage. I wouldn't touch you with a barge pole now." With one final passive look in her direction, he left the room.

She sank to the floor, sobs racking her body. In one fell swoop – in one unintentional declaration of the truth – she had destroyed her marriage and almost everything she had worked for.

"And none of it was my fault," she thought, feeling sorry for herself. "I'm not the one who couldn't deliver when we wanted to get pregnant. That was Liam's failure, not mine, so I had to resort to drastic measures. And I didn't go out last night with the intention of sleeping with Jack Sansovino, or anyone else for that matter, but it happened." She reiterated. *"Through no fault of my own."*

Carly used the rim of the bathroom sink to help her to her feet. She took a tissue from the box on the counter and blew her nose, then wiped her face with a hand towel. Only then did she dare look into the mirror again.

She was gaunt and ghostly pallid, but looked a damned sight better than she did just thirty minutes ago. She felt her resolve and strength returning in small surges, her intense anger banked for the time being.

She had ten years to squirrel away money before Liam divorced her, a decade in which to ensure her complete financial security and to bring her business to new heights. However, she would request that Liam put their new agreement in writing – with strict legal confidentiality, of course - before going another step.

Carly began to run a brush through her wet hair, staring at herself in the mirror.

"And I also have ten long years to devise some form of revenge on Liam and his God-awful family," she thought. "One way or another, they will pay for what they have put me through."

It never occurred to Carly that her daughter Megan was part of the family equation as well.

ENTHRALLMENT: Excerpt from Chapter Ten

*August 1991
Larkin City, Maine*

SARA SULLIVAN WRESTLED WITH the information given to her by her father for almost two months. Her initial excitement about having a half-sister was now tempered with the unwelcome knowledge that Carly was *one of them*. She was not only a Sullivan by birth, but a member of the Larkin family who Sara had collectively hated for many years.

She felt it unjust that Carly had been kept in the dark about her dubious ancestry all her life, and it was time someone told her the truth.

Although Sara promised Ben never to reveal the mixed heritage to Carly, she decided to renege after lengthy consideration. Without telling her father, Sara made plans to meet Carly on her own in order to illuminate her bloodline.

It wasn't hard to find Carly, of course. As the owner of Harbor View Catering she was well-known in Larkin City. However, getting an appointment to see her was another matter. HVC's receptionist Julie Rooney was highly protective of her boss, requesting the whys and wherefores from visitors before agreeing to make an appointment, much less putting through a random telephone call to Carly.

Sara identified herself as Mrs. Sara Halloway, requesting an appointment with Carly specifically to plan an event for her husband's crew at Knightshades. It was a ploy to get access to Carly, and it worked. Carly was obviously reluctant to turn away a business prospect, no matter how small the catering job, especially with the added benefit of spreading word of HVC to Glenburn.

The HVC reception area was busy when Sara walked in one morning in mid-October. It was near the Halloween season, with numerous events for companies and private parties still in the planning stages. Sara felt a brief stab of guilt at her subterfuge, intruding on the chaos, but she let it slip away. There was never an agreeable occasion to impart bad news, so now was as good a time as any.

When Sara was ushered into Carly's private office, she was struck by the physical similarities between them right away. Carly was on the telephone and did not notice her at first, so Sara had a moment to observe her older sister.

Both of them were tall and slender with dark blue eyes, although Sara's were more on the violet side. Each sister possessed full lips and perfectly-shaped noses. They also shared similar facial features, such as the shapes of their eyes and small ear lobes, but whereas Carly had generous breasts Sara was rather flat-chested.

Carly finally looked up and met Sara's eyes. She motioned her to one of the chairs in front of the desk, the telephone receiver still in her ear. Sara sat quietly, crossing her legs and smoothing imaginary wrinkles in her navy-colored skirt.

"Sorry about that," Carly apologized after she ended the telephone call. "It's a busy time of year for us." She glanced down at her appointment sheet. "What can I do for you Mrs. Halloway? I understand you want to organize a Halloween bash for your husband's company. Are you looking for a lavishly-themed dinner party, or are you more interested in a cocktail reception with a selection of Halloween appetizers and drinks?"

"That's not the real reason I'm here."

"Excuse me?" Carly was startled.

"My name is Sara Halloway," she admitted. "And my husband does own the Knightshades motorcycle shop in Glenburn, but that's not why I'm here."

A flash of annoyance crossed Carly's face. "As I told you, I'm very busy," she said evenly. "I really don't have time for games, Mrs. Halloway."

"Then I'll get straight to the point," Sara said crisply. "We have the same father, you and I. You know him as Ben Webb, but his real name is George Sullivan. You've heard of the Sullivan's, haven't you? Unless Shannon Larkin has forbidden any mention of us, which wouldn't surprise me, you must have heard the Sullivan name even if just in passing."

Carly's jaw dropped. The presence of Sara Halloway and the news she was imparting was a worse shock than discovering Ben Webb was her father in the first place. If Sara was telling the truth, then Ben – or rather George Sullivan – had conveniently forgotten to mention he was blood-related to the Larkin's. Which meant Liam was not only her husband and third cousin, but Megan's half-brother and second cousin as well.

"Are you some kind of nut job?" Carly managed to ask, her voice hushed. "Are you here to extort money from me? Just what kind of game are you playing?"

Sara leaned forward. "This is no game, and I don't want your money."

"How do you know about me to begin with?" Carly was aghast.

"Our mutual grandmother spilled the beans in a letter written before she died," Sara replied. "And Ben filled me in on the rest."

"Who the hell was our mutual grandmother?" Carly said, almost afraid to ask.

"Her name was Jennifer Sullivan, formerly known as Jennifer O'Connor. She was the estranged husband of Jean-Claude Sullivan, and Ben's mother."

Carly shook her head. "I don't understand. Why wouldn't my own mother tell me about all this? And why would Ben go to all the trouble to meet me and then hide one of the most important family facts?"

"Mainly because of your hidden blood relation to your husband," Sara said. "I can't imagine your mother or Ben were anxious to impart that bit of information."

"This is sickening!" Carly cried, rising from her chair. She whirled away from Sara and looked out her office window, seeing naught of Main Street below or the beautiful autumn day.

She had thought nothing of allowing Rory Larkin to impregnate her, a secret she swore to carry to her grave. She knew deep in her soul that it had been morally iniquitous to encourage her father-in-law, but the end result which was Megan erased any lingering guilt she may have felt.

Being married and sharing a bed with her husband-cousin for eleven years probably wasn't much different in God's eyes, but the possibility of Megan being the result of a double-genetic-whammy turned her cold. It was all very twisted and complicated, almost beyond comprehension. *"At least I know what the 'S' on my rings stands for now,"* she thought waspishly.

Carly turned to face Sara again. "Who else knows about this?" she asked.

"About Ben, you mean?"

"All of it!"

Sara shrugged. "Ben's identity is known only to you and me, my husband, a friend of mine, and now I suppose your mother. However, I'm fairly certain some members of the

Larkin family are aware of the blood relation they have to the Sullivan's. They just don't know Ben Webb is one of them because he quit using the name George Sullivan. He lived away from Larkin City for many years, and his appearance changed considerably by the time he returned in 1983. And I'm positive none of them realize you're a Sullivan. You didn't even realize it until a few minutes ago."

Carly sat down again, her expression vacant. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Live with it," Sara advised her. "Learn to deal with it, like I have. I've hated the Larkin family since I was a child, when Shannon used my brother Mike and threw him aside like a piece of trash. Knowing I'm related to them by blood infuriates me, but there's nothing I can do about it."

Carly stared at her sister. "Why couldn't you leave this alone? Why not leave me alone?"

"Because you have a right to know the truth," Sara replied. "What you do with the information is up to you. Frankly, I'm tired of the lies and deceit that have permeated my life. It's driven me to be scrupulously honest in all my dealings . . . well, for the most part anyway. I promised Ben I wouldn't tell you the truth, but I just couldn't keep my word this time."

"What about your mother? Does she know?"

Sara shook her head. "My mother doesn't know that Ben – or *George* as she knows him – fathered a child before marrying her, nor does she have any inkling that the Sullivan's and Larkin's are all part of the same family tree."

"How is that possible?" Carly wanted to know. "It seems to be common knowledge in your little circle."

"You'd have to know my mother," Sara said. "She's a very nice but simple person. She was devastated by the loss of my brother, but the Larkin's never thought to tell her Mike was a member of the family, so to speak. I'm not about to tell her about it. She's remarried now and happy, and I don't want to upset the apple cart. She doesn't deserve that kind of hurt, knowing my father betrayed her from start to finish."

"You mentioned a friend of yours knows about all this, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Who is this friend of yours?" Carly asked. "Do I have to fear exposure by a stranger every time I turn a corner? Will someone knock on my door one day and demand money to keep their mouth shut?"

"I doubt it," Sara said cryptically.

"Then tell me who your friend is," Carly insisted. "Don't I have a right to know that, too?"

"You've probably never met her, but I'm sure you've heard of her. Marianne Chamberlain was Sean Larkin's first wife and the mother of Brose Larkin. I met her quite by accident a few years ago. When we figured out who was who, we had a lot to talk about."

"This just keeps getting better and better," Carly said dissonantly.

"Marianne hates the Larkin's as much as I do," Sara informed her. "Sean really screwed her over in the divorce, with a helping hand from his family. He was granted primary custody of their son, whom she rarely gets to see unless the visit is supervised. She never received any kind of monetary compensation, ether."

Even though she had never met Marianne Chamberlain, Carly had of course heard about the woman. To listen to the Larkin's, one would think Sean's former wife was the

devil incarnate who might lead poor Brose astray and down a path of mediocrity if given the chance. Carly almost felt sorry for Marianne, knowing that if it wasn't for the grace of her prosperous business she could be facing the same future.

"So you trust Marianne?" Carly asked.

"Yes," Sara declared. "It's also a great relief to share a mutual frustration with someone who understands completely."

Carly went silent for several minutes in an attempt to organize her thoughts. Her first instinct was to thank Sara for the information, and then send her on her way. She didn't want to disrupt the comfortable rhythm of her life, and she had no desire to confront Ben and Susan with the truth of the matter. Their surreptitious version of events hovered too close to her own Machiavellian behavior concerning Megan's true parentage. She wanted to leave well enough alone, but at the same time she did not want to alienate Sara or eventually force her hand.

"Is that what you're offering?" Carly asked at length.

"Pardon?"

"Are you offering me a shoulder to cry on? A relief valve for the injustice of it all? Chat sessions with you and Marianne to unload my troubles?"

"If that's what you need, then yes I am."

Carly appraised her sister. She was surprised by her willingness to believe Sara's story, but why on earth would she go to such trouble if it wasn't true? Besides, she noticed the resemblance between them, even though she denied it within herself at first. It might be beneficial for her to avail emotional support from Sara in the future.

She leaned back in her chair, her demeanor suddenly calm. "This has been quite a year for me," she stated dryly. "First, I meet my long-lost father. Now here you are, my long-long sister with a boatload of disturbing revelations about the same aforementioned father."

"Sorry."

Carly held up her hand. "I'm not trying to be a bitch, truly I'm not. I was actually thinking we should make the best of the situation we find ourselves in, don't you? What's the harm?"

"What do you mean?"

"We should become friends," Carly said simply. "It's not every day we're given a chance to connect with family members we never knew we had before. It's probably a blessing in disguise."

"But what about Ben?" Sara asked doubtfully. "What do we tell him?"

"Nothing," Carly replied flatly. "He needn't know we've met. Let him and my mother play their little games. It might actually turn out to be fun."

"How so?"

Carly smiled deeply. "Revenge, Sara. *Revenge*. It's quite satisfying, you know. Someday when they get tired of playing their games – messing with our very lives in the process – we can have the last laugh because we've known about their perfidy almost from the get-go."

"If you say so," Sara said, unconvinced.

Carly laughed. "I have so much to teach you, little sister. Wait and see."

"ENTHRALLMENT" INFORMATION

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Deidre Dalton is author of the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, which chronicles the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than 165 years, most of which are set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine. Titles in the ten-part family saga include *Hearts in Sorrow*, *The Advent*, *Quixotic Crossings*, *The Twain Shall Meet*, *Enthrallment*, *The Keeper's Journal*, *Hearts Desires*, *The Twilight*, *Megan's Legacy* and *Limb of Iniquity*.

For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/collective/>

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