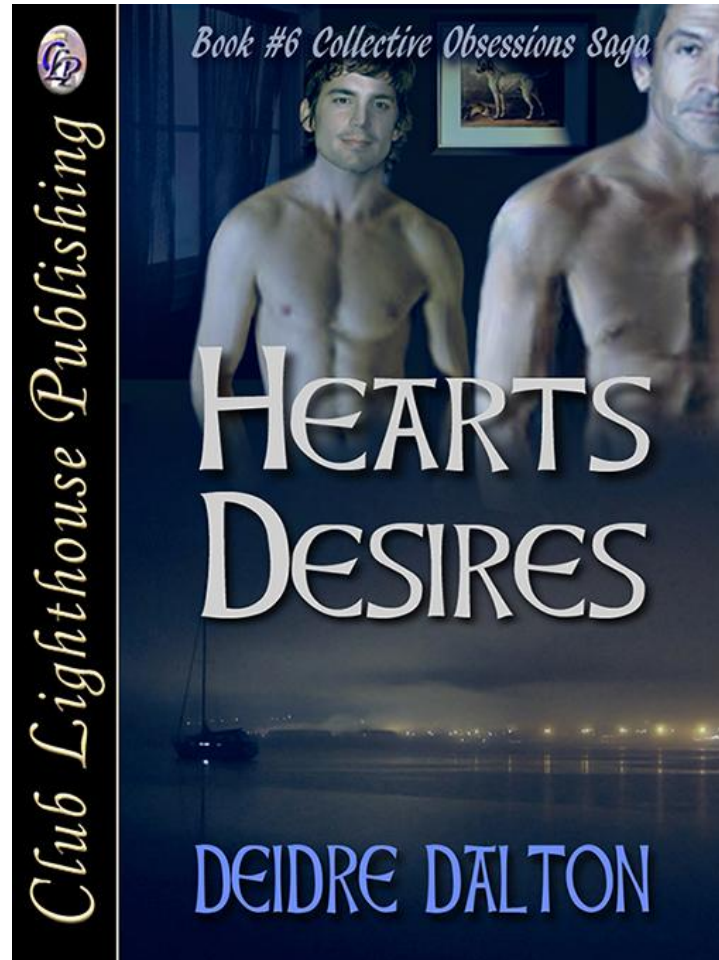


Excerpts from:

Hearts Desires

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #6 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Family Epic/LGBT/Romance

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-975754-07-5

E-Book ISBN: 978-1-927337-67-7

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ABOUT "HEARTS DESIRES"

Hearts Desires by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the sixth book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in February 2013. The paperback edition followed in August 2017.

Shannon's son Jamie Page begins to understand his lifelong yearnings but fears his family will never accept them. His first love affair with a nefarious character nearly costs his life, but brings to light his hidden desires. Happiness continues to elude the family, as if a dark shadow of evil has settled over the family estate.

Brose Larkin finds himself falling in love with a local "tomboy" who bests him at every turn. Despite having known her since high school, she is the antithesis of his ideal woman in her simple attire and direct manner. Brose knows he has met his ultimate match in Bridget Gallagher.

Shannon's son Jamie Page begins to understand his lifelong yearnings but fears his family will never accept them. His first love affair with a nefarious character nearly costs his life, but brings to light his hidden desires.

Jamie's sister Angela Page suffers an emotional collapse after discovering she cannot have children. She holes herself up in the attic at the Larkin mansion, much like her ancestors Molly and Patrick Larkin did before her.

Happiness continues to elude the family, as if a dark shadow of evil has settled over the Larkin estate.

For more, go to:

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

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter One

*June 1996
Larkin City, Maine*

BROSE LARKIN SPRINTED DOWN the path to the beach, perspiration beading down his forehead. He ran bare-chested, the denim cut-off shorts accentuating his muscled thighs. His longish blond hair was plastered to his head, the darker sideburns glistening with water drops. He doused himself in the swimming pool before taking his daily run, and now he was ready for the ocean.

The beach was white and hot, pristine in the sunlight. Brose ran through the surf, diving into deeper waters and swimming out to sea. The water was cool, and he loved the feel of it. He turned himself to face the beach, where he admired the view of the lighthouse, the keeper's cottage and the winding path to Banshee's Point and the jutting rooftop of the mansion.

Then Brose spied his cousin Jamie Page running down the footpath. He came toward the beach and soon joined his cousin in the water. The two young men swam around each other for a few minutes, and then floated on their backs in the gently rippling ocean.

"Do you have a date tonight?" Jamie wanted to know.

"Hah," Brose replied. "Why?"

"Let's go to The Coven," Jamie suggested. "I haven't been there in ages. I had a rough week at the clinic and I need a night out."

Brose swirled salt water in his mouth and spewed it over Jamie's head in a steady stream. "Sure. In the mood for drinking, are you? Or are you looking to hook up?"

"Just some drinks, nothing more."

"What happened at the clinic?" Brose wanted to know.

"I had to put down an old dog," Jamie replied sadly. "He was riddled with arthritis and blind in one eye, and the owner was beside himself. I had to talk him into letting his pet go because he was suffering." He angrily slapped the water with both hands. "It's the one part of my job that I dislike. I *hate* putting animals to sleep, whether they're old and infirm or because they're strays without hope of adoption. One of these days *soon* I'm going to open a no-kill animal shelter in Larkin City, and I don't care if it costs me every penny I have in the bank."

"It's a very noble cause," Brose agreed. "And not impossible."

"It's a goal of mine," Jamie said firmly. "I won't stop until it's realized."

Brose allowed himself to float on the water, lost in his own thoughts. Although he was older than Jamie by one year, Brose always felt a fierce protectiveness for his cousin. Jamie was an easy character, open and friendly to everyone, more often than not with a smile on his face. At times, he exuded a less than manly air because of his natural gentleness, possessing none of Brose's blunt manner and rough edges.

More than once during their childhood, Brose had to defend Jamie on the playground at school. The bully faction seemed drawn to Jamie, and while no coward he was always trying to find a way to resolve conflict peacefully rather than with violence. The random hounding continued in high school, although by Jamie's senior year he was left

alone for the most part because of Brose's aggressive stance, which eventfully grew to legend.

Brose sensed Jamie was gay long before his cousin recognized his own sexuality. He never seemed interested in girls except as friends, and he gravitated to gentle pursuits rather than typical rough-and-tumble male activity. When he grew older, Jamie dated local girls sporadically to keep any suspicions about him at bay. Brose knew Jamie was terrified of disappointing his parents, afraid they would reject him if he revealed the truth about himself.

Brose tried to tell his cousin he was wrong. "Scott and Shannon would never turn away from you," he insisted. "You're their son, their flesh and blood. They love you unconditionally. Besides that, your parents aren't like some of the bigoted assholes floating around Larkin City. They don't judge people for being different, so they would *never* do that to you."

Jamie remained unconvinced. He was perhaps more reluctant to shock his father, knowing deep down that Shannon would never turn her back on her son. Instead of creating emotional upheaval with a "coming out," Jamie decided to keep silent. Brose respected his choices, but knew his cousin would eventually have to come clean.

Brose righted himself in the water, swimming closer to Jamie. "Are you coming to the mansion for dinner?"

"Probably."

Brose splashed water on his cousin. "I'm in dire need of a shower, so I'll see you then."

Jamie splashed him back. "I'll see you then."

* * *

SHANNON KNEW HER SON was gay with a mother's instinct, but it didn't bother her. What bothered her was Jamie's denial of his true self, although she realized she could never press him into action. So she waited patiently, secure in the knowledge that he would confide in her someday.

Scott did not have clue, of course. Even if he did, he would never encourage Jamie to come out in the open to claim himself as gay. An admission of homosexuality by his only son would devastate Scott, making him feel less of a man and a failure as a father. That bothered Shannon, too, and was perhaps the only blemish in her husband's otherwise flawless character.

She was still thinking about her son's private dilemma as she prepared dinner one sultry evening in June. The family was all-in tonight, apart from Angie and Tom who were in New York, and Shannon wanted to cook a special Friday meal. Everyone had been working hard all week, the Clamshell maids had left the mansion spotless, and the weekend stretched out invitingly for all of them.

Deciding to go exclusively Mexican, Shannon began simmering pork loin in vegetable broth and seasonings. On the butchers block, she chopped and sliced onion, tomato, lettuce and green olives, and then grated large mounds of cheddar cheese. She also prepared guacamole using a dozen avocados, and defrosted several containers of homemade salsa from the freezer.

After the pork cooked through, Shannon separated the meat in shreds and then

placed the pieces in a large frying pan. She added salt, pepper, instant minced onion, chili powder, paprika, dried red pepper, oregano, cumin, cornstarch and instant minced garlic. She allowed the pork to simmer in its juices for another thirty minutes, and then warmed flour and corn tortillas in heated dish towels.

Dana entered the kitchen just as Shannon was placing the taco condiments into serving bowls.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Dana said breathlessly. "We had a last-minute event schedule for tomorrow. It took me forever to get off the telephone."

Ever since Dana had taken over Harbor View Catering last year, she had been kept incredibly busy. She loved the work, but she was becoming increasingly annoyed by the long hours. It was keeping her from her husband Sean and their thirteen-year-old twins, Derek and Diana.

Shannon held up her hand. "Don't worry about it, Dana. It's not a problem. And *no*, before you ask me for the millionth time, I do not want a part-time job at HVC. It's bad enough Carly stole most of my recipes and claimed them as her own. Her little catering venture is *your* quandary now."

Dana made a face at her friend as she stirred the simmering pork on the stove. "I wasn't going to ask you again, never fear. I know how busy the mansion keeps you. I've been *there* and done *that*. The Larkin's are a demanding lot." She inhaled the steam rising from the pork. "God, this smells delicious. You'd think in running a catering and food product company I might get a bite now and then, but I missed lunch. I'm starving."

"It's almost ready," Shannon assured her.

"Anything I can do?"

"Sure," Shannon said. "Fill up the pitchers with beer and take them to the dining room. I bought a few cases of Old Thumper Ale at the store today, which is a perfect food pairing for the tacos."

Dana emptied twenty-four amber-colored bottles of the ale into several glass pitchers, which had been pre-frosted in the large walk-in freezer, and carried them on trays to the dining room.

Before long, the family sat down to dinner. Jamie arrived from the cottage with Foofer, freshly showered and wearing khaki slacks and a white polo shirt. Every time she saw her son, Shannon was taken aback by his physical perfection, most specifically his striking handsomeness and stunning smile. Prior to sensing his preferences, the mother in Shannon always thought: "*Whoever lands Jamie someday will be one lucky girl.*" In recent years she had amended her notion to "one lucky young man."

Foofer settled comfortably at his master's feet, patiently waiting for tidbits he knew Jamie would sneak to him under the table.

Kevin poured beer for everyone, passing glasses to his left and right. "Great spread as usual, Shan," he enthused. "Your tacos are my absolute favorite."

"Where's Mariko?" Liam wanted to know from across the table.

"She had a staff meeting after work," Kevin replied, taking a long sip of beer. "I'm going to meet her in Larkin City later, and we're going to see a movie."

"Which movie?" Derek piped-up from his place further along the table. Derek Larkin was a remarkable replica of his father Sean, with black hair and blue eyes. At thirteen, he was tall and gangly with pale, almost translucent skin.

"I'm not sure yet," Kevin admitted. "I usually let Mariko decide."

"Try *Twister* or *The Nutty Professor*," Derek advised maturely. "They're really great movies."

Kevin nodded slowly, trying to keep a straight face. "We'll seriously consider both."

"Are you going to marry Mariko?" Diana asked from next to her twin Derek. Tall and dark like her brother, she giggled, knowing how Kevin loathed the question.

Kevin turned to Sean. "Your daughter takes after you," he said pointedly. "Any way you can fix that?"

"Actually, Diana takes after *you*," Sean retorted good-naturedly. "You were a horrible influence on her."

"Now you sound like Liam," Kevin said, squinting one eye as he looked at his cousin.

"It can't be helped in *this* house," Jamie muttered as he bit into a taco, shaking his head. He slipped Foofer a piece of pork under the table, grinning as his family continued their harmless verbal banter.

* * *

BRIDGET GALLAGHER WAS AN amazon. Six-foot-three in her stocking feet, she towered over most men and with her bulky yet fit frame, could take on most of them and win. She had flaming red hair sometimes dyed blonde that fell to her shoulders in a perpetual frizz, blue eyes and a pale complexion that burned repeatedly during the summer months. She could not be called beautiful or even attractive, but her size and coloring usually made her the focal point in any social situation. Her nose was slightly bulbous, but her cheekbones were high and chiseled, and she had generous, pouting lips.

Her physical body was large-boned but taut, which in part was due to her work on the construction crew for Larkin City. She worked hard during spring, summer and early autumn, but spent winters at her small house on Elm Road. Her parents died in a car accident shortly after she graduated from high school in 1991, after which she was left to her own devices in the home she had been raised in, alone for the most part.

Bridget loved wintertime. She had plenty of money to live on from her city construction salary, and loved nothing better than spending her time reading mysteries and crime dramas, cooking, ice-fishing and tending to her menagerie of six formerly stray cats: Buffy, Noel, Gene, Rhoda, Kermit and Lance.

She also frequented The Coven every weekend whether she was working or not, and was a familiar and welcome sight at the club. She was loud, bubbly and self-assured, especially after a few gin and tonics, but she was also a down-to-earth and kind-hearted woman to her core. She brooked no foolishness from men, letting no one dominate her, and was known to have dated frequently over the years but without a lasting romance.

In high school she had been obese, which was where Brose Larkin first took notice of her. While the butt of many cruel jokes because of her weight, no one dared taunt her to her face because of her otherwise intimidating presence. By her senior year, Bridget had thinned although she never lost the impression of size because of her big-boned frame. She took an interest in sports, excelling at girls basketball and football. Brose knew her casually, but never looked upon her in a romantic light. His predictable type consisted of petite blondes and the occasional raven-haired beauty.

Bridget arrived at The Coven on a Friday night in June 1996, dressed in tight blue jeans and a bright yellow tank-top. The shirt gave display to her nicely muscled arms and

generous breasts, and emphasized her frizzy dyed-blond hair and sparkling blue eyes. She loved to play pool, and after ordering a gin and tonic, engaged a few local lads in several paying games.

She hardly noticed when Brose walked into The Coven with his cousin Jamie Page an hour later. Being a lifelong resident of Larkin City, Bridget was not overawed or impressed with the local founding family and their wealth. In fact, she never thought about them at all.

After winning a few billiard games – and tucking away the winnings in her jeans back pocket – Bridget went to the bar and ordered another gin and tonic. She felt good, only slightly buzzed, satisfied that her reputation as a pool shark was intact. Brose sat with Jamie at the bar, both of them nursing beers and deep in quiet discussion.

Brose glanced at Bridget as she ordered another drink. She nodded in recognition, but said nothing. She tapped her fingertips on the oaken bar, waiting as the bartender mixed her gin and tonic. Jamie excused himself to use the men's room, leaving Brose alone momentarily.

His proximity to Bridget forced Brose to make small talk. "I see you're still cleaning house at the pool table," he said to her.

Bridget looked at him, surprised that he was addressing her. True to form, she recovered quickly. "Some nights are quicker than others," she replied politely. "The locals know me too well, but when someone new comes in it's a lot easier."

"How so?" Brose wanted to know.

Bridget grinned. "Most men assume women don't know how to play pool. Their assumptions are to my benefit."

He laughed. "True." Brose was suddenly struck by Bridget's smile, and the ease and confidence in which she handled herself. He was used to lovely, frail creatures full of insecurities and vicious jealousies. Bridget was not a great beauty, but she was like a breath of fresh air. He had never really paid her any mind in the past – she was just *there* – but suddenly his interest was piqued and he wasn't sure why.

"I'm game," he began. "I *know* what a good player you are, and make no assumptions to my detriment. I'll go a few rounds with you."

Bridget chuckled, sipping her gin and tonic. "I hope you brought money." She winked. "I'm on my A-game tonight, and I don't accept IOU's."

Before Brose could reply, Jamie returned to the bar. He smiled at Bridget in greeting as he took his seat.

Brose turned to his cousin. "I'm going to play pool with Bridget," he said. "Will you be okay for a bit on your own, runt?"

Jamie sighed. "Of course I will. Jesus, Brose, I'm not a kid. In fact," he said pointedly. "I'm older than *you*."

Brose snorted. "Yeah, whatever. See you later." He slid off the barstool and followed Bridget to the billiard area.

Jamie watched them with interest as they began to play. He had known of Bridget Gallagher since high school, just like everyone else in his class, but no one really *knew* her. She was probably friends with her co-workers on the city construction crew, yet she never seemed to socialize with other women. She was a vivacious character in an amazon package, just like Brose, and equally as difficult to condense in a few words.

They moved easily around one another as they played pool, both of them concentrating on the game and not on each other. Jamie sipped his beer, fascinated with

their natural interaction. Anyone looking at them who didn't know better would say they were old friends, or maybe even long-time lovers.

Jamie laughed to himself. Bridget was definitely not Brose's physical type. He typically lusted after petite blondes without brains in their heads, or the occasional fiery *Latina* with black hair and flashing eyes. Bridget was neither one of those stereotypes. In fact, Jamie was hard-put to place her in any category. She was an island unto herself.

Despite the obvious improbabilities, Jamie had a strong feeling that Brose was unknowingly stepping into an extraordinary sway with Bridget Gallagher that would change his life forever.

* * *

BRIDGET WON BOTH EIGHT-BALL games against Brose, delighted with her \$200 haul. He didn't balk at the \$100-per-game bet she proposed, certain he could win at least one of them. But it was not to be, and Brose had to admit she was the better player.

She was not one to gloat, or to display poor sportsmanship. "Maybe next time," she said kindly as she and Brose returned their pool cues to the wooden rack near the table.

Brose snorted. "Not likely, unless I practice for a month beforehand."

"You're actually pretty good," Bridget admitted. "Better than some of the lads I play most weekends, anyway. You almost had me a few times."

"When?" he wanted to know.

"When I had to make the angle shot," she told him. "That was dicey."

"Yeah, but you did it anyway," he pointed out.

"True," she grinned. "Thanks Brose, you're a good sport. Seriously, I'd love to play you again sometime."

"Sure," he said casually. Then he looked at the rack of cues in front of him. "How is it that someone as good as you doesn't have her own special pool cues?"

She shook her head. "They're too expensive. I can afford them, don't get me wrong, but I'm just not willing to fork over four hundred dollars for a fancy case and designer cues when I can use the ones here at The Coven."

Brose shrugged. "You should think about it someday. I know you work construction, but surely you could make a killing in the winter months. Hell, they have pool tournaments all over the state."

Bridget laughed. "I'm not interested in turning professional. I play just for fun."

He patted her shoulder. "Whatever makes you happy. Maybe I'll see you again sometime."

"If you come to The Coven, you'll see me," she said. "Either that, or holding signs on the road as we repave this summer."

He nodded, waving behind him as he walked away and returned to Jamie at the bar.

"She kicked your ass, didn't she?" Jamie asked as Brose sat down.

Brose looked sheepish. "And then some. She's really, *really* good."

"Not your type, though."

"Excuse me?"

"Bridget Gallagher is not your type," Jamie replied.

Brose was puzzled. "Where did *that* come from? Of course she's not my type! We just played a few games of pool. It wasn't a date, for chrissakes." He took a long swig of

beer. "I mean, *come on*." He lowered his voice. "Look at her, Jamie. She's as tall as I am and built like a brick firehouse. Her face is okay, friendly enough, but it's not what I'd call breathtaking."

"She's a lot more interesting than the typical bimbos you hitch your wagon to," Jamie declared. "With Bridget, you can have a decent conversation and she's not mean and spiteful like most of your women seem to be."

"Again, where on earth is this coming from?" Brose asked, bewildered. "What gave you the idea that Bridget would be someone I'd want to date?"

"I watched the two of you as you played pool," Jamie responded. "There's an even flow between you; it's very easy and natural. Of course you didn't notice because you were paying more attention to the balls on the table."

"That's why we were together in the first place," Brose said patiently. "We were playing a game of pool, *not* having a dinner date."

"Maybe you should think about asking out her on a dinner date," Jamie said bluntly. "I'm telling you, I sense something good here."

"And I think you've got a screw loose," Brose declared, ordering another beer. "Let me make myself clear, cousin. I am *not* interested in Bridget Gallagher in any sort of romantic way." He paused. "The thought of tangling with her in bed makes me cringe. She'd probably kill me. Have you ever seen her on the road crew? In a pair of shorts? Her thighs are like steel. She'd strangle me like a Black Racer snake, squeezing the very life out of me."

"So you've considered the possibility, then?" Jamie smirked.

"I'm a man, aren't I?" Brose countered. "Naturally I've considered the possibility, but as I've just explained to you I'm not anxious to become embroiled with a woman who probably has more physical strength than I do."

"It might come in handy," Jamie pressed.

Brose groaned. "Let's change the subject, shall we?"

Jamie drained his beer, a slight smile playing around his lips. "Whatever you say, cousin. Whatever you say."

* * *

DESPITE HIS PROTESTATIONS TO the contrary, Brose found himself thinking about Bridget Gallagher over the weekend. She would pop into his head unbidden, whereupon he tried to dismiss all thoughts of her. He was puzzled by his own behavior, wondering why Bridget kept reappearing in his fanciful line of vision where he had never given her fleeting notice before now.

By Monday morning, he decided to give in to the relentless notions. Brose drove into Larkin City before lunch and went directly to the sports shop on High Street, near the university. He was intent on finding Bridget a pool table accessory kit, and he found one almost right away. It included four cues with Irish linen wraps, pro balls, table and under-rail brushes, a wall rack with a bridge clip, an 8-ball triangle, 9-ball rack, bridge stick, a cherry-colored table cover, tri-color chalk with a holder, and a repair kit.

It cost Brose nearly \$400, a pretty penny for a woman he really didn't know. He refused to dwell on his impulsive action, but rather arranged for the sports shop to deliver the kit to Bridget's house late that afternoon. He scribbled a note to be included with the kit, making it short and sweet.

He almost changed his mind at the last minute. Bridget would surely think he was a lunatic after receiving the gift, or she might assume he was after an expensive roll in the hay.

Perhaps both were true.

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter Two

*July 1996
Larkin City, Maine*

JAMIE TRIED TO GET away from the Larkin Animal Clinic every afternoon for lunch, barring an emergency. He used to eat a sandwich or a salad at his desk, but eventually found it stressful as staff members frequently interrupted him with procedure questions and advice. In order to recharge his batteries and clear his mind, he tried to leave the clinic every day at one o'clock for a well-deserved break.

His favorite haunt was Bruno's Café, but on Fridays he went to the Amber Whale. He loved the tavern seafood, especially the grilled salmon steak with fresh asparagus in the summer. By the time he reached the tavern shortly after one o'clock, the busy noontime lunch crowd had dispersed and there were only a half-dozen patrons lingering at the tables. He took a seat near one of the windows, which overlooked the harbor.

A young waitress took his order, but Jamie failed to notice her interested glance. Instead, he stared out the window. He watched the activity on the water, noting the *Lady Banshee* making her rounds as part of the Larkin Harbor Tour Company's day-tripper package. The tourist season was busy this year. While Larkin was not considered a major city destination in Maine, reputation of its charms reached far and wide. Summer and autumn were typically a vast boon for local businesses, and more often than not compensated for the slower winter months.

The waitress returned with a plateful of salmon and asparagus, so Jamie dug in. The food was superb, as usual, and he even ordered a second draft beer to complete the meal. He had just pushed his plate away when he noticed a tall, slender man walk into the restaurant from the kitchen. Jamie took in his black hair and olive-tinted skin, and the coal darkness of his large eyes. The man appeared older, perhaps in his early thirties, and walked with a natural ease that bespoke of regular exercise. He was wearing a long-sleeved red shirt with a white collar and tight-fitting black slacks, which drew attention to his lean body.

It was a moment before Jamie realized he was staring at the man, his mouth slightly agape. The stranger looked familiar, but Jamie was unable to connect the awareness with a recent memory. However, the manly vision was pleasing and brought a thrilling jolt to the pit of his stomach.

Jamie was simply mesmerized.

* * *

JACK SANSOVINO KNEW JAMIE Page was staring at him. He saw the young man from the Amber Whale kitchen as he cooked lunch dishes, and took a particular interest in his flawless handsomeness and quiet demeanor. When Jack entered the dining area, he deliberately walked toward the window overlooking the harbor. The lunch crowd had been fast and furious, and he was ready for a break, but his real reason for venturing out was to get a closer look at the solitary diner.

Jack paused just to the left of Jamie's table, pretending to take a long look out the window into the harbor. He crossed his arms and drew a great sigh, knowing the action would attract Jamie's attention. While the young man continued to stare at him, he did not say a word at first.

"It's a beautiful day, don't you think?" Jack finally said, glancing at Jamie and meeting his eyes.

Jamie reddened slightly, having been caught gaping at the stranger. He cleared his throat. "Yes, it's always lovely this time of year."

"You live in Larkin?"

Jamie nodded. "I was born and raised here. You?"

Jack shrugged. "I'm from New York, Little Italy in Manhattan to be exact. I moved to Larkin City about seven years ago."

Jamie raised his eyebrows. "Oh? That long ago? I can't believe I haven't seen you before now. Where do you work?"

Jack gestured toward the kitchen. "I'm head chef here at the Amber Whale. Before that, I was a sous chef for Harbor View Catering."

Jamie's eyes lit in recognition. "I thought you looked familiar. I must have seen you at HVC before."

"Did you work there, too?" Jack asked innocently.

"No," Jamie replied. "But my Aunt Dana runs the place now."

Jack stepped closer to the table. "Then you knew Carly O'Reilly?"

"You could say we were related by marriage," Jamie said ruefully. "She was married to my cousin, Liam Larkin."

"You have my deepest sympathies," Jack said sincerely. "I was shocked when I heard about Carly's death last year. No one at HVC suspected she was the type to take her own life."

"It was a bad time," Jamie agreed. Then he stood up, extending his hand. "By the way, my name is Jamie Page. I'm a veterinarian at the animal clinic on Waterford Street."

Jack shook his hand. "I'm Jack Sansovino. It's nice to meet you."

The touch electrified Jamie. It was unlike him to respond so strongly to a complete stranger. He felt he hid his reaction well, confident that Jack had no inkling.

Jack held Jamie's hand a few seconds longer than normal, feeling the young man's reaction to their touch. "Well, well," he thought. "*Not only is Jamie part of the illustrious Larkin family, he's a fruit basket to boot.*" He withdrew his hand slowly, a smile appearing on his face. Becoming friends with a troll member of the local high and mighty could prove useful in the future.

It wasn't part of Jack's nature to prefer men in his bed, but if he could gain inroads into Jamie's family wealth, perhaps it might be worth a tumble or two. In that instant, he knew if he took the plunge there would be no going back for either of them.

"Say, are you doing anything tonight?" Jack asked smoothly. "I'm off work until Sunday, and I wanted to check out the culinary competition at the Lobstertail."

Jamie laughed. "I can save you the trouble. Your cooking is much better than the food at the Lobstertail."

Jack cocked his head slightly, and then winked. "Yeah, but I need some excuse to get out of the house. Come on, say you'll join me."

"Sure, why not?" Jamie replied, trying to sound casual. "I usually go to The Coven

with my cousin Brose on weekends, but maybe we could go there afterward?"

Jack nodded. "That sounds great," he said easily, although he had no intention of going to The Coven any night soon. Before he met Jamie's close friends or family, he wanted to ensnare the young man hook, line and sinker. That way, personal disapprovals would hold little sway with the impressionable Jamie.

"*Jack and Jamie, Jack and Jamie,*" Jamie tested the names in his mind. Then he grinned. "You've got a date," he sparkled aloud, unable to help himself.

"Good," Jack replied pleasantly.

In hindsight, Jamie would realize if he looked closer that day he might have seen the narrowing glint in his new friend's eyes.

* * *

JACK AND JAMIE ENDED up spending the weekend together. After dinner at the Lobstertail early Friday evening, Jack convinced Jamie to accompany him to Bangor to visit the Hollywood Casino and Raceway (known as the *Racino* to locals). Leaving Jamie's Datsun pickup in the Amber Whale parking lot, the two men climbed into Jack's black Corvette and took Interstate 395 leaving Larkin City. The journey to Bangor was a quick thirty miles, and they reached the city just as dusk fell.

Jamie was suitably impressed with Jack's car. "It's gorgeous," he said. "Where on earth did you find a Corvette in such pristine condition?"

"My brother Tony used to buy, restore and sell vintage Corvettes," Jack replied as he maneuvered the Friday night traffic on Interstate 395. "Years ago he overhauled this little beauty, and he gave it to me on my nineteenth birthday."

"He doesn't restore Corvettes anymore?" Jamie wanted to know.

Jack shook his head. "Once in a blue moon he'll take on a project, but he's too busy with the family restaurant to work on cars like he used to."

Jamie was astonished. "Your family owns a restaurant?"

Jack grinned. "You seem surprised."

"Well yes," Jamie admitted. "Why would you come all the way to Larkin City to work in a restaurant if you could keep it in the family?"

"My father is set in his ways," Jack said with a touch of bitterness. "Tony is the oldest son, so Tony gets the restaurant. Even though I'm the one devoting my life to the culinary arts, Tony *still* gets the restaurant. Don't get me wrong. I love my brother, but he can't boil an egg. His true talent is in restoring old cars, obviously. Being the chef in the family, I wasn't about to sit around and play second fiddle to Tony while he reaped all the benefits from the restaurant." He glanced at Jamie, his hands still steady on the wheel. "I guess you could say I rebelled. I heard about Larkin City University's Chefs Program through a friend, so I applied and got in. I've been in Larkin ever since."

"Carly must have been impressed by your skills to hire you," Jamie noted. "While she wasn't one of my favorite people, she did take HVC very seriously. She only hired the best and offered the finest."

"She was a remarkable woman in more ways than one," Jack said nonchalantly. He glanced at Jamie again. "Why didn't you like her, then?"

Jamie shrugged. "It's not that I didn't like her. Even though she was married to my cousin Liam for fifteen years, I really didn't know her that well. It may sound odd, but even

though we all lived in the same house she was an enigma to many of us in the family. Let's just say she wasn't easy to know."

Jamie was not comfortable discussing Carly O'Reilly, considering her murderous actions in life and the way she died. He did not want to rehash the scandal attached to her demise, either. Anxious to change the subject, he asked: "Is Tony your only brother?"

"Yes," Jack replied absently. "I have a younger sister, though. Her name is Desideria, but we call her Désirée. She works at the family restaurant as a waitress."

"Are you close to your family?"

"Despite my defection we keep in touch," Jack answered. "*You don't need to know that my father is a son-of-a-bitch,*" he thought to himself. "*You also don't need to know that my brother is a lazy bum, my sister is a slut, and my mother is a drunk.*" Aloud, he said: "I try to go back home at Thanksgiving and Christmas."

"Your family has never visited you in Larkin?"

"They rarely leave Manhattan," Jack replied. Assuming a light tone, he said: "Enough about me. What about you? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I have one older sister. Her name is Angie. She and her husband Tom live in New York, where they publish the *Manhattan Daily Journal*."

Jack whistled. "*Really?* I think my father reads that paper."

"Tom founded the journal about five years ago," Jamie said. "He and Angie have made a real success out of it."

"What about your parents?" Jack prodded.

"My father used to work in the mining business. He's sort of semi-retired now, but for the most part he and my mother just love hanging out together. They are two of the happiest married people I know."

As they took Exit 3B to Main Street in Bangor, Jack changed the course of their conversation. "I can't believe you've never been to the Hollywood Casino," he said. "What's more amazing is you've lived all your life in Larkin and never heard of the place. The *Racino*, as it's known to locals, is a complete blast. They have live harness races between April and November."

"What are harness races?" Jamie interrupted curiously.

"They're not as exciting as track races but are fun nonetheless," Jack replied. "Basically, the horses in harness races typically pull two-wheeled carts called *sulkies*. You know, like the one-seat carts they used for rural transport back in the old days. I think the Amish still use them." He took a breath. "Anyway, the horses race in a specified gait, which is either trotting or pacing. Betting is allowed, just like it is for standard track races."

Jamie could tell his new friend relished harness racing, so he tried to take a further interest. "What sorts of horses do the racing?"

"You mean, what breeds?"

"Yes."

"They're known as Standardbreds," Jack continued. "They are bred specifically for harness racing. They are well-muscled with solid legs and long bodies. They are also a bit heavier than thoroughbreds, with powerfully-built shoulders and hindquarters. Some of the better-known breeds are the Tennessee Walker, the Morgan and the American Saddlebred, which comes from Kentucky."

"You really know harness racing," Jamie said with admiration. "Before today, I'd never even heard of the sport."

"I'm probably boring the hell out of you," Jack said good-naturedly.

"No, not at all. I find it interesting."

"The *Racino* has more to offer than racing," Jack assured him. "They have a thousand slot machines, and two restaurants. They also have video roulette and poker, and live entertainment in the Sound Stage Lounge. It's the most fun to be had this side of Atlantic City."

"I'm not much of a gambler," Jamie admitted.

"*In more ways than one*," Jack thought. "*But that's about to change*."

"Mark my words," Jack said aloud as they pulled into the parking lot of the *Racino*. "You are about to have the time of your life."

* * *

JACK WAS A SEASONED gambler, so Jamie's ineptness at the "sport" amused him. They started out at the slot machines, but Jamie was careful to bet the minimum.

"You'll never win anything if you bet that way," Jack chided him gently. "If you bet the maximum, you'll reap the rewards."

Jamie looked dubious. "Yeah, maybe, but this is like flushing money down the toilet."

"Give it a chance," Jack encouraged him. "Not many people win right from the get-go."

Jack sat next to Jamie on the wooden stool provided by the casino. Jack ordered beer from the waitress, catching her eye. She was small and voluptuous, with dark hair and blue eyes. He read her name tag: *Annabel*. She was obviously giving him and Jamie the once-over. At any other time, Jack would take advantage of the situation but he daren't reciprocate with Jamie in earshot. Instead, Jack winked at the waitress and turned his attention back to the slot machine.

Jamie seemed unaware of the attention he drew from various females in the casino. His striking good looks were breathtaking, yet he didn't seem to care about the possibilities at hand. It would take very little effort on his part to score, but he simply wasn't interested.

"*What a waste*," Jack thought to himself. "*If I had that kind of pull, my bed would be full for the night with a different woman every hour on the hour*."

Suddenly, Jamie's slot machine began ringing. He grew excited. "I took your advice and bet the max a few times," he said. "What did I win?"

Jack glanced up at the flashing scoreboard and gasped. "You bloody lucky boy," he exclaimed. "You just hit the jackpot."

"How much?"

"Two thousand dollars."

Jamie's jaw dropped. "Are you serious?"

Jack pointed to the flashing numbers. "Look for yourself."

Jamie was beside himself with excitement. He waited for the cashier to verify his winnings, and then took the tokens in hand. "I want to stop and cash these in," he told Jack. "There's no sense in playing anymore. I don't want to lose what I've won."

Jack chuckled. "You *are* a novice, aren't you? The point of gambling is to take chances. True, you might lose what you've already won but you also might win a lot more."

Jamie was unconvinced. "I'd rather stop for now. We can always come back another time."

Jack glanced at his wristwatch. "It's only eleven o'clock," he noted. He turned to Jamie. "Say, I've got a great idea. Let's stay the night so we can go to the Saturday harness race. It starts at one-thirty tomorrow. We could have lunch beforehand, and make a real day out of it."

Jamie hesitated. "I'm not sure..."

"Do you have other plans?" Jack prodded.

Jamie shook his head. "Not really. I'm off work tomorrow."

"Do you have someone waiting at home then?"

"I live alone in a cottage on the family estate," Jamie confessed. "But my dog Foofer is stuck in the house."

"Is there someone you can call to take care of him?"

Jamie nodded. "I can call my cousin Brose."

"Then why don't you do that?" Jack suggested. "Come on, aren't you having fun?"

Jamie brightened. "Actually, I *am* having fun. I forgot what it's like to relax and enjoy myself."

"There you have it," Jack said. "Tell you what, I'll get us a room and you call your cousin. After you're done, we can get a bite to eat and then play some more slots."

"Let me give you some money for the room," Jamie offered. Then he grinned. "Besides, I just won a few thousand so I think I can afford it."

"*That and a lot more*," Jack thought. Aloud, he said: "Okay. Go make your call and then we'll get a room."

After Jamie left to find a telephone, Jack ordered another beer from the waitress and continued playing his slot machine. He knew he was on the precipice of something momentous with Jamie Page. He could feel it in his bones. While intelligent, Jamie was highly impressionable and nervous about revealing too much of himself right away.

Jack was typically offhand in his treatment of lovers and the like, but he had no experience with a tender-hearted homosexual like Jamie. The young man was still unsure of himself and his yearnings, which might make a relationship with him more difficult to manage. Jamie required special handling.

But Jack was nothing if not resourceful. He knew he was capable to adapting to any situation to suit his purpose, even if it meant romping in bed with a man. He decided to treat it like a new adventure, and wasn't life just full of them? Having a rich and easily manipulated boyfriend was the best means to an end for him. Even if it didn't work out in the end or was only short-lived, he would still benefit from the association.

The key was to be gentle and patient, qualities that were normally foreign to Jack. He was used to taking what he wanted when he wanted it, with no regrets. However, this time, he set his mind to accepting a slow pace. He would court Jamie with infinite care and consideration, making sure to ensnare the young man before he knew what was happening to him. Jack had done much the same with women before, so surely his charm could work its magic on a burgeoning twink. He would gently tease Jamie to whet his desire, and to make the relationship indispensable to him.

That decided, Jack continued to play his slot machine. A slight grin appeared on his face as he waited for his new-found friend to return to him.

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter Six

*September 1996
New York City*

DESIDERIA SANSOVINO FELL IN love with Jamie on first sight.

At twenty-five, Désirée was the baby of the Sansovino family. She was four years younger than her brother Jack and still unmarried. Short and plump with a head full of blue-black hair, she had an ivory complexion with dark blue eyes and a pouting mouth. Her fingernails were extraordinarily long, and painted red. There was a small mole just above her upper left lip, which seemed to emphasize the generosity of her wide smile.

Despite not having seen Jack since Christmas, she was more interested in his friend as they walked in to the family's Italian market on Spring Street. She knew Jack was bringing a friend to the Feast of San Gennaro, and that they were going to have lunch upstairs in less than an hour. But nothing prepared Désirée for the magnitude of Jamie Page's good looks, the sheer perfection of his form and face. From her place at the deli counter, she stared at him dumbstruck as he walked alongside her brother.

Sansovino's Italian Market was adjacent to the family restaurant. Both were popular destinations in Little Italy. The sights and smells in the market were mouth-watering, perhaps even more so than in the eatery. The store featured gourmet imports such as brined olives, truffles, exotic spices, candies, jam and cheese condiments, more than three hundred varieties of olive oils and vinegars, cookies and cakes from Italy, and an entire section devoted to handmade pastas and sauces.

There was also meat and seafood, Italian hams and sausages, fresh tomatoes and other greens, cheeses, and wine and liqueurs. A coffee bar offered gourmet cappuccino, espresso and lattes, along with straight-up but strong coffee. The deli was a busy spot, where fresh sandwiches and *calzones* were served. Long strings of garlic adorned every nook and cranny, adding to the pungent yet delectable aroma in the store.

The bakery and gelato was in-house and fully staffed, where they baked breads such as *Tuscan* (crispy crust with soft interior), *Ciabatta* (broad white bread), *Pugliese* (rounded loaves), *Panigacci* (flatbread), *Grissini* (thin breadsticks), *Pan di Ramerino* (rosemary bread popular during Easter), *Panettone* (cupola-shaped sweet bread), *Taralli* (sweet or savory pretzels), *Focaccia* (herbed flatbread), and *Farinata* (crisp, pizza-like pancakes). The cakes and pastries included rum cakes, tiramisu, cannolis, *sfogliatelle* (cone-shaped pastries filled with orange-flavored ricotta and almond paste), biscotti, black and white cookies, and cupcakes.

Désirée kept her eyes on Jamie as he and Jack came to the deli counter. She was not the least bit interested in her brother, but she put on a good show. "Jacopo!" she cried, clapping her hands together. "How I have missed you, dear brother. I'm so glad you're here to take part in the Feast of San Gennaro, and to show your new friend the sights and sounds of Little Italy."

Jack smiled at his sister, although the warmth did not reach his eyes. "Jamie, this is my little sister Desideria. Désirée, this is Jamie Page. We met in Larkin City when he came to the Amber Whale for lunch last summer."

Désirée wiped her right hand on the stained white apron adorning her ample form, and then thrust it across the deli counter. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Jamie."

Jamie shook her hand. "It's nice to finally meet you, Désirée. Jack has told me about his family. I'm glad to be here."

"Where are Mamma and Papa?" Jack interrupted. "And Tony?"

Désirée glanced at her brother. "Tony and Papa are next door, prepping for the lunch crowd so they can get away to join us. Mamma is upstairs, where she has been since the crack of dawn cooking a special meal for your visit home."

Jack groaned. "Oh God, she's not going to all that trouble, is she?"

"You know Mamma," Désirée replied shortly. She turned her attention back to Jamie. "You must be hungry. Would you like a snack to tide you over until lunch?"

Before he could protest, she handed him a stick of prosciutto-wrapped *Grissini*. "The breadsticks were baked fresh this morning," she said proudly. "I've already eaten a half-dozen. I just love them when they're wrapped with prosciutto." She winked at Jamie. "I'll bet you don't have *Grissini* in Larkin City, do you?"

Jamie looked slightly embarrassed. "Well, as a matter of fact, yes we do. Jack serves them as an appetizer on every table at the Amber Whale. Granted, they're not wrapped in prosciutto but they are scrumptious nonetheless."

Désirée's face fell slightly. "Hopefully he uses the recipe Mamma taught him," she said waspishly. "Sansovino's makes the best *Grissini* in all of Little Italy."

"Of course I use Mamma's recipe," Jack defended himself. He reached across the deli counter and took a *Grissini* from her hand. "I think you've had enough of these for one day." He bit into the breadstick and chewed furiously as he glared at her.

Désirée hid her irritation with Jack. She removed her apron and set it on the counter. "Why don't we go upstairs? I'm sure Mamma is anxious to see you, and to meet your new friend."

"Yes, why don't we?"

Jamie finished his *Grissini*. "These are very good, Désirée."

She beamed at him. "Thank you, Jamie."

She came from behind the counter to join them in the store. She wore black slacks that were smudged with flour, and a pink blouse that was tucked unflatteringly into her waist. "I need to change before lunch anyway," she said, gesturing to her attire. "I'm a mess." She turned and began walking toward the rear of the store.

"You're a mess in more ways than one," Jack muttered under his breath as he and Jamie followed her.

"What did you say?" Jamie asked.

Jack flashed him a quick smile. "It's great to be home."

* * *

THE SANSOVINO FAMILY HOME was up a flight of stairs situated at the rear of the deli, behind a locked door. A separate entrance was located on Spring Street, next door to the deli, which the family considered the proper entryway to their home.

Jamie could smell the tempting aromas of savory foods cooking as he and Jack followed Désirée up the stairs. The scents were almost as intense as those in the deli, both of which were making his tummy rumble with hunger. The sampling of *Grissini* had simply

whetted his appetite.

The apartment, much like the restaurant and market, was housed in an older building originally constructed in 1908. Goffredo Sansovino, Jack's grandfather, purchased the structure in 1921 shortly after arriving in America from Florence, Italy with his family. Mingled in with the food smells was a distinct, musty odor that reminded Jamie of an old house left unattended for many years.

Désirée opened the door at the top of the stairs. Jamie trailed Jack onto a large living room area, which overlooked Spring Street through a divided picture window. One side of the living room had smooth, white walls while the other contained faded red brick with a fireplace. The furniture was mostly mismatched, but in otherwise good condition. Jamie saw two brown-colored loveseats, a black leather recliner with a bright red ottoman at its feet, and a rounded coffee table covered with several white lace doilies.

"Is that you, Jacopo?" A husky female voice came from the direction of the kitchen, which was located down a short hallway to the right of the living room.

"Mamma," Jack spoke. "We're in the living room."

Adelina Sansovino came down the short hallway toward them, a big smile on her face. She was short and rotund like her daughter, with iron-gray hair that was cut in pageboy-style. She had dark eyes with deep fatigue circles, a wide nose and blotchy red skin on her cheeks. While she may have once been beautiful, years of heavy drinking had bloated her face and body. Jamie could hear her labored breathing as she approached them.

Jack embraced his mother and kissed one of her red-splotched cheeks. Then he turned to Jamie. "Mamma, this is my friend from Larkin City, Jamie Page."

Adelina shook his hand. "It's wonderful to meet you, Jamie."

"Thank you for having me," Jamie said politely.

"We don't get to see Jacopo very often" she said, glancing at her son. "He comes once or twice a year, *maybe*. Perhaps you could persuade him to spend more time with his family?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "Let's not start with *that* again," he said impatiently. "You and Papa are just as capable of hopping a plane or a train to Larkin to see me."

Adelina sighed, shaking her head. "You know I don't like to fly. And *this* is your real home. Besides, didn't you say you're apartment was *minuscolo*? Tiny? How could all of us fit in such a place?"

Désirée touched Jamie's arm, whispering in his ear. "They'll go on like this for hours if we let them."

At that moment, two men entered the living room from the deli stairway. Jamie felt the older man had to be Jack's father as they were nearly identical. Tall and thin, Mario Sansovino had the same facial features as Jack but with dark blue eyes similar to Désirée's. The younger man, who Jamie assumed to be Jack's older brother Tony, was small in stature with the beginnings of a pot belly, thinning black hair and dark eyes.

With obvious relief, Jack turned from his mother. "Jamie, this is my father Mario and my brother Antonio. Dad, Tony, this is my friend Jamie Page."

The men shook hands. "Welcome to our home," Mario said graciously. "You and Jacopo are here to attend the Feast of San Gennaro?"

Jamie nodded. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Surely you can stay in our family home while in Little Italy and have dinner with us tonight as well," Mario remarked stoutly, as if his words were a command rather than a

general statement. "We live humbly, but honestly."

"No Papa," Jack interrupted. "Jamie's family owns an apartment on Central Park South, which is where we're staying. We're having dinner with Jamie's sister Angela tonight, who lives in Greenwich Village."

"I'm sorry we cannot offer the refinements of Central Park South," Mario said, obviously irritated with his son. "As I said, we live humbly but honestly."

Jack's eyes narrowed. "Are you implying that anyone who lives on Central Park South is *not* humble or honest? You would disparage Jamie and his family in that way? You know nothing about them, and yet you have already passed judgment?"

Adelina clapped her hands together. "*Abbastanza!* Enough!" she exclaimed. She turned to her husband. "Come. Let us eat lunch and be done with this conversation."

Mario looked at his wife passively, and then nodded. She led the family and Jamie down the small hallway to a dining room, which was just off the kitchen. The dark wood table was set with white china underneath a cream-colored tablecloth. A glass vase of fresh yellow daisies centered the table.

Désirée made sure she sat next to Jamie, smiling prettily at him and engaging him in small-talk. "Don't mind Papa and Jack," she whispered as everyone took their place at the table. "They *always* argue. Papa is upset that Jack left Little Italy all those years ago, and that he's made a life for himself somewhere else."

"That's kind of silly, isn't it?" Jamie whispered in return.

"I think so, but there is no winning with Papa."

"Jack is happy in Larkin City," Jamie told her. "Your parents should come for a visit. They would be proud of him."

Adelina re-entered the room laden with platters full of food. She huffed and puffed as she placed the dishes around the table, and then hurried back to the kitchen for more.

Jack nudged Jamie. "Mamma always cooks enough for an army, but even this is ridiculous."

The vast array of food prepared by Adelina for lunch was astounding, although Jack later told Jamie his mother normally didn't go to such trouble in the kitchen unless it was for a holiday: there was *Crostini Misti* (toast with smoked mozzarella, porcini and olive paste toppings and a sliced tomato), *Pecorino & Pear Salad* (with fava beans, pecorino cheese, Anjou pears, toasted pine nuts, balsamic vinegar and olive oil), *Pappa al Pomodoro* (bread and tomato soup), *Bracirole Rifatte* (beef fried in extra virgin olive oil and then tender-cooked in tomato sauce, served with green beans, red onions and tomato) and finally *Panna Cotta* (molded cream with hot chocolate sauce). All the edibles were to be washed down with copious amounts of room-temperature red Chianti wine.

Tony seemed curious about Jamie. "Jack tells us you work as a veterinarian. What's that like?"

"I love it," Jamie confessed. "I've always been an animal lover, so it seemed like a natural progression to become a veterinarian. I received my doctorate in veterinary medicine from Larkin City University, where I also obtained my bachelor's degree in veterinary science and animal husbandry."

"Aren't there some fancy initials following your name if you're a doctor?" Désirée asked, seemingly fascinated.

Jamie grinned. "I'm simply known as James Page, DVM."

"And the DVM stands for doctor of veterinary medicine?"

"Right."

"What did you have to study in college to get those degrees?" Tony asked as he chewed a large piece of *Bracirole Rifatte*.

"My class schedule was heavy on science," Jamie replied, sipping his glass of Chianti. "I studied organic and inorganic chemistry, calculus, physics, biochemistry, animal biology, animal nutrition, genetics, vertebrate embryology, cellular biology, microbiology, zoology, and systemic physiology. I also had to take English and literature, as well as social sciences and business management." He paused. "Larkin University has one of the best veterinary medicine programs in the country."

"How long did all of that take?" Tony queried. "You seem awfully young to be a doctor, no offence intended."

"Don't worry, I'm not offended by your question," Jamie replied with a smile. "I know some people think I look twelve-years-old at times, but that's my cross to bear." He continued. "It typically takes four years for the bachelor's degree and four years of veterinary school. I accelerated through veterinary school because of my good grades, and passed the veterinary college admission test with flying colors. I'm currently near the end of my residency at the Larkin Animal Clinic."

"Will you stay there once you complete your residency?" Mario wanted to know.

"Most definitely," Jamie told him. "I have future plans to build a no-kill animal shelter, and I may go back to school someday to get specialty degrees in animal behavior and infectious diseases."

"Very impressive," Mario stated. "None of my children went to college except Jacopo."

"*Really* Papa," Désirée protested. "When could Tony and I find the time for college? We started working at the restaurant and market before we were teenagers, and we've been in the family business ever since."

"Jacopo managed," Tony spoke up. "He decided the family business wasn't the life for him and he did something about it."

"But he is so far away," Adelina reproved, draining her fourth glass of *Chianti*. "I wish he lived closer."

Jack laughed shortly. "I could never afford to live in New York on my own nowadays. Besides, I really love Larkin City. It's small without being backward or rural, and the cost of living is definitely much cheaper."

Désirée glanced sideways at Jamie as she took a second helping of *Panna Cotta*. "Do you have an apartment in Larkin City?"

Jamie always dreaded the "where do you live?" question, uncomfortable in explaining that he lived rent-free on his family's vast estate. Rather than elaborate, he answered: "I have a cottage on the outskirts of town."

"Nice," Désirée responded, wiping custard from her chin with a napkin. "One of these days I'd love to come to Larkin City to visit Jack, of course, but also to see this place he is so madly in love with."

"Be careful," Jamie teased her. "You might like it so much you'll never want to leave."

She giggled. "Maybe so." She peered at him. "Tell me, how many girlfriends do you have? Someone as good looking as you must have a dozen."

"Désirée!" Adelina chided her daughter. "That's not an appropriate question to ask our guest."

"That's okay Mrs. Sansovino," Jamie said quickly. "I don't mind." He glanced at Désirée, who was slightly embarrassed by her mother's stern words. "Thanks for the nice remark about my looks, although I don't really see myself that way. To answer your question, between school and work I don't have time for a steady girlfriend. I don't think anyone would be prepared to put up with my schedule." He smiled. "This is the first long break I've had in quite awhile."

"And there's no better way to spend it," Jack interjected. He glanced at his wristwatch. "We'll be back tomorrow morning to join you for the street festivities, but for now we need to get going."

"Make sure to come early for the church service," Adelina reminded him. "I'll have cappuccino and *cornetto vuoto* ready beforehand."

"What's *cornetto vuoto*?" Jamie asked.

"It's the Italian version of a croissant," Jack told him. "Despite its name, which literally means *empty cornetto*, Mamma fills hers with jam and chocolate cream and sprinkles them with powdered sugar."

"Sounds divine," Jamie said.

They said their goodbyes, with Jamie thanking Adelina profusely for the meal, and then made their way back down the staircase to the deli.

"I think your sister has a crush on me," Jamie said as they stepped out onto Spring Street.

Jack snorted. "I could tell, never fear. I'll tell you something about my sister, Jamie. Désirée may seem nice and chatty on the outside, but she likes any man with two legs and a schlong. I think she's slept with every eligible male on the block, and then some. Is it any wonder she can't find a husband? They've all had her six ways to Sunday, so why bother with anything else?"

Jamie was shocked by Jack's tone. "It can't be *that* bad, surely."

"But it is," Jack said grimly as he hailed a taxicab. "She's already had three abortions, which my parents know nothing about, and she's only twenty-five years old."

"I may be Catholic, but I still believe in a woman's free choice."

Jack sighed. "That's not the point. I agree that a woman should be allowed to make medical choices regarding her own body, despite my Catholic upbringing, but Désirée finds herself in these predicaments because she whores around and can't be bothered with birth control. It's as simple as that."

"Oh," Jamie said faintly.

Jack turned to him. "Aren't you glad you came to Little Italy with me?" he asked with a grin. "If meeting my family didn't scare you off, nothing will."

Jamie laughed. "Your family isn't so bad, Jack. They are nice, decent people. Hell, you've already had a run-in with *my* family and survived."

"Mamma is a drunk," Jack said bluntly. "Or didn't you notice? She's been like that for years. She can drink my father *and* brother under the table."

"She didn't seem drunk to me. She drank several glasses of wine, true, but she didn't appear sloshed."

"She's been doing it for so long that she knows how to hide it well," Jack continued. "I can't remember the last time she was completely sober."

"Every family has its idiosyncrasies," Jamie said as they climbed into a taxicab. "Oh, the stories I could tell you about *mine*..."

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter Nine

*July 1997
Larkin City, Maine*

BROSE AND BRIDGET CELEBRATED their first year as a couple by sneaking away for a private weekend in Spruce Head, Maine. They chose a charming bed-and-breakfast on Clark Island called the Craignair Inn, where they enjoyed the tranquility of the seaside paradise. They could have just as easily stayed home and taken a room at the Amber Whale to celebrate, but both of them were anxious to get away from the proximity of work, family and friends for a few days.

Their private room was in the Vestry area of the Craignair Inn, which overlooked the ocean and Clark Island. The bed-and-breakfast was built nearly seventy years ago to house quarrymen and stonemasons who worked nearby.

On Sunday morning Brose and Bridget walked hand-in-hand along the causeway that extended across the water to Clark Island. The cobbled granite steps led to an old quarry, which first became a hub of activity in 1870. The hollow was now a saltwater swimming hole, deserted when the couple stopped to have a look. Earlier, they read in Craignair's brochure that granite from Clark Island was used to build Central Park bridges and gate houses, the Brooklyn Battery tunnel, the Standard Oil Building in New York, and the Library of Congress in Washington.

As they walked back toward the bed-and-breakfast, Brose and Bridget were lost in their own thoughts. They were leaving that afternoon to return to Larkin City, and both were a bit melancholy about departing. They had enjoyed their stay on Clark Island immensely, and were already planning a return trip over the upcoming Labor Day weekend.

"If I didn't love Larkin City so much I'd consider living here," Brose said.

Bridget flashed him a smile. "Yes, but what would you do? Clark Island is lovely, but there are no jobs to speak of anymore. However, it's a great place to take a vacation."

He winked at her. "You forget, I don't *need* to work. I could retire tomorrow and not have to worry about money."

"That's not your style," she countered. "You'd go crazy with nothing to do, and you love the estate too much to leave it."

"All true," he admitted. "I'll probably die sitting upright on the lawnmower when I'm ninety years old." He glanced at her. "What about you?"

"If Dana will have me, I'll still be the menu planner at Harbor View Catering when I'm old and decrepit."

"Oh, she'll have you. I think it's safe to say she finds you indispensable at this point."

"No one is indispensable," Bridget insisted. "I'm grateful for the opportunities Dana has given me, and I don't intend on taking them for granted."

"No regrets about leaving your old job behind, then?"

She shook her head. "Not now, but I have to admit I was a bit nervous at first. I had no complaints in working for the city. They did well by me, and I made a lot of friends on the crew. It was difficult to walk in last April to give my notice, but the guys made it easy for

me. They were actually happy for me, you know? Starting a new job is always scary, but it helped that I had six months as a part-time runner-up."

They reached the sidewalk incline that led to the Craignair Inn. "Are you ready for some lunch?" Brose asked her. "One last meal before we head for home?"

"I'm starving," she admitted. "This time I want to try their spinach salad. They use raspberry vinaigrette, and layer the leaves with cranberries, feta cheese and toasted pecans."

"Are you planning to add it to the HVC menu?"

Her eyes twinkled. "One never knows."

Brose ordered smoked haddock chowder after they sat at a table. As they nibbled on the crab cake appetizers, Brose casually took a ring box from his pants pocket. Bridget froze. She watched him open the box and set it in front of her. She looked to his face and saw his wide smile.

"What's this for?" she asked dumbly.

"To mark our one-year anniversary," he reminded her. "I know you're not one to wear much jewelry, but the ring is simple and very much to your taste."

She stared down at the ring in the box. It was made of white gold, with a small cluster of seven diamonds in the middle. The band was thin, and twined where the diamonds met.

"Oh Brose," she breathed. "It's beautiful." She reached into the box and slipped the band on her right-hand ring finger. "It's simple, and it's gorgeous. Thank you." She leaned across the table and kissed him. She settled back to look at the ring with a smile, but then her face fell. "Oh my God, I didn't get you anything."

"I didn't expect anything," he assured her. "Hell, just coming to Clark Island was enough of a gift for me. Our weekend couldn't be more perfect."

She twirled the slim band on her finger. "What kind of ring is this? I mean, what does it signify?"

He grinned. "Don't worry, it doesn't mean you're enslaved to me forever. It's just a promise ring." He paused to take a spoonful of chowder. "I bought the ring at Azoulay Gems in Larkin. Since David Azoulay is now our illustrious mayor, his daughters Rachel and Deborah run the family jewelry store. They told me a promise ring is a symbol of a promise made between two people, and is given for both romantic and platonic reasons."

She glanced at him. "And what promise are we making today?"

He reached across the table and took her hand. "I know neither one of us is big on flowery phrases," he said quietly, watching her reaction. "We both avoid commitment conversations like the plague. That's okay, I'm comfortable with that. I just want you to know how much you mean to me, Bridget. I'm not interested in having anyone else on my arm, if you know what I mean." He shrugged. "I suppose the promise ring signifies our exclusivity as a couple. Fidelity, monogamy, whatever you want to call it. I've felt that way from the get-go with you, but it took me this long to figure out how to express it properly."

She was touched by his words, knowing how difficult it was for him to talk about his feelings of love. She felt much the same way, happy in their relationship as it was. She feared talk of marriage would spoil their nearly perfect union. She was grateful he hadn't asked her to marry him because she knew she would have turned him down. Maybe someday in the future they would both be ready for marriage and children, but now was not the time.

"I'm perfectly agreeable to monogamy," she replied strongly. "I have no intention of sharing you with anyone else." She held up her hand to display the ring on her finger. "If anyone tries to come between us, I'll flash this in their face and tell them to blow."

He grinned. "Perfect."

* * *

JACK SANSOVINO SAID GOODBYE to his old apartment on High Street without regret. He had spent the last seven months making amends to Jamie in the best way he knew how, mainly by playing at humbleness and treating the fruit basket with kid gloves. As a reward, Jamie asked him to become his roommate at the A-frame cottage. He was certain the request came only after Jamie jumped through several hoops for his family and nimbly avoided the true nature of their relationship.

Jamie came to High Street to help Jack pack his belongings, which didn't amount to much.

"It's a good thing you have decent furniture and dishes," Jack teased Jamie. "Otherwise, we'd be screwed."

Jamie laughed. "All the furniture and dishes at the cottage belong to my parents."

"Speaking of you parents, how did you get them to agree to me moving in?" Jack asked, taking the opportunity to satisfy his curiosity.

"I spoke a few white lies," Jamie admitted. "I told them I wanted a roommate plain and simple, to alleviate the boredom and to share with the utilities, and that I thought you'd be the best candidate. They already know you personally, so it really wasn't a big deal to talk them into it."

"What did your father say?"

"He was all for it. Dad has always thought I was a bit of a loner, unable or unwilling to make friends outside of the family. He worried I wasn't socially adept, frankly, not suspecting for a minute that his only son is gay." He paused. "Actually, Dad thinks you're a good influence on me. He says you've drawn me out of my shell."

"What about your mother?" Jack pressed.

"I've never sat down with Mum and told her I'm gay," Jamie replied. "But she knows. My mother is scarily intuitive and she understands me more than anyone else, aside from Angie. She's also very non-judgmental, so I've never feared her reaction to my choice of lifestyle."

Jack stacked boxes near the doorway to the apartment. "So this is as good as it gets," he said with a grin. "Whether your family knows it or not, I'm a bona fide member of the Larkin clan. Albeit, through the back door."

Jamie looked momentarily puzzled by yet another of Jack's skewed euphemisms, but then he smiled in return. "I suppose you're right. Same-sex marriage isn't recognized in Maine, so we could always jet over to Denmark and do the deed."

"Gay marriage is legal in Denmark?" Jack asked in amazement.

Jamie nodded. "Believe it or not, I keep track of the issue. Denmark became the first country to recognize same-sex marriage in 1989, although the unions are technically known as *registered partnerships*."

"Imagine *that*. Do you want to move to Denmark?"

"Not this week," Jamie retorted good-naturedly. "We've got to get you moved into

the cottage first."

"Yeah, but what about later?" Jack continued. "What if we take a trip to Denmark in the near future? We could get hitched and no one would know once we got back home. We'd be married, but you'd still be saving face with your father and I'd be able to keep my family at bay."

Jamie regarded Jack quietly for a moment, and then spoke: "Are you asking me?"

"Asking you what?"

"Are you asking me to marry you in Denmark?"

Jack hesitated for a brief second. Then he shrugged. "Sure. Why not?" At the same time, he thought to himself: *"What does it matter if we tie the knot in Denmark? No one will legally recognize the union stateside, so what's the harm? Then again, being married to a rich fruit might come in handy someday."* Aloud, he said: "I love you, Jamie. I'll do whatever makes you happy."

Jamie stared at Jack. "I love you too, but I don't think marriage is in the cards for us at the moment. I'd rather just take one day at a time."

Jack nodded. "Marriage is just a piece of paper, anyway. We don't need it to define how we feel about each other."

Jamie seemed pleased. "I'm glad you see it that way." He gestured to the boxes by the door. "Are we ready to take those down to my truck?"

"More than ready," Jack declared. "Let's get this show on the road."

* * *

SHANNON WATCHED JAMIE AND Jack as they hauled boxes into the A-frame cottage. From her position on the widow's walk of the mansion, she had a clear view of their activity. The sun was bright in the sky, and it was a hot summer's day. When it looked as though they were almost finished, she was going to take cold beer and sandwiches to her son and his new roommate.

Jamie was happy, the happiest she had seen him in a long while. In her mind, the jury was still out on Jack Sansovino. She liked him well enough, but was still reserving final judgment on his character. The telephone call she'd received from Tom Cimorelli last year had also given her some pause. Tom was wary of Jack and his motives, so he discreetly had the man's background investigated.

Tom informed Shannon that while Jack lived in New York several years ago, he had a problem with gambling and at one time owed a great deal of money to a group of loan sharks. Apparently the matter was eventually resolved, and seemed to be the only secret blight on Jack's character.

She thanked Tom for the information, but kept their telephone call to herself. It wouldn't do to tell Scott because he would wonder why Tom investigated Jack's background in the first place. Shannon tucked away the revealing tidbits for future reference if need be, but she saw no reason to tell her husband or the rest of the family. It would be akin to violating Jamie's privacy.

"There you are," she heard Scott's voice. "I had a feeling you'd be up here today."

He joined her at the high stone-edge of the widow's walk. He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her head, following her gaze to the cottage. "How's the move going?"

"Jack really doesn't have much," Shannon replied. "They seem to be hauling a lot of

boxes, but very little furniture."

"You'd think with Jack being a professional chef, he'd have more to show for it."

"He's living the bachelor life," she told him, her eyes twinkling. "Don't you remember your single days before you met me?"

He grinned. "My single days are a vague and unpleasant memory, thanks to you."

"I thought you might say that," she replied smugly. She gestured toward the cottage. "It's a good thing the A-frame is furnished, isn't it?"

Scott chuckled. "It will make it easier for Jamie and Jack to live the bachelor life in style."

She paused briefly, looking at her husband. "So you like Jack, then?"

"What's not to like?" Scott responded. "He has a stable career, and he seems to be a decent guy. It's always been difficult for Jamie to make friends with men, although he seems to have a gaggle of female pals. It probably harkens back to when he was bullied in school. Thankfully he had Brose to protect him in those days, but Jamie has needed to expand his social horizons and make friends outside the family for a long time. Jack seems to be a positive influence on him, and I think having him as a roommate will only help Jamie come out of his shell." He winked. "Besides, Jack is Italian. Need I say more?"

"Our children and their Italian friends," Shannon smiled. "First there was Angie and Tom, and now Jamie and his buddy Jack."

"Our kids know quality when they see it," Scott quipped.

"Don't forget you're only half-Italian on your mother's side," she reminded him.

"That's the half that counts," he insisted.

She kissed him. "I'm going down to the cottage with beer and sandwiches for the boys. Do you want to come along?"

He arched one eyebrow. "What kind of sandwiches?"

"I used one of Claude Mondoux's old recipes," she confessed. "Ham sandwiches on Irish soda bread with mustard."

"You can count me in," he said with delight, grabbing her hand. "Come on, kitten. Let's go take lunch to our son and his new roomie."

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter Ten

*June 1998
Larkin City, Maine*

A FEW MONTHS AFTER Brian Larkin's death, Shannon left the mansion and made her way to the family cemetery. Since her father's funeral, she had only visited his grave a few times. She placed flowers on Memorial Day, and on two other occasions she stopped by the marker to briefly pay her respects. Shannon thought nothing of strolling through the family cemetery almost every day before Brian's death, but knowing her father was now buried in its earth made her somehow uneasy about entering the hallowed ground.

Even now her purpose was not to visit Brian's grave, but rather to seek out her twin brother Sean. She knew he was working in the cemetery alone today, tidying growth near headstones and watering the many shrubs, espaliers and perennial borders. As she walked across the wide expanse of lawn she inhaled the mingled bouquets of flora, appreciating the beauty of her surroundings with every step.

It was a clear, sunny day with a slight breeze rolling in from the ocean. Owing to the continued efforts of Sean and Brose, the emerald green lawns were immaculate and the entire estate was abloom.

Aside from the rose garden next to the mansion, there were groupings of red, yellow and deep purple tulips, summer sunflowers, yellow and red chrysanthemums, peonies, hanging vines of grapes and gourds, flowering Narcissus plants, Cyclamen, lilies, Azaleas and flowering trees.

Closer to the house were various garden patches of edibles, including lettuce, spinach, radish, carrots, scallions, onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, bell peppers, eggplants, zucchini, okra, sugar snap peas, summer squash, winter squash, pumpkin, watermelon, green beans, red and white potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, garlic and sunflowers. There were also two herb gardens behind the mansion nearest the kitchen, which contained allspice, anise, basil, chervil, chives, cilantro, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, cumin, dill, ginger, mint, nutmeg, parsley, sage, tarragon and turmeric.

Shannon slowed her pace as she neared the entrance to the cemetery. The tall, wrought-iron gates were ajar so she stepped inside and followed the circular stone path that began on the left. She passed by the Lady Grace Chapel and the ornamental *bean-sídhe* water fountain before arriving at her father's gravesite.

She found Sean kneeling next to Brian's headstone, carefully clipping overlong grass and throwing it into a pile with other garden debris. Shannon took in her brother's worn blue jeans and white tee-shirt, his hair blowing slightly in the wind and his barest stubble of beard with specs of silver.

"Our father was a good man," Sean said, without looking up from his task.

There were several comments poised on the tip of her tongue, but she refrained from voicing them for fear of upsetting her brother. She had loved their father as well as Sean, but her view of him was tempered by Brian's innate self-involvement while alive and his sometimes glaring disregard for the feelings of others. What did it matter now, anyway? Brian Larkin was gone and should be remembered for his finer points rather than his

shortcomings.

"Mum is packed and ready to leave," Shannon told her brother.

"I wish she'd stay," Sean grumbled as he came to his feet. "There's no need for her to go traipsing off."

"It's not as if she's taking a vacation," Shannon pointed out. "She's spending a week or so with Tom and Angie in New York, and then she's going on to Vermont to hire someone to look after her and Dad's house."

"She should sell the house in Goss Hollow and move to Larkin permanently," Sean replied bluntly.

"She probably will eventually," Shannon said, annoyed by her brother's tone and all that it implied. "Mum is a grown woman, Sean. She's perfectly capable of looking after herself. Her life doesn't need to revolve around us." She shook her head. "Just because Dad is gone doesn't mean Mum has to stop living. Her life can be about more than just you, me and her grandchildren, for God's sake. Cut her some slack. Give her breathing room or she'll avoid coming back to Larkin City altogether."

"Why would she want to travel without Dad in the first place?" Sean asked, recognizing the signs of his sister's indignation but stubbornly taking a stance anyway.

"You're pissed because Mum is moving forward," she accused. "You're madder than a hornet because Mum doesn't shrivel-up into a little ball and refuse to go on. Jaysus, Sean. If something were to happen to *you*, would you prefer Dana throw in the towel? Would you wish that kind of misery on anyone you profess to love?"

"That's not fair," he protested. "I'd never want Mum or Dana to be unhappy, or *you* for that matter."

"Men are such insipid little pantywaists," Shannon said scornfully. "You want women to mourn until their own dying day, without a further thought of happiness for themselves. You expect us to cater to your every whim while you walk upright, at the expense of our own contentment, and then want us to continue the misery after you're dead and gone. Men want to be irreplaceable in the eyes of women, as if life isn't worth living without *them*. Yet in the next breath men claim to only want happiness for the women in their life . . ."

"You're such a spiteful bitch," Sean exclaimed crossly. "It's a wonder Scott has tolerated your mean spirit all these years."

The twins stood facing each other, both of them angry and hurt. Then, just as suddenly as it began, their argument ended as they started to laugh. It was mirth from collective relief, each one knowing the cause of their ruction was based on mutual angst over the loss of their father.

Sean and Shannon embraced. "You old goat," she muttered. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"For the same reason I tolerate your high-handedness," he quipped. "We can't escape each other. Twins, remember?"

They stood at Brian Larkin's grave for a few more minutes, and then began walking toward the mansion arm-in-arm.

"You're right about Mum," Sean admitted. "She needs her own life, not just one that's about us and our kids."

"She's a mature, vibrant woman who still has a lot of living left to do," Shannon remarked. "She loved our father deeply, but she's healthy and more than ready to live her

life on her own terms."

"Which is the way it should be," he agreed.

She glanced at her brother. "Let's hope we both remember that when *our* time comes."

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter Thirteen

July 1999
Larkin City, Maine

AFTER JACK FLED LARKIN City, Jamie eventually recovered from his physical wounds but the mental anguish took longer to dissipate. Jack was the first love of his life, not easy to forget despite the violence that marked their relationship in the end. Jamie's first and only love affair to date was an unmitigated disaster, and he was in no hurry to become embroiled in another.

Instead, he devoted himself to work and family. Between the animal clinic and the no-kill shelter, he had little free time. When Désirée came to visit in July, he took his first days off in months. Rather than query him about what happened with Jack, she treated the encounter casually. She was just a friend, her intention to spend a few summer days with Jamie.

She was surprised when he brought up Jack anyway. They were lounging on the beach in chaise lounge chairs, drinking margaritas and watching Foofer run his nose along the sand. It was a humid and hot day, the sun shining brightly in the sky. The ocean rolled gently, white caps peaking underneath the surface.

"They found Jack's car," Jamie told her suddenly.

She glanced at Jamie in surprise. Dressed in a purple bikini, Désirée eschewed heavy makeup for the hot sun, knowing it would melt on her face. Instead, she wore large, rounded sunglasses and a floppy straw hat. "Who found Jack's car?" she asked.

"The police," Jamie replied. "It took awhile, but they traced his movements to Sherbrooke, Quebec where he sold his Corvette. The trail went cold after that, though."

"So he's probably somewhere in Canada," she noted. "It's a big country, and Jack's resourceful. God only know where he eventually landed."

Jamie glanced sideways at her. "I thought you'd want to know because of the Corvette. Do you think Tony wants it back?"

Désirée snorted, taking a sip of her margarita. "I doubt it. He doesn't have much time for tinkering with cars anymore." She returned Jamie's glance. "Jack must've been desperate to unload the Corvette, though. He loved that car."

"That's what I thought," Jamie agreed. "Oh well, he's long gone now. I doubt he'll ever surface again, not unless he wants to face prison time."

Anxious to change the subject, Désirée began rubbing suntan lotion on her arms. "Didn't you say Brose and Bridget were joining us?"

"Bridget has a catering job at LCU until late this afternoon, so she and Brose are coming for dinner. They're bringing steaks for the barbeque, and leftover potato salad."

"What about Angie?"

"She's in Massachusetts on a road trip," Jamie said. "She's doing a touristy piece for the *Manhattan Daily Journal*. She'll be back tomorrow, though."

"I really like Bridget," Désirée confessed. "She's so nice, and down-to-earth."

"Jack hated her."

Resigning herself to repeated mention of her despicable brother, she continued:

"Why?"

"He thought she was ugly and coarse."

"What does Jack know?" Désirée asked, loathing in her tone. "Bridget has to be one of the loveliest people I've ever met."

"I think so, too. Jack didn't like many people."

She sighed. "My brother doesn't like people he can't manipulate. That's why we didn't get along too well. I never let him take over."

"I guess he found me easy to manipulate then," Jamie noted quietly.

Désirée was immediately contrite. "I didn't mean anything by what I said, Jamie. You're *not* easy to manipulate. You just happened to fall in love with him, which made you vulnerable to his maneuvering. That could happen to anyone, gay *or* straight."

He smiled at her, and she was struck by how handsome he was yet again. "You're pretty wise for someone so young," he told her.

She shrugged, trying to brush aside the compliment. "That's what friends are for, Jamie. I don't care if Jack is my brother or not. What he did to you was unforgivable. I'm ashamed to call him kin."

"Maybe someday you'll forgive him."

"Not in this lifetime," she said strongly. "And you shouldn't, either."

He was quiet for a few minutes. "Thank you for being such a good friend," he finally said. "You'll never know how much I appreciate it."

Désirée tried to attempt humor. "At least there's one Sansovino you know you can count on."

"I'll never forget it."

She reached over and touched his arm, which rested brown and muscled on the chaise lounge. "And I'll never forget what a good friend you've been to *me*. You could have easily dismissed me as Jack's flighty sister, but you took me at face value and liked me anyway. Very few of my friends in Little Italy treat me like you do, with such respect and genuine kindness. You listen to what I have to say and never belittle me. Your friendship means a great deal to me, more so than my own family. I hope it stays that way always."

He squeezed her hand, a gentle light in his eyes. "Count on it."

* * *

BRIDGET WAS GLAD TO see Jamie in better spirits, fully crediting Désirée's visit with the positive change in him. He seemed relaxed and happy, no longer morose over the bad taste Jack Sansovino left behind. It was hard to imagine Désirée being related to Jack because of her sweet demeanor and rather outlandish appearance, which Bridget grew to realize was just part of her bubbly personality.

Like Brose, Bridget had grown fiercely protective of Jamie. He was like the brother she never had.

The foursome sat at the picnic table behind the A-frame cottage, full of barbecued steak and potato salad. For dessert, they enjoyed red wine and sliced cheese with green apples. Foofer lay under the table, gnawing with great concentration on a steak bone. Jamie poured sangria, handing Désirée the first goblet. She flashed him a smile, which was not lost on Bridget.

"How long are you staying in Larkin, Désirée?" she asked, popping an apple slice into

her mouth. "One weekend doesn't seem long enough. Don't you get vacation time?"

"Working for my father doesn't give me much leeway," Désirée admitted. "I've been behind the deli counter at our restaurant since I was sixteen, and I don't remember ever taking a long vacation. I think Papa would have a stroke if I asked for a week off."

"That's too bad," Brose said with sympathy. "I know how you feel, though. I work right in my own back yard, so it's hard to get away from it."

Désirée agreed. "If I could get away for a long vacation, I'd like nothing better than to come to Larkin. This place is so beautiful."

"Maybe I can talk to your father for you," Jamie offered. "He has to let you go after all these years, doesn't he? Surely they can survive without you for two weeks."

"Now's probably not a good time," Désirée said softly. "Mamma and Papa are still upset about what happened with Jack. Even though he was in the wrong, Jack is still their son and they're touchy about me coming to Larkin at all."

Jamie understood her meaning. "You're probably right."

"But you're an adult," Brose pressed, ignoring Bridget's warning kick under the table. "You can make your own decisions. If you're unhappy, no one can stop you from picking up and leaving Little Italy."

Jamie laughed. "You still don't grasp the Italian family way, do you gravedigger?"

"*Familismo*," Désirée said. "Always *familismo*."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Brose asked, truly puzzled.

"It's the social structure of the Italian family," Désirée explained patiently. "In essence, the needs of the family as a whole are far more important than the needs of one family member."

"Oh," Brose said, going uncomfortably quiet.

Bridget spoke up. "Whatever the case, I wish you could spend more time in Larkin City."

"So do I," Désirée replied sadly. "Maybe someday."

It was on the tip of Bridget's tongue to offer Désirée a job at Harbor View Catering, but then thought better of it. Even though Désirée had years of experience working around food and was a perfect candidate, Bridget realized she had no real authority to hire or fire staff at HVC. She was sure she could persuade Dana to consider Jack's sister as part of the team, yet it might inflame an already wriggling can of worms.

She was happy to see the positive affect Désirée had on Jamie and wanted it to continue, but cautioned herself not to meddle.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY, JAMIE drove Désirée to the airport for her return flight home. He piled Foofer into his Datsun pickup, placing Désirée's luggage in the bed of the truck. The threesome squeezed into the front seat, Foofer in the middle. The dog filled the cab, panting and wagging his tail.

Jamie apologized. "Foofer would never forgive me if I left him home. Since I don't ascribe to putting animals in open flatbeds, I'm afraid you'll have to tolerate him."

Désirée laughed, blinking her eyes as Foofer's tail swished her way. "I don't mind, Jamie. I love Foofer. He's part of your family, one of the gang."

"I think he wants you to stay."

"I wish I could," Désirée said wistfully as they pulled away from the A-frame cottage.

"I know the family credo means a great deal to you, but Brose was right too."

"About what?"

"About you being able to make your own decisions."

Désirée glanced at him. "My family is in a vulnerable place right now. To be honest, I'd like nothing better than to leave Little Italy for good. If I don't, I'll end my days behind the deli counter. Great life, huh? For right now, I need to stand by my parents." She shook her head. "You wouldn't believe the shame of it all. It hasn't really hurt our business, but Mamma hates to show her face on Spring Street. Everyone knows Jack is wanted by the law for beating a man in Larkin City."

"Just so you know you're always welcome here," Jamie said firmly.

She smiled at him. "Our friendship is the *one* good thing about Jack's presence in your life."

"I agree, so don't be a stranger."

"Don't worry about that," she assured him. "We're friends for life."

And she meant it.

HEARTS DESIRES: Excerpt from Chapter Fifteen

*June 2000
Larkin City, Maine*

AFTER DINNER, JAMIE WALKED up to the mansion with Foofer to find Brose and Angie. He needed to confide in someone, to share what happened to him in Larkin City that afternoon. He thought about his mother first, but then decided he didn't want to involve her. She fretted about him as it was, and he didn't want to add to her worries. Talking to his father about the rumors, whether true or false, was not an option.

Brose was in the drawing room with Bridget. The couple was enjoying a glass of wine together and talking quietly. When Foofer bounded into the room excitedly, Bridget held out her arms and hugged the dog as he licked her face.

"That mutt likes you better than me," Brose noted. "When did *that* happen?"

"When you weren't looking," Bridget teased.

"Where's Angie?" Jamie asked.

"She went to the study to find a book to read," Brose answered. "She'll be right back."

"Good. I need to talk to all of you."

"What's up, runt?"

Before Jamie could respond, Angie came into the drawing room with a book in her hand. She was delighted to see her brother. "What a nice surprise!" she exclaimed, embracing him. "I thought you'd be busy at the shelter tonight."

"Under normal circumstances I would be," Jamie said. "Can I talk to you guys for a minute?"

"Want some wine?" Brose offered.

"Yeah, a big glass, please."

After they were seated and Foofer settled at his master's feet, Jamie told them about his visit from Kit Bathers three months ago, and then about events occurring that afternoon.

"I haven't heard the rumors," Bridget declared. "I work with different sorts of people all day long at HVC, and I haven't heard anything."

"The subject of rumors is the last to know," Brose told her. "In this case, it includes Jamie and the rest of us."

Angie was furious. "How can Bathers think he'll get away with this? We should start some rumors of our own, about *him*. Let's fight fire with fire, for God's sake."

"Then it will never end," Jamie disagreed. "The rumor mill will continue to churn if we feed it."

"The hell with it," Brose said, annoyed. "Let the rumor mill churn, Jamie. Who gives a damn what a handful of people think, anyway?"

Jamie blushed. "I do, Brose. The animal shelter is a community effort, and now people think it's managed by a pervert. Mind you, I'm not ashamed of who I am or of my sexual orientation, but we can't control how others react. It's an unfortunate fact of life that not all people are so tolerant."

"This is the year 2000," Angie said angrily. "Homosexuality shouldn't even be an issue anymore. Yet people continue to point fingers, considering it scandalously immoral or a reason to dismiss someone entirely. I don't understand the mentality. Are they living in the dark ages?"

"I don't want to engage in a debate," Jamie said firmly. "But I do want to find some way to resolve this. Caving in to Kit Bathers' demands is out of the question, and I also don't want to contribute to the rumor mill. I can let it slide and hope for the best, or do something to counteract the gossip."

"Like what?" Bridget wanted to know.

"That's why I'm here," Jamie replied. "I was hoping one of you might have a suggestion."

"I still say ignore it and carry on," Brose muttered crossly. "Maybe one of these days I'll come across Kit Bathers in a dark alley and rearrange his thinking."

Bridget rolled her eyes. "That won't help, Brose. You can't solve every problem with your fists."

"Do you have a better idea?" he grouched.

She hesitated, glancing to Jamie. "I think I do, but it's rather drastic."

"Tell me," Jamie urged.

"If you got married, no one would think twice about the rumors."

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" Brose exploded. "Jamie getting married to stave off local scuttlebutt is *beyond* drastic. It's crazy. Why should he have to compromise his entire life, his future, just to satisfy the small cluster of bigots in Larkin City? Marriage under normal circumstances is a big step, but to enter into it under false pretenses for no good reason is outrageous."

Angie was aghast. "I agree. Besides, what woman in her right mind would marry you just for the sake of it?" She looked at her brother, noticing the thoughtful expression on his face. Her eyes widened. "Don't tell me you're considering Bridget's idea?"

"Getting married wouldn't compromise my future," Jamie said. "Think about it. I could have a short-lived marriage and get divorced later, after the rumors were put to rest. I might have to pay someone to do it, under confidentiality restrictions of course, but what difference does it make? I could have my cake and eat it, too. And it would stifle Kit Bathers right proper."

"I have another idea," Angie's voice was cold. "Let's expose Kit Bathers for the blackmailer he is and sue him for slander. He as much threatened you in your office if you didn't vote his way in the next election, Jamie. Political corruption would blacken his name in Larkin City forever."

"I don't want a long, drawn out legal battle," Jamie told her. "And it will be hard to prove. Only me and Kit were privy to our discussion, and how can we verify he was the one who started the rumors? No matter what we do there will always be a shadow of doubt in some people's minds, but there is nothing I can do about that."

Angie sighed in frustration. She knew her brother had been depressed since Jack Sansovino disappeared from Larkin City, despite what the man did to him. It was as if he was just going through the motions of daily living. She had a feeling he would jump at any excuse to get his life to a different place, even if it meant marrying someone for convenience.

"I can see you've made up your mind," Angie finally relented. "That being said, who

do you propose as the first and probably only Mrs. Jamie Page?"

"Don't look at *me*," Bridget said quickly. She glanced sideways at Brose. "I'm sort of spoken for."

"There's only one person really," Jamie said slowly. "Only one person who understands the situation, and knows me well."

"Désirée Sansovino," Angie guessed.

"How'd you know?" Jamie asked his sister.

"The woman worships the ground you walk on," Angie responded cryptically. "It might not be obvious to you, but it's glaringly apparent to the rest of us. She'll probably jump at the chance to marry you, in name only or not."

"Do you really think so?" Jamie asked innocently, yet Angie was not fooled. She knew it was Jamie's intention all along to validate his plan with family members. He truly cared about Désirée, just like a sister. He missed her presence, her easy acceptance of his lifestyle. In twisted fashion, she was also the last remaining link Jamie had to Jack. The man may have beaten Jamie senseless and raped him to boot, but there was lingering affection not be denied. By marrying Désirée, Jamie could squelch ugly rumors and keep warped ties to Jack in one fell swoop. It would also make Kit Bathers appear the loser.

"Marrying Désirée will explain Jack away," Brose said impatiently. "But I don't think it's worth giving up your life for. You are what you are, Jamie, and you shouldn't have to apologize for it. There's nothing wrong with you. My best advice is to ignore the rumors and get on with it." He gazed at his cousin with sadness. "But like Angie, I can see you've already made up your mind. Just know, whatever your decision we'll stand by you."

"Thank you," Jamie murmured. "I think it's time I took a trip to Little Italy and had a serious talk with Désirée."

Angie shook her head. "I never thought I'd see the day when I had a sister-in-law. Brother-in-law, *maybe*."

"Don't count your chickens," Jamie warned. "Désirée hasn't agreed yet."

Angie snorted. "I have no doubts whatsoever. I guarantee by summer's end, we'll be welcoming a new member to the family."

* * *

June 2000
Little Italy, New York

IT WAS HOT IN New York that June, easily passing the hundred-degree mark for several days running. The sun shone brightly in the sky with little cloud cover, casting an unbearable scorch of heat into the plentiful concrete. There were sporadic brown-outs throughout the city as people tried to keep cool by running their air conditioners, placing a heavy burden on the power grid.

Désirée worked from early morning until ten o'clock at night, baking fresh *Ciabatta* bread and *Grissini*, along with serving deli customers at Sansovino's Italian Market. Summer was an exceptionally busy time for the family, bringing a typical influx of tourists. Many of them were keen to see Little Italy and other famous sites, the Statue of Liberty among them. Having food and drink on offer was always a lure, promising healthy profits before day's end.

There was a brief lull after the lunch crowd, so Désirée took the opportunity to sit at one of the tables to enjoy a glass of iced tea. Her uniform of black slacks and pink blouse clung to her damp flesh, and she welcomed the slight breeze coming from a ceiling fan. The heavy make-up she wore on her face had been slowly melting for the last hour, and she was sure she looked a sight. Taking a handful of paper napkins from the table dispenser, she dabbed at her face and under her eyes.

"You look great no matter what you do," she heard a voice. Glancing up, she saw Jamie Page standing by the table, a wide smile on his face. He appeared cool as a cucumber in white slacks and cranberry-colored short-sleeved shirt. He was clean-shaven and bright-eyed, and certainly a sight for her tired eyes.

Désirée jumped up and hugged Jamie tightly. "I never expected to see you here in a million years," she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming to New York? I would've tried to get a few days off."

"I wanted to surprise you," he said, returning her embrace. "I was long overdue a visit, anyway. Can you get away for a few minutes?"

"Most definitely," she replied. She looked to the deli counter, catching the curious eyes of a prep server. "Carlos, watch the counter for me, will you? I'm taking a break."

She turned back to Jamie. "There's a bodega up the street that sells shaved cherry ice. Why don't we go there?"

"Sounds lovely."

Désirée grasped his arm as they left the deli. "You're such a sight for sore eyes. I was just sitting there, feeling sorry for myself in the boiling heat. You've definitely made my day a lot brighter."

"Glad to be of service," he joked.

They ordered cold ices at the bodega counter, and then took seats on the sidewalk. A small umbrella shielded them from the sun. Désirée felt herself relax for the first time in days.

"How long are you in town for?" she asked as she scooped bits of cherry ice into her mouth.

"Just a few days," he replied. He looked at her intently, setting his shaved ice on the table. "I need to ask you a huge favor."

"You know I'll do anything for you, Jamie. What is it?"

He gave a half-laugh. "This isn't your run-of-the-mill favor, Désirée. What I'm about to ask might offend you."

"I doubt it, but go ahead."

"Will you marry me?" he blurted out, watching her face closely for reaction.

She choked on a cough, spitting out a cherry-red fleck of ice. He reached over and thumped her on the back. "Are you okay?" he asked anxiously. "Désirée?"

She recovered quickly from the coughing spell, her eyes watering from the effort. She finally found her voice. "How is marrying you a favor, Jamie? I'd marry you any day of the week, you must know that, but how is it a *favor*?"

"I have a lot of explaining to do," he confessed. "Will you bear with me?"

She nodded, her eyes on his face.

Jamie told her about his run-in with Kit Bathers, and the resulting spread of rumors in Larkin City. "I could probably ride out the storm," he said. "But it's like allowing Bathers to win. If I turn around and get married, it will offset the rumors and let me carry on my

work without whispers and stares." He looked down at his lap. "I'm ashamed to say my reputation means a great deal to me, even at the expense of living my life the way I see fit. It's just a temporary arrangement, a few years at the most, and I'll make sure you're adequately compensated."

Désirée stared at him open-mouthed. "Let me get this straight. You want me to marry you to deflect local busy bodies, and you'll pay me for doing it?"

He nodded. "That about sums it up." He paused, searching her face. He looked so earnest that her heart skipped a beat. "It's more than that, though. You know how much I care about you, Désirée. Aside from Brose and my sister, you're my best friend. I hope we can *always* be friends, even after marriage and divorce. I'd never ask you such a major favor if it wasn't so important to me. I don't want to see my livelihood *and* reputation go up in smoke because of a mayor-wanna-be with a big chip on his shoulder."

She gazed at him in wonder. To Jamie, he was asking a life-altering favor that he already felt guilty about. To Désirée, it was a life-saving bolt of good fortune. If she agreed to his plan, she'd be delivered from the daily grind of the family delicatessen and out from under the watchful and often critical eyes of her parents. She was more than half-in-love with Jamie anyway, so marrying him certainly wouldn't be a hardship. It was almost too good to be true.

"What happens if we get married?" she wanted to know, her voice quiet for a change. "Would I come to Larkin City to live?"

"Of course," he replied, his hopes rising. "You'd live with me at the cottage, albeit in a separate bedroom. You'll be my wife in every way except physical. You can spend your days at leisure or get a job if you like. Money is not a worry. At the end of a few years, we'll get a quiet divorce and continue to be friends. I'll give you a generous settlement, and then you'll be free to go and do as you please. I know it sounds almost *too* simple, but I can't see any reason why it won't work."

"Women would *kill* to hear what you just offered me," Désirée said. "Live without money worries? Do as I please? *Are you kidding?* I've been miserable for so many years, living with my parents and working my fingers to the bone in that damned deli. To top it off, you're the most gorgeous man I've ever laid eyes on." She grinned. "Talk about rumors, will you? I'll be the envy of every woman in Larkin City."

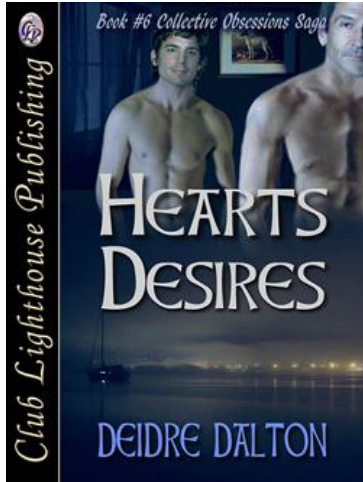
His eyes lit up. "Are you saying yes? You'll marry me?"

She leaned over and planted a kiss on his lips. "I'm saying yes, Jamie. Yes, yes, *yes!*" She held his face in her hands, gazing at him with shining eyes. "*Penso che ti amo*, Giacomo. I think I love you, Jamie."

He smiled, touched by her words. "We'd better go find your parents," he said gravely. "I need to ask Mario for your hand in marriage."

"HEARTS DESIRES" INFORMATION

Hearts Desires by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Club Lighthouse Publishing.



BOOK DETAILS:

Club Lighthouse Family Epic/LGBT/Romance

Series: Collective Obsessions, Book Six

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-975754-07-5

E-Book ISBN: 978-1-927337-67-7

Cover Art: T.L. Davison

EXTRAS:

Hearts Desires @ Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/collectiveobsessions>

"Collective Obsessions Saga" website:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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

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

She is also author of the *Bloodline Trilogy*, which follows the uniquely magical journey of three women through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*. For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/bloodline/>

Deidre is author of the *Larkin Community Cookbook*, which is a compilation of recipes mentioned or prepared by characters in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, and the electronic versions of *About Larkin* (companion guide to the *Collective Obsessions Saga*), and *The Private Journal of Colm Sullivan*.

Writing under her real name of Deborah O'Toole, Deidre is also author of the fiction titles *Celtic Remnants*, *The Crypt Artist*, *Glinhaven*, *In the Shadow of the King*, *Mind Sweeper*, a book of poetry known as *Torn Bits & Pieces*, and the *Short Tales Collection*.

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

Using the pseudonym Shenanchie O'Toole, she also writes for the cooking/recipe website Food Fare. She is author of a dozen cookbooks, along with more than forty titles in the *Food Fare Culinary Collection*. For more, visit <https://deborahotoole.com/FoodFare/>

Deidre is a native of Greenwich, Connecticut. She has also lived in San Francisco, Reno and Spokane, among other US cities. She currently resides in the mountain west.

For more, visit Deidre's website: <https://deborahotoole.com/deidredalton/>