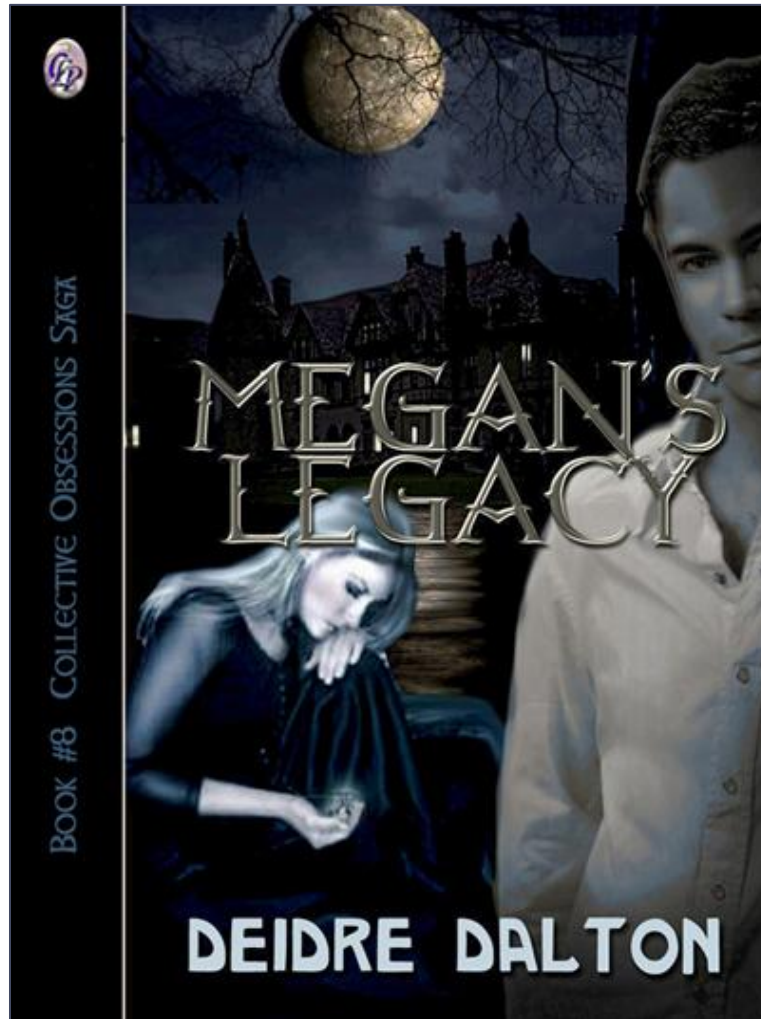


Excerpts from:

Megan's Legacy

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #8 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Historical Romance /Family Epic Edition

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ABOUT "MEGAN'S LEGACY"

Megan's Legacy by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the eighth book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in December 2013.

Megan Larkin falls for dashing Boston attorney Luke Castaneda, a newcomer to Larkin City. Locals try to warn Luke about Megan's family, their history of madness and tragedy, but he is determined to make her his wife. Other elements are at work to ensure the union never takes place, bringing another veil of evil over the Larkin's and their self-named city in the guise of a serial killer. Megan is forced to discover the truth and to set herself free from a legacy of family secrets and obsessions.

A serial killer is on the loose in Larkin City, targeting women with long, blonde hair . . .

Liam Larkin develops a new hotel and winery to attract tourists. He hires Sommelier Petra Fortescue-Pemberton to organize sophisticated wine-tasting parties, finding love where he least expects it.

Twins Diana and Derek Larkin make their own way in Larkin City. Diana becomes the local television news anchor and embroils herself in a secret love affair, while Derek follows his culinary passions by opening an elegant restaurant known as *The Silver Tassel*.

Megan Larkin, only child of Liam Larkin and Carly O'Reilly Sullivan, falls for Boston attorney Luke Castaneda, a newcomer to her city. Locals try to warn Luke about Megan's family, their history of madness and tragedy, but Luke falls in love with the shy and retiring Megan, determined to make her his wife.

Other forces are at work to ensure the union never takes place, bringing another veil of evil over the Larkin's and their self-named city.

Megan is forced to discover the truth and to set herself free from a legacy of family secrets and obsessions.

For more, go to:

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

MEGAN'S LEGACY:
Excerpt from Chapter Two

December 2004
Larkin City, Maine

IT WAS EARLY EVENING when Luke Castaneda navigated his black Ford Bronco off the city exit on US Highway 1 North, just as a light snow started to fall. He passed a beaten down old motel called Anchors Aweigh, and then found himself on the main street of the city. He noted gas street lights illuminating the cobble-stoned streets and wide boardwalks in front of the various shops and restaurants. Keeping his eyes peeled for a decent motel or lodging house, he slowed the speed of his Bronco and tried to drink in a few of the sights.

There was an old air about Larkin City, much like the aura of a typical small harbor town. Little groups of people milled along the boardwalks which seemed to run the length of the main thoroughfare, and several of the restaurants were well-lit and obviously lively with patrons. Luke saw a movie house, a little café tucked just off the road called Bruno's, a large grocery store and an entire block devoted to what appeared to be Larkin Lumber & Hardware. Further along, he passed the city hall and courthouse, which included a water fountain and a tall clock tower. Located next to the official buildings was a large public park with a sign at the entrance that read: "Colleen Larkin Memorial Park."

"Larkin," Luke said. "The town must have been founded by someone named Larkin."

A few blocks past the courthouse and memorial park, he spied a large and well-lit sign to the right advertising the Amber Whale Tavern & Lodging House. A large wooden sign depicted an amber-colored whale slicing through blue waves of water. The rather rustic-looking building was set a pace back from the boardwalk, which was also elucidated by shimmering boat lights on the city's harbor. Several cars filled the parking lot next to the Amber Whale, and Luke pulled in his Bronco to join them.

Locking his vehicle, he walked the short distance to the main entrance, which had double doors of dark wood with round portholes for windows. Once he stepped inside, he had to wait for a moment while his eyes adjusted to the dim interior. He could hear laughter and jukebox music coming from the left, which was the entry to the tavern.

He stepped up to the registration desk and saw a solitary man standing from behind, observing him. The man was somewhat elderly, with a balding pate, a tall frame and craggy features.

"Can I help you, sir?" the man asked, his voice deep and rasping. "My name is Martin Colby, and I'm the night manager of the Amber Whale."

"Yes, I'd like a room if you have one available," Luke said.

"We always have rooms available this time of year. You can have your pick. The place is fair to empty except for regulars who visit the tavern."

Luke rested against the registration desk. "I'll probably need something for a week or two."

Martin seemed surprised. "So you'll be staying with us for awhile?"

"Maybe a few weeks or less," Luke said, deciding to be honest with Martin. "I'm actually hoping to move here, if the truth be told. I'll need a room until I can find a house to either buy or rent."

Martin's interest was piqued, Luke noted, as he saw the man's eyebrows raise and inspect him closer. "You want to move to Larkin City? If I may ask, where do you come from?"

"I'm from Boston," Luke replied. "I'm originally from Connecticut, but I've lived and worked in Boston for the last five years."

Martin paused as if he was considering Luke's words, and then he said: "Larkin City is a fine place. I've lived here all my life, but we don't get many city folks moving in very often."

Luke smiled. "You could say I'm tired of city life."

"Well, you couldn't have found a better place to come to." Martin motioned toward the stairway to the right of the registration desk. "I can show you the rooms, and you can take your pick."

Luke shook his head. "Not necessary. Just give me the biggest, if possible."

Martin opened a large, leather-bound red book and flipped to a page at the front. "The best we have is the Captain's Suite, which overlooks Larkin Harbor and has a sitting room, a bedroom, and a large bathroom with a walk-in shower. Will that do you?"

"The Captain's Suite sounds grand," Luke said. "Can I pay by day with a credit card?"

"As long as you have a valid driver's license," Martin replied. "Your name, sir?"

"Lucas Castaneda." Luke stopped and pulled out his wallet from the back pocket of his faded blue jeans. He took out his driver's license and credit card, handing them over.

Martin started copying Luke's information into the register. "There is no room service past midnight," he told Luke. "And since the kitchen is part of the tavern, there's no breakfast, either. But there are plenty of restaurants along Main Street, although I recommend Bruno's Café. It's the best place in town, and the prices are reasonable."

"Thank you," Luke said. As Martin continued taking his information, Luke let his eyes wander to the desk counter. He saw a brochure about the Amber Whale and picked it up, thumbing through the pages. "This place has quite a history," he said after a moment.

Martin glanced up. "It certainly does. The Amber Whale was originally built in 1870 and was run by a woman named Lizbeth Bisiker and her son, Adam. The tavern burned down in 1904, and was later re-built into a dress shop. About twenty-five years ago the property was designated a historical landmark, and the Larkin family had it reconstructed to the original Amber Whale specs."

"Interesting," Luke said. "I noticed some of the businesses along Main Street carry the name Larkin, such as the lumber yard and the park. The town must be named after them, but does anyone in the family still live here?"

Martin ran Luke's credit card through a machine. "Oh, yes, the Larkin's still live here," he replied. "They have an estate on the outskirts of town, near the beach. They own most of the businesses in the city, and much of the property as well. They donated money for Larkin City University, which was built eighty years ago, and they paid for the construction of the hospital."

"Sounds as if they are very civic-minded," Luke observed.

"That's one way of putting it," Martin said, handing Luke his driver's license and credit card. "Because we're off season, I'll only charge you thirty-five dollars a night."

"Thank you, that's very reasonable," Luke said, the change of subject not eluding him. "By the way, do you know where I can find a realtor tomorrow? Someone to help me find a house, or an apartment?" he asked as he signed the credit card receipt.

Martin closed the registration book and pulled a room key from a drawer behind the desk. "A few doors up from Bruno's Café is a small real estate office run by Kip Bathers. He's lived here all his life, so I'm sure he can find you a house in short order."

"I'll look him up in the morning," Luke said, taking the key from Martin. "I'll get my luggage and settle in."

"Let me know if you need anything, and welcome to Larkin City."

* * *

LUKE CARRIED HIS TWO large suitcases and leather-bound laptop computer up the curving staircase of the Amber Whale. Martin was nowhere in sight, but noises from the tavern area continued unabated. At the top of the maroon-carpeted stairs, Luke paused to look around. Straight ahead was a wide bay window which overlooked Larkin Harbor, and to the right and left were hallways with dimly-lit etched-glass sconces.

The floor had the same maroon carpet as the staircase, except it had a gold-feather and column design. The walls were paneled with dark cherry wood and seemed shiny in the dim light. Aside from the muffled sounds from the tavern and the clinking of a buoy in the harbor, the upper level of the Amber Whale was ghostly quiet.

Taking his chances, he walked down the right hallway until it began to curve slightly. He came to stand in front of double doors made of the same wood as the walls. A blond oak plaque was displayed next to the doors, framed in gold feather design: *The Captain's Suite*.

"This is me," he said aloud, his voice sending a subdued echo along the hallway. Setting his bags down on the floor, he inserted the room key into the right-door lock.

Beyond the door was pitch darkness. Luke stepped inside and felt for a light switch on the wall.

"Voila!" he whispered, feeling the switch and flipping it into place.

An overhead light flooded the sitting area of the suite through smoky glass, illuminating a blue-and-white brocaded loveseat and a coffee table. He noted the dark blue carpets and beige-colored walls. A white marble fireplace faced the loveseat, with two short steps to the right leading to the bedroom.

Luke brought his bags in and shut the door, walking up the steps to the bedroom. Meager shadows cast on the walls and floor from lights on the harbor. The beams came through the vast bay window, which seemed to encompass the entire room. He saw the dark hulk of the bed and walked carefully toward it, coming to stop when the wood frame brushed his knees.

He set his luggage and laptop on the bed. Guided by the harbor lights from the window he reached the side of the bed and switched on a table lamp.

He was enchanted. The room was a delight. The bed was king-sized, with four posters hung with burgundy-colored bed curtains. A table and two chairs were situated near the bay window, and a large screen television faced the bed on the far wall next to a dresser. He saw a small placard on the table, with the lettering CABLE TV and INTERNET ACCESSIBILITY printed on the front. An empty ice bucket and a clean ashtray, amber in color, were positioned in the middle of the polished table. His eyes wandered to the small door off the bedroom and found the bathroom, which was masculine dark green with a long counter and a walk-in shower. A small porthole window was above the sink, with gold-

colored ship-wheel escarpment on the rim.

Luke went back into the bedroom and stood in front of the bay window. The harbor seemed ink black, with a touch of silver fog on the fringes. Stray lights from anchored boats on the water shimmered in the dark and threw erratic patterns on his face.

"This place is beautiful," he thought to himself. He was tired, travel-weary, but he was suddenly enveloped with a feeling of overwhelming contentment, a sense of peace he had long been searching for.

"But this is insane," he muttered. "I pick a city from a map, eyes closed. I've given up a lucrative job in the city of Boston to come to a place I've never seen before, much less heard of."

Luke stood for another minute, arguing with himself. "Yet I know this is right, I feel it in my bones. I need to renew myself, and this is the place to do it. My friends might think I'm crazy, but I'm on the perfect path. I can start over with a small legal practice – no murderers, no rapists, no drug lords. Give me simple divorces, bankruptcies, small claims court – anything but the aimless life I was leading before."

He stepped closer to the bay window, reaching his hand out to touch the glass.

"This is the place."

MEGAN'S LEGACY:

Excerpt from Chapter Four

MEGAN LOVED THE DRIVE from her office to the family estate, six miles outside of town. Shortly after leaving the outskirts of Larkin City, the road turned into a two-lane highway just past the airport. The road was known as Larkin Highway South, rarely congested with traffic apart from regular morning and evening commutes. Because the Larkin's owned most of the property surrounding their estate, there were only about two dozen families who lived nearby that either worked or went to school in the city.

The property between the city and the family mansion had been developed over the past few years, and now small houses and several farmhouses dotted the landscape. The old Sullivan mobile home was still standing near the highway a few miles away from the estate, but it had been refurbished and sold many times over. Every time she passed the trailer, Megan always thought of the tangible history between the Sullivan's and the Larkin's, in particular Megan's strong connection to both. She tried not to dwell on her past very often, but the trailer brought memories flooding back. She had never been inside the mobile home, had not wanted to; yet the dwelling represented her origins as illustrated by her parentage. She recognized the implications of the home and what it symbolized not only to her but to the entire Larkin family.

With successive generations, the original ten thousand acres of family property had been parceled out to John Larkin's descendants. Both Liam and his brother Kevin were allotted twenty acres apiece when their father Rory died in 1999, just as Shannon and her twin Sean were given similar acreage when their father Brian, Rory's brother, died in 1998. For the most part little had been done with individual properties, collective family members preferring to keep the land as one.

However, within the last year, Liam developed his acreage near the highway, a mile away from the main gate that led to the family estate. His grand idea of building a winery, hotel and golf course was coming to fruition, just as Megan knew it would. He convinced various investors the world over to pour money into the projects, having multiple contacts through his late uncle and father. He was already incorporating the name Banshee Point into both ventures: Banshee Point Winery and the Banshee Point Hotel & Golf Course. The winery was all but finished, and construction on the hotel and golf course was well under way.

It was nearing six o'clock when Megan turned her silver Acura onto the long driveway of the Larkin estate. Large stone markings flanked the entrance, with an oversized silver mailbox to the right. The name was painted green:

Larkin
4807 Larkin Hwy South

After she entered a pass code on the security keypad by the mailbox, the main gates opened. She began driving onto the grounds, the paved entry slowly ascending into the property. Because it was winter the lawn seemed gray and lifeless with patches of snow, but the expanse still stretched as far as the eye could see. Trees full and imposing during the spring and summer were now barren hulls, yet still somehow majestic. Numerous pine

trees mixed in with the maples and oaks, and every twenty feet stone benches and various outbuildings remained unhidden.

Streams, small Japanese bridges and decorative garden statues were placed alongside the road, giving a starkly gothic impression with an eerie, intricate fringe. Just prior to reaching the crest of the incline, Megan passed the A-frame cottage that had been built by Shannon Larkin and her late husband, Scott Page. The couple lived there for several years early in their marriage before taking permanent residence in the mansion. The cottage was now the home of their son, one of Larkin City's most well-liked veterinarians, Jamie Page, his wife Désirée and their one-year-old son, Gabe. The couple also kept a Siberian husky-golden retriever mix that went by the name Foofer, and two mercurial cats dubbed Guido and Geena.

After the cottage, the mansion came into view. The sight never failed to take Megan's breath away, despite the fact she had been raised there. The estate was mammoth, one of the largest on the East Coast. The house was semi-Tudor in design, with gray brick and black-mullioned windows. A large awning covered in ivy was positioned above the main entrance to the house, which included a set of double doors made from polished dark oak.

She turned her Acura toward a group of buildings to the left of the mansion, which housed various cars and other vehicles such as motorbikes and snowmobiles. She parked in one of the open garages, glad to be home and anxious to see members of her family again. She had been gone for two days but it felt more like a week.

Megan left the garage and took a well-worn path that led to the back of the mansion and entrance to the kitchen. Even before she reached the wide back steps she could smell the corned beef cooking mixed in with the mouth-watering aromas of bacon, cabbage and soda scones.

She let herself into the house, shutting the windowed door behind her. As she stood and removed her coat and gloves, she drank in the sight of the large kitchen, the warm comfort of the room bringing back nothing but happy memories for her. The room was a haven, a safe place to meet and mingle, and above all to be with her family.

The kitchen was a chef's delight. Stainless steel appliances somehow blended in with the shiny oak walls and smooth red brick floor. A four-foot long butcher's block rested next to a long counter island that had a clean, black-lacquered sheen.

Megan stepped further into the room and spied Shannon standing at the stove over a steaming pot. Although Shannon was Megan's second cousin, the older woman was more of a motherly figure to Megan, a favorite "aunt" as it were. After the suicide death of Megan's mother Carly O'Reilly, Shannon stepped in to help Liam raise his only child. Another mother-figure to Megan was Dana Larkin, wife of Shannon's twin brother, Sean. Megan essentially grew up with Sean and Dana's twin children, Derek and Diana, and considered them her dearest friends. She was also close to Brose Larkin, Sean's son from his first marriage.

Shannon turned from the stove and appeared startled to see Megan standing there. She wiped her hands on her apron and approached. "It's about time you found your way home," she said, hugging Megan. "You work too hard, my dear."

Megan smiled at Shannon, amazed as she always was by the older woman's beauty. Now in her fifty-third year, Shannon still looked rather youthful but considerably less of flesh since the death of her husband Scott Page two years earlier. Megan could feel her shoulder blades as they embraced, and the sharp line of the woman's cheekbones.

Shannon's once-black hair was heavily streaked with silver strands, although she still wore it long but in a tight braid that fell to her waist. The silky yellow blouse and black skirt somehow lent an earthy glow to her face and the untamed, slightly etched rows around her eyes.

"I finally gave in to Kip's badgering to hire an assistant," Megan told Shannon as she stepped toward the butcher's block and plucked a peeled baby carrot from a silver bowl. "I'm interviewing someone tomorrow morning. If I can find the right person to help me, maybe I can come home every night."

"Thank God for that," Shannon waved her hand toward the bowl of carrots. "Take more if you like, while you get changed for dinner. You've got thirty minutes before drinks."

Megan chuckled as she scooped up a half-dozen carrots in her hand. In recent years, Shannon had become a stickler about the family dressing up for dinner, or high tea in the afternoon. Megan found the tradition antiquated but charming as well, and since no one argued with Shannon over the matter Megan saw no cause to take issue with it.

"I'm off then," Megan said as she munched on a carrot. "Drinks at 6:30?"

"As always, my dear," Shannon replied. "Brose lit fires in the drawing room and the dining room, so both should be nice and cozy."

Megan left the kitchen and walked down a hallway toward the front area of the house. The main foyer of the mansion was a center point of the first floor, which led to the doorways of the drawing room, living room, dining room and study. The staircase began its wide ascent to the right of the double front doors, slightly winding to the main landing and a large window that reached the ceiling. The window overlooked the path that led to the beach and lighthouse on Banshee Point.

She stopped at the foyer table on the main floor, checking to see if she had any mail, then continued up the staircase. Once beyond the landing, she walked down a wide hallway with engraved wood walls and light brackets every ten feet. The various doors in the hallway led to guest bedrooms, with little alcoves here and there containing small, rounded windows that overlooked the estate. Megan's quarters were on the fourth floor, so she passed through two more hallways and lesser stairways to reach her destination. There was an elevator that blended in with the paneling on each floor, but the family rarely used it unless they were transporting large items or a group of guests.

Ever since she had been a child, Megan fancied Victorian piece furniture, loving the simple yet elegant designs. Her sitting room included a loveseat with rose Fyffe brocade and intricately carved mahogany. Two matching chairs were situated on either side of the small fireplace, and a long coffee table with white oak finish stood in front of the loveseat. Beyond the sitting area, two stairs led to her expansive bedroom, which had high ceilings with beige finish and cherub etch work. The king-panel bed had high posts with feather headboard moldings and a high canopy. Next to the bed was a dark wood nightstand containing a Victorian lamp with frosted glass. Several houseplants were scattered about, along with paintings on the walls, many of them her own. A small desk with a laptop computer was placed next to the television cabinet, a small drafting lamp clipped to a nail in the wall. A rounded table and two chairs were located in front of the French doors that led to her balcony, and a tall dresser next to the wide television cabinet completed the décor of her room.

Megan shrugged out of her clothes, depositing them into the black wicker hamper in the closet next to the bed. Off the bedroom was her personal bath, tiled in white with black

trim. The room included a shower that took up an entire corner, a long counter with a double sink and mirrors, and a toilet and bidet that were situated under a bay window that overlooked the grounds of the estate, Atlantic Ocean in the distance.

She showered quickly and then donned a long midnight-blue pleated skirt and a creamy white blouse with the long sleeves tucked in. She stood in front of her triple-dresser to brush her damp hair, glancing in the beveled mirror before slipping on a pewter mini-clip to form a pony tail.

She sat on her bed as she slipped on a pair of dark blue pumps. The hot shower made her realize her weariness. She plopped backward on the bed and stared up at the cover canopy, which was creamy beige and matched the bed curtains and comforter.

She had lived in the room her entire life; she had never known anything else. However, over the years she added her own personal touches such as the Victorian piece furniture and the plants. Her bathroom was also fairly new having been redesigned the year before last by her father Liam and her Uncle Kevin.

She turned her head to glance at the framed photographs on top of the dresser. There was her beloved grandfather Ben Webb – also known as George Sullivan to some – and his daughter Carly O'Reilly, who was Megan's mother. Megan gazed at the picture of her mother briefly, feeling no connection whatsoever. She placed the photograph out of a sense of duty more than anything else – Carly had been her mother, after all. The blonde woman in the picture was physically beautiful with a stunning, "barracuda" smile. Megan had vague memories of her, none of them particularly pleasant.

The largest photograph atop the dresser depicted Megan and her father Liam, outlined in a gold frame. It was taken the previous summer when father and daughter posed at their lunch table in Bruno's Café, with Kip Bathers out of focus behind them at another table. Megan loved the picture, and never tired of looking at it. Her affection for her father was without bounds, and the thought of his unconditional and unwavering love brought a smile to her lips.

She leapt from her bed. She had dawdled long enough. It was time to join her family downstairs.

* * *

AFTER A SUMPTUOUS DINNER, the family sat around the dining room table, chatting and sipping Irish cream liqueur from small glasses. The room was done in gray stone and dark wood paneling, with an arched ceiling. A massive Waterford chandelier was the striking centerpiece, which rested above the long dining table. Tall, slender windows with tiny black mullions wrapped around the room toward the small door leading to the kitchen. Several pine logs burned in the tall, Jacobean fireplace, its light bouncing off the Irish symbol tapestries. Several candles were lit around the table, giving the room a distinctly dreamy ambiance.

Shannon sat at the head of the table, a place once reserved for her late husband. On either side of her was her son Jamie, and her twin brother Sean.

Farther down the table, Megan sat between her father Liam and his brother, Kevin.

"Delightful meal as always," Kevin declared as he drained his liqueur. "Mariko and I had a quick snack earlier, but we didn't want to miss out on Shannon's feast. She never misses a beat."

Liam leaned back in his chair. "Speaking of Shannon, did you tell her you might have a prospective tenant for the old mining office?"

Kevin looked uncomfortable. "Not yet. She's been in a good frame of mind lately, and I'm reluctant to spoil it. I know she still sees the office as Scott's."

"It can't sit empty forever," Liam pointed out. "Surely she'll see the sense of leasing it."

"I'll mention it to her tonight," Kevin said. "And I'll be damned careful how I choose my words."

"Like you always do?" Liam snickered good-naturedly from behind his liqueur glass, eyes twinkling when Kevin shot a glare his way.

"Shannon might surprise you," Megan broke in. "She has common sense. She knows Scott's old office can't remain empty forever." She paused as she sipped her drink, turning toward Kevin slightly. "Who's your prospective tenant?"

"He's a new man in town, a Boston lawyer wanting to relocate and experience life in a smaller community," Kevin responded. "He's currently renting the Woods house and wants to set up practice here."

It was all too coincidental, Megan thought, knowing Kevin was talking about Luke Castaneda before he uttered the name.

"What's his name?" Liam asked.

"Luke Castaneda," Kevin said, confirming what Megan already knew. "He seems like a decent fellow. Mariko told me he worked in the District Attorney's office in Boston, so he's no slouch."

"Funny, that," Megan stated wryly. "I have an appointment with him tomorrow morning. He wants me to design his web site, and office sundry – you know, stationery and business cards and the like."

"Larkin City is a small world," Liam observed. "But right now I think our biggest hurdle will be telling Shannon about the office."

"I heard you the first time, *neddy*," Kevin returned irritably, glaring at his brother again. Kevin did not care to be reminded of the unpleasant task ahead.

"Of course you did, you bloody cur," Liam taunted his brother cheerfully.

Megan hid a smile as she took another sip of her drink. For as long as she could remember, her father and Kevin baited and cajoled one another, engaging in lengthy battles of witticisms that often left others around them rolling with laughter. The brothers were amusing in their barbed dialog, and the rumbling discourses never failed to entertain her. Kevin always referred to Liam as a *neddy*, which was Irish slang for *fool*, while Liam delighted in describing his older brother as a "cur."

"I have a suggestion," Megan said. "Why don't you tell Shannon about renting the office *now*, in front of the whole family? Perhaps she'll remain calm."

Kevin glanced at Megan. "Good idea, squirt. Brace yourselves."

Shortly there was a lull in general conversation, so Kevin seized the moment and addressed Shannon at the head of the table.

"Someone might be interested in renting the mining office," he said tentatively, meeting her questioning eyes.

"Oh? I didn't realize we were offering the office as a rental."

"We're not advertising yet," Kevin said. "But I ran across someone today who might be interested in the space. It's been empty for two years, Shannon." He avoided her eyes.

"We need to do something with it."

Shannon was silent for a long moment, staring at Kevin. "The office has been empty because my husband died there," she said slowly, with quiet measure. "He died in his office, Kevin. Did you tell your prospective tenant *that* bit of information?"

"Not yet," Kevin spoke reluctantly.

Shannon's eyes clouded over. She lowered her gaze to her liqueur glass, touching the rim slightly with her fingers. The quiet stretched out, bringing with it a mounting tension that seemed to fill the room. It was several moments before Jamie reached across the table to touch his mother's hand. Jamie was a mirror image of his father, tall with black hair and the ever-present stubble of a day-old beard. Jamie had his mother's dark eyes, but his resemblance to the late Scott Page was uncanny and sometimes startling.

"Mum, it makes sense," Jamie said gently. "The office can be of good use to someone else. Dad would never have wanted you to keep the place empty or enshrine it in his memory. You sold the mining company, so there's no reason for it. The office has a prime spot on Main Street, perfect for a new business or local service. It's time to let it go, Mum."

Shannon raised her head, looking at her son through damp eyes. "I'm being silly, aren't I? Of course it's time to let go, and allow someone else to make use of it. No one seems to have a need for mining services in Larkin City, which is hardly surprising these days." She looked at Kevin. "Who's interested in the office space?"

"A lawyer by the name of Luke Castaneda," Kevin told her. "He's renting Leo and Sachiko Woods' place, and wants to set-up a family practice in Larkin City. He just moved from Boston, where he worked in the district attorney's office."

"Hmmm," Shannon said thoughtfully. "Main Street *would* be a perfect place for him, then."

Megan observed Shannon covertly. Despite her rather newfound love with LCU's English professor Lee Gunther, she still had difficult moments when memories of her husband surfaced. Scott Page suffered a massive heart attack while sitting at his desk two years ago. The man seemed to be in top physical shape, his only vices being cigarettes and a few nightly whiskies. Scott had been composing an e-mail to Shannon, who was at the mansion, inviting her to join him for lunch. Apparently, Scott sent the e-mail and then slumped over at his computer keyboard. Shannon found him there hours later.

Shannon and Scott appeared supremely happy together, their thirty-one-year marriage seemingly solid and filled with an all-encompassing love that had not dimmed over time. Shannon was devastated by Scott's death. Her grief turned to rage when she discovered he'd been carrying on an affair behind her back ten years before he died. Scott's double life was exposed when his mistress, Andrea St. John, filed a paternity suit against his estate, claiming he was the father of her young daughter Alexandra. Scott's mistress abandoned their child after she failed to garner money from his estate. Shannon's daughter Angie stepped up and legally adopted her half-sister Alexandra, who now lived with Angie and her husband Tom Cimarelli in New York.

Aside from increasingly infrequent recollections that sometimes plunged her into a brief depression, Shannon seemed to have recovered from the loss of her husband and knowledge of his perfidy. Over the past year she had grown closer to Lee Gunther, their relationship decidedly intimate as they undertook weekend excursions together on a regular basis, sometimes only as far as the lighthouse keeper's cottage.

Unbidden, Megan found herself thinking about Luke Castaneda. "*What the hell?*" she

thought, slightly alarmed. The man rather annoyed her. It was puzzling that he kept returning to her mind out of the blue.

Megan finished her liqueur in one swallow.

"Do you want another?" Liam asked his daughter.

"I think I will," Megan replied, holding out her glass. "Fill it up, Dad."

MEGAN'S LEGACY:
Excerpt from Chapter Seven

February 2005
Larkin City, Maine

MEGAN ARRIVED AT HER office early Monday morning. The cold winds from Friday blustered in a steady downpour of rain over the weekend, and it continued coming in droves.

She made a dash from her Acura to the doorway of the office, pausing to shake her umbrella and prop it upside down against the building. She was just about to enter when she heard a soft mewling sound. She glanced around her, trying to find the source of the noise. It sounded like a cat in distress, so she was driven to help it.

The fenced area in front of the office building featured a rock garden. Small, white-painted pebbles surrounded an eastern black oak tree contained in a red-brick planter. Megan stepped toward the enclosure, braving the rain without her umbrella.

An old laundry basket was lying atop the rocks, the outer edges pushed down into the white stones. She spied a kitten through the squared-hole design of the laundry basket, its mouth opening and closing with cries, staring at her frantically. Someone obviously placed the kitten under the basket, trapping it against the rocks, and now it was miserably wet and bedraggled.

Megan nimbly climbed over the short fence. She lifted the laundry basket, freeing the kitten from its cruel prison. It began to dart off, so Megan called out: "Here kitty, kitty." The tiny feline stopped short, looking at her cautiously. "Here kitty," she repeated. The cat hesitated, so Megan used the opportunity to scoop the animal into her arms. Then she hopped the fence again and ran for the office building.

Kerry Matheson met her at the door. "You look like a wet rat," she declared. "What have you got there in your arms?"

A few minutes later Megan entered her office and sat on the daybed, where she put the kitten on the red comforter spread across the surface. She tried to take a closer look at the animal. On first inspection, it seemed healthy enough, although a bit on the thin side. The cat had startling blue eyes with white-gray markings on its fur. Small in stature akin to a runt, the kitten also had a gray-and-white striped tail. All four paws were white, worn like a pair of tiny boots.

"She looks part Siamese," Kerry observed. "Her coloring is beautiful."

Megan explained how she found the kitten, and then said: "I don't know if it's a boy or a girl." She picked up the cat, lifting it in the air to look at her underbelly. The animal hissed at her with all its diminutive might, so Megan set it down again. Almost at once, the kitten crawled onto her lap and began to purr.

"Well, what's the verdict?" Kerry asked.

"It's a girl," Megan answered, stroking the kitten on top of the head.

"What are you going to do with her?"

"I'm not sure. She's adorable, isn't she? What kind of person would leave her trapped under a laundry basket like that? I doubt anyone is looking for her." She reached for her purse, and drew out her wallet. "I know this isn't in your job description, but can

you go to the store and get me a few things?"

"Sure," Kerry replied with a smile. "What do you need?"

"Some kitten food - dry and canned - along with a bag of kitty litter and a litter box. Oh, and don't forget two bowls - one for food, one for water." She handed Kerry a fifty dollar bill. "That should cover it. If there's any left over, buy some cat treats and maybe a few mousy toys."

"You're keeping her, aren't you?" Kerry asked, amused yet touched by her employer's concern for the abandoned animal.

Megan sighed, but there was a wry smile on her face. "It looks that way, doesn't it? She's so sweet - feisty, but sweet. It infuriates me that someone just dumped her off like that." She glanced down at the cat, which by now had curled into a ball on her lap, eyes sleepy. "I don't know . . . I just feel compelled to give her safety and security. I'll bet her young life has been spent at the harbor, scrounging and fighting for food and shelter." She shook her head, gazing at the kitten with warm eyes. "Something about her tugs at my heartstrings."

Kerry went to the doorway of the office, where she took her purse from a peg on the wall. "I'll be back as quick as I can with the kitty goodies."

"Thank you, Kerry. I'm going to call Jamie and see if he'll examine the kitten for me. I want to make sure she's healthy."

As soon as Kerry left, Megan lifted the feline from her lap gently. She stood up and set the kitten back on the daybed, where it stretched out its paw to her and then closed her eyes.

Megan felt tears well in her eyes. The poor little runt may have started life fending for herself on the harbor, but she was determined her new-found kitten would never want for anything again.

* * *

"HER BELLY FEELS A bit wormy," Jamie told Megan later that day after he examined the kitten. "But I have medicine for that."

"She's okay otherwise?"

"Yes. She's very healthy, although a bit underfed." He grinned. "I'm sure you'll remedy that right quick."

"Can you tell how old she is?"

"I'd say roughly three or four months," Jamie replied.

They were standing in one of the exam rooms at the Animal Medical Clinic. The cat was on the steel table, none too happy about being poked and prodded. She glared at Jamie, her eyes darkening as she let out a wide-mouthed hiss. Her tail puffed in warning, slightly twitching at the tip.

Jamie and Megan looked at each other and laughed. The kitten seemed almost certain she was intimidating the two humans in her presence, which made the situation even more comical.

Jamie gently scratched the feline behind the ears. "*Scary times*, little one." He withdrew a small plastic syringe, sans needle, from the pocket of his white jacket. "I'm going to administer a liquid dose of Drontal, which should get to work on her tummy worms. Come back in a few days and I'll give her a second dose, and that should fix the

problem. Then we can arrange for her vaccinations."

Megan watched as Jamie held the cat's head and opened her mouth. He squirted the pink-colored de-wormer between her clenched teeth. When he released her, she shook her head and began washing her face.

"What are you going to name her?" Jamie asked as he disposed of the syringe in a lined wastebasket against the wall.

"I've been thinking about it all day," Megan confessed. "I watched her sleep on the daybed in my office for awhile, and then tried to keep her out of mischief as she darted all over the room. She chewed the hell out of one of Kerry's ink pens, and then had the nerve to look indignant when I pointed my finger at her and said 'No!' I gathered very quickly she doesn't like being told *no*. She glared at me with her ears back, and then stood her ground with defiance."

"Cute," Jamie responded. "So what are you calling her?"

"Right, I was getting to that. Late this afternoon I caught myself calling her Kiki, which sort of sounds like *kitty* when you say it fast, doesn't it? She looked at me every time I said *Kiki*, so I think the name fits. Kiki it is."

"*Kee-kee*," Jamie sounded it out. He glanced at the kitten. "Suits her to a tee."

Megan gathered the kitten in her arms. "Maybe once she gets settled, I'll bring Kiki over to the A-frame cottage to meet Foofer, Guido and Geena."

Jamie snorted. "I envision a brutal world war in my near future."

Megan kissed Jamie on the cheek. "Thanks, cuz. See you later?"

"You can be sure of it."

* * *

THAT EVENING, KIKI WAS the center of attention during cocktail hour at the mansion. Megan affixed a new collar to the kitten's neck - colored blue with white paw prints and a tinkling bell - allowing the feline to sit on her lap as she enjoyed drinks with her family before dinner.

"Has Luke met your little bundle of joy yet?" Liam asked his daughter with a smirk. "Funny, he doesn't strike me as a lover of cats."

Megan made a face at her father. "Luke's been in Ellsworth most of the day, meeting with prospective clients. I'll tell him about Kiki tomorrow."

"I just love her eyes," Shannon commented from the divan. "They're such a beautiful blue. Kiki was very lucky you found her, Megan. Think of the fun she'll have exploring the mansion."

After dinner, Megan went to her rooms on the fourth floor. Kiki seemed to prefer the relative privacy, inspecting her litter box in the bathroom, and then sampling from her dry food and water bowls set out on the long counter space. She walked around the two rooms, sniffing, staring and generally giving her seal of approval to her new home.

Megan changed into her pajamas, top and bottom, which were dotted with cartoon depictions of bunnies. She crawled into bed, pulling the covers around her waist. After a few minutes, Kiki leapt up and found her. She began kneading the coverlet, staring at Megan with sleepy eyes.

"You're safe for life, *Keekster*," Megan whispered with a smile. Kiki curled up next to her, making sure their bodies touched thorough the blanket.

Megan was just about to doze off when the telephone on her nightstand table rang shrilly.

It was Luke. "Where are you?" she asked groggily.

"I'm on my way back from Ellsworth," he told her over his cell phone.

"How did your meetings go?"

"Very well," Luke replied. "I think I've found a few potential clients. What about you? Do you feel like joining me for a drink at the Amber Whale?"

"Oh Luke," she said, dismayed. "I just got into bed with Kiki."

There was silence on the other end of the telephone for several seconds. "Who the hell is Kiki?" Luke finally asked, obviously irritated.

Megan couldn't help but laugh. "Kiki is my new kitten. I found her abandoned near the harbor today. She's so cute, so adorable . . ." She paused. "You're not allergic to cats, are you?"

"No," he said dryly. "Not that I know of, anyway. I take it Kiki has the pleasure of sleeping with you while I'm headed home to my lonely bed. What do I have to do? Grow whiskers? Grow a tail?"

She giggled. "You're such a tease."

"Uh, no, I think you lay claim to that title."

"I'm taking Kiki to the office with me tomorrow," she informed him. "Why don't you pick me up for lunch so you can meet her?"

"Is that my consolation prize for being forced to sleep alone?" he groused.

"Take it or leave it, buster."

"Ah, I'll take it. On that note, pleasant dreams to you and Kiki."

"Good night, Luke."

"Nighty-night, Meggie."

**MEGAN'S LEGACY:
Excerpt from Chapter Eight**

*March 2005
Larkin City, Maine*

LUKE OPENED FOR BUSINESS the first week of March. The redecoration project in the old mining office was complete, and he was quite happy with the results. Mindful that Shannon Larkin might be emotional about the changes, he specifically invited her to view the space before he officially opened his doors.

She came one late afternoon, accompanied by Lee Gunther. Luke was surprised to see Lee with her. He assumed Shannon would want to view her dead husband's long-time place of business on her own, not sure how she might react to the changes. Normally, an overly emotional response to memories of a previous mate did little for the current male libido, but perhaps Lee was different.

Shannon seemed to discern the question in Luke's mind. "Don't worry about me and Lee," she told him softly. "We've run the gamut on our first marriages, through and through. There's no longer anything new under the sun. You'll learn that as you get older, trust me. You can't reverse spilt milk, so there's no sense in agonizing over it."

They arrived shortly after three o'clock, dressed in coats against the cold. Shannon wore a stylish black wool gabardine jacket with navy blue slacks and a cream-colored blouse. Lee was equally well-dressed, his camel-colored neck scarf and single-breasted overcoat reaching to his knees. He looked every inch the elite English professor.

Shannon paused in the reception area of the office, her eyes taking in the changes. She turned to Luke and told him: "At first glance, I can tell you I'm very pleased."

Luke felt a stab of relief. "I have Bennett Blueprints and the fine craftsmanship of Ben Webb to thank."

"You can't go wrong with either one."

The seventies-style carpet and furniture had been completely removed. Instead, the original hardwood floors were left exposed and adorned with large maroon area rugs, which also contained unique blue and gray justice scale motifs in the middle and at the corners. The window drapes held similar design, tucked at the sides with knotted sashes. The dark beige reception chairs were booted with dark oak and carved in ivy design, another one of Ben's specialties. The end tables and large coffee table were built using the same dark oak, as was the reception desk. Creamy wallpaper with slight flecks of red completed the look of first impression.

Luke led Shannon and Lee into what was once the drafting room. It was now divided into two sections, which included an area with several filing cabinets, and a spacious conference room with much the same design as the reception entry. A dark oak table with chairs dominated the room, with a vase of purple crocus in the center.

A smaller office had been converted into a lounge, with a small refrigerator, table and chairs, cupboards and a coffee pot. The small bathroom had a dark red glass counter with vanity mirror, and a vessel sink.

They went back to the reception area, where Luke paused at the doorway of the executive office. He glanced at Shannon anxiously, knowing it was where she found Scott

dead at his desk more than two years ago.

Despite her pragmatic words earlier, she paled as they approached her husband's old office. She turned to look at Lee, taking his hand. "Do you mind if I go in there alone first?" she asked him. "Just for a few minutes."

He kissed her on the cheek. "It's okay, darling. Take your time. I'll wait here with Luke."

Glancing to Luke with a small smile, almost apologetic in fashion, Shannon disappeared inside and shut the door firmly behind her.

* * *

IT WAS DIFFERENT, BUT some elements were the same. Luke kept the only window in the room, which had a dubious view of the alleyway. The glass was covered with dark beige window blinds, open to let in the light of the day. Scott's nautical clock, now hung near the window, quietly ticked in time. New bookcases, built from the same dark oak used for the reception area furniture, went from floor to ceiling on each wall. Two chairs, brocaded in dark red faux velvet, faced the desk in the room.

Luke kept the desk. It was the same one used by her father and her husband, now both dead. The wood was nicely polished, but it was still the same. Scott's old computer was gone, in its place a sleek-looking blue lap top with the screen upraised.

She stood in the center of the room, staring at the desk. Memories came flooding back to her, bringing with it the horror of the day. She had loved Scott Page with all her heart and soul, for more than thirty-two years. At first, it was incomprehensible to her that he could be gone in an instant. *Just like that*. His lies and deceit revealed themselves after his death. She was left to suffer another acute loss, almost worse than his sudden demise. Now, two years after the fact, her feelings were a mix of sad regret, waning grief and the occasional resurgence of anger directed at her husband's betrayal.

Shannon reasoned her flashes of indignation, which grew less frequent with time, were roused more by not being able to confront Scott about his betrayal. As she settled into a comfortable relationship with Lee, both points of rankle had diminished, and didn't seem to matter much anymore.

She closed her eyes, bringing Scott's face into focus in her memory. The years he spent behind the desk couldn't be taken away, any more than the faint presence of her father in the room could be erased. Each man had been an influence on her life, wielding both positive and negative power that colored her mindset.

She could feel them, although Scott's spirit seemed stronger than Brian Larkin's. She could picture Scott sitting at the desk, absorbed in his work to the exclusion of all distractions.

A frown crossed her face. The image in her mind changed. Now she saw Andrea St. John sitting in Scott's lap, planting kisses on his face and neck.

"Bitch," Shannon breathed.

Then she opened her eyes. Scott was still sitting behind the desk, staring at her intently. His image was muted, somewhat faded in appearance. He was wearing the same clothes from the day he died, faded blue jeans and a white cotton polo shirt. If he was dead and showing himself to her, why wasn't he wearing the clothes she buried him in instead? The indigo corduroys and a silky blue shirt with a brown short-vest?

"Why am I seeing you?" she whispered. "Are you a figment of my imagination?"

"I sensed you thinking about me," he answered her simply. She recognized the sound of his voice, although now it came slightly muffled and otherworldly.

"I've thought about you plenty of times before," she pointed out, her tone calm and rational. *How could one equate 'rational' when speaking to an apparition?* "So why are you here now?"

"I also sense you've moved on," he continued, ignoring her words. "It makes me sad, but at the same time I want you to be happy."

She closed her eyes again. Was she losing her mind? Or was Scott really sitting behind the desk? She wasn't as scared as she ought to be, she realized. It wasn't the first time she had experienced ghostly episodes, and was certain it wouldn't be the last. Although infrequent, she was no longer shaken by occurrences that forced her to question her own sanity. If she *was* crazy, at least she was a functioning loony. "*It's old hat*," she thought. "*Perhaps I'm jaded*."

"Why do you care if I'm happy?" she asked aloud.

"Because I love you. I've *always* loved you." He watched her, face expressionless.

"Liar," she spat.

"Andrea didn't mean anything to me," he insisted, as if trying to explain himself. "I loved *you*, kitten. You probably don't realize it, but you're a very intense person to be around. You've always been a powerful force to me, which is one of the reasons I loved you so much. Andrea was simple, uncomplicated. I felt in control when I was with her, but it wasn't love."

"Uncomplicated?" Shannon's tone was scornful. "Guess again. Your simple little trollop made moves on your estate after you died. She had underhanded designs on you from the start, Scott. When her plan failed, she dumped her daughter and skipped town."

"My daughter, too."

Her eyes narrowed, glittering dangerously. Alexandra was a sore spot with her, and always would be. "Screw you," she responded calmly. "No, better yet, *fuck you* and the ghostly wind you rode in on."

"C'mon, kitten. Don't be that way . . ."

There was a loud rapping on the office door, jolting Shannon from the impossible tableau. She heard Lee's voice on the other side. "Shannon, are you all right in there?"

She turned to the door, reaching for the knob. "I'm fine, Lee," she said strongly. "Come in."

As Lee and Luke entered the room, she glanced back at the desk. It was empty, of course. What did she expect? She and Scott could continue their conversation some other time, if ever. *Not once had he apologized for his behavior . . .*

Keeping her bearings and adopting a friendly tone, Shannon addressed Luke. "You've done a splendid job with the redecoration. I'm impressed, and very pleased. All my fears seemed for naught. It was rather silly of me to fret about it, anyway." She gestured to the room. "I predict you will be very happy here, and enjoy great success."

"Thank you," Luke replied, visibly relieved. "Your approval means a lot to me."

"Who were you taking to?" Lee wanted to know, glancing at Shannon with a curious expression on his face.

"I wasn't talking to anyone," she said evenly. "You must be hearing things."

"No, I was not. I heard you talking."

Shannon thought fast. "Oh! I *did* call Dana on my cell phone. I told her to get started on preparing the tea service without me." She stared at Lee. "Maybe that's what you heard."

"Probably," he finally conceded, meeting her eyes.

He had no desire to belabor the point in front of Luke, but he didn't believe her.

MEGAN'S LEGACY: Excerpt from Chapter Eleven

*August 2006
Larkin City, Maine*

IT WAS WELL AFTER midnight when Kerry Matheson arrived home from the annual beach party at Banshee Point, kicking off her shoes first thing. She felt the sting of her slightly-sunburned skin, wanting nothing more than to take a cool shower and go to bed. She was light-headed from one too many beers, but not inebriated by a long shot.

Her duplex flat in the North Town area of Larkin City wasn't extravagant, but it was clean and the rent was affordable. She was friendly with her neighbors, often giving them freshly-baked oatmeal raisin cookies, which also happened to be a favorite of her boss, Megan Larkin.

Her place was small, with a living room, kitchen, bathroom and one good-sized bedroom. She kept a tiny fish tank on top of her half-bookcase in the living room, which was populated with four lively Blue Gourami. Kerry tapped a portion of fish flakes into the tank, watching as Papa Smurfy, Glutsy, Scaredy and Tracker nipped at the food as it floated in the water.

She went to the bathroom, removing her shorts and tank top. She stepped into the tub-shower and drew the curtain, allowing the tepid water to run over her sun-burnt skin and to soak her long blonde hair.

Afterward, she dried herself vigorously with a large pink towel, wrapping it around her body when she finished. Walking barefoot to the kitchen, she went to the stove and put on the water kettle to boil. She had a sudden yen for a hot cup of tea.

Yawning, she stretched her arms above her head, glancing to the small window above her kitchen sink. She'd forgotten to draw the curtain closed, so she stepped toward the sink. Just as she reached for the curtain, she saw the reflection of a man behind her in the window.

"Oh my God," she whispered. Her first thought was to break the window and scream. Surely it would attract someone's attention, but before she could make a move she was hit from behind.

Some minutes later, she awoke on the kitchen floor. Her head was throbbing painfully, each beat of her heart seeming to pound in her temples, made worse by a taut blindfold across her eyes. She felt the blessedly cool linoleum against her cheeks. She tried to move, but her hands and feet were bound tightly together.

"Don't fight me and you'll live," a strangely familiar male voice said above her. "You saved me a lot of work by being naked under the towel, and for that I'm grateful. You'll get extra credit if you play your cards right."

Kerry felt hot tears swelling in her eyes, her mind running riot. "*Please, God, don't let me die,*" she begged silently. "*I won't fight what's happening to me, but please let me live through it. Spare my life, please . . .*"

He rolled her onto her back, bringing her knees up to his chest as he pushed against her. He touched her intimately, and then she felt the dry pain of his first thrust. Tears seeped from her eyes, burning and soaking through the cloth he had strapped across her

upper-face.

She heard his heavy breathing as he had his way with her, grunting every time he pushed into her. He increased the speed of his movements, each thrust more painful than the last, violating her in the worst way possible. She tried to remove her mind from the trauma, forcing herself to deny what he was doing to her. She heard the bubbling sounds coming from the fish tank, wondering idly if her Blue Gourami were enjoying their flake feast. Then loud screeching from the kettle filled the room as her tea water came to a boil.

"Damnit!" he swore. He moved even faster, pushing into her as far as he could go, and then out again. Finally, he reached a jerky climax. He moved away quickly, allowing her legs to fall to the floor.

He removed the kettle from the stove, and the screeching stopped. She heard the sound of a zipper, and assumed he was putting his clothes to rights. Then his voice came again. "The hot water is a good idea, Kerry. It's very cleansing."

He knew her name. How did he know her name? And why did he sound so oddly familiar?

She felt the boiling water as he poured the contents of the kettle down onto her lap and thighs. She tried to scream from the excruciating pain, the blistering fire stripping her skin raw, but no sounds came from her throat. Then she tried to move and roll to no avail. He kicked her in the ribs to stop her, taking her breath away.

"I told you not to fight me," he said belligerently. "You'll pay for that, bitch."

She whimpered behind the gag, feeling as if she were being skinned alive by the scalding water. The cool air in her flat touched the raw wounds, but it gave her no relief from the mind-numbing pain.

"You should have listened to me," he chastised her, his tone now gentle.

Through her agony, she finally recognized his voice. *How can it be?* He didn't have it in him to be such a brutal monster - *or did he?* She couldn't believe he was the one . . . for now there was no doubt in her mind he was the serial killer running loose in Larkin City, free to do as he pleased without fear of retribution. If only there was some way she could leave a clue behind, a telltale hint that would help police identify him.

He knelt down and whispered in her ear: "Nighty-night, Kerry."

Then she felt the cold steel of a blade against her throat and the movement of his arm as he pierced and slashed from left to right.

* * *

LYLE GOULD WAS HORRIFIED when he viewed the crime scene at Kerry Matheson's apartment. It was brutal, far worse than the dump sites where the killer left the bodies of Katie Kirk and Chrissie Fox. He couldn't deny the feeling in his gut as he gazed down at the scalded and bloodied form of Kerry on the kitchen floor. Despite the fact she was raped and murdered in her own home, unlike Katie and Chrissie, there was not a doubt in his mind that her killer was one and the same.

Dale Grainger had been Larkin City's medical examiner for nearly fifty years, following in the footsteps of the legendary Julian Bathers, Kip's grandfather. Julian had been coroner in the days of Patrick and Colleen Larkin, the one who examined the body of one Nicholas Bertrand, the family chef who was also Colleen's lover. Patrick stabbed the cook to death as he and Colleen were in the throes of passion, shortly thereafter hanging

himself in the attic at the mansion. Dale kept all of Julian's old notes from the past, where he noted on 31st October 1947 as he bent over the dead body of Nicholas Bertrand: *"This is the most brutal murder I have ever had the misfortune to assess. The head is just short of being severed, and the eyeball has been sliced from its socket. If I had to guess, I would say Mr. Bertrand was stabbed more than thirty times. It's positively gruesome. I haven't heard nor seen the like since the tales of Jack the Ripper."*

Dale would beg to differ at the moment. While none of Kerry Matheson's body parts were severed, the brutality of her attack reached the scales as one of the worst he had ever seen, including the fairly recent deaths of Katie Kirk and Chrissie Fox. Despite his years as the only medical examiner within thirty miles, he never grew accustomed to the intractable atrocity of violent crime. Larkin City wasn't swimming with murder and mayhem as a norm, but the last few years had motivated him to think of finally retiring at age seventy-one.

Lyle watched as Dale took Kerry's temperature with a liver puncture needle, and then scribbled in his black leather notebook. The medical examiner was short and slender, with a head of gray hair and watery blue eyes. Lyle noticed he was shaking as he wrote in his notebook, taking in the blue vein lines on his aged yet capable hands.

"What's the verdict?" Lyle asked him.

"Going by her body temperature, I'd say the victim died between midnight and two o'clock this morning."

"Any idea on cause of death, or is it obvious?"

Dale stood up from the floor, looking at Lyle. "The killer poured boiling water on the victim before she died. The seared flesh on her body is consistent with skin fragments stuck to the linoleum underneath her. She was raped beforehand as well. Her throat was cut, obviously, which I believe caused her death."

Lyle glanced helplessly at the tableau. "Did you find foreign hairs or fibers?"

"Nothing at first glance," Dale replied. "I'll know more once I get her body ready for autopsy. We'll test for DNA, check under her fingernails, the whole ball of wax."

Lyle turned to his assistant, Curtis Day. The younger man had a medium build with mousy brown hair and eyes, a gap-toothed smile seeming ever-present on his face. He started as a traffic cop with LCPD, but quickly ingratiated himself with Lyle. Since the murders began two years ago, Curt willingly lent a hand in the investigation. As far as Lyle was concerned, Curt was his best choice. He might not be the brightest tool in the box, but he was intensely methodical when gathering evidence and following leads in the open murder cases. He was also a Larkin City native, familiar with the community and its people.

"Who found the body?" Lyle asked Curtis.

"The next door neighbor," Curtis replied. "He came outside to get his newspaper around six o'clock, when he noticed Kerry's front door was wide open. He said he peeked in to make sure she was okay, and then found her in the kitchen."

"Does anyone know if the victim has family in Larkin City?"

"Her parents have a small blueberry farm on Cliffhaven Lane."

"We'll have to take a trip out there," Lyle said with distaste. "One of them has to positively identify the body. Ah, *crap*. I *really* hate this part of the job."

"The victim worked for Megan Larkin," Curtis volunteered.

Lyle paused. "You're right. Kerry was Megan's assistant, wasn't she?"

Curtis nodded.

Lyle darkened. "Someone has to tell Megan about Kerry, too."
"Better you than me," Curt muttered.

* * *

CAPTAIN PAUL COLLINS ACCOMPANIED Lyle to the Matheson home on Cliffhaven Lane, helping him with the difficult task of informing Kerry's parents their daughter was dead. Collins did not normally involve himself with every crime committed in Larkin City, but felt the implications of Kerry's death in relation to a serial killer required his special attention. While there was no solid proof her murder was perpetuated by the same person who took the lives of Katie Kirk and Chrissie Fox, he knew as well as Lyle it was more than likely.

Kerry's parents Rick and Amy worked full-time on their small blueberry farm, selling most of their seasonal produce to the Banshee Point Winery. Their son Randy was just about to enter his senior year in high school. The Matheson's were a hard-working, middle-class family who saved for years to send Kerry to LCU, where she earned a degree in computer networking two years ago.

Lyle was glad for Captain Collins presence when he told Rick and Amy Matheson their daughter was dead. Having been chief of the LCPD for more than twenty-five years, Collins wielded a calming influence in difficult situations. He was tall and spare of frame, with thinning white hair and thick spectacles perched on his nose. He seemed to give the air of a concerned father or benign college professor, but Lyle knew the man could be as hard as nails when he had to be.

As Lyle and Collins prepared to depart the Matheson home, Rick agreed to make the trip to the medical examiner's office to identify the body of his daughter. Amy refused to go, instead remaining inside the house, where she sobbed uncontrollably in the arms of her son Randy.

"Where are you going now?" Collins asked Lyle.

"To the Larkin mansion," Lyle replied. "I'm sure a phone call would do, but since Kerry worked as Megan Larkin's assistant, I think she deserves to be told in person."

"I agree. When you're finished, come back to the station so we can get all our ducks in a row. I'm giving you four deputies to help in the investigation. We have to get the son of a bitch who's doing this, Lyle."

"I'd like nothing better," Lyle said in frustration. "But so far, the bastard isn't leaving any clues behind. No DNA, no hairs, no fibers, no fingerprints, no footprints. Worst of all, we don't have any witnesses." He shook his head. "Maybe Grainger will find something on Kerry's body to help us, but I have my doubts."

"Your theory the killer is after Diana Larkin just went out the window," Collins said as he climbed into his police cruiser. "Katie Kirk and Chrissie Fox were affiliated with Diana, but Kerry Matheson wasn't. Instead, she worked with Megan Larkin."

"I'm not sure where we go from here," Lyle muttered as he stood by the open door of the police cruiser.

"I have a suggestion, but it might not work." He hesitated. "While Larkin City has never really been a hotbed of crime, Mark Balsam is perhaps the only person with enough years of experience to give us some advice. He's rather testy about being bothered in his retirement, but maybe he'll make an exception in this instance."

"You're saying I should ask Mark for advice?"

"You don't have many other options at the moment, do you? Besides, what can it hurt?"

"I'll give him a call," Lyle agreed. "And thank you."

Collins looked at Lyle with compassion. "Good luck at the mansion."

"I'll need that, too."

MEGAN'S LEGACY:

Excerpt from Chapter Twelve

Autumn 2006
Larkin City, Maine

MARK BALSAM WAS ENJOYING his retirement, not missing any aspects of his former job. That part of his life was over, as far as he was concerned. To Mark, retirement meant the definition of the word. It was cut and dried: he had no interest in solving crimes or dealing with scum, even in his capacity as casual observer or as an ex-officer of the law.

He was well aware there was a serial killer on the loose in Larkin City. He read the *Larkin Gazette* online every morning with his coffee. He didn't volunteer his opinion, although from the telephone messages he'd received he knew Lyle Gould wanted to know his thoughts on the matter. Mark avoided the desperate attempts to contact him, refusing to answer or return calls from Lyle or the LCPD in general.

Mark hadn't given much credence to Lyle's investigative skills during his first few years on the police force. The man had a penchant for unsubstantiated gossip and self-promotion. However, as time went on and Lyle matured, he lost some of his green edges and managed to actually absorb much of what Mark tried to teach him.

It was inevitable Lyle would be promoted to lead detective when Mark retired a decade ago. There was no one else qualified to take his place. Captain Paul Collins had no desire to be in the trenches, and no other officer aside from Lyle had knowledge of Mark's methods and departmental workings.

As with the murders of Katie Kirk and Chrissie Fox, when Kerry Matheson was found raped and murdered Lyle tried to reach his former boss. Mark adroitly avoided his attempts for the most part. If Lyle happened to reach him, Mark would pleasantly agree to meet him and then not show up, predictably disappearing for a few days.

Lyle was desperate. He had no clues or evidence to lead him to the killer, and he wanted Mark's sage advice on how to proceed. His irresponsible quirk of disassociation greatly annoyed Lyle, who found it incomprehensible the older man didn't want to help in some way.

Rather than leave another message on the man's answering machine, Lyle went to Mark's house on Pine Whispers Road unannounced. A widower for thirteen years, Mark lived with three cats in his two-bedroom home, which was a mile away from Larkin City Cemetery. He was an avid fisherman and birdwatcher, often absent as he indulged both his hobbies.

It was mid-morning on a Sunday in October when Lyle knocked on Mark's front door, fairly certain the older man would be home. He hated having to trap his former boss between a rock and a hard place, but he had come to the end of his options.

Mark answered the door, his face darkening when he saw Lyle on the doorstep. Lyle took in Mark's appearance: bald pate, deep lines in his face, thick glasses perched on his long nose, but thinner than he remembered.

"Don't you believe in asking permission to visit?" Mark asked gruffly. "I certainly don't recall inviting you to Sunday brunch."

"C'mon Mark," Lyle scolded gently. "You won't return my calls. When I do get a hold

of you and you agree to meet me, you never show up."

"Doesn't that tell you something, Lyle? I don't want to get involved. I'm retired, for hell's sake. I have no interest in being part of any ongoing investigations, cold cases, parking tickets, domestic disputes, traffic violations . . ."

"Larkin City has a serial killer," Lyle broke in.

"You think I don't know that?" Mark asked crossly. "I read the papers."

"We have no clues, no suspect DNA. Mark, I need your help. I don't know what to do next. Where do I go when I've exhausted all possibilities?"

"I'm retired," Mark reiterated firmly. "I have as much input as the milkman."

"Please," Lyle pleaded. "It's just not my career on the line, that's not why I'm here. The people of Larkin City are mighty uneasy, not to mention the fact a serial killer being on the loose might taint our rather lucrative tourist trade. Three women have been raped and murdered in much the same fashion in the last two years. I need answers, some sort of direction. I need your advice. I'm begging you, if that's what it takes."

Mark sighed loudly. "What makes you think my advice has any value now? You said it yourself - there isn't any solid evidence or DNA to go on. I don't have mental telepathy, Lyle, nor am I some mystical wizard with all the answers. What can I possibly offer you?"

"Can I please come inside?" Lyle asked. "I'd rather the whole neighborhood didn't overhear our conversation."

Mark snorted. "My closest neighbors are members of our illustrious bone yard."

"Damnit, Mark, *please!*"

"Bollocks," the former detective declared, opening the door wider. "Hurry up and get inside. You're not staying long."

Mark's home was modest but clean, with most of the vintage furniture coming from the seventies era. Three well-fed tabby cats, curled close together on the orange-brown striped couch, gave Mark and Lyle sleepy but cursory stares as they walked though the living room to the kitchen.

"I'd offer you coffee but I just drank the last cup," Mark said flatly as they sat at the small kitchen table. Lyle noticed the remnants of the older man's breakfast, an empty plate with dried yolk stains and toast crumbs. A window above the sink overlooked the back garden, where Lyle knew Mark grew copious crops of zucchini and pumpkin.

"I'm fine," Lyle said. "I had a big breakfast at Bruno's Café with a large pot of coffee."

"So let's get on with it," Mark said shortly.

Lyle folded his hands together, resting them on the table. "You know Larkin City better than anyone. I've exhausted every empty lead, witness and avenue of follow-up. If you were me, what would be your next step? I can't just allow three murder cases to go cold, not on my watch. What would you do?"

Mark regarded Lyle for a long minute across the table. He wanted to dismiss the younger man, let him go on his way to find his own path. He meant what he said before: *he didn't want to get involved*. He'd done his duty, for almost thirty years, and felt he didn't owe another minute of his time to the LCPD or Lyle Gould.

"I won't change my mind," Mark stated. "I won't help you with the investigation. I'm out of all that, and I deserve every leisure moment my retirement affords. I'm certain you'll come to understand that someday."

Lyle's face fell.

"But," Mark continued strongly. "I will offer you a piece of advice, for what it's

worth. It's the one thing that stuck with me throughout my career, and it's the only thing my father Jameson passed on to me."

"I'm listening," Lyle said eagerly, leaning forward.

"There's one common denominator between all recorded murders in Larkin City," Mark said slowly. "It applies to some of the other violent crimes as well. They can all be traced to one combined source." He looked at Lyle. "It's the Larkin and Sullivan families. While I don't think one of them is your serial killer, I'm sure your suspect is connected to them somehow. That's been my experience all along. Start looking at people with known associations with the two families."

Lyle appeared stunned. "I can't believe I didn't think of the connection before."

"All of the facts are there," Mark continued. "Just go back in time, look at history. Patrick Larkin killed the family cook as long as sixty years ago, and then hung himself. Mike Sullivan, Patrick's first cousin thrice removed, killed a man at the mansion and kidnapped Shannon Larkin. Mike's sister Carly murdered Marianne Chamberlain and Sara Sullivan in cold blood and then killed herself. Even the most violent of crimes, such as Jack Sansovino on the run these last eight years after beating Jamie Page senseless, is connected to the Larkin family. You have to study all these relationships, and put pieces of the puzzle together from there."

"It makes sense," Lyle agreed, excitement shining in his eyes. "It gives me a place to start."

"I can't fathom a guess as to the identity of your serial killer, so you have a lot of leg and brain work ahead of you. Make lists of family members, sub-lists of their friends, lovers and spouses. Look into these people, track their whereabouts over the years, follow their financial paper trails, interview them repeatedly if need be. Make another sub-list of employees, teachers, ex-lovers and former friends. Leave nothing out, and leave nothing to chance. You'll learn personal kibble that may seem utterly useless on the surface, but pursue it anyway." He paused, taking a breath. "The needle you're looking for is in that intricate family haystack somewhere. I'd bet my life on it."

Lyle stared at the older man. "You're right, on all accounts. Thank you, Mark. I know how reluctant you are to get involved further, so I won't ask it of you. However, I want you to know your advice has been invaluable to me."

"This is the one and only occasion I'll help you," Mark said crisply. "I won't make myself available a second time."

"I won't bother you again," Lyle promised.

* * *

THUS BEGAN THE LENGTHY process of assembling all the puzzle pieces. Lyle followed Mark's advice. He made paper lists and interchangeable strategy boards of Larkin and Sullivan family members, their spouses, children, friends and lovers. He gathered their histories, financial data, known facts and local tidbits. He tried to connect the dots between those in the inner circle and their wide spectrum of acquaintances. He also created dossiers on each individual, no matter how important or marginal, with the help of his assistant Curtis Day, and looked for glaringly odd or common threads.

Without DNA or other evidence, it was all Lyle could do. He knew in his bones that Mark Balsam was right: most all paths led back to the Larkin and Sullivan families, and it

was just a matter of time before he linked them to familiarity with the killer.
One way or another.

MEGAN'S LEGACY:

Excerpt from Chapter Fourteen

August 2007
Larkin City, Maine

JACK SANSONOVINO DROVE ALONG Main Street, finding many of the sights familiar yet somehow different. Even a moderate-sized harbor town like Larkin City had to change, he reasoned, especially after nine years. He noticed the absence of the mining company, replaced by an attorney's office. An embossed sign above the entryway advertised the services of one "*Lucas Castaneda, Esquire. Specializing in family law and bankruptcy.*" A few doors down, Jack spied Bruno's Café. The eatery was a Larkin City landmark, and was obviously still doing a brisk business.

Careful to drive the speed limit so he didn't attract undue attention, Jack moved along the length of Main Street in his used Dodge Avenger. It was his intention to appear like any other tourist flocking to the harbor town in summer, to blend in with the crowds so to speak. He had allowed his gray hair to grow a bit longer, which now brushed the tops of his ears. A scant silver beard grizzled his chin and formed a thin stencil above his upper lip.

He went by the Larkin Animal Clinic on Waterford Street, and then took the highway on the outskirts of town that led to the estate. Along the way, he saw billboards advertising the Banshee Point Hotel, golf course and winery. "*That's new,*" he thought with bitterness. "*The Larkin's never run out of sources for money.*"

He passed by the entry gate to the estate, noticing the gate was closed. Because of the high stone fence surrounding the property, it was nearly impossible to gain access unless one knew the gate code. When Jack lived in the A-frame cottage with Jamie, he knew the code to be 101829, which was an abbreviation of John Larkin's birth month of October, in the year 1829. He doubted the numbers were the same, especially since the last time he drove out of the gates he was on the run after beating Jamie to a pulp.

The most far-flung way to get on the property was to walk a few miles out of the way to get to the beach, and then enter by taking the path that went past the lighthouse and keeper's cottage. Perhaps there were better methods of access via the Banshee Point Hotel, which was something he would have to discover on his own.

Jack drove back into Larkin City, stopping at a gas station to fill the teal-colored Avenger with gas and to buy a print copy of the *Larkin Gazette*. Then he went on to Bar Harbor, where he got a room at the Belle Isle Motel on route three.

He knew it had been a long time since he resided in Larkin City, but didn't want to take any chances that someone might recognize him - least of all his dumb-bitch sister Désirée or her fruit-basket husband Jamie Page.

* * *

BECAUSE MOST OF THE summer had been quiet, Lyle Gould avoided pursuing his suspect list. He was reluctant to delve much deeper into the lives of the men left on the list. He thought about it on occasion, but quickly put it in the back of his mind.

Until he received a visit from the Mayor of Larkin City.

David Azoulay walked into police headquarters on a Thursday afternoon, taking the short walk from his office at the courthouse unattended. He drew stares from officers and clerks alike as he approached the reception counter, where Lyle's assistant Curtis Day stood open-mouthed.

Despite his diminutive physical stature, Azoulay managed to convey a commanding presence nonetheless. Not known for angry outbursts or abusing executive privileges, he was well-respected throughout the community and by most employees who worked for the city government.

"Is Detective Gould available?" the mayor asked Curtis crisply.

"Yes," Curtis replied. "Let me . . ."

Azoulay held up his hand. "Don't bother to announce me. I know where Lyle's office is located."

Lyle nearly choked on his bologna sandwich when he looked up to see Mayor Azoulay standing in the open doorway of his office.

Lyle stood up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Mayor Azoulay, what a surprise. What can I do for you?"

"I need to talk to you," the mayor said firmly. "Alone."

"Of course. Come in, sit down."

Azoulay stepped into the office and closed the door behind him. He sat in a chair in front of Lyle's desk. He began speaking at once, his voice courteous but with a hint of displeasure. "It's been ten months since my daughter Rachel was murdered, detective. I haven't heard a word about the status of your investigation for quite a long while now. If you don't mind, I'd like a progress report."

Lyle resumed his seat. The mayor always got to the heart of the matter without appearing rude or overbearing. The man wanted answers. Lyle could not fault him for that.

He looked down at the remnants of his sandwich, appetite gone. "To be honest, I've got nothing new to report. As you know, the killer didn't leave behind even a speck of DNA, or anything else. I have no witnesses."

"Surely you have someone in mind for the crime," Azoulay interrupted him, his tone almost desperate. "I'm not asking as the mayor, but as a still-grieving father."

Lyle decided to be honest with him. He told Azoulay about his conversation with Mark Balsam nearly a year ago, in which Balsam theorized the killer was somehow connected to the Larkin family, and his assembly of a suspect list. "Before summer began, I crossed Brose Larkin off the list because I was able to account for his time during the murders."

"Brose Larkin?" Azoulay was aghast. "Are you serious?"

Lyle nodded. "I wanted to eliminate the men one by one, and it took some time and research. I'm starting to think Balsam's theory is bunk, frankly, because neither of the two men remaining on the list could possibly be a rapist or a cold-blooded killer."

"Who are they?"

Lyle hesitated briefly, and then spoke. "Nick Brooks and Luke Castaneda."

The mayor looked troubled. "You're right, it's not plausible. But why haven't you crossed them off as suspects?"

"I can't bring myself to dig into their lives like I would with a common criminal," Lyle admitted. "I know it's my job, but Brooks and Castaneda? It's just too far-fetched. Nick is one of the most upstanding members of our community, trustworthy and liked by all.

And Luke, there's just *no way*. He worked in the DA's office in Boston for years, and now has a reputable practice in Larkin City. He works to uphold the law, not break it."

"I agree," Azoulay replied. "However, I also trust Mark Balsam's judgment. He developed an uncanny instinct during his years on the force, and his opinion should not be taken lightly. I think his theory warrants your complete attention. At this point, you've got nothing to lose. I suggest you examine Nick and Luke just like you did the other suspects on the list. Perhaps you can employ a more prudent inquiry method, but eliminating them as suspects once and for all will allow you to move forward."

Lyle stared at the mayor. "What if their collective activities clear both of them?"

Azoulay shrugged. "Then you're back to square one, aren't you? At least it will liberate you to find a new direction for the investigation. Where to, I'm not sure."

"You're correct on all counts," Lyle conceded. "I promise to get on it and finish the process."

"You'll let me know what you find?"

"My first phone call will be to you."

The mayor appeared satisfied. "Thank you, Lyle."

MEGAN'S LEGACY: Excerpt from Chapter Fifteen

*September 2007
Larkin City, Maine*

ALTHOUGH HER WEB DESIGN business hadn't suffered since she took on the art gallery project, Megan had precious little free time. She arrived at her office on the harbor at six in the morning, six days a week to stay current with the work. She hired a new assistant six months after Kerry Matheson was killed, a twenty-year-old named Kay O'Neill who was attended LCU in pursuit of degrees in web design and information technology. Kay was short and heavysset with flaming red hair and a toothy grin. She always brought treats to the office. When she discovered Megan loved oatmeal raisin cookies, a holdover from her great-grandmother Jennifer Sullivan, Kay baked a batch for her boss at least once a week.

Usually by mid-afternoon, Megan was free to dash over to Colm's cottage on Cove Hollow Circle. She met with Ben frequently, both of them closely watching the redecoration progress being undertaken by Bennett Blueprints. Megan was confident they would be ready for the gallery opening, which was scheduled for Friday, 18th April 2008, a week past the 75th anniversary of Colm's death.

She also developed a friendship with Finley Cooper over the summer. He visited his mother Petra for two weeks in July, and then again in September. Being a professional architect, he was interested in Megan's project and offered to contribute. He suggested adding public bathrooms on each floor of the cottage, and recommended the construction of a snack kiosk in the garden. In the process, Finley and Kip became friends as well. They had one major point in common, their affection and fascination for Megan, which naturally drew them together.

The passage of summer was like a blur for Megan. Luke was busy, too, handling multiple divorce, child custody and bankruptcy cases. His reputation was stellar in the community, especially when it became known he took on pro-bono legal cases for less financially endowed residents of Larkin City. Once a week, he travelled Waldo County and beyond to meet with prospective new clients. Megan began to feel they were like two ships passing in the night for all she saw her husband.

Her typical work day usually ended after eight o'clock at night. However, she made the effort to leave the gallery early one Friday afternoon in September, determined to go home and prepare dinner for Luke. She stopped at the grocery store to buy two steaks, fresh broccoli and a pre-made cheesecake.

When she got home, Kiki greeted her with enthusiastic *meows*. Megan picked her up and held her close, scratching her neck and behind her ears. Kiki purred and flexed her paws, gazing at Megan adoringly.

After changing into blue jeans and a white sweater top, Megan marinated the steaks in teriyaki sauce and freshly minced garlic. She trimmed and washed the broccoli, placing the flowerets in her electric steamer. She took a few minutes to set the dining room table, placing a wine glass by each plate.

Just as she returned to the kitchen, she heard the front door open. She was glad for

Luke's timing. Now they could relax together before she started cooking dinner, enjoy a glass of wine and a rare moment alone.

He walked slowly into the kitchen, carrying his briefcase, looking at her in surprise. "What are you doing home so early?"

Megan was taken aback by his tone. He looked surprised to see her, true, but almost resentful she was there.

"I wanted to make dinner for you," she replied, forcing herself to sound cheerful. "I told Ben and Fin I was coming home early today, no matter what."

"Oh," he said faintly. "Finley's still around?"

"He's leaving on Monday," Megan answered abruptly, irritated by his tepid response. "Why?"

Luke shrugged. "Just asking, Meggie. No need to get your feathers in a ruffle."

She could no longer hold her temper. "I made an effort to get home early tonight, but you don't seem to give a damn. What's wrong with you?"

"What do you want from me?" he asked coldly. "I hardly see you anymore. Do you expect me to be grateful because you've decided to grace me with your presence?"

"I've been working, just like you."

"Doing what?"

"I've been working my ass off, and you . . ."

He tossed his briefcase onto the counter with a thud, causing Kiki to scatter from the kitchen. "Is it more important to you to design web sites and fuck around with some old paintings than spending time with your husband? It's not like you have to work in the first place."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she cried out angrily.

"Exactly what I said, Megan. You're filthy rich, your Daddy's rich, your whole damned family is rich. You don't have to work another day of your life if you don't want to, and yet there you are every morning, leaving at the crack of dawn and not coming home until after dark."

"How *dare* you talk to me like that?" she demanded furiously.

He glared at her. "God forbid I should talk to one of the Larkin's without kissing ass first."

"Go to hell," she snarled. She whirled on her feet and walked hurriedly to the bedroom. She heard the front door open and then slam shut. Determined, she took her old suitcase from the closet and began throwing clothes inside. She gathered her toiletries from the bathroom, shoving them on top of her clothes.

She heard Luke's Bronco peel out of the driveway just as she latched the suitcase closed. She sat on the bed, shedding angry tears. Kiki crept into the room tentatively, looking around cautiously. When she saw Megan was alone, she jumped on the bed with her.

"We're getting out of here," she said through her sobs, taking Kiki in her arms. "Luke is just downright *mean*, and I'm not going to stay in his house another minute. He has a whole lot of apologizing to do before I even consider stepping back through that front door."

She took Kiki and the suitcase to the hallway. She found Kiki's white travel carrier and put the cat inside. She wiped her eyes with a tissue and ran her hands through her hair.

She hesitated, briefly faltering in her course of action. She and Luke had never

argued like that before. She was hurt by his words and digs at her family. Was it how he really felt, or was he just lashing out? She was beyond infuriated with her husband, but wasn't that what marriage was about? Working through highs and lows, ups and downs? She loved him, no matter that his cruel words wounded her heart.

"I won't accept anything less than an apology from him," she finally decided. "If I let him think he can get away with talking to me so disrespectfully, he'll just do it again."

Grabbing her suitcase and Kiki's carrier, Megan left the house without looking back.

* * *

THE MANSION WAS QUIET when Megan arrived just after seven o'clock. Leaving her suitcase and Kiki's carrier in the foyer, she peeked her head into the drawing room.

Shannon was on the settee with Lee, both of them reading a book. A blanket was spread on the floor in front of the settee, where four-year-old Gabe Page slept soundly under Shannon's watchful eye. The child bore an uncanny resemblance to his father Jamie and therefore the late Scott Page, his handsome little face framed by black hair and long lashes as he slumbered.

Sean and Dana were playing a game of *Go Fish* on a table by the French doors, which were open to let in sweet air from the rose garden. In surprise, Megan noticed Mary Larkin sitting in a chair by the cold fireplace, where she was knitting a stack of dish clothes.

Shannon sensed a presence and looked up. She brightened when she saw Megan standing in the doorway. "Fancy seeing you here," she exclaimed, keeping her tone low as not to waken Gabe. She gestured to her grandson. "I had one hell of a time getting him to settle down. He refused to go upstairs, so I let him crash on the floor." She set her book on the settee. "Jamie went out of town with a friend for the weekend and Désirée wanted a night to herself, so I'm playing babysitter until tomorrow morning."

Megan stepped into the room. At once, Shannon could see Liam's daughter was upset by her red and watery eyes, and her trembling chin. "What's wrong?" Shannon asked, concern in her voice.

"Is Daddy here?"

Shannon shook her head. "No, he just left for Petra's tasting event at the winery. Would you like to call him, ask him to come home?"

"No, I don't want to spoil his evening." She took a deep breath. "Luke and I had a fight," Megan said, her voice catching. "Is it okay if I stay here tonight? I brought Kiki with me."

Shannon patted the space next to her on the settee. "Of course you can stay. This will always be your home, Megan."

Dana and Mary left their places and came to Megan, enveloping her with a hug.

"Sit down and tell us all about it," Dana murmured kindly. "You know we're always here for you."

* * *

LYLE GOULD WORKED LATE on Friday. He sent Curtis Day home, and then sequestered himself in the conference room at police headquarters. Using the table, he laid out his suspect list and file folders full of financial data and alibi witness statements.

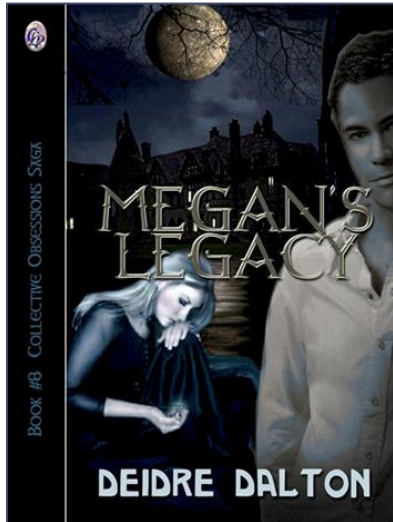
After examining bank statements and verifying time frames, he stared at the suspect list for a long time. Months of doubt over Mark Balsam's theory flew out the window. The crusty old detective had been right all along. There was no way around it now.

Flipping open his cell phone, Lyle made a quick call to the mayor as promised. Then he dialed Curtis Day's number to summon him back on duty.

They finally had an arrest to make.

"MEGAN'S LEGACY" INFORMATION

Megan's Legacy by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is currently available from Amazon, Barnes & Noble and the Club Lighthouse Publishing website.



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EXTRAS:

Megan's Legacy @ Facebook:

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

"Collective Obsessions Saga" website:

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

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*.

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