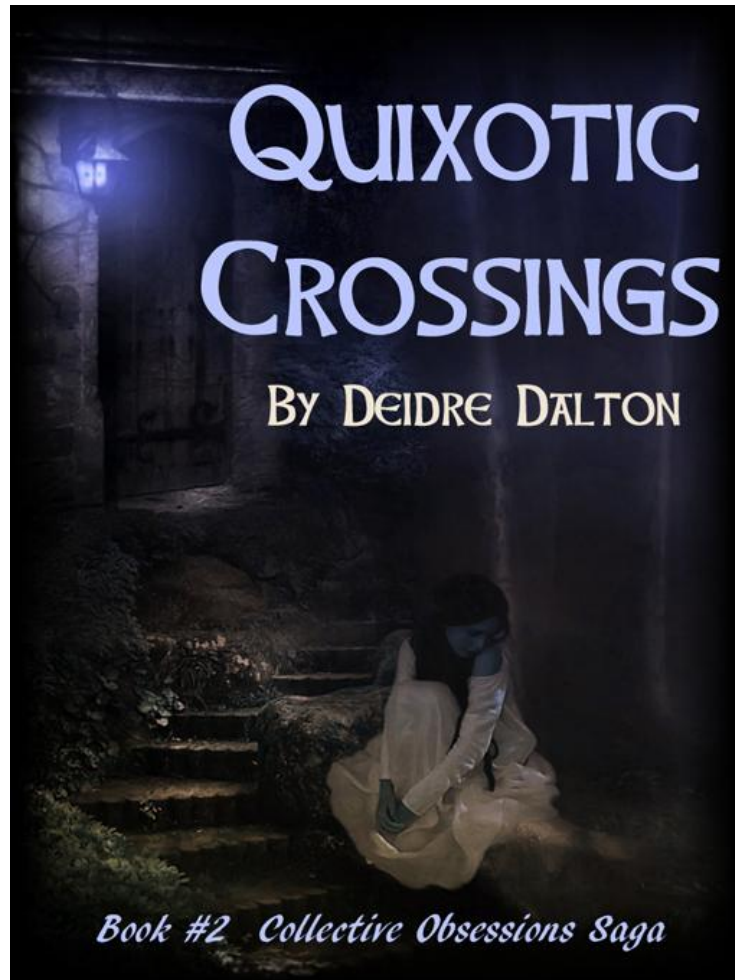


Excerpts from:

Quixotic Crossings

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



Book #2 in the Collective Obsessions Saga

Club Lighthouse Publishing/Historical Romance Edition

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-534956-27-8

E-Book ISBN: 978-1-311440-97-6

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ABOUT "QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS"

Quixotic Crossings by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the second book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*. The e-book edition of the novel was released by Club Lighthouse Publishing in July 2011. The paperback edition followed in June 2016.

Fate continues to entangle the Larkin and Sullivan families amidst madness, murder and obsessive love. Colm and Molly's grandson Jean-Claude Sullivan finds his life driven by greed and perversely tainted pleasures. Beloved family chef Claude Mondoux watches helplessly as Colm slowly loses his mind in ghostly visions of Molly, while Colleen Larkin seeks love in the arms of another man with deadly consequences.

After the death of family patriarch John Larkin in 1926, the strains of madness filter their way into the second and third generations of the irrevocably entangled Larkin and Sullivan families.

Colm and Molly's grandson Jean-Claude Sullivan finds his life driven by greed and perversely tainted pleasures, while Molly's coldly-calculating nephew Patrick Larkin propels the family business to impressive heights as he fosters a new generation with his wife Colleen McGarren.

Murder, obsession, self-indulgence and avarice continue to haunt the Larkin and Sullivan families. Patrick has an affair with his wife's sister Phoebe McGarren but is then rendered less than a man after an accident. He retreats to the attic in the family mansion to ponder his fate much like Molly Larkin did before him, where he becomes increasingly ominous yet ever vigilant.

Beloved family chef Claude Mondoux watches helplessly as Colm slowly loses his mind in ghostly visions of Molly Larkin, while Colleen seeks love in the arms of another man with deadly consequences.

For more, go to:

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

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS: Excerpt from the Prologue

*Larkin, Maine
January 1926*

JOHN LARKIN KNEW HE was dying. His shrunken frame appeared diminutive in the cavernous bed, gossamer skin wrapped taut against his ancient bones. Having celebrated his ninety-sixth birthday just three months ago, he felt every inch his age and then some. He cursed the failings of his physical body, made worse by his still-alert mind and acute sensibilities.

He welcomed the warmth radiating from the fireplace, chilled despite the layers of blankets covering him. At one time he considered his luxurious suite on the second floor of the mansion his own private sanctuary, but now felt the rooms to be a hellish place of confinement. It was only a matter of time before he was no longer the master of his own household, soon to be forgotten after he joined his wife Anne and their daughter Molly in the family cemetery nearby.

His eyes went to the mullioned windows, which overlooked the north-east side of the estate with a view of the Banshee Point Lighthouse in the distance. He could see the sky leaden with black-gray clouds, swirled like paint on canvas, revealing hundreds of snowflakes as they danced against the glass panes before falling to the ground below.

There was a quick knock on the bedroom door, which startled John from his lethargy. Before he could speak, his son Roddy strode into the room. He was followed by family chef Claude Mondoux, who carried a silver tray laden with plates and matching dome covers.

"Are you ready for dinner, Papa?" Roddy asked as he came to stand at the foot of the bed. John's only son was tall and imposing with azure blue eyes, but advancing age revealed itself in gnarled, arthritic hands and silver hair, once the color of chestnuts.

John nodded. He was hungry, but knew from past experience he wouldn't be able to eat much. He watched as Claude set the tray on the bedside table, removing the dome covers to reveal a platter of sliced zucchini bread slathered with butter, a bowl of creamy potato soup and a white plate containing a pork cutlet, fat trimmed off, and a pile of green beans tossed with crumbled bits of bacon.

"I prepared some of your favorite foods," Claude told him. "Please try to eat, *Monsieur*. You must nourish your body to stay strong."

Roddy came forward to help his father into a sitting position. Claude plumped the pillows behind his back, easing the old man against their softness. He placed the tray on John's lap, pointing to the zucchini bread. "Even if you eat nothing else, I know you will enjoy my zucchini loaf. You always do."

John gazed at the chef warmly. Claude had been in his employ for more than fifty years, but was much more than the family cook. The two men were friends, a relationship that developed over the years with mutual respect and shared secrets. John trusted Claude implicitly, never doubting the Frenchman would take confidences to his own grave.

"You never miss an opportunity to applaud your culinary talents," John said with a wan smile. "Are all Frenchmen so self-assured and arrogant?"

Claude winked. "Only the good ones, *Monsieur*."

"Please eat something, Papa," Roddy urged. "I don't want you to get so weak that we have to call for the doctor again."

John managed to eat a slice of zucchini bread and a few spoonfuls of soup, but little else. "I'm full," he said with apology, looking to the concerned faces of his son and Claude. "Maybe later I can nibble on a biscuit or two."

Roddy smiled kindly at his father. "We'll leave the tray in case you change your mind."

Claude removed the silver tray from John's lap and returned it to the bedside table. "I'll come back later to check on you," he said quietly. "Try to rest, *Monsieur*."

Roddy leaned down to kiss his father on the cheek, and then helped Claude return the older man to a horizontal position. "Sleep well," he said. "I'll stop by and see you in the morning."

After the two men left, John allowed himself to doze briefly. He was unable to enjoy proper slumber anymore, fearful he might not awaken from a deep sleep. Troubled thoughts also kept him restless in bed, his mind plagued with guilty memories of past deeds.

Suddenly, he felt a cold draft wash across his body. Could the fire in the hearth be dying already? He opened his eyes, trying to focus his aged eyes as they fell on the room. A shape near the windows drew his attention, so he turned his head to get a better look.

Surely he was dreaming. His eyes beheld the diaphanous image of his daughter Molly. Her body appeared seamless and muted, but her dark eyes revealed a steadfast venom he found puzzling. She was pale and thin just as he remembered, yet her striking beauty had lost none of its stunning allure. She wore a dark green cloak, the hood thrust back on her shoulders.

John wasn't frightened. At least not at first, for surely he was dreaming. He had thought about Molly many times since her death thirty-nine years ago, most of his reflections laden with guilty regret. He blinked his eyes, assuming the action would dismiss her image from his dream. When he looked again, she was still there, regarding him with the same venomous contempt.

He realized he was not dreaming, but fully awake. The familiar pain in his legs reminded him he was a helpless old man in his bed, at the mercy of his obviously perturbed daughter. "*My dead daughter*," he told himself. A sense of panic started to build within him, which he tried to keep from his voice.

"Mary Margaret?" he asked hopefully, using her birth name. "Is that you, or am I dreaming?"

She stared at him, hating and deriding with her regard. "You are *not* dreaming," she finally said, her voice a slivery whisper.

He looked at her, his mouth open slightly. He felt his body begin to tremble with fear, his hands shaking under the coverlet. "Why are you here?"

She came toward him, seeming to glide rather than walk. He flinched when she loomed over him. He could see a vague outline of the windows through her sheer image, the snowflakes still visible in the backdrop. With her close proximity came another shaft of cold air, which seemed to permeate his bones.

John pulled the coverlet to his chin, looking up at his dead daughter with an uneasiness he no longer bothered to hide. She returned his gaze with anything but love. She

raised her arm and pointed to him. "It's time for you to die, old man." Again, her voice was a whisper, yet filled with strong anger nonetheless. "You've outlived your usefulness. For once in your life act with humility, and allow yourself to abandon the bonds of earth."

"Is that why I'm seeing you?" he asked fearfully. "You're here to take me away?"

She was silent for a long moment, watching him. "Depending how you perish, I may or may *not* be here to take you away."

"I'm not ready to die," he spoke again, his feeble voice tinged with a familiar stubbornness.

"It doesn't matter what you want," she said, her angry tone unrelenting. "It's out of your hands. Don't you feel it? All of your control has ebbed to a mere trickle. You command no one, you have no power to direct and destroy anymore." She laughed harshly, the sound hurting his ears. "The once-mighty John Larkin is now a mortal shell. You're nothing more than an old geezer-bastard, a he-goat who will end his life just like every common man."

"I'm not ready," he repeated, his words coming on a gasp.

She leaned down, her face mere inches away from his. He felt another blast of cold, an unpleasant sensation propelled by his growing fear. "Tough luck," she hissed in his ear. "I wasn't ready to throw Colm away at your decree or end my life on Banshee Point, either. We don't always get what we want, now do we?"

"I suffered greatly over what happened to you," he defended himself weakly. "I've been racked with guilt all these years."

"Lying son of a bitch," she snarled. "If you felt any guilt at all, you'd let the whole truth be known."

He was horrified. "That can never happen," he protested. "Think of the shame, the scandal."

"Mother is dead," Molly replied with scorn. "What - or *who* - is left to protect?"

"My legacy, for starters." He felt his hackles rise, some of the old spunk returning, if only for a brief time. "I worked for years to establish the family name. I built an empire, Mary Margaret. I will not toss it away by publicly acknowledging your bastard son with Colm Sullivan. I count Colm as a trusted friend, but even he understands I cannot recognize Mick as my grandson."

"Hypocrite!" she accused him. "I'm your daughter. My welfare should have been your first priority, not what local gossipmongers might have said or done."

"That's not the way it works. You know that, Molly."

"You unimaginable bastard," she seethed. He saw her filmy hands clenched at her sides. "What kind of man are *you*?" she demanded, eyes glowing like dark coals in her pale face.

"I'm hard-working and honest," he responded almost desperately, bargaining to validate his presence on earth. "You never wanted for anything, not once."

"Wrong," she disagreed. "The one thing I wanted you wouldn't let me have. You took away the only true happiness I've ever known. Your selfish actions forced my hand, and directly led to my decision to end my life nearly forty years ago."

John closed his eyes, hoping she would just go away.

"You *will* listen to what I have to say," she said brutally. "If you have an ounce of sense left in your decrepit old body, you would be wise to take special heed of my words."

He stubbornly kept his eyes shut.

She leaned down to whisper in his ear again, bringing another veil of cold air with her. "You still have choices, old man. I advise you to use them well in the little time you have left. If you allow your life to end on a natural course, your suffering will go beyond any pain you have ever known. The flames of hell will fan your guilt to searing heights. Use your wits to make the right decision, otherwise you will be forever locked with me in the lowest pit of Hades. The Devil's tomb will be your eternal home."

John finally opened his eyes, looking at his dead daughter with terror. "Leave me alone!" he cried. "You're trying to trick me, aren't you? No, *no*, this is a dream and I will soon awake . . ."

Her ethereal frame resumed its distance, gliding back to the windows. She turned to look at him one last time, a slight smile playing about her lips. It wasn't a cheerful beam but rather an all-knowing expression of satisfaction.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Molly whispered.

He watched as her image slowly dissolved, leaving behind more bone-hurting chill and discomfort.

John groaned, turning his face to the pillow.

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS: Excerpt from Chapter One

*January 1926
Larkin City, Maine*

A FEW DAYS AFTER John's funeral, Patrick Larkin returned to Larkin City, anxious to get back to work. He drove his Model-T Ford along Larkin Highway, feeling well-satisfied after a breakfast of poached eggs and toast. As if to contradict his frenetic work energy, Patrick was conservative in most other aspects of his life. He ate frugally and drank alcohol infrequently, perturbed by the example of his father. Patrick's one bad vice remained cigarettes; he smoked two packs of Camel's every day.

Patrick slowed his Model-T as he came close to Phoebe's Boutique on Main Street. He looked in his rear-view mirror before parking, and then cursed himself for doing so. Guilt ran deep within him. He always imagined one day Colleen would follow him to Larkin City and discover his secret. His fears were foolish, of course. Colleen trusted him implicitly and had no suspicions. Still, the guilt nagged at him.

Phoebe McGarren was Colleen's older sister, both of them being the daughters of Dr. Rory McGarren. The old doctor had once been Larkin City's only physician before his death in 1919. Since then, the city had been populated with several good doctors and a dozen nurses from the New York City area.

Phoebe was outspoken and gregarious, very independent and highly self-sufficient. She was tall and voluptuous, where Colleen was small and dainty; Phoebe was intelligent and opinionated where Colleen was submissive and concurring; Phoebe was wildly spontaneous and passionate, where Colleen was predictable and devoutly religious, viewing sexual relations as a wifely duty and only necessary in order to produce children.

Because Phoebe adored her younger sister, she loathed herself for plunging into an affair with Patrick. She found him physically irresistible even though she was repulsed by him personally. He was unlike his staid exterior when he was in bed with her, full of spontaneous passion. She only meant their affair to be brief and inconsequential, yet somehow it had stretched on for more than a year. She was in a quandary, not sure which direction to take, but the guilty torture had taken its toll.

When Patrick entered the dress shop, he saw Phoebe helping a customer. He stood in the doorway for a moment, admiring her salmon-colored pantsuit. Despite the beauty of her long legs, Phoebe eschewed dresses in favor of stylish slacks, blouses and jackets. They did little to detract from her fresh loveliness, and in fact heightened it.

Phoebe glanced at Patrick briefly, and then returned her attention to her customer. It was then Patrick recognized the woman as Abigail Southwick, wife of Larkin City's Mayor Clarence Southwick. Rolling his eyes, Patrick wandered through the shop, taking in the clean and elegant displays. Phoebe had a gift for creating eye-catching tableaux of perfumes, hosiery, jewelry sets and hair accessories. It was no wonder she did a brisk bit of commerce.

When the Amber Whale Tavern burned to the ground in 1904, the Larkin's razed the lot, leaving it vacant for many years. After Patrick's marriage to Colleen McGarren in 1918, he had come to know Phoebe and appreciated her unabashed swiftness of mind and her

inherent business sense. At the time, Phoebe was working for a dressmaker in Bangor, designing many of the outfits sold. Patrick convinced Roddy to hand over the Amber Whale lot to Phoebe, giving her financial aid to build her own dress shop. The business was a success, seeing profits within weeks of opening in 1920. Many local women liked the fact they could buy stylish and modern apparel without having to travel to a large metropolis such as Bangor or the far-flung New York City.

The shop was constructed of mellow pink brick and dark Tudor clapboard windows. Phoebe's vision of design came to fruition with her shop. She added small personal touches inside, such as live hanging ivy along the walls, a small waterfall in a corner, and a glass cashier counter that also displayed a large section of cosmetics. All of the latest fashion magazines were in a rack by the entryway, along with sale flyers. Throughout the shop were framed fashion sketches, many of them from agencies in New York. Phoebe also offered fresh tea to her customers at no charge, sometimes with small poppy seed and lemon cakes. Once a year, she held a special fashion show at her shop whereby locals modeled the latest outfits and enjoyed a full tea service.

Mrs. Southwick made ready to leave the shop when she noticed Patrick. She smiled. "Good afternoon, Mr. Larkin."

Patrick came closer. "Good afternoon, Ma'am."

The older woman suddenly became somber. "I'm sorry to hear of your grandfather's death. You have mine and Clarence's deepest sympathies. It's hard to believe the founder of Larkin City is gone."

Patrick assumed the mayor's wife was a tad annoyed about not being invited to John's funeral, so he said gently: "I'm sorry you weren't asked to the funeral service, Ma'am. Grandfather specified he wanted only family members present."

Mrs. Southwick appeared mollified. "Oh, I understand," she said sociably. "Clarence and I hadn't seen John in years. Hopefully his end wasn't painful."

"No Ma'am," Patrick replied politely. "He passed away in his sleep quite peacefully. Claude found him one morning just as he'd left him the night before."

"May God rest his soul," Mrs. Southwick murmured. "Well, I really have to be going. It was nice seeing you again, Mr. Larkin."

"The same to you, Ma'am."

After the woman left the shop, Patrick turned to Phoebe and found her staring at him. She did not look happy to see him, but then she rarely did. Despite their ongoing affair, she regretted every encounter afterward and tried to keep him at a distance. Patrick had to work that much harder to win her over the next time he saw her.

"I'm busy today, Patrick," Phoebe said coolly, retreating behind the glass cashier counter.

He watched her, keeping his face expressionless. "What do you think brought us together, Pheeb?" he asked, using his nickname for her.

She pretended to make herself busy with a stack of receipts. "You married my sister," she said strongly. "What started between us was brought about by our inability to fight temptation. I'm at fault as much as you are. We should both make it right and not continue."

Patrick felt a twinge of despair, but he took great care not to show it. "Why do we have this discussion every time we make love?" he asked her in a civil tone. "I don't understand, Pheeb. We go to bed, and afterward you treat me like a leper."

"We haven't been to bed in weeks," she pointed out.

He grinned. "We can rectify that right now, if you'd like."

Phoebe wanted to be angry, but she saw the twinkling in his eyes and could not help but smile in return. "Damn you, Patsy," she exclaimed, using her nickname for him.

He leaned over the counter. "So how about it, Pheebs? Can we go upstairs?" He reached over and touched her hand.

Phoebe reddened becomingly. Since opening the dress shop, she had lived in the rather lavish apartment upstairs. It was there she and Patrick had their trysts, and where they sometimes ate meals together.

She drew away, determined to keep her resolve. "Not today," she affirmed. "I told you, I'm busy."

He knew better than to push her. There would always be another day. He stood straight from the counter. "Okay darlin," he said. "I'll come by and see you in a few days."

Before she could respond, he was gone. Phoebe quickly ran to the door and flipped over the alternate "OPEN" sign to "Back in 30 Minutes." She hurried to the private stairway near the back of the shop and went up to her apartment. The single oak door at the top of the stairs opened easily as she stepped inside, glad to be alone. Her Siamese cat Lady Sam jumped off the damask couch in the living room, first stretching before coming forward to greet her. Phoebe bent down and scratched the cat on the head.

"You always make me feel better," Phoebe said as she picked up the feline. "Would you like a bowl of milk for your trouble?"

Lady Sam began to purr, rubbing her head along Phoebe's neck. Phoebe walked slowly to the kitchen, which was a gleaming white ensemble with all the modern appliances. She poured milk into a small glass bowl, and then set it on the floor. Lady Sam began to lap the creamy liquid with obvious delight, while Phoebe leaned her hip against the kitchen counter.

"Face it," she said aloud. "If it wasn't for Patrick, I wouldn't have this shop *or* this apartment." Not for the first time, she wondered if Patrick's initial motives for helping her were geared toward gaining entry into her bed. She resisted him for a long time, afraid of the guilt and the disloyalty to her sister Colleen. However, Patrick was not to be denied and he finally wore her down.

Despite her shame and reluctance, Phoebe found herself enthralled by Patrick in her bed. It was a love-hate relationship. While she enjoyed his physical attentions, she had no desire to claim Patrick as her own. She did not envision a life with him, nor did she want to be his wife. She knew deep in her heart she was not in love with him, and never had been. Theirs was a purely physical union.

"So why bother?" Phoebe said aloud again, watching Lady Sam finish her milk. The cat began grooming herself with contentment, brushing her face with her paw a dozen times over.

Phoebe wanted nothing more than to come clean with her sister, to clear her conscience. However, she knew knowledge of her husband's perfidy would destroy Colleen, not to mention unraveling her trust in Phoebe.

She walked into the living room, for once not struck by the beauty of her surroundings. The cream-colored walls blended perfectly with the white furniture strung with gold-leaf design, and the tables shined brightly from frequent waxing. The carpet underneath her feet was from China and depicted an ivy motif also spun with gold.

Phoebe sat on the same damask couch recently vacated by Lady Sam. She wanted desperately to end her affair with Patrick, but she knew it was impossible. She owed him her livelihood, and the thought of him telling Colleen about their relationship filled Phoebe with a sickening dread. She wouldn't put it past Patrick to stoop so low as to keep their meetings a constant fixture. In essence, she was stuck in a place she could not get out of. Colleen must never know, and Phoebe would move heaven and earth to shield her sister.

Phoebe rose from the couch. "I just won't think about it anymore," she muttered as she walked toward the door. "Patrick be-damned."

* * *

COLLEEN LARKIN GENUINELY LIKED her mother-in-law Sascha. The two women got along famously, although they rarely talked about deeply personal matters. Sascha thought Colleen was perfect for her son and a wonderful mother.

A few days after the death of John Larkin, Sascha and Colleen spent the afternoon in the drawing room at the mansion. There was a fire in the grate, and the remains of a tea service on the sideboard. Sascha sat in a chair by the fireplace knitting, the needles clicking as she worked on a blanket for her grandsons.

Colleen sat on the floor with her two sons Brian and Rory, where she had assembled a chess game. John taught the boys how to play, and it was their favorite pastime this winter. Colleen watched her children closely, happy they had the wherewithal to play chess, eager for the challenges while still enjoying themselves.

Sascha glanced at them, smiling at their contentment. She was very fond of Colleen, and blessed the day Patrick brought her home and announced he wanted to marry her. Colleen was quiet and agreeable, and Sascha thought she would make a good match for the reserved and sometimes indifferent Patrick. Colleen never complained about his off-handedness, so Sascha assumed their marriage was a happy one.

"Did Patrick say if he would be home in time for dinner?" Sascha asked as she continued to knit.

Colleen looked at her mother-in-law from her place on the floor. "He said he wanted to work for a few hours, but that he would be home early."

Sascha hesitated only slightly before speaking again. "Patrick is very dedicated to his work," she said carefully. "He gets that from Roddy. They have increased the family fortune immensely, yet there are times I wish they would both slow down. Family is important, too."

Colleen felt herself relax with her mother-in-law's first few words. She had expected a lecture about the hard-working Larkin men and the assumed gratefulness thereof, but Sascha finished her comments with a harbinger of sympathy and understanding. The two women were running the same gamut of emotions in much the same fashion, with quiet acceptance.

Colleen smiled from the floor. "I agree. Family is very important. Patrick needs to slow down sometime."

"John never did," Sascha said quickly. "Even at the end, he ran his empire from a wheelchair."

"True," Colleen said, a look of concentration on her face. She looked at her sons playing their chess game. "So we are doomed to life in a gilded castle, waiting for our men to come home?"

"It looks that way, my dear. But one can always hope otherwise."

In that moment, Colleen decided her new direction *would* be otherwise.

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS: Excerpt from Chapter Five

*Spring-Summer 1928
Larkin City, Maine*

MICK SULLIVAN WAS FORTY-seven years old in 1928. The year before, he was forced from his job as the lighthouse keeper at Banshee Point because of the new regulation automation systems provided by the government. Mick had been crushed at first, but Roddy Larkin was a decent sort and he saw to it that Mick had a job to go to.

Roddy opened the Larkin Harbor Tour Company shortly after the lighthouse automation was in place. He hired Mick to guide tours on the harbor as well as a leisurely route around the lighthouse area and the Larkin's private beach. Mick was not a boat-pro, but he quickly adapted to the 65-foot wooden schooner known as *Lady Banshee*. The vessel was constructed at the Shipbuilders Station on the harbor, and was made with traditional two-inch carved cedar planks over white oak frames. The schooner had a roomy fifty-six feet on deck, with cushioned edge seats and grip rails. The beam was fourteen feet with a draft of six feet six inches. *Lady Banshee* had 18,000 pounds of ballast and carried 1,600 square feet of sail.

Mick was plenty busy during the summer tourist season, but winter brought a lull to his activity. Apart from general maintenance around the lighthouse once a month, which Roddy paid him for, Mick was left to his own devices from October to April each year.

It wasn't that Mick needed the money. He rarely touched the \$450,000 John Larkin willed to him. He spent bits here and there, but Mick was determined to provide his own income. He heartily disliked being idle. His wife, the former Layla Barton-Brooks, often begged him to relax. "You could retire right now," she told him. "There's no need for all this restlessness. Enjoy life, my darling. Find an interesting hobby, or just simply retire."

But Mick loved the Banshee Point Lighthouse. He didn't care if he had enough money to live comfortably for the rest of his life - he yearned to work in his beloved lighthouse. Since that was no longer possible, he made do with the harbor tours. Yet it was a poor replacement for his true calling.

Instead of the blissful quiet of the keeper's cottage, Mick and Layla now lived in a two-story house on the waterfront of Larkin Harbor. Mick dipped into his inheritance to buy the house outright for \$10,000, and he allowed Layla a generous \$2,000 to furnish the home.

The house was painted white with beige trim. It included a deck that wound its way around the back of the house, which faced the water. There were tall windows on the first and second floors, with boxed flower planters under many of them. Mick attached framed gas lights over the front and back doors, and built deck chairs and a table for him and Layla.

The inside of the house contained four bedrooms, an attic loft, a large kitchen overlooking the harbor and a parlor that faced the front of the house on Harbor Street Pier. Most mornings Mick and Layla awoke to the gently lapping tide in the harbor, a peaceful beginning to any day. Mick built a shed when they first moved in, where he fiddled with woodwork or fixed household appliances. He was also only a half-mile away from the Larkin Harbor Tour Company, so he never had far to go.

Mick loved the house, although he still secretly yearned for the keeper's cottage. In the evenings, he liked nothing better than to sit on the deck of his harbor home with a pint of ale to watch the sun set. Layla often joined him, sipping white wine to his ale.

Mick and Layla had been married for twenty-three years. Their relationship was affectionate and comfortable. He remained enchanted by his wife's head of dark curls, her pale skin and delicate physique. Despite her apparent outer frailty, Layla was a strong woman with many opinions of her own. She did not view Mick as her lord and master, and he admired her independence.

One evening in late May, Mick and Layla settled on the deck. Each had their favorite libation in hand as they watched the sun set together in silence. Their time was quiet, apart from the sounds of harbor bell buoys.

Finally, Layla spoke. "I talked to Jean-Claude this morning. Jennifer miscarried last night."

Mick was dismayed. "Oh, God no. Is she all right?"

"Yes, but very depressed."

He felt a twinge of sadness, the loss of an unknown grandchild bringing a tear to his eye. "The poor dear. Should we go and see her? Is she still at the hospital?"

"Jean-Claude said she's going home from the hospital in the morning," Layla told him. "Maybe we should stop by tomorrow afternoon."

Jean-Claude and his wife, Jennifer O'Connor, had married the year before. Jean-Claude worked at the offices of the *Larkin Gazette*, where he edited articles for the daily publication. He had fallen into the job after graduating from Larkin City University with degrees in English and American history. He started at the *Gazette* as a part-time clerical worker, but the editor soon recognized his talents and promoted him to assistant editor.

Mick shook his head. "I don't want to intrude. You should call first. You know how Jennifer is about her privacy."

"You're right," Layla agreed. "I'll telephone Jean-Claude before we go over."

Jean-Claude Sullivan, named after the uncle Johnny he never met and the effervescent Claude Mondoux, was parsimonious with money. The \$100,000 John Larkin left him sat in the bank earning interest. Even Jennifer wasn't aware of the fortune, but Jean-Claude had his own reasons for keeping the knowledge from her. He was meticulous, careful and organized. Jennifer was an unknown quantity so early in their marriage, and Jean-Claude wanted to be certain she would be with him for the long haul before he let her in on his bounty. It was unromantic and calculating, but he planned for the future with exacting detail, viewing the inheritance as his retirement nest egg.

Mick drained his glass of ale. "I have this funny feeling Jennifer doesn't like us."

Layla sighed. "I get the same feeling, but I don't understand it. We've been nothing but kind to her."

"Jennifer is different," Mick admitted. "She seems obsessed about her privacy, and almost paranoid about outside interference."

"Jean-Claude appears to be happy enough with her."

"That's all that matters," Mick said. "As long as he is happy in his marriage, we can't complain."

* * *

JENNIFER O'CONNOR SULLIVAN GLARED at her husband Jean-Claude as he tucked her into their bed carefully.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Jean-Claude ignored her and continued to see to her comfort. He resembled his father to a remarkable degree, and thusly like his grandfather Colm.

"You are a bastard," Jennifer sneered. "You think you're handsome and smart and debonair because you work at the paper, but you're nothing more than the son of an unemployed lighthouse keeper."

Jean-Claude ignored her again. She glanced at the water vase on her night stand. Without hesitating, she grabbed the vase and smashed it down viciously on her husband's head.

He staggered and then stumbled to his knees. He clutched at his head, feeling the wet mixture of blood and water. *His own blood.*

He stood to his feet, looking down at his wife. She appeared pleased with herself, returning his stare with a small smile.

"You're a crazy bitch," he muttered.

"Oh grow up! Don't start bleating about how I abuse *you*," she taunted him. "Who in this town could believe a man - a *real* man - would let his wife intimidate him?"

Jean-Claude still held his hands to his head. "You need help, Jen."

"What I need is peace and quiet," she exclaimed. "You're no help at all. Leave me alone, for the love of God."

Jean-Claude left the room gladly. He walked down the narrow hallway to the small kitchen, where he found a tea towel and pressed it to the wound on his head. Then he went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Removing the tea towel, he inspected the damage. There was a thin cut on his left temple, but he didn't think it was worth a trip to the doctor. Not this time, anyway.

He had known Jennifer since they were young children. She was the granddaughter of Patrick O'Connor, one of the four men John Larkin hired in New York off the boat from Ireland in 1881. In high school, Jennifer and Jean-Claude became good friends, although by the time they graduated their relationship took a romantic turn.

She had been sweet and lovely then, with long blonde hair and large blue eyes. She was a happy person, full of humor and kind deeds. After their wedding a year ago, Jennifer seemed content to throw herself into their marriage with enthusiasm. She enjoyed fixing up their small cottage on Curry Street while Jean-Claude worked at the *Gazette*. Although their home was small and fairly bland, she kept the two bedrooms clean and cheerful with flowered wallpaper, fresh linens and small bowls of chopped cinnamon and vanilla. The kitchen was spotless, even down to the drab olive color of the walls. Jennifer added little touches here and there - frilly white lace curtains and decorative place mats on the table - and she was a superb cook. Their living room window faced the tiny front yard and Curry Street. Most evenings they would sit and read after dinner, or talk about their respective days.

Jennifer suffered her first miscarriage four months after their wedding. Afterward, she developed extreme mood swings. She would strike out at Jean-Claude with no warning but with increasing regularity, once breaking his finger when she tried to pull his wedding ring off. He had gone to the hospital then, explaining to the attending doctor he had caught his finger in a cupboard door.

She became pregnant again, and her moods seemed to settle. But she miscarried a second time, and the hostility began anew. When Jean-Claude tried to talk to her about her hysteria, Jennifer refused to acknowledge she had a problem, instead blaming him for her reactions. Jean-Claude was too embarrassed to ask her doctor about the circumstances he found himself in, so he continued to live in shameful fear of his wife. The idea of divorcing her never entered his mind. They were married for life, whether the union was miserable or not.

Now she had miscarried a third time within a year. Jean-Claude dreaded what the coming months would bring.

The telephone rang, startling Jean-Claude. Leaving the towel on the bathroom sink, he returned to the kitchen and picked up the wall receiver.

"Jean-Claude, it's mother," Layla said. "How is Jennifer doing?"

Jean-Claude tried to keep the frustration from his voice. "She's very depressed, as you can imagine. I just got her settled into bed."

"Your father and I would like to come and see her," Layla continued. "Would tomorrow morning be convenient?"

Jean-Claude hesitated. He couldn't allow his parents to see his injury. "Why don't you give her a couple of days before coming over? She needs to rest so she can recover fully."

"Very well," Layla said, sounding surprised. "Please give her our love, and tell her we'll stop by in a few days for a visit."

"Thank you, mother."

Jean-Claude sat at the kitchen table after replacing the telephone receiver. He looked around the room and frowned at the mess. There were dirty dishes in the sink, crumbs on the floor and newspapers strewn all over the table. In her right mind, Jennifer would be horrified by the disarray.

He stood from the table. He was going to clean up before going to bed. He wanted a good night's sleep before returning to work at the *Gazette* tomorrow. When Jennifer was out of sorts, he usually slept on the lumpy couch in the living room.

Before he could move, a blood-curdling scream rent the air. Jean-Claude froze, recognizing Jennifer's wail. "*Oh God, what is it now?*" he thought in a panic.

He raced into the hallway, and then heard a second scream. He stopped short near the bathroom, seeing his wife standing at the sink. He came to the doorway. She looked at him, her head moving with a twitching motion.

"What is it, Jen?" he asked. "What's wrong?"

There were tears streaming down her face. She had the bloody tea towel in her hand, holding it out to him. "What have I done?" she sobbed. "The blood . . . it's like the color of roses. Is it *mine*? Is it the baby's? Or is it yours?"

Jean-Claude wanted to go to her, but he was uncertain. If he held her in his arms, would she turn on him as she had so many times before? He kept his distance. "It's my blood," he said quickly.

She threw her head back and let out another slow-building squall. She took the tea towel and began rubbing it over her face, her chest, her belly.

He was shocked by the display. Jennifer had lost her mind, he realized with devastating clarity. *She was completely barmy.*

He went to her then, and she collapsed in his arms, dropping the bloodied towel to the floor.

* * *

JENNIFER WAS ADMITTED TO the Bangor Mental Hospital later that evening. Jean-Claude was beside himself with worry, but his wife was virtually mindless by the time a doctor sedated her.

"We need to observe her for a couple of days," the doctor told Jean-Claude. "It appears your wife had some sort of breakdown. We need to monitor her behavior before we can determine treatment for recovery."

So Jean-Claude left Jennifer at the hospital in Bangor and returned to Larkin City. There was little he could do to help her at this point. He was still reeling from the memory of her extreme displays of emotional pique as he parked in front of his parents' house on Larkin Harbor.

Mick and Layla were sitting on the porch. Jean-Claude looked at them from his Ford Model-T, suddenly overwhelmed by sensations of comfort and security. No matter what happened, he knew he could rely on his parent's unconditional love and support. After the day he had just experienced, he was grateful for the safe haven.

Layla knew something was wrong when her son walked toward the porch. Even Mick seemed taken aback by Jean-Claude's appearance.

"He looks like hell," Mick said bluntly. "Like he hasn't slept in days. And where on earth did he get that cut on his forehead? Do you think he's been brawling? That's like not him."

Jean-Claude stepped onto the porch and took a chair between his parents. Then his flow of emotions came to the surface, as if he could finally allow them to, and he started to sob, leaning over and placing his head in his hands.

Layla was alarmed. She touched Jean-Claude on the shoulder, feeling the cries rack his body. "My God, darling, what happened?"

"I had to . . ."

"It's all right, son," Mick spoke up. "Take your time. Here, have a sip of ale. It will help settle your nerves."

Jean-Claude took the glass of ale with shaking hands and drained the amber liquid. He handed the glass back to his father and then leaned back in the chair. His parents waited expectantly.

"Jen had a nervous breakdown," Jean-Claude finally said, his voice dry and cracked. "She was depressed after the miscarriage, and started screaming and throwing things. I took her to Larkin Hospital, but the doctor in the emergency room suggested I go to the Bangor Mental Hospital. So I did. The doctor at the mental hospital sedated her, and told me he wants to observe her for a few days before offering a diagnosis and treatment." He left out that his wife had been abusing him since her first miscarriage. He was somehow ashamed to admit it, and did not want to worry his parents further.

"The poor dear," Layla exclaimed, reaching over to hug her son. "Her miscarriage was bad enough, but then to fall apart on top of it all . . ."

"Is there anything we can do?" Mick asked, stunned by his son's revelations but feeling he was leaving select details from his narrative.

Jean-Claude shook his head. "I'm supposed to go back to Bangor in a few days to talk to the doctor, if not sooner. I'm returning to work tomorrow. I want to try and be as normal as possible to keep my own head, you know? Maybe if I can keep busy I won't worry about poor Jen so much."

"Do you need help at home?" Layla questioned.

"I'm okay, truly. I need to go home and get some sleep."

"I insist you come in and eat something," Layla said firmly. "You can always sleep in the guest room. There's no need to go home to an empty and dark house. Stay here tonight, darling."

Jean-Claude accepted gratefully. "Thank you. I was hoping you'd say that."

After a hot meal of beef steak, boiled potatoes, sweet peas, thick Irish soda bread with butter and sliced cheese and apples, Jean-Claude felt replenished but completely exhausted. He went to the guest room and fell asleep almost instantly. The emotional tumult from the past few days left his mind and body as he rested in the secure comfort of his parent's home.

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS: Excerpt from Chapter Six

*Spring 1929
Larkin City, Maine*

COLM SULLIVAN WAS FEELING his age shortly after his 69th birthday in March 1929. He had led a rather quiet life since the death of John Larkin two years earlier. Colm kept his cottage in Larkin City, whiling away his days with painting and reading. He wrote weekly letters to his youngest son Aidan, a Catholic priest serving in Toronto, Canada, and once a week Colm's oldest son Mick stopped by the cottage to visit with his wife Layla. On occasion, Mick's son Jean-Claude came to see his grandfather with his wife Jennifer or his new best friend Mason Berger. Colm usually rustled up a big pot of Irish stew, which Jean-Claude and Mason seemed to enjoy immensely.

Colm had not been to the Larkin estate since John's funeral. He was tired of funerals, having just attended the service for Lizbeth Bisiker at Larkin Cemetery. John's mistress was now gone, as if God was running through Colm's generation. He had no reason to go the mansion, although he sometimes felt the desire to see Molly's grave.

Claude Mondoux came to Larkin City every Saturday for supplies, as he had done for years, and he always came to see Colm. The two usually had lunch together at Colm's cottage, or they sometimes went to Bruno's Café for a hearty meal.

Claude and Colm were the best of friends, yet they rarely mentioned the past or Molly Larkin since Nigel's funeral. Claude knew Molly still haunted Colm's mind. It was an unspoken knowledge. Colm had been a dutiful and affectionate husband to his wife Maureen until her death twenty years ago, but Molly had always been on the peripheral edges of their marriage. Maureen had been aware of this of course, yet she loved Colm until her dying day.

* * *

COLM'S TWO-STORY COTTAGE was located at the end of Cove Hollow Circle in Larkin City. The cottage was clapboard slate-gray, with two chimneys and a fenced rear garden. The interior was pleasingly decorated in eggshell blues and pale greens, with pale yellow wallpaper and comfortably cushioned window seats.

One morning in early April Colm set up his easel in the garden behind his cottage. It had rained earlier, and the drops fell heavily on the grass, shrubs and flowers. The sun broke through the clouds, gradually dissipating the liquid bubbles of rain, creating a persistent drip amongst the foliage.

Colm was painting his image of the garden, a collection of lilac bushes, roses, tulips, peonies, and larkspur. It was a riot of color, and Colm loved nothing better than to convey the sight with splashes on his canvas.

He stored his finished artwork in a spare room inside the cottage. Aside from portraits he had given to John Larkin and members of his own family, Colm kept all of his paintings, rarely showing them to anyone. It wasn't because he was insecure about his talent - he knew the art was good - but he had no desire to become part of a showcase to

promote his work. He painted for the enjoyment of it, not the possible financial windfall it might provide. He was also mindful of the terms of John Larkin's will. Some of the portraits depicted the relationship between him and Molly, and were therefore not suitable for public consumption.

All finished works were well-organized in wooden crates, carefully separated by large pieces of thick tissue paper. One box held miniatures he had painted over the years: some of Molly, but mostly of his children and grandchildren. Bigger portraits, such as landscapes, lighthouses, gardens and other people were in tall, slender crates.

Colm continued to work, humming to himself as he deftly stroked the canvas with his paintbrush. He had been painting for the better part of an hour when all of a sudden he felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. Someone was in the garden, watching him.

He laid the brush on the easel ledge, setting his paint board face-up on the garden table next to him. He wiped his hands on a small towel tied to one of the belt loops on his trousers.

"Can I help you?" he asked without turning around.

Silence greeted him.

Colm sighed, standing up from his chair. He turned around, expecting to see a vagrant standing in his garden. Instead, the vision before him took his breath away and set his heart pounding with fear.

It was Molly Larkin, looking like she did the last time he saw her . . . *forty-three years ago*.

Colm blinked his eyes, willing the image of her away. But when he opened his eyes, she was still there.

She was staring at him, her regard expressionless. There seemed to be a white, muted fringe around her figure, as if she were suspended in time. She was hollow-cheeked, pale and thin just as she had been on the last night of her life, but her beauty was still haunting. The hood of her dark green cloak was thrust back and resting on her shoulders. He looked at her hands, which held open the cloak, and he could see they were still bony and blue-veined.

"What do you want?" Colm cried, grabbing the back of his head with his left hand. "You're dead, for pity's sake. Am I losing my mind? Are you here for a reason?"

She smiled then, her lips parting slightly. "You are not losing your mind," she said in a cool whisper. "I'm only here because you want me to be here. I waited a long time to hear your voice."

Colm shook his head. "*Nonsense*. I don't want you here."

"Your thoughts brought me here," she said gently. "You've thought about me ever since I fell from the cliffs, haven't you Colm?"

He turned away from her, trying to convince himself he was having a hallucination, but then the cold caress of her hand smoothed over his shoulder.

"Don't be scared, Colm. I'm not here to hurt you."

"But you're dead," he insisted. "And you didn't just fall from the cliffs. You threw yourself onto the rocks at Banshee Point."

"All true. Please, Colm, look at me."

He turned again and found her only inches away from him. He was weak at the knees, terrified by her presence.

Molly smiled again. "That's better. There is nothing to fear, Colm. When I died, you and I weren't really through with one another. Before my last night on earth, you went on with your life while I lived in despair, true, but there was never a proper end for us. My father saw to that, with his almighty interference and righteousness. You were forced into a marriage with my maid to save face for our children."

Colm found the courage to face her ethereal image, meeting her eyes for the first time. "My marriage to Maureen may have been a convenience at first, but I loved her in the end."

"Like you loved me?" Molly questioned.

He was defeated. "No. There was never the love . . . nothing like I felt for you."

"That's better," she said, gladness in her wraithlike eyes. She glanced at his hair, his hands, and his body. "You've held up remarkably well, Colm. If only my father had left us to our own devices, we could be alive together right now, enjoying our twilight years in peace."

Every time she spoke, Colm could feel her icy breath on his face. Was it because she was dead, and as eternally cold as the earth? He still felt as light as air, as if he were in the middle of a surreal dream. "You're dead, so you must be seeing your father in the confines of heaven. Have you talked to him, confronted him with your anger?"

Her eyes grew dark, almost turning black. "What makes you think I went to heaven?" she countered in a whisper.

Colm recoiled in horror, perspiration forming on his brow. "You came from hell?" he asked, trepidation in his voice.

"That's one theory," she said softly, her non-earthly wisp of a voice sending a shiver through his body. She evaded a direct answer to his question. "I'm Catholic, and I killed myself. What other logical conclusion is there to my ultimate fate?"

Colm's eyesight dimmed and he felt his limbs turn to water. Turning away from her, he found his chair by the easel and sat down.

His brain rattled: *"I'm talking to Molly Larkin, who is fresh from hell to see me . . ."*

* * *

COLM WASHED HIS FACE vigorously in the bathroom sink in the cottage. He cupped running water and doused himself over and over again. Finally, he stopped, gripping each side of the sink with his hands. He raised his head slowly and looked at his face in the mirror.

He was pale, grimly ashen. "My God, I look old," he said aloud. "When did *that* happen?"

Shaking his head, he grabbed a white towel from a wooden rack next to the sink. He rubbed his face dry and then ran his fingers through his silver hair.

He went to the kitchen and put the tea kettle on the stove to boil. He avoided looking out the window into the back garden, instead assembling a small tray with a cup and saucer, a spoon, sliced lemon and a small pitcher of cream. He sliced a few pieces of fresh zucchini loaf, given to him just a few days ago by Claude, setting the small delectables on a white china platter.

Colm hesitated, and then added a second cup and saucer.

"I've either drifted into the netherworld, or I did indeed see Molly," he said aloud, pondering his actions. Most of his fear was gone now. "Have I grown dotty in my old age, seeing Molly because I wish to? Or was she really there? Is it my time to go, is she here for me? But I did nothing to warrant a trip to hell."

He placed the teapot on the tray and left the kitchen, making his way back to the garden. A few yards from his easel was a small, round oak table with little benches encircling it. Colm set the tray down and poured tea into the cups. Then he turned around and looked toward his easel.

She was there, sitting in the chair he vacated earlier. She looked angry. "What took you so long?" she snapped, her voice still coming in a silvery whisper.

Colm gestured toward the table. "Tea, my lady?" he asked. Then he thought: *"Am I simply going with the train of my disintegrating mind, or is she really sitting there, madder than hell at me?"*

Molly rose from the chair, smoothing down her dark blue skirt and the surrounding cloak. She seemed to glide over the grass, coming to stand in front of him. He felt the coldness in the air again.

"Tea?" she questioned, her anger gone. "I haven't had a decent cup of tea in ages. I would be delighted."

They spent the afternoon sitting at the oak table, rarely speaking. They simply gazed at one another, sipping their tea and enjoying the spring sea breezes that washed over them. Colm nibbled on the zucchini loaf, but Molly desired none.

Shadows fell across the garden as late afternoon approached. Colm cleared off the table, placing the empty tea cups on the tray.

"I have to go in now," he said casually, looking at her in the quickly fading light.

She smiled at him. "I know. Don't worry, you'll see me again soon enough."

* * *

MOLLY ONLY CAME WHEN Colm was alone, never appearing when he had other guests. When Mick and Layla were visiting, or when Claude came to lunch on Saturday, Molly seemed to vanish into thin air. It was the same when Jean-Claude and Jennifer stopped by on occasion.

Molly was only available to Colm, and no one else.

She did not appear every day. Sometimes a week would pass, and Colm would slip back into his normal routine. Then, out of the blue, Molly would be there, wearing the same gown and cloak, and bringing with her the now familiar glimmer of wintry air. She would watch him paint, or prepare a pot of tea. She never accepted food, but seemed to relish in a hot cup of tea.

Colm questioned his sanity every time he saw Molly. He was convinced he was slipping in his old age, but she seemed so real to him, so tangible, that he eventually dismissed encroaching senility. He was hesitant to tell anyone about his visions of Molly, certain they would think him stark raving mad. He was growing accustomed to her presence, her whispery voice, and he began to look forward to her visits. They were now like an old married couple, comfortable in familiarity and quietness, the way it should have been from the start.

Then Claude came to lunch one Saturday in mid-summer, bringing with him two zucchini loaves and two bottles of sangria wine. Colm prepared lamb chops, mint jelly, a big bowl of buttered peas, boiled potatoes and a plentiful board of fresh bread, cheese and sliced apples. Colm had taken to baking his own bread every week, and it was always an offering when Claude came to lunch.

The two friends ate in the garden, enjoying the mild heat of the summer day. They were halfway through the delicious meal before they began talking.

"How is everyone at the mansion?" Colm wanted to know.

"They are well for the most part," Claude replied, dabbing his mouth with one of Colm's white linen napkins. He scooped up another forkful of boiled potato. "Monsieur Roddy is feeling his age like the rest of us. Madame Sascha spends most of her days in the sitting room, knitting and drinking tea."

"Patrick and Colleen?"

Claude shrugged. "Those two, I never know what to make of them. Monsieur Patrick is an *aucune fiche pour* - how do you say? - a cold fish. Madame Colleen is bringing herself into the forefront of the family, let me tell you. In her own subtle yet sweet way she has taken over the running of the household with an absolute finesse."

"I've heard about her charity work," Colm commented. "She is doing great things for Larkin City."

"*Oui*. She spends much time working on her charities. She is to be commended."

"Does she have any time left for the wee ones, Brian and Rory?"

"Impossible as it sounds, *oui*. She reserves each morning for the boys. They play in the garden, they swim at the beach, and they climb to the top of the lighthouse. Madame Colleen wants them to learn how to cook, so some afternoons she brings Brian and Rory to the kitchen to learn simple dishes from myself or Nicholas."

Colm sipped his wine, replete with the meal. "Interesting. I learned how to cook from necessity, but Colleen sees the need for her sons to know the skill as a matter of course."

Claude leaned forward, his voice carrying a nattering timbre. "Frankly, I think it is a ruse, my friend."

"A ruse for what?" Colm was puzzled.

Claude ripped a piece of bread from the loaf. "I think Madame Colleen fancies Nicholas, and he her. There is an air about them . . . side glances, little smiles . . ."

"Are they having an affair?" Colm asked, enjoying the gossip.

"I don't think so. Not yet, anyway. Monsieur Patrick spends so much time at work, it's only natural Madame Colleen might find the attentions of an attractive young man alluring. But she is too much of a lady to do anything about it." He rolled his eyes dramatically. "The secrets of that old household. The stories keep growing each year, with each life tended to in surreptitious fashion."

"Nicholas feels the same way as Colleen?" Colm was aware of the Larkin secrets, having been part of them since first laying eyes on Molly forty-seven years ago.

"*Oui*. He is in love with Madame Colleen, but he is too refined and aware of proprieties to take another man's wife." Claude smiled. "I have a sense about them, though, just like I did with you and Molly. Only this time, there is no boding of tragedy."

Colm looked down at his plate. The mention of Molly made him think of her recent visits. Their continuing life was a secret, too, mainly because no one would believe him if

they knew the truth. Suddenly, he decided to tell his trusted friend about Molly's ghostly return.

"This may sound insane, or like the mumblings of an old man," Colm began slowly. "But Molly has been coming to me in the last few months. Here in the garden, and inside the cottage."

Claude tried to hide his surprise. "What do you mean, *she has been coming to you*? Does she appear in your dreams?"

Colm pushed his plate away. He trusted Claude implicitly and had no compunction about relating his experiences with Molly.

"At first I thought my mind was finally slipping," Colm began, watching Claude's face for reaction. "But she was there - rather, *here* in the garden. She came one morning in early April while I was painting, and she kept coming back. She intimated she was here because I wished it, and that she came from hell because she killed herself. She looked the same - she wears the same clothes she had on the night she threw herself from the cliffs at Banshee Point."

Claude was alarmed by Colm's ruminations, but he kept his voice even. "And what does Mademoiselle Mary Margaret have to say for herself?"

"She said when she died we weren't really through with one another," Colm replied seriously. "By that I assume she has unfinished business with me. You hear about this sort of thing with ghost stories all the time, but I never thought it to be true, neither with ghosts nor the part about unfinished business. She regrets the events in our relationship, blaming John for most of them. She said if John had left us alone, we could be together now, old and enjoying our twilight years."

"If she's from hell, is it not the devil speaking to you?" Claude blurted out before he could stop himself.

Colm shook his head. "No. She's not on an evil mission, Claude. Don't ask me how I know this; *I just do*. I have this crazy idea she wants me to choose between heaven and hell when my time comes. In order to be with her, I would have to choose hell. I don't think I can do that, even to be with her in eternity."

Claude was speechless. He realized he had to select his words carefully because Colm was talking about what he perceived as a real encounter with Molly. Was it real, or a figment of Colm's aging and wishful imagination? "Are you sure Molly isn't just in your dreams, my friend? Or are you *truly* seeing her?" Claude asked gently.

"I'm seeing her, Claude," Colm insisted. "She's no dream. I see her as I'm seeing you now. However, every time she comes around I always feel a wall of cold air, in her touch and with her breath."

Claude drained his wine glass. He accepted Colm was convinced of Molly's presence, but in reality . . .

He saw the plea in Colm's eyes, the desire to be validated. Claude knew and trusted Colm like a brother; he knew the man would never consciously lie to him. But was he perhaps slipping mentally, losing his mind?

Claude decided to take the safe route. "Do her appearances frighten you?"

Colm seemed relieved, assuming Claude believed him. "Seeing her shocks me, and I was frightened at first, but I am no longer made uneasy by her. Despite the reason she gave me for being here, I still wonder why she is coming around now. Why wait all of these years? Does it mean I'm getting ready to die, that she's come to help me make a choice?"

"She said she was from hell," Claude pointed out again. "That is not the place for you."

"My biggest sin was with Molly," Colm said softly. "You know that better than anyone."

"Your so-called sin with her is not enough to send you to the burning damnation of hell," Claude said impatiently. "You did right in the end. You married Madame Maureen and provided a home for Mick and Johnny. You won't go to hell for that."

Colm nodded. "I suppose you're right. So if I want to be with Molly, I have to choose hell rather than find my natural way."

"*I don't believe we are having this conversation,*" Claude thought to himself. Aloud, he said: "Well, what will you do?"

Colm stared at Claude. "I don't know, honestly. I just don't know for sure. Not right now. Maybe when the time comes I'll get it right."

"Will you continue to talk to her every day?" Claude asked, desperately concerned that his friend was slipping away from him.

"What else can I do?" Colm was rueful. "It's not like I can ignore her, you know. I could never ignore her, even in life."

The afternoon waned as Claude listened to Colm talk about Molly, his apprehension increasing with each passing minute. He did not have the heart to tell Colm he was dangerously close to dementia or senility. The memories of Molly made Colm seem almost euphoric, and Claude could not wrest that away from him.

Near four o'clock, Claude seized on a lull in the conversation and rose from the garden table. It had been one of the saddest afternoons of his life, and he felt as if he had lost a little piece of his friend in the process.

"I need to get back to the mansion," Claude said as he gazed down at Colm. "We'll do this again next Saturday, *oui*?"

Colm glanced up at his friend. "*Oui*, Claude. We have a standing date, don't we?"

Claude saw the distance in Colm's eyes, the lack of focus. Before he could stop to think about what he was saying, Claude joked. "Say *bonjour* to Mademoiselle Mary Margaret for me."

Colm brightened. "Yes, I will. She always liked you."

Claude walked across the garden until he reached the side gate. He turned to look at Colm once more, the sight in front of his eyes stopping him in his tracks.

Colm was still seated at the garden table, but now there was another figure present. Claude saw a diaphanous image of Molly, looking just like she had before her death. She was standing behind Colm's chair. Claude watched as she reached down and caressed Colm on the shoulders with her fingertips.

Claude blinked his eyes several times, certain he was befuddled after three glasses of sangria. But when he looked again, he witnessed Colm leaning back and gazing up at Molly with a beatific smile on his face.

Claude turned and left the garden, anxious to remove himself from the dreamlike tableau.

He drove back to the mansion slowly, one thought uppermost in his mind. "*Colm isn't crazy, he isn't seeing things. Mademoiselle Molly is actually with him, I saw her with my own eyes. She is real, in this moment.*"

Then a realization struck Claude, collaborating Colm's notion. "*But she is here for his soul. She wants him to choose hell over heaven to be with her in eternity . . .*"

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS:

Excerpt from Chapter Ten

Spring 1935
Larkin City, Maine

PATRICK LARKIN LOVED THE attic in the family mansion. It wasn't a typical attic filled with cobwebs and creeping rodents, but a light and airy place with well-ordered boxes, covered furniture and bric-a-brac located on one end. The floors were of highly polished hardwood, laid with a long Oriental carpet down the center walkway. The attic was cleaned and dusted by maids on a weekly basis, one of the few times Patrick allowed himself to be displaced from the blissfully quiet confines.

The other side of the attic, which was located up a few steps from the entrance doorway, was a vast, unoccupied space. A rounded carpet held a solitary antique chair with a high back and thick armrests. Above was a window that went across the breadth of the ceiling, revealing sunlight in good weather and clouds, rain and snow in bad. It was Patrick's favorite spot, as it had once been Molly Larkin's refuge from the world.

The design of the ceiling window was ingenious, sprung from the mind of John Larkin for the top and final level of his extraordinary home. Patrick would often stare up into the stars, or look out the porthole windows on either side of the attic, watching the mist roll in from the ocean as the automated beacon swept across the estate from the Banshee Point lighthouse.

A rounded, wooden door on the other side of the attic led to the widow's walk on the roof the mansion. Patrick sometimes stood on the dizzying height of the walk to look at Larkin City in the distance, but the view did not impress him. The populace of Larkin City and the township itself no longer held any allure for him.

He was far removed from human contact in the attic, which is what he preferred. The high-grade insulation blocked any and all sounds from the rest of the mansion. He often screamed to release his deep tensions, secure no one else could hear him.

A maid brought his meals, leaving the food on a tray outside the attic door. Shortly after his accident, Patrick built a lavatory in the attic, located just inside the entrance. He purchased a simple double bed that he placed in a corner, but he rarely slept there. Sometimes he went downstairs to his old room to get fresh clothes and the odd book, and every night no matter the weather he took a long walk around the estate grounds, alone. He spent each night at the keeper's cottage, and then made his way back to the mansion in the early morning hours to return to the attic, thus ensuring little human contact.

Patrick felt half a man since the accident at the lumber yard. He had no desire to show his face to the community ever again, especially to the men at the lumber yard. He allowed Gary McCain to run the company, although he kept close tabs by telephone. A courier delivered paperwork and payroll checks to the mansion each week for Patrick's signature. A maid would bring the documents to the door of the attic and then leave. He would take the papers and affix his moniker, and then leave them for the maid to pick up again. It was an odd process, but it worked for him.

No one could penetrate the shield Patrick had surrounded himself with - not Roddy, not Sascha, and not Colleen. Even his children, proof of his former manhood, could not

rouse him. He wanted to be left in peace, and no amount of pressure or cajolement could persuade him otherwise.

* * *

COLLEEN CLIMBED THE SHORT staircase from the fourth floor of the mansion to the attic. She dreaded her mission, but it could not be helped. Patrick had barely spoken two sentences to her since his accident, and yet she still never invaded his lofty sanctuary. Until now.

Their sons, Brian and Rory, aged fifteen and eleven respectively, were finally asking her about Patrick's strange behavior. Although accustomed to their father's long absences in the past due to work, they were now stymied that his constant presence in the house kept him from their lives. Colleen was concerned about their mounting resentment. The only possible solution was to bring the matter to her husband's attention.

She walked up the short steps into the attic, the cloudy day making the area a bit murky but still illuminated from the ceiling window. She saw Patrick sitting in the high-backed chair, his hands on the arm rests. He was staring up at the overhead window, his profile expressionless.

"Patrick?" She spoke softly, with uncertainty.

He started and turned his head to look at her. The shock in his eyes was soon replaced by anger. "What are you doing here?" he snapped.

"I need to talk to you," she replied, finding the courage to be firm. He might expect her to quiver, but she had no intention of giving him the satisfaction.

"You know I don't like to be bothered when I'm up here," he said coldly.

"But you're *always* up here," Colleen countered. "When else can I talk to you?"

He was quiet for a moment, and then he looked away. "Fine. Make it quick, please."

She stepped closer, coming to stand in front of the chair. She saw his body recoil slightly from her proximity, and she realized he was determined to avoid all human touch. Perhaps her mission was pointless after all, but she had to try. "I've been patient with your self-imposed exile," she began, her tone strong yet somehow still gracious. "I've given up trying to help you. I don't care about your peculiarities for myself, but now Brian and Rory are asking questions. They know you're here, holed up in the attic, and they're becoming a bit angry about not seeing you. It's as if you are rejecting them."

Patrick glanced up at her, and she saw the dead emotion in his eyes. She was not reaching him. "What would you have me do?" he asked sardonically. "Play catch with them on the front lawn? Swim with them in the ocean?"

Colleen hated her husband in that moment. He was callous and unfeeling, unable to see past his own miserable existence. His coldness toward her was inconsequential, but his disregard of his own two sons was unforgivable. She forced herself to remain civil. "Can't you just talk to them?" she pleaded. "Act like a normal father. Take an interest in their lives, show them that you care."

"Whatever for?" he snorted with derision. "You've managed quite well on your own. You don't need me to bolster their little egos."

She cringed inwardly, furious at his inference, his subtle plea to be needed. Maybe a few years ago she would have fallen for it, but not now. Patrick no longer had a hold on her.

She lost all respect for him long ago, and considered their marriage one in legal name only. What affection and love she once felt for him had vanished, and it was irretrievable

"I never thought I'd see the day," she said bitterly, losing her cool composure. "You are actually rejecting your own flesh and blood."

"Well, you *are* seeing the day," his tone was dismissive. "I have no use for anyone."

"Rejecting your sons over the loss of your manhood," she spoke again, this time her voice accelerating with anger. "Brian and Rory are not to blame for your delusional insecurities. Why make them suffer for it?"

Patrick narrowed his eyes. "Are you quite finished?"

Colleen whirled away from him, walking toward the stairway. She stopped on the first step. Her scalp tingled, her rage giving her face a clammy sheen. "When did I become nothing to you?" she wanted to know, her voice a whisper.

Patrick wanted to tell her the truth, that he still loved her as he loved their sons, but he could not form the words. The pain and shame of his reality was too crushing, and he could not overcome it.

"What makes you think you were anything to me in the first place?" His voice came like ice, and he regretted the words even as he said them. But in order to keep Colleen away from him, he had to hurt her. "It was my responsibility to carry on the Larkin line, and I've completed my duty. Just be glad you remain my wife, and that you continue to live here as you fiddle with your beloved charities."

She choked back a sob, his cruel words slashing at her confidence. But she was quick, and now was the time to clear the air. "So you don't care what I do?" she asked calmly. "Is that what you're trying to tell me? As long as I leave you to your wretched asylum?"

He was alerted by her words, sensing she was alluding to an important milestone or decision. "Do what you will as long as you don't shame my family," he said with conviction. He watched her guardedly, certain she was hiding something.

"I'll remember that," she retorted. "Do what you will, and I shall do the same."

She could no longer look at him. She ran down the attic stairs, slamming the door behind her.

Patrick returned to his normal stance, leaning his head back to look out the ceiling window again. But this time a lone tear crept out of his left eye, rolling unchecked down his cheek.

* * *

THAT EVENING COLLEEN SAT Brian and Rory down in the drawing room, determined to tell them the truth about their father, albeit buffered with some half-truths. They deserved answers to their questions, to know the reasons why Patrick had virtually deserted them.

She adored her sons, and was proud of their intelligence and good looks. Brian was already tall, with dark hair and eyes. Rory was developing into much the same, but he had paler skin and a cleft in his chin, which Colleen recognized as a trait from her side of the family passed down by her father, the late Dr. Rory McGarren. Both boys looked like Patrick, but she could sense herself in their mannerisms and innate kindness.

Brian and Rory followed their mother into the drawing room after dinner, each of them curious. Colleen did not beat around the bush. She looked at her sons as they sat down on the divan. She faced them in a chair across the coffee table, smiling reassuringly.

"I want to talk to you about your father," she said, successfully keeping all bitterness from her voice. "You know he suffered a terrible accident a few years ago."

Brian and Rory nodded.

"He was hurt physically, but the wounds went deeper than that," Colleen continued.

"What do you mean, mother?" Brian asked.

"The wounds also hurt him mentally," she replied, choosing her words carefully. "The accident took away his ability to be a husband in the physical sense, and this has affected his mind. He doesn't want to show his face to the world, so he stays hidden in the attic."

"What does acting like a husband mean?" Rory wanted to know.

Colleen lowered her eyes. "Performing the sexual act," she answered honestly.

Brian nudged his brother. "We know about the birds and the bees."

"Oh!" Rory exclaimed, comprehending his mother's meaning.

"Your father is in a deep depression that he may never come out of," Colleen said. "He refuses all offers of help from others, including family." Now she had to impart the white lies, the deception saddening her. "Please understand that he loves you, but that he is not able to act like a normal father." She took a deep breath, the lies rising like bile in her throat. "None of this is his fault, or yours."

Both Brian and Rory worshipped their mother, and they took her word to be truth. Patrick had been a non-entity long before his accident, so it was easy for them to accept her story with very little distress. Brian had been the most concerned about his father's peculiarities, but his mother's explanation eased him for the most part. Patrick was an enigma, a remote parent who exuded anything but warmth and affection.

"Okay then," Colleen smiled, proud of their resilience. "Why don't the two of you go to the kitchen and convince Claude to give you an extra slice of zucchini loaf. Then it's time for bed. It's a school day tomorrow, after all."

Brian and Rory kissed their mother before leaving the drawing room to fetch a treat from Claude.

Colleen rose from her chair and poured a brandy at the sideboard. The meeting had gone well, she mused as she went to stand at the French doors. She heard the wind whipping through the foliage in the garden and in the joints of the house. In a brief flash of lightening she saw the waves of the ocean.

"I am free to do as I please as long as I don't shame the Larkin family," she thought. She took a sip of brandy, the warmth of it burning down to her stomach. "What could I possibly do to tarnish myself? I devote my time to charity work, I essentially run the mansion, and I have stood by my husband through thick and thin. But when does my time come? When do I get to achieve my own personal happiness?"

Nicholas Bertrand came into her mind, as he often did. For more than nine years she had nursed an intense attraction for the junior chef, and she knew he felt the same way about her. Daily contact with Nicholas brought lingering glances, discreet conversations and a high awareness between them. For nine years she denied herself and her true feelings because of her marriage, torturing herself with images of Nicholas and his sensual ambience.

Nicholas remained at the mansion year-round, only venturing into the city for supplies. He had never taken a vacation, preferring to spend his holidays in servitude to the Larkin family in order to be near Colleen. His secret but passionate love for her had been barely held at bay for almost a decade.

Colleen drained her brandy, taking the glass with her as she made her way to the kitchen. The foyer was dimly lit by a lamp on the entry table. The house seemed settled as its occupants took their nightly rest.

Nicholas was alone in the kitchen, washing two plates in the sink. Colleen smiled when she saw him with head bent, scrubbing the plates and rinsing them.

She walked to him, setting her brandy glass on the counter. "Do you mind washing one more thing?" she asked sweetly.

Nicholas started, glancing at her. Then he smiled, taking her glass. "Why not? Your sons already left me two dirty dishes with remnants of zucchini loaf."

"Where is Claude?"

"He retired early," Nicholas replied as he washed her glass. "I think his arthritis was bothering him more than usual tonight."

"And what of you?" Colleen asked bravely, leaning against the counter. "What are your plans for the evening?"

He slowed in his chore, pausing to glance at her again. "I was going to read for a bit, and then go to bed."

"Can I join you?"

He was taken aback, certain he misunderstood her. "Do you mean you'd like to join me in reading a book?"

"Yes. And whatever else you have in mind."

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS: Excerpt from Chapter Sixteen

*August-September 1948
Paris, France*

TIME HAD BEEN SOMEWHAT unforgiving to Jean-Claude Sullivan and Mason Berger. Their first years in France had been comfortable ones, filled with prosperity, an endless round of parties to enhance their social visibility, and frequent sensual interludes.

Jean-Claude wrote an advice column for the evening newspaper *Le Monde*, while Mason published a blue novelette titled *Amour Interdit* ("Forbidden Love") in 1943. The book was a scathingly honest portrayal of two women deeply in love. Mason reversed the gender in his fictional account, but the words, actions and love scenes were purely Jean-Claude and Mason. The novel sold well despite its scandalous content, and could be found in fashionable as well as backstreet book shops. It made Mason the toast of the underbelly for quite some time, a role he relished with great aplomb.

Jean-Claude and Mason rented a sumptuous flat on Passy Street in the Bois de Boulogne Auteuil area of Paris. The newly *au courant* quarter housed many from the Paris stylish set. Before long, Jean-Claude and Mason were well-known for their eccentric yet lavish parties. They attracted echelons of high society, successful artists, writers and those of their own persuasion. Their widely known yet rarely acknowledged sexual orientation drew other men like a magnet, although rendezvous were conducted with the utmost discreetness-in-hand under the noses of established social keepers.

But Jean-Claude and Mason's love of fine wines, rich food and fancy digs soon sent their fortunes awry. Jean-Claude's heavy drinking and experimentation with opium intensified, making him unreliable and lethargic. After failing to meet several deadlines for *Le Monde*, he lost his job. And despite the popularity of his novelette, Mason could not seem to bring forth any new literary masterpieces.

Eight years after arriving in Paris, Jean-Claude and Mason accepted defeat and moved into a smaller flat in Saint Germain des Pres, a bohemian neighborhood that was filled with jazz musicians, struggling artists, hopeful writers, prostitutes and drug addicts. The two men survived on small pension checks, erratic royalties from Mason's publisher and the occasional freelance article written by Jean-Claude.

They stayed close to Rue Guénégaud, sharing their one bedroom apartment that also included a small private terrace, a kitchen, a bathroom and a cramped sitting room. Despite their financial woes, they brought with them the furnishings from their flat on Passy Street. Over time, however, they were forced to pawn various possessions for cash. Still, they maintained an air of genteel elegance, although somewhat frayed around the edges.

One Sunday morning in late August 1948, Jean-Claude and Mason enjoyed a breakfast of warm croissants and coffee on their terrace as they read *Le Figaro*, their newspaper of choice since Jean-Claude was fired from *Le Monde*. Birds were perched and chirping on tree branches next to the terrace, and the two men could hear people walking and talking on the street below as they went about their business.

"We should take a walk to the Quai de Conti this afternoon," Mason said vaguely from behind the political section of *Le Figaro*. "It's a beautiful day, no? *Ein vollkommener Tag für ein Picknick*."

Jean-Claude bit into his third croissant. "I don't know, Mason darling. I'd rather just sit here on the terrace, watching the people go by."

Mason looked across the table at his beloved. Jean-Claude was pale this morning, the wispy remnants of his once-blond-hair exposing a reddened pate. His eyes were puffy and heavy-lidded, and his hands shook as he took a sip of coffee.

Mason loved Jean-Claude unconditionally. They were both getting older, but years of dissipation had accelerated the aging process. Jean-Claude was only forty-one, yet he looked sixty years old. Mason felt every second of his fifty-two years in his arthritic joints, hip degeneration and failing eyesight.

Suddenly, their white Persian cat strolled out onto the terrace, her tail swishing high in the air. She gave a soft, mewling sound, a signal she wanted to be fed. Mason leaned down to scratch the feline on the head, but she pulled away in disdain.

Jean-Claude laughed. "I see Madame Larkin is in fine form as usual. Give her some cream, Mason. Royalty commands the best."

The cat was so-named because the two men felt their cat was regal, pompous and condescending beyond measure, much as they viewed members of the Larkin family back in Maine. Yet they loved their little feline to bits, treating her like a daughter. They called her "Le Petit Mademoiselle" when she was naughty.

Mason had just poured cream into a small bowl when they heard a soft rap on the front door.

"Drat," Mason muttered as he set the bowl down on the ground for the anxiously waiting Madame. "I'd rather not entertain any guests today. A nice afternoon stroll would have been nice, but we don't have to talk to people on the street. If they come to our door, we are forced to be polite, to offer *erfrischung* – refreshment . . ."

"When do we have company since moving to Rue Guénégaud?" Jean-Claude asked as he rose from the table. "The last time we had proper guests was two years ago last Christmas."

Leaving Mason on the terrace with Madame, Jean-Claude walked slowly through the crowded small apartment to the front door.

When he beheld the presence of his son George, Jean-Claude was speechless with shock. He never expected to see George again, but his eyes drank in the image anyway. Jean-Claude also felt a wave of pleasure wash over him, a somewhat euphoric sense of happiness that made him giddy.

George was fresh-faced and tall, his blue eyes sparkling. His blond hair was close-cropped, with razor-straight short fringes protruding along the top of his forehead. Jean-Claude was reminded of himself, as well as Colm and Mick Sullivan all rolled into one.

"George?" Jean-Claude finally asked, leaning weakly against the door frame. "Is it really you?"

"Papa, it's me," George grinned, taking his father into a warm embrace. Jean-Claude felt his son's physical strength, his stocky frame, and was assailed with a sense of pride.

"Come in," Jean-Claude gasped out when George released him. "Please come in."

George picked up a small suitcase from the hallway floor, a battered yellow piece of luggage Jean-Claude instantly recognized. It was the same traveling bag Jennifer used on their honeymoon twenty-one years ago.

Jean-Claude shut the door after his son entered. "How on earth did you manage a trip to Paris?" he wanted to know. "Certainly your mother didn't approve. Or did you even tell her? Has Larkin City changed? Are you working, or going to school?"

George laughed, holding up his hand. "One question at a time, Papa. My return flight to the States isn't until the second week in September, so we have plenty of time to catch up."

Jean-Claude brightened. "How wonderful! Mason and I can show you the sights of Paris, and we can become reacquainted again." He touched George on the arm, almost hesitating before he spoke. "Come to the terrace and meet my dear friend Mason, and then we'll have a bit of breakfast after your long journey."

* * *

IT DIDN'T TAKE GEORGE long to fully understand the true nature of his father's relationship with Mason Berger. He was slightly repulsed by it but not overly shocked, having suspected Jean-Claude's inclinations for a long time just by the tone of his letters and the affectionate mentions of Mason. The more time he spent with the two men, the more he realized how instinctive their relationship was.

Jean-Claude and Mason seemed to flow together. They finished each other's sentences, or they sniped at each other playfully, just like an old married couple. In truth, the two men were married in a spiritual sense, their unconditional love evident in every touch and vocal gesture.

George brushed his initial repulsion aside, and soon found himself enjoying their company. He was not inclined toward their sexual preference - had never thought about it, actually - but he did appreciate their frequent bitchy humor and embellished repartee.

Jennifer Sullivan would be aghast if she knew her son had ditched the French Club tour to be with his father for the duration of the trip, and that Mrs. Tremblay agreed to the subterfuge because she knew the history of Jennifer and Jean-Claude, having attended high school with the former many years ago. Marie Tremblay had never liked Jennifer O'Connor during their teenaged years, and did not like her as Jennifer Sullivan, either, although she took great pains to hide that fact for George's sake. She was glad to be a part of George's long-awaited reunion with his father, however brief it might be.

George had no illusions about his mother, or bitterness that she tried to protect him from knowledge of his father. Now that he grasped Jean-Claude's lifestyle, it was understandable that she wanted to shield him from it. Jennifer had problems of her own to be sure - she had never remarried, had no interest in dating men, and preferred her nightly tittle - but she was a good woman at heart, and he could not have asked for a better mother.

After George polished off the croissants and coffee, Mason cleared the table and left the terrace, giving father and son time alone. Madame curled up in Jean-Claude's lap, while George lit a cigarette.

"How is your mother doing?" Jean-Claude asked. "Even though we are no longer together, I still care about what happens to Jennifer. I hope you believe that."

"Mother is well," George replied, blowing a smoke ring into the air. "You'd never know she just passed her thirty-seventh birthday. She's as spry as a young girl, although as plump as a hen. Mother spends a lot of time with her church group, and every spring she plants a huge vegetable garden. She's a great collector of all things feline as well - cat figurines, garden statues, tissue boxes, lamps - oh, you just name it."

Jean-Claude nodded. "And you? Do you have a girlfriend?"

George's eyes lit up. He crushed out his cigarette in a small glass ashtray on the table. "Her name is Susan O'Reilly. We've known each other since second grade. Over the summer we fell in love," he grinned, glancing at his father. "We have one more year of high school left, but I think I'm going to ask her to marry me anyway. I thought about it on the flight over here, all the way. Susan and I are like soul mates. We know each other so well, and I can't imagine being with anyone else."

"That sounds wonderful," Jean-Claude said with all the sincerity he could muster, although he was wary that his son was placing all his eggs in one basket at such a tender age. "Tell me about her."

"Susan's father owns a chain of restaurants known as *The Sand Trap*, and he is rather affluent. They live in Harbor Hill. They seem to like me. Mother likes Suz, too, and thinks she is a smashing girl." George lit another cigarette, leaning back in the chair. "Suz and I want the same things, you know. We are on the same wavelength."

Jean-Claude stroked the top of Madame's head, listening to the cat purr contentedly. He glanced at his son, who was looking heavenward as he smoked his cigarette. "Have you decided to go to college? Or are you just going to stay in Larkin City after high school and find work?"

George shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. I'm not really good at anything in particular. I mean, I know how to do a lot of different things, but I can't seem to focus on just one. I can fix a car, unstop a plugged sink drain, or I can build tables and chairs from piles of lumber, but all of that won't get me far, will it? I need to figure out how to make a living, but nothing has come to me yet."

"It sounds like you are underrating yourself," Jean-Claude observed. "If you know how to do many things, then you are valuable in many ways. You could offer yourself as a handyman in Larkin if you want to stay there and get married, or you could go to college and perhaps a true vocation will come to you there. You are young, George, and the possibilities are endless. But grab opportunities as you can, take them and run, because time marches swiftly and snatches away your choices."

George looked at his father thoughtfully, tapping the ash of his cigarette into the ashtray. "I do want to stay in Larkin," he admitted. "I love the place, but maybe I could talk Susan into going with me to school in Portland, or Boston even. We could get married and I can go to college anyway, and then when I'm done we can move back to Larkin and get our life going."

Jean-Claude smiled. "It sounds like a plan. A very good plan. Whatever makes you happy, George. Grab life with gusto, and take happiness where you can find it."

Mason returned to the terrace, having changed into khaki slacks and a white cotton shirt. He addressed his beloved: "Since your son is here, will you finally agree to leave this apartment and show him some of the sights?"

Jean-Claude laughed, causing Madame to hiss and jump from his lap. She flicked her tail and waltzed back into the flat. "You win, Mason, Let's go."

George grinned. "I'm game. Where to?"

* * *

GEORGE FELL IN LOVE with Paris during his two-week stay. True to their word, Jean-Claude and Mason showed him the sights. He saw the Eiffel Tower, viewed popular Picasso and Dalí exhibits at the Musée de l'Orangerie, took strolls along the River Seine and underneath the Arc de Triomphe, walked about the Place de la Concorde, visited Notre Dame, took in an opera at Opéra National de Paris Garnier, and listened to Mason talk about the liberation of France from the Germans in 1944.

"I am German, yes," Mason told George one evening as the three men sat on the terrace at Rue Guénégaud, drinking red wine and smoking cigarettes. "But I deplore Hitler, and hate being associated with the German race because of him. Those first few years in Paris, I tried to hide my accent but to no avail. Luckily, our friends didn't seem to mind my origins, and took me at face value, knowing I would never support the actions of a complete *verrückt* – a lunatic." He shook his head, taking another sip of wine. "For God's sake, some of our best friends are *Jüdisch* - Jewish, no? How could I support the inhumane action, the atrocities practiced by Herr Hitler?"

George soaked it all in, enjoying the conversations, the trips around Paris, but most of all getting to know his father again. Jean-Claude was a complex man, his son realized. Intelligent, articulate and with a sense of humor, the elder Sullivan also possessed traits that were typically abhorred by others but seemed to blend in effortlessly with his other quirks: he was priggish and spoiled, and expected Mason to take care of unpleasant details, making reality a better place to be. Mason accepted Jean-Claude as he was, warts and all, and even seemed gladly willing to be the one who nurtured and comforted his partner without expectation of the same in return.

George realized Jean-Claude did the best he could with what he had, which limited his capabilities as a father. George felt no resentment for the lack of a father figure during the course of his adolescence. In fact, he was proud of the uniqueness of his father and his lifestyle, that he had the courage to do as he pleased and damn the consequences. Jean-Claude Sullivan lived life as he saw fit, with no apologies.

Near the close of his visit to Paris, George's thoughts returned to his life in Larkin City. Granted it would seem dull and boring when compared to his time in France, but he was looking forward to getting back to Susan, of asking her to marry him. They would finish out their last year of high school together, get married, and then he would apply to colleges in Portland and Boston. Surely by then he would know what he wanted to do with his life, if only vaguely, and college would fill in the rest of the blanks.

George spent the night before his departure from Paris with Jean-Claude and Mason on the terrace of their flat. The three men dined on chicken and dumplings, and drank substantial amounts of wine. It was during the meal that Jean-Claude broached the subject of money with his son.

"I heard through the grapevine that my father Mick, your grandfather, died in 1945," he said as he poured more wine into the three glasses. "I'm so very sorry, George. Were you and Mick close?"

George sipped the fresh wine. "Yes, we were. I spent a lot of time with Mick and Granny Layla. I used to go out on the harbor with Mick in the summer when he worked for

the Larkin Harbor Tour Company, which is still going strong by the way. It was awful the way Mick died, you know, he had a sudden heart attack as he was sailing the *Lady Banshee* with a group of tourists from New York City. He was the picture of health before that, so his death was quite a shock."

"I'm so sorry," Jean-Claude repeated, keeping the proper amount of respect in his voice.

Mason was alert at once. He glanced at his lover and saw his mind working. Jean-Claude was not so much concerned with the death of his father or the welfare of his widowed mother as he was with the remaining fortune left behind by Mick Sullivan. He was being circumspect, but he was getting to the point in his own way.

"Didn't Granny Layla write to you, tell you that Mick died?" George wanted to know.

Jean-Claude shook his head. "No. After I left Larkin City, I never heard from your grandparents. I have a few friends left there, and I think the news came to me in a Christmas card a few years ago. I can't recall." He sipped his wine, his eyes on George's face. "How is your grandmother these days? I imagine Mick left her financially secure, considering the Larkin inheritance willed to him years ago."

George popped a dumpling into his mouth, shrugging. "Oh yes, she doesn't have to worry about money, that's for sure. He left me a little bundle, too, although I haven't touched it apart from taking some out to make the trip to Paris." He took another sip of wine. "Granny is doing okay, though. She takes regular excursions to Portland to shop, usually on weekends, and she had her whole house redecorated a few years ago."

"Don't forget, you have another inheritance coming to you," Jean-Claude advised his son in a serious tone, as if his welfare was of the utmost importance to him. "In two more years you'll turn eighteen, and it will be time to collect your comeuppance from Grandfather Colm."

"It seems so far away I never think about it," George admitted. "Although fifty thousand dollars would come in handy for Suz and me, you know, for starting our life together. We can buy our own house with that kind of money, and then some. That way I wouldn't have to touch what Mick left me for quite some time." He emphasized his last sentence, looking out the corner of his eye to gauge his father's reaction.

Jean-Claude fingered the stem of his wine glass, his eyes narrowing. Mason quickly gulped down the rest of his wine, setting his glass on the table. He knew his lover was plotting *something*; there was no doubt about it. And it had something to do with getting money out of his son. Mason did not demur, desperate for funds in his own way. The fact that George was here to reconnect with his father, and that Jean-Claude seemed touched by the gesture, was becoming lost in the perpetual need to survive.

"My original inheritance is long gone, of course," Jean-Claude said aloud, while Mason drew in his breath. "One doesn't live in Paris without paying the price."

George pushed his plate aside and lit a cigarette, regarding his father across the table. He had come to realize how financially destitute Jean-Claude and Mason really were in the two weeks he had stayed in their home, and was amused by their attempts to hide the fact. Jean-Claude had not made any moves to ask for a loan, but somehow George knew it was coming now. The subject had not been appropriate until they discussed Mick Sullivan's death.

"I suppose I'm lucky," George said slowly, blowing a smoke ring in the air. "Not only do I have the fifty thousand coming to me from the trust left by great-grandfather Colm, but I have clear access to the three hundred thousand left to me by Grandfather Mick."

Jean-Claude's jaw nearly dropped, while Mason coughed into his wine glass. George enjoyed the reaction, but continued smoking his cigarette in leisure fashion.

Jean-Claude moistened his lips, offering his son a wan smile. "Good Lord, George. That's quite a bit of money. Are you sure it's in a safe place? You know how banks are these days. You need to keep an eye on it so you don't lose it."

"It's still where Mick left it," George said. "In the bank. The interest is piling up quite nicely, thank you."

Mason watched the slight game between father and son, somewhat amused that George played the dolt while Jean-Claude tried his best to cajole financial facts and figures out of him with what he thought was clever finesse.

George stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray. "I can't understand why Mick didn't leave you *something*," he said, drumming his fingers on the table with exaggerated slowness. "You were his only son, after all. He left Granny Layla the bulk of the estate, of course, but I suppose that will come to me one day, too."

"My father did not approve of my lifestyle," Jean-Claude said bluntly, the time for games over in his mind. "I was not worthy because I felt love for another man rather than a woman, as is natural to most people. I was a loyal and giving son until Mick and Layla turned their backs on me, when they found out about my lifestyle. Parents should love their children unconditionally, don't you think? It shouldn't have mattered what I did, they should have loved me through thick and thin. It's not as if I went out and killed someone or robbed a bank, for God's sake."

To Mason's surprise, George agreed. "Yes, Papa, that's the way it *should be*. It was a terrible oversight on the part of Mick and Layla, but I cannot fault them too much because they always treated me with kindness. I can see your point, though, and it's unfair that you should be left out in the cold by your parents' misguided ill will."

Jean-Claude held his breath.

George's happiness at being able to see his father again, combined with the knowledge of Jean-Claude's tendency to excess, gave him a surge of generosity. It was unusual for a son to provide for his father in normal instances, but George had long ago realized his family was not normal, nor were the events of their lives.

Knowing he may never see his father again after leaving Paris, George decided to be more than magnanimous.

"I can send you some money," he said, happy to see his father's eyes light up with glee, and a hint of relief. "I can spare it, since I received what would have probably been yours under normal circumstances. Would you mind terribly accepting money from your son, or would you rather forget about it?"

Jean-Claude's eyes widened with a brief flash of panic, and then he reached across the table to pat his son affectionately on the hands. "I trust your judgment, George. Whatever you think is best. It's your money after all, although you were probably right in assuming it would have been mine if my life had gone differently."

George nodded, rising from the table. "Thank you, father, for trusting me. As soon as I get back to Larkin City, I'll send you a bank draft for thirty thousand dollars. Would that help you and Mason for a little while?"

Mason stifled an exclamation of surprise by covering his mouth, while Jean-Claude kept his cool exterior. "You are more than generous, my son," he said smoothly. "We are eternally grateful for your assistance during this difficult time. Hopefully I can pay you back in due course."

George waved his hand, dismissing his father's words. "No need, Papa. We are family, you and I. Whatever I give you is a gift, not to be repaid like an impersonal bank loan. Perhaps in another year or so I can send more money, if you and Mason require it."

"I would be more than grateful," Jean-Claude said, his voice choking with emotion. "Thank you, George. Thank you so much. You have lifted a great burden from both of us, and we will forever be in your moral debt."

"Ja, danke, George," Mason sputtered, tears of relief dampening his cheekbones. "What a wonderful son you are."

George smiled. "Please, consider it a gift from a grateful son. I have truly enjoyed our time together. It has been priceless, and will be in my memories for many years to come. Please use the money to keep yourselves warm in the winter months, or to treat yourselves to an opera or two at the Garnier, or to get Madame a delicacy from the fish market."

Mason dabbed at his eyes with his table napkin, while Jean-Claude gazed at his son with wonder. "You will never know how you saved us, my son," he said. "You saved us, plain and simple."

"And my thoughts will always be with you, Papa," George said to himself silently, gladdened by the genuine love he saw in his father's eyes.

QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS:

Excerpt from Chapter Nineteen

January 1956
Larkin City, Maine

GEORGE SULLIVAN PACED THE waiting room at Larkin City Hospital, his rubber-soled boat shoes squeaking every so often on the clean floor. He clasped his hands behind his back, his head down in consternation as he passed back and forth in front of his mother on the waiting room couch.

"George, you have to calm down," Jennifer Sullivan told her son. "You're going to wear out the new Perry shoes I gave you for Christmas."

"The hell with my shoes," George snapped. He stopped and pointed in the general direction of the hospital corridor. "My wife is in there giving birth to my first child. How on earth am I supposed to remain calm under the circumstances?"

"Babies are born every day," Jennifer responded. "The doctors know what they're doing, and Linda is strong and healthy."

"My baby isn't born every day, mother," George declared, and then resumed his pacing with renewed fervor.

Jennifer sighed, remaining seated on the couch. It wouldn't do if they were both on the verge of hysteria, so she decided to take the high road. She let her son go on with his nervous pacing, a slight smile playing about her lips.

George had done well for himself in the last few years. He finished high school, even managed a year of general study at Larkin University afterward, and had since taken over as captain of the *Lady Banshee* for the Larkin Harbor Tour Company. Occupying the position his grandfather Mick once held, along with a small handful of other seafaring locals, gave George a sense of history. He seemed happy with his work, although it continued to remain seasonal.

Two years ago George married Linda Bisiker, daughter of Adam Bisiker, after they met at a dance social in Ellsworth. While born in Larkin City, Linda had been raised in Ellsworth by her mother following her divorce from Adam, who went on to marry two more times before his death in 1951.

Small and dainty with dark blonde hair and oval-shaped blue eyes, Linda Bisiker was five years younger than George. She was pretty and affable, her pleasant manner a refreshing change into the lives of George and his mother.

Ever since he returned from Paris in 1948 and discovered Susan O'Reilly had disappeared without a word or a trace, George changed. He took his own apartment near the harbor after graduating from high school, and worked a summer in the fish cannery before attending Larkin University. He continued to send Jean-Claude funds at least once a year, and corresponded with his father regularly. After he began work at the Larkin Harbor Tour Company, George settled into a mundane routine, though still haunted by thoughts of Susan and what he perceived as her deception and abandonment. He was deeply wounded, but knew in his heart that he still loved her despite her betrayal.

Working as the captain of a tour boat was not glamorous by any means, or one that pleased his sensibilities, but it was a money-maker in season. He wanted to be self-

sufficient, stable and secure and not reliant on trust funds and inheritances. He was frugal. He used his money to buy sensible clothes, a reliable car, and to pay his rent on time. He wanted to live on the money he made rather than taking from his inheritance. Giving money to his father was acceptable. The older man needed it to survive, and George was his only salvation.

Meeting Linda was a God-send. She was different than Susan, easier to read and much more amenable to letting him take the lead. She was pretty in a nondescript fashion, and George found himself yearning for the stability of a life with her. He didn't feel the passion and curiosity he once had for Susan - and doubted he would ever feel again - but he was ready to settle for happiness, simplicity and constancy, three things Susan had not given him.

* * *

MICHAEL JOHN SULLIVAN WAS born on 11th January 1956, healthy and screaming with a head full of blond hair. Even as a newborn, he had pale, translucent skin, almost effeminate to a casual observer. His dark blue eyes were spaced close together, long-lashed and striking, as was the child's singular and extraordinary beauty.

George was stunned by his son's perfection. Not only was he healthy in body and spirit, he possessed a startling physical gorgeousness that struck all those who laid eyes on him. Jennifer was taken aback by her grandson's resemblance to Colm Sullivan, never having guessed such splendor could be replicated twice in one family line.

As he was only one year old when Colm died in 1933, George relied on old photographs and paintings to confirm his mother's observations. It was true. Michael was a double for Colm in every physical way. Even Linda was awed by her newborn son, amazed that she had produced such a faultless human specimen.

The day after his son's birth, George held Michael in his arms as he sat in a chair in Linda's hospital room. His wife was dozing, having just nursed the baby. George pushed the chair near the window, which overlooked the front of Larkin City Hospital and the bustle of Main Street. The infant stared up at him as if fascinated, his blue eyes studying George's face with serene calm.

"You'll be important someday, Mike," George whispered to his child. "You'll make something of yourself. You'll find happiness and success where I have fallen short, and where my father before me fell short. You have the world at your fingertips, and the good fortune to have both Sullivan and Larkin blood flowing through your veins. That particular combination of heritage hasn't helped me or my father much, but you are blessed by the angels. You are a God-send from your great-great-grandfather Colm. How can you go wrong with all that in your favor?"

The baby gurgled. George stood from the chair and looked out the window, raising Michael in his arms as if to have a look at the city street down below. "This is the place of your ancestors, Mike, and don't forget it. You have as much right to it as anyone else with the same blood."

"Who on earth are you talking to?" Linda asked groggily from the bed.

George turned around and walked to her side. "I'm telling Michael he is blessed by the angels, and that he'll make something of himself someday."

Linda smiled at her husband. "That's beautiful, George."

George glanced down at his son again, noting the child was growing sleepy-eyed. "I mean every word," he said in wonder. "Michael will be someone important one day, and not one soul in this harbor town will ever forget him."

* * *

August 1958
Larkin City, Maine

AS PHOEBE MCGARREN NEARED her fifty-ninth birthday, she decided it was time to retire. She had proven herself a successful businesswoman for almost forty years, bringing high fashion to Larkin City at affordable prices, at the same time creating a large profit margin for herself. She had tucked away a tidy retirement sum, enough to live comfortably for the rest of her life, and she felt it was time to start reaping the benefits of her long years of hard work.

Despite her age, Phoebe was still formidably attractive and stylish, giving off an elegant air that was a natural part of her now. She had taken to coloring her hair to retain its shade of brown, and she switched to wearing more conservative clothing although she still had the figure to highlight the latest fashions.

"High fashion is for the young," Phoebe told her sister Colleen. "I've had my day in the sun, but now it's time for someone else to take over in my stead."

The obvious choice was Phoebe's long-time assistant, Teresa Davis, a forty-year-old divorced mother of two who had worked at the boutique for more than twenty years, right out of high school. Phoebe wanted to sell her shop but knew Teresa could not afford it in one lump sum, so the younger woman secured a loan with Larkin City Bank & Trust and began to take over the boutique. Glad to hand over the reins - and assured by Teresa that the name of the shop would remain Phoebe's Boutique - Phoebe started plans for her retirement future.

The first order of business was moving out of the apartment located over the shop, so Teresa could move in with her two children.

"Come and stay at the mansion until you find a house in town," Colleen offered. "Take your time and find a place you like. In the meantime, you can keep me company and spend more time with the children. There are plenty of empty rooms in the mansion, you know that."

Phoebe agreed. She began to pack her belongings, smiling with fond remembrance as she tucked away photographs of her cat, Lady Sam, who died of old age many years ago. Not meaning to replace her beloved feline but rather to find another companion, Phoebe bought a stray cat from the local animal shelter, naming the rambunctious white-and-gray kitten Lucinda. The feline, now six years old, would be part of her life no matter where she lived.

It was a warm Sunday afternoon in August when Phoebe packed up the last of her belongings. Colleen was due to arrive with Rory Larkin to transport boxes to the mansion, where Phoebe would stay until she found a suitable house in Larkin City. Placing Lucinda in her pet carrier, Phoebe set the cat by the main door of the apartment and looked around to make sure she hadn't left anything behind.

She was leaving the furniture and kitchen appliances for Teresa, as well as a few houseplants and commercial seascape paintings.

Phoebe had taken almost half of her life - along with all of her memories, good and bad - into boxes and crates, with no clue where they would eventually find a permanent home. The mansion was a good place to start, but she had no intention of living out her days on the good graces of her sister or the Larkin family.

Phoebe was grateful Colleen was eschewing her self-imposed exile to make a rare foray into Larkin City to help her. Colleen was genuinely excited for her sister, happy to see her retiring and relegating hard work aside to enjoy her life. She felt it was about time.

Once Colleen arrived with Rory and a few strong-armed men from the lumber yard to move her belongings, Phoebe and Colleen went from room to room in the apartment to check for items left behind. They stopped in the bedroom, standing in the middle of the room for one last look.

"I spent so much time in here," Phoebe said ruefully. "Now it will be Teresa's little escape from life's pressures."

Colleen put her arm around Phoebe's shoulder. "You're doing the right thing, darling. You need to enjoy life, and not work so hard. I know you're sad, leaving all this behind. It wasn't just your place of business. It was your home, too."

Phoebe nodded, wiping a tear from her eye. "I know, but you're right. I need to put work behind me. I'd love to just be idle for a month or two, and then maybe I'll start traveling. I'd love to go to London, or maybe Rome, just like a regular tourist." She glanced at her sister. "You could always go with me."

Colleen hesitated. "I don't know," she demurred. "The house, the kids . . . I don't think I would be comfortable leaving them."

"You need to relax just as much as I do," Phoebe pointed out. "You've worked for years at that mansion, making it what it is today. You've given your life over to the Larkin family, just as I gave mine over to the shop. It's about time you started enjoying yourself, too. You're overdue a proper rest." She studied her sister, taking in her pale demeanor and wan expression. "You look so tired, Colleen - just plain worn out. Neither one of us is getting any younger, you know, so it's time we did something for *ourselves*. We need to take our chances where we find them."

Before Colleen could reply, they heard a crash from the living room. Both women rushed out to find the cause, only to come face-to-face with a sheepish Rory holding a partially ripped cardboard box.

"I lifted this up and it fell apart," he explained. "I hope nothing is broken."

The spicy-sweet fragrance of *Coup de Fouet* wafted up between them, forcing Rory to wrinkle his nose. "What in God's name is that smell?" he wanted to know.

Phoebe laughed. "It's my bottle of Madame Caron perfume, Rory. I have another, so it's not a great loss."

"I should say so," he mumbled, glancing down at the broken glass. "Nonetheless, I'm sorry for breaking it."

"I'll run down to the shop to get the mop and broom so I can clean this up," Phoebe told Colleen. "I'll be right back."

"And I'll keep moving," Rory said quickly, relieved Phoebe was not overly irritated with him for destroying her peppery bottle of perfume.

After Phoebe and Rory left the room, Colleen knelt down to pick up errant items from the ripped box. She touched the silver-rope handle of the broken perfume bottle, smiling at Phoebe's earthy tastes in scents. Her sister had always liked uncommon accretions to fashion - not just in perfumes, but in accessories such as over-sized bracelets, dangling earrings and delicately carved hairpieces. She might not like them for herself, she had become conservative of late, but she did enjoy collecting the unusual and offering it up for sale as "exclusive" to her boutique.

Bent in her task, Colleen's eyes fell on a small bundle of letters that had fallen from the box. Startled to recognize Patrick's handwriting on the top envelope, she grabbed the stack and removed the first letter. She studied the envelope, noting it was postmarked June 1925 and addressed to her sister at the shop. The letter was more than thirty years old, saved by Phoebe as a keepsake obviously, but why on earth would Patrick write her - thirty years ago or at any other time prior to his death - and why had Phoebe not told her about it?

Curiosity got the better of her. Colleen took out a single sheet of yellowed paper from the envelope and started reading:

My Darling Pheeb,

I wanted to thank you for Thursday afternoon. It was a nice surprise, and kept me chipper for the rest of the day. I know your guilt assails you on occasion, but I want to assure you Colleen has no inkling of our meetings and never will from my lips.

Please understand that I love you, no matter that I'm married to your sister, and no matter that we have two sons. Because of my position I am married for life, you know that, but my love lies with you and no one else. Please believe that.

Yours always,

Patsy

Colleen dropped the letter to the floor, where it fluttered and settled in a puddle of *Coup de Fouet*, its amber liquid seeping through the paper. She was shocked by what she had just read, but not overly so. She had known Patrick to be cold and unfeeling toward her during their marriage, but she had no idea he saved his passion and his love for her sister, or that her sister had not seen fit to tell her about it even after all these years.

It was not a reaction of jealousy, Colleen realized dimly as she sat on the floor, feeling light-headed and dizzy all of a sudden. It was a reaction of hurt that her sister went behind her back to see Patrick, that the two of them had slept together knowing that she was safely back at the mansion caring for her children. The two of them had conspired together to have an affair right under her nose. She never suspected her sister or her husband of such cruel deception, such disregard for her feelings or basic common respect for her being.

Colleen felt a twinge in her chest, a painful twist that made her gasp. "*I didn't love Patrick, not like a wife should love her husband,*" she thought, aware that the shadows in the room were lengthening, making it hard for her to focus in the encroaching dark. "*The love of my life was Nicholas Bertrand, and Patrick took that away from me, too. He took any respect he had for me and threw it aside like a rag-doll, slept with my sister, and then decimated the only man I ever loved. I can believe Patrick behaving in such a fashion, but Phoebe? How could my own sister be a part of that?*"

Another knife of pain gripped Colleen's chest, forcing her to seize herself with both hands. The darkness seemed to wane, the bright sunlight streaming into the room again. She took a large gulp of air and fell over to her side on the floor.

Phoebe came to the doorway seconds later, a mop and broom in her hands. She stood transfixed for a moment, staring at her sister immobile on the floor, surrounded by envelopes and a sheath of perfume-soaked paper.

She knew what the envelopes contained without having to take a closer look. They were the few letters Patrick had written her so long ago, saved only because they were misplaced and not for fond remembrance. She had forgotten them, dismissed them when she placed them in the box the day before, considering them unimportant but not pausing to throw them away. They were merely set aside, much like the memories of the man who had written them to her.

Phoebe knelt next to her sister, alarmed by Colleen's shallow breathing. Her eyes opened and closed, fluttering in pain, incoherent sounds coming from her lips.

"Colleen," Phoebe shouted, shaking her sister and trying to get her to sit upright. "Colleen, what's wrong? Did you faint? Darling, please sit up and look at me." She pulled her sister close, into a half-sitting position, looking into her face and then almost drawing back in horror.

Colleen's head lolled to one side, her mouth in a twisted grin as if part of her face was numb. One eye was open, looking out sideways, while the other was partially closed but looking head on. The expression in the half-eye made Phoebe take in her breath. Was it a look of hateful anger, betrayal or pain? Or all three rolled into one? And why was her sister as limp as a doll, her head unable to sustain itself?

Fear tore at Phoebe's insides when she finally understood. She held Colleen close to her, a sob forming in her throat. "Rory!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "Rory, come quick. I think your mother had a stroke. Rory, please hurry!"

Phoebe heard the commotion downstairs, the pounding of more than one set of feet coming up the apartment stairs. In a flash, she realized she had to get rid of the cause for Colleen's collapse, or what she felt to be the reason. Still holding Colleen with one arm, Phoebe snatched up the letters and stuffed the papers down the front of her dress, pushing them flat underneath the wire rim of her brassiere.

She cradled Colleen in her arms as Rory ran into the room.

"*What have I done?*" Phoebe thought to herself frantically. "*Oh God, what have I done?*"

* * *

THE DOCTORS AT LARKIN City Hospital told Phoebe and members of the Larkin family that Colleen had suffered a massive stroke, the cause for which was unknown. Stricken by the news, Phoebe kept Patrick's letters to herself, convinced she was the reason Colleen had fallen ill, but not anxious to share the information with anyone else.

The prognosis was not good. The cardiac specialist informed Brian and Rory Larkin that their mother's state was probably permanent, that she would likely never walk or speak again. "To make matters worse, she could have another stroke at any time," the doctor told the two men. "The only thing we can do for her is to let her go home, where she will probably be more comfortable. I can arrange for physical therapy, and perhaps speech

therapy, but that's up to you. At this point, I don't think either will make much difference in your mother's condition."

So Colleen went home a week later, taken by ambulance to the mansion and whisked up to her room in a gurney by medics, where she was laid with great care in her own bed. Phoebe fussed over her sister, plumping her pillows and arranging the blankets so that they were smooth. Colleen watched her out of her half-eye, the expression of anger, betrayal and pain still and now forever present. Phoebe avoided making eye contact with her sister, preferring to keep herself busy in tidying the room or by reading a book or magazine at the bedside.

A nurse was also hired to come during the day, to monitor Colleen's vital signs and to dispense medication if necessary. However, over the months her condition did not change.

Phoebe made her escape when the nurse came, taking long walks on the beach or retreating to her own room - right next to Colleen's - to bathe and change her clothes. The idea of leaving her sister now, of getting on with her life, was out of the question. The thought of buying her own home was still suspended in Phoebe's mind, but she knew she could never abandon her sister while she was in such crippled limbo and not while she felt she was the cause of it.

Every afternoon Mae Jensen would bring tea on a tray to Colleen's room. Phoebe would let the brew cool before giving her sister the refreshment through a plastic straw. High tea had always been a ritual in the Larkin household, and Phoebe wanted to keep a familiar schedule for Colleen, despite her apparent oblivious state.

Brian asked Phoebe to stay on at the mansion, telling her it seemed to settle his mother. "The last thing anyone wants to do is aggravate mother," he told Phoebe. "She needs a tranquil setting in order to stave off another stroke for as long as possible. You seem to settle her and give her a sense of peace. Please consider the mansion your home, Aunt Phoebe, for as long as you want. You are family too, after all, and I'm so grateful you're here when mother needs you so desperately. You have a home here for the rest of your days, I want you to know, or for as long as you want to grace us with your presence."

More guilt washed over Phoebe at Brian's generosity, but she still could not reveal to him the reasons Colleen had fallen in the first place.

Colleen watched Phoebe through her mismatched eyes, the twist in her lips and the constriction in her throat preventing her from speaking. The side effects of the stroke also rendered her incapable of using her hands to write, so she was unable to communicate. Colleen could see the remorse on Phoebe's face, could sense her sister's despair over the present state of affairs, and wanted to reassure her *she was not the cause of it*. But there was nothing she could do to assuage Phoebe's guilt, to tell her it was permissible for her to get on with her life.

"I am paying for my sins by forfeiting my own life," Phoebe thought every morning as she entered Colleen's bedroom to begin the day. *"I never loved Patrick, but I'm paying for the disloyalty and the treachery I showed my loving sister when I chose to be with him. I deserve a fate worse than hell. If this is it, so be it."*

"QUIXOTIC CROSSINGS" INFORMATION

Quixotic Crossings by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon (paperback and Kindle), Barnes & Noble (Nook) and Kobo Books (multiple formats).



BOOK DETAILS

Club Lighthouse Historical Romance /Family Epic Edition

Series: Collective Obsessions Saga, Book Two

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-534956-27-8

E-Book ISBN: 978-1-311440-97-6

Cover Art: Webs Divine

EXTRAS

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

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