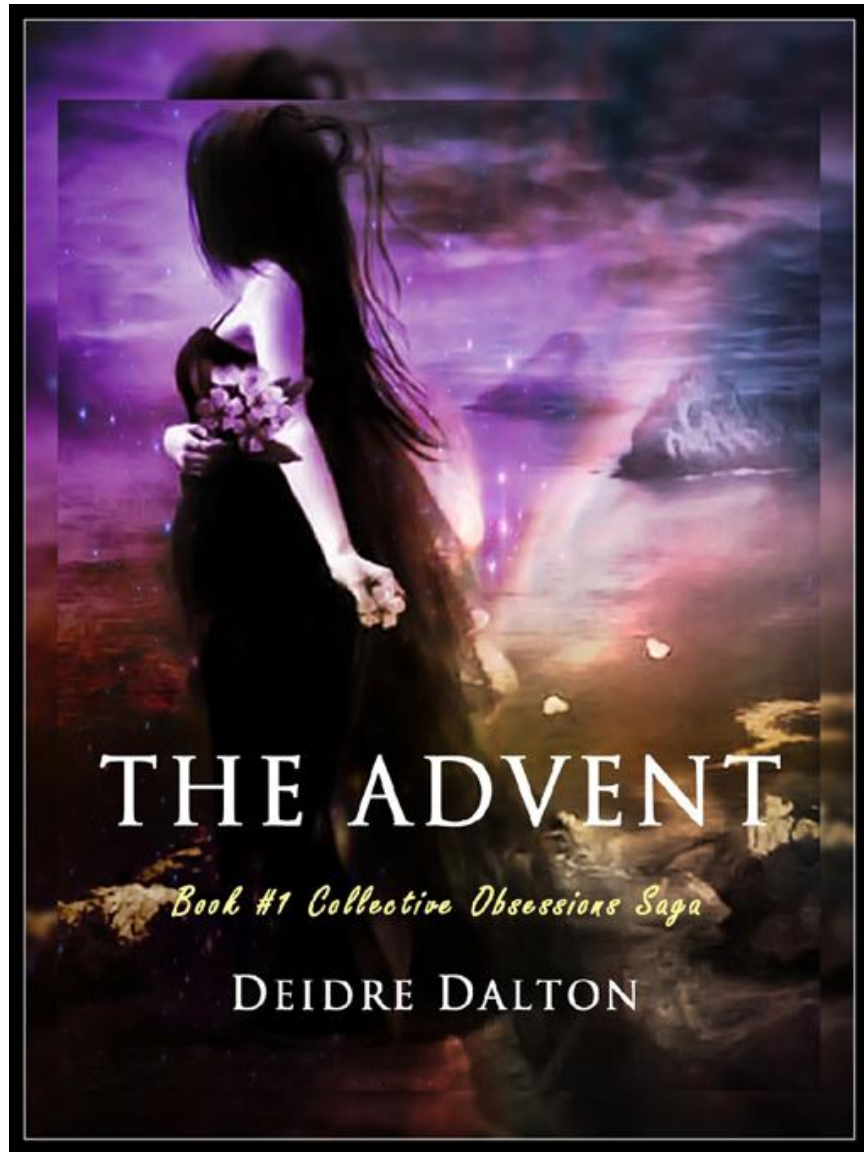


Excerpts from:
The Advent

By Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole)



THE ADVENT (*Book #1 in the Collective Obsessions Saga*)

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ABOUT "THE ADVENT"

The Advent by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is the first book in the *Collective Obsessions Saga*.

Forbidden love and dark secrets haunt two Irish families hacking out a new life in 19th-century America. When Molly Larkin's father discovers her affair with lighthouse keeper Colm Sullivan, his reaction pitches her into madness. Yet the legacy forges a bond of blood that will endure for generations...

The Advent marks the beginning of the *Collective Obsessions Saga*, when John Larkin emigrates from Ireland to America in 1865 and settles a self-named township in Maine. John soon builds a wealthy empire and grand estate, becoming one of the richest men on the Eastern Seaboard.

Hiding behind the wealth and social position are quirky English servants, the effervescent family chef Claude Mondoux, John's alcoholic wife Anne, their steadfast son Roderick and their mercurial daughter Mary Margaret, also affectionately known as Molly.

In ***The Advent***, Molly falls in love with lighthouse keeper Colm Sullivan, bringing shame and tragedy upon her family. Although cloaked in secrecy and madness, the love affair establishes a connection between their families that would endure for generations.

For more, go to:

<http://deidredalton.com/>

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Three

June 1880
Larkin City, Maine

WHEN TWENTY-YEAR-OLD Colm Sullivan stepped off the boat from Ireland in June 1880, the sun glinted off his blond hair. Electric enthusiasm shown from his eyes, which were set in a strong, sun tanned face and white teeth behind full lips. All who saw him agreed that he was wonderful to behold. Tall at six-foot-four, he was blessed with such an abundance of physical beauty that when contemplated by himself or others, he became embarrassed. Men teased him by calling him "pretty boy" or the lad who was "easy on the eyes." His mellow temperament and integrity, supported by an innate and moderately educated intelligence, gave him a presence that others trusted instinctively. He was alone in the world and determined to make a life for himself in America, even if he had to begin with menial labor.

Young as he was, his lower back ached from sitting in the flat bed of the carriage careening toward Larkin Village. Mr. Larkin, sitting up on the carriage's only seat with the driver, hired the four of them on the dock a few days ago in New York. Once on the road, Colm heard Mr. Larkin tell the carriage driver to go as fast as he could because he was eager to get home to his family. So the four of them were having their backsides pounded all across the terrains of New York, Massachusetts and now finally Maine. The closer they got to their destination, the more he looked forward to the relief of being on solid ground.

The weather, sunny and warm with a salty breeze, was a blessing after being closeted in the ship's steerage from Ireland to New York. He turned to look at the passing scenery as they went deeper and deeper into the wilds of Eastern Maine. He suddenly wished they were still in Bangor where they stopped to rest and eat two days ago. Surely they were getting closer to their final destination now. How much farther could it be?

"What are you thinking, pretty boy?" Seamus Flaherty asked, his head bobbing up and down from ruts in the road.

He turned to look at the sturdy, red haired, freckled young man. Seamus was from Belfast, and hired by Mr. Larkin to be a grounds worker. "I'm thinking it's time we stopped. Me arse and back is killin' me."

Seamus laughed. "Don't you know it. I don't think we have far to go, though."

"How would *you* know?" demanded Barry O'Toole, an 18-year-old from Kerry.

"Just a feeling. Mr. Larkin said it was two days or so from Bangor, and we've been riding for two days now."

"I'm starved, and I need a good drink by God," said Patrick O'Connor, a tall, thin, Dublin native in his early twenties with russet hair and dark eyes.

O'Toole nudged him. "Watch your blessed tongue. Larkin isn't deaf, man."

O'Connor snorted. "If we can't hear ourselves over the din of the horses, how can he?"

"How come Larkin chose you to work in his new lighthouse?" Flaherty asked Colm.

Colm shrugged. "I worked in one in Malahide."

"It'll be a good deal for you, I'm thinking," Flaherty nodded. "Larkin told me I'd be working on the estate grounds, as he calls them, but if I don't like it I can go into the village and get work at the forge. That's what I'm really good at, that's what I did in Belfast. Larkin said his father-in-law owns the forge in the village, but he's too old to run it now. I'll be seeing what happens, I guess."

"I'm good with the land," O'Connor declared. "Me own Daddy had his farm outside Dublin, but he gave it to me older brother and I was sort of shoved out. I think we'll all do good in America."

"Me, too," O'Toole agreed. "I'm good with livestock. My uncle has the biggest dairy farm in Kerry, but he had six sons and I was a bit in the way, I think. Besides, the Irish girls are all quiet-like and they don't give out. I'll bet the lasses in America give out, them being so liberated and all."

"Don't count on dipping wick into a Yankee candlestick," O'Connor snickered. "I hear tell they're more snobbish than the limeys; that they put on airs here."

"We'll see," O'Toole said. "I'd love to have an American wife someday."

"I imagine we'll all marry Americans," Colm mused. "We're here now and we don't have much of a choice, unless we don't marry at all."

Flaherty laughed. "You'll marry, pretty boy. Some lass will get a good look at you and go for your jugular. You'll have no problems with the ladies, I'm thinking."

Colm flushed. "Can't help my looks, lads. I was born this way."

They fell silent and gaped as the carriage approached the mansion. Mr. Larkin told them his house was big, but they were in no way prepared for the reality of it, not even in their wildest imaginations. The mansion was bigger than the Irish castles Colm had seen in his lifetime, even the ruined ones. The pines surrounding the house lent a dark, forbidding air to the estate as did the trailing ivy that snaked around the entire structure.

"*Good...God...Almighty.*" O'Connor's eyes were wide. "I have never seen the like in all of my life. It has to be bigger than the shagging Pope's house, don't you think? Jaysus! Are we all going to stay in this fortress?"

"We're servants, man," Flaherty said patiently. "Why would the good Mr. Larkin put us up in his own home? I'm thinking our lot will be in the stable. Mark my words."

"Not Sullivan. The lighthouse has its own cottage. I heard Larkin say so."

Flaherty looked at Colm. "Is that true, then?"

"So Mr. Larkin told me. But it wasn't my doing, you know. I asked for no special place. *Honest.* Besides, how big can the cottage be? I'm a servant, like the rest of you."

"Your looks will take you far, Sullivan," Flaherty predicted. "And you ain't just like the rest of us. You'll be somebody with that face, there's no mistaking it. You may just be off the boat, and you may be poor like the rest of us, but with looks like yours, it will take you places. I'm doubting any lass, whether she's a peasant or a lady, could ignore the likes of *you.*"

The carriage slowed as it came closer to the mansion, giving Colm some relief from Flaherty's talk. Colm spied a massive awning over what appeared to be the double entry doors, but the carriage did not stop there. It veered left and went around the back of the mansion. O'Toole laughed harshly. "That's typical. We're being taken to the tradesmen's entrance. Not good enough to trip through the front door."

"Shut yer yap!" Flaherty snapped. "Larkin can hear us now for sure."

They were quiet as the carriage stopped at the rear of the house. They watched Larkin jump out of the carriage before it stopped. He looked up at the house and turned to face them, happy to be home. They did not guess he was in his fifty-first year because he showed little sign of his age. He stood tall and erect, with a mere dusting of silver at his temples. He motioned them out of the carriage. After they gathered their meager luggage, the driver moved the carriage off toward the stables.

"This is my home," John stated flatly. "It is here you will live and work. Someday you may want to work in the village, but for now you will earn your wages on my estate. Except for Colm, all of you will be housed on the fourth floor of the house. You three will share a room, a very large room with a fireplace and a sitting room. Colm, as you all seem to know, will reside in the lighthouse keeper's cottage, as that will be in line with his job here."

The men stood listening and watching him.

"I'll give all of you a few days of rest. I'm sure you're all tired from your long journey and these days on the road. We're back in time so I can have tea with my family, whom you will meet shortly. Meanwhile, I'll leave you in the care of my cook in the kitchen, where he will give you tea and something to eat. After a short while, I'll return to collect you and introduce you to my family. It's important that you know who they are, because when I'm not here, you will answer to my son Roderick. He's a fair-minded and patient lad, and not in the least bit abusive."

John paused, looking at his new servants, checking his mental agenda of things he wanted to say to them. He pointed to Flaherty, O'Connor and O'Toole. "Please take baths. A supply of clean clothes will be provided for you while your own are washed."

John looked at Colm. "I'll take you to the keeper's cottage after you meet my family. After you've been to the village, you can prepare your own meals at the cottage, if you so desire. If you can't cook, you are certainly welcome to eat all your meals here at the mansion with the other staff."

Colm nodded slightly. "Thank you, sir. I can cook some. I'll be all right on my own, once I get some supplies."

"As you wish." John swept his gaze over them again. With one hearty nod for emphasis, he rubbed his palms together. "Let's get out of the sun and into the kitchen. I'm sure you're as famished and thirsty as I am." The relief on their faces was so transparent that he laughed aloud, a happy sound that made the men smile. Patrick O'Connor, particularly, looked so pleased at the prospect of food and drink that John decided to add one more thing.

"I don't mind if you take a drink. There's a pub in Larkin called the Amber Whale that you might come to frequent soon enough. But know this: I will not tolerate drunkenness on the job. I will simply not abide it. I don't subscribe to the quaint notion that all Irishmen are drunkards and good-for-nothings. I have proven otherwise. If you are discovered drinking while working for me, you will be dismissed at once, and you can find your own way off my estate. What you do on your time is your own business, as long as you break no laws, nor hurt anyone else in my employ or in the village. My wife, Mrs. Larkin, is particularly moral and will not have...shall I say *indecent* frolicking with any of the maids. Do I make myself clear?"

John looked at each man individually until he received their nods of compliance, then he smiled. "Good, good! Now let's go inside and relax. You've earned a good rest."

They followed him inside, with Colm Sullivan taking the lead.

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Four

THE SERVANT'S CARRIAGE jounced as they raced the rain. Storm clouds streaked across the sky, trying to beat them home. Nichols pushed the horses harder despite the lather fly-ing from their mouths.

Molly sat in the flat-bed pressed tight to Colm. The other passengers did not appear to care, if they noticed. Even Seamus kept his mouth shut.

Molly and Colm's purchases filled several burlap sacks beside them. Molly bought silky blue fabric for a dress, and Colm stocked up on supplies for his cottage, coming in just under the twenty dollar limit. He was excited to get home and put his supplies away and begin making the cottage feel like home. He relished thoughts of his day with Molly in Larkin Village. They had strolled along the boardwalk on Main Street, had eaten lunch at the Sea Wharf Café, then sat at an outdoor table talking and laughing. She asked him about Malahide, so he told her about his village, and how his parents and sister were killed.

She turned to him and asked over the noise of the race down the road: "Have you ever been married?"

"No, never!" he laughed. *Now what brought that on?*

"Any special lasses back in Ireland?"

"Nary a one."

"How old are you? Don't you like girls?"

"I'm twenty, and, yes, I like girls. I just had a wonderful day with one, didn't I?"

"Touché," she smiled. She turned to notice they were entering the mile-long road to the estate, and then looked up into his face. "You're the perfect age, you know."

"The perfect age for what?"

Molly's merry laugh was carried away on the wind, but she did not answer him.

As they neared the kitchen door, Molly turned to him, her eyes dancing. "I'll get those vegetables to you tomorrow. Now you'd better run to beat the storm."

"I'll wait in suspended animation," he teased, knowing his words would amuse her.

She giggled. As the carriage stopped at the door, she touched his arm and whispered: "It's tea time, and we beat the rain." She paused. "I loved our day together."

Colm lowered his voice to match hers. "We'll do it again soon."

"Yes."

Colm jumped down and held up his hand to Molly, who, instead of making a nimble leap to the ground, gave him her hand and stepped down like a lady, then, with one last glance into his face, hurried indoors with her bag of blue fabric. Colm gathered his purchases and began walking back to the cottage, where he would make a supper for himself of bacon and eggs. He was pleasantly tired, and wanted to be alone to remember every detail of the day.

As he walked toward the path to his cottage, leaning into the wind, he felt the first few drops of rain. He had to hurry or he would get soaked. A feeling told him to look back. He turned and saw Molly standing in the front doorway, waving. He felt, rather than saw her happy glow, and waved back, then turned and ran into the dark. As the path descended

sharply, he slowed. Then the thought came: *"I have to draw Molly. I have to paint her. I want to put her image down permanently, so that it will always be alive."*

As he opened the cottage door, the sky pealed rain. He closed the door behind him, glad to be home and filled with an overwhelming sense of happiness.

THE ADVENT: Excerpts from Chapter Five

MOLLY DID NOT COME to Colm that night, or the next. He was frantic and helpless. He could not inquire about her around the estate. As a paid servant, it was not his place to ask the Larkin family personal questions. Finally, desperate, three days after he last saw Molly, he took tea in the servant's hall.

Claude was surprised to see Colm. Since getting supplies from the village, Colm kept to himself at the keeper's cottage, making his own meals, and rarely venturing to the mansion.

"Irish beauty!" Claude exclaimed. "You are here for tea? I wondered about you. All is well with you?"

Colm stood in the back door. Claude was busy at the stove.

"I missed having tea here," Colm offered what felt like a plausible reason.

"*Oui*," Claude replied, noticing the distress Colm was trying to hide. "It's nice to be alone, but it is good to be with others, too?"

"Yes, something like that."

Claude shrugged. "The servants are having tea."

"Thank you," Colm said, turning to the servant's hall.

"*Thank you for what?*" Claude wondered, puzzled by Colm's behavior.

Colm saw Maureen Kelly sitting alone at one of the tables. He smiled and waved to some of the other male servants he knew, but it was Maureen he wanted to speak with. He walked over and sat next to her.

"Why are you sitting here?" she wanted to know, alarmed by his presence. "Your friends seem anxious to talk with you."

"I need to speak with *you*," Colm spoke quietly. "What's wrong with Molly? Why hasn't she come to the cottage to pose? Is she ill?"

Maureen frowned. "You must not be so familiar with her name, Mr. Sullivan. It is not seemly."

"Yes, fine. What's wrong with Miss Larkin? Tell me what's going on."

"Mistress Mary is ill," she answered, surprised by his urgent tone. "Both she and Mrs. Larkin have influenza. Mistress Mary has been confined to her bed these last few days."

"Why didn't you let me know?" Colm demanded.

Maureen regarded him coolly. "How was I to do that, pray tell? Come alone to your cottage? I think not, Mr. Sullivan."

He let go of some of his tension. "Is Mol...will Miss Larkin be well soon?"

"Yes. She is much better already." Maureen paused, glancing around to be sure no one was listening. "She thought you might come up here to ask about her. She wanted me to give you a message."

"Yes?"

Maureen took a piece of paper from her pocket and gave it to him. "She said it was for your eyes only." She returned her attention to her tea.

"Thank you, Maureen." Colm said, trying to sound grateful. He rose to leave, and leaned down to whisper: "Tell your mistress I miss her presence at the cottage, and that I wish her good health soon."

"I will tell her."

It took Colm twenty minutes to escape questions from Seamus Flaherty and Barry O'Toole about the lighthouse and his work there, and they telling him about their jobs on the estate. Finally, he promised to join them next Saturday at the Amber Whale, having no intention of doing so, and left the hall and the mansion.

Once Colm was on the path to the lighthouse, he stopped to read Molly's note, standing motionless in view of the mansion.

Colm,

I am sorry I was unable to meet you at the cottage. I have been very ill with the flu, thanks to my mother who contracted it from the head maid of the house, Clea Barton-Brooks. God knows where she got it. This illness is taking its run through everyone.

I will try and see you soon. I miss you; I miss talking with you and just seeing you. You are so fine to look at. Maybe I should write you more often like this. I do not feel as shy! Interesting, isn't it?

Remember, I adore you, and I cannot wait to see you again.

Love, Molly

He smiled. She wrote as she spoke, only more open. She used the word "love" in her signature, and that made Colm's heart sing. He folded the note and started to whistle. It was almost time to light the beacon, and he decided to make some pork side and eggs for his dinner.

Just a little while longer, and Molly will be mine.

* * *

SHE STAYED UNTIL dawn. The hearth was cold and the rain had stopped. She and Colm joined together more than once before the sun began to rise on Banshee Point, and she felt deliciously tired, satisfied and warmly content. But she knew she had to get back to the mansion. The servants rose early, too, and she did not want to be seen sneaking into the house like a common trollop.

She got out of bed, picked her robe up from where it lay in a heap, and slipped it over her shoulders. He watched her, knowing she had to go, but hating it. She had no choice. Besides, he knew he was too weak from their time together to stop her.

She bent down and kissed his lips. "I'll come back tonight, but I have to go now."

"I know, and I don't like it. I feel like I'm a man now, Molly. Thanks to you."

"And I'm now a woman, Colm. Thanks to *you*." Molly kissed him again, and then slipped out the open French doors and disappeared into the early morning darkness.

"*Back to her rightful place at the mansion,*" Colm's thought came, unbidden. He sat up, pulling up the coverlet. He was not used to sleeping naked, his mother would never allow it, but it felt good to him. His heart was bursting with so much love for Molly that he could die a happy man. He smiled at the rising sun, and discovered he was hungry. He

wanted coffee and eggs. He put his feet on the floor, stood, and indulged in a leisurely stretch.

As he dressed, he had to convince himself that last night had not been just a dream. "*Molly and I are meant to be together,*" he mused as he made his bed, smoothed the coverlet, and imagined Molly naked beneath his hands. "*Our night of love was proof enough for me that we need to be as one. The result of our special love would be the issue from our bodies of another human being, a child made from the bits and pieces of both of us, and from the love between us. She has gone back to her proper place at the mansion, soon to be my rightful place as her husband.*"

THE ADVENT: Excerpt from Chapter Eight

AFTER MAUREEN KELLY LEFT the mansion, Molly suffered the ministrations of Clea Barton-Brooks. Clea was assigned to Molly because she was an experienced midwife and had helped birth several babies born on the estate. She was also not likely to brook the same foolishness from Molly that Maureen had. Anne reluctantly agreed to let Clea take care of Molly. She resented that she should suffer the loss of Clea's care because her daughter behaved like a common trollop and now had to bear her bastard child in secrecy and in shame. Molly was confined to her bedroom on the third floor for the duration of her pregnancy, and not even allowed to take fresh air outside. John's explanation for his daughter's purported self-imposed exile, to those in a social position with the temerity to ask, was that she was preparing herself for a coming out event on her eighteenth birthday in late summer of 1881. People seemed to accept this explanation, and if they had doubts, they did not dare voice them.

In late January 1881, Molly sat by her bedroom window watching the red beacon from the lighthouse flash rhythmically through the cold fog. Colm would be up there now, she knew, doing his job; doing the job she had saved for him, had suffered for. She shifted uncomfortably. Her back ached. She was now five months along, though it was not easily discernible through the loose gowns and long shawls she wore. No one save Clea and her family saw her anyway.

Clea came in carrying a tray. "Are you ready for some tea, miss?"

"I suppose so."

"Yes, miss." Clea set the tray on a small table and poured the tea into a delicate cup.

"Why won't you tell me about Maureen's wedding?"

"Because Mr. Larkin instructed me not to speak of it to you."

"Do you always do as you're told?"

"Yes, Miss." Clea handed Molly the tea. "It is my duty. Your mother told me you would do well to learn that."

Molly grunted. Of course, her mother was behind Clea's carefully worded barbs, so polite and correct. "Will you tell me just a little bit about the wedding? A little bit won't hurt," she pleaded.

"There's no point in being curious, miss. It's done. Your lighthouse keeper is married."

"He's not my lighthouse keeper," Molly snapped.

Clea raised her eyebrows and glanced pointedly at Molly's swollen belly as Anne entered without knocking. Molly did not bother to hide her surliness, which was not stemmed by Anne's pretty cream chiffon gown and flushed cheeks.

"Stop baiting Clea, Mary Margaret. She is just doing as she's told."

"Go away, mother. I didn't ask for your company."

Anne stood in front of her daughter, eyes cold. "If you had sought my company more often in recent months, perhaps you wouldn't be carrying a servant's bastard."

"True, because, if I had spent my time with you, I'd be a drunk by now. Did you drink your lunch today, mother? Your color is unusually high."

Anne blushed. *Molly never considers her words, even in front of the servants.* She turned to Clea. "You may leave us now. Return in half an hour."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why did you bother sending Clea away? She knows you're a drunk. You can't hide your weakness for the bottle from the servants."

Anne closed her eyes briefly, ashamed for her daughter and her waspish tongue. Being with child seemed to make her more obstinate. "You're not behaving as your father wants you to," Anne finally said, overcoming her distaste for her daughter. "He wants you to learn some humility while you're confined. Instead, you seem to be getting worse. Did your time fornicating with the lighthouse keeper affect your brain, as well as your morals?"

Molly's eyes glittered dangerously with hate. While Molly's pregnancy had nothing to do with Anne, it fuelled her obsessive hatred and made Anne's quiet watchfulness unendurable. "Go to hell," Molly hissed. "You're nothing but a mindless, addlebrained, weak-willed bitch. Daddy must have been possessed by the fairies when he married you. You were never his choice, you know. Grandfather O'Quinn told me as much. You were a piss poor replacement for the real love of his life, your sister Maeve. How dare you stand there like a cow with a stick up her arse and judge me? Get out of my sight, you dirty old dried up excuse for a woman!"

Anne was aghast. She had never heard John in his blackest moods use such language. "I believe you are going mad. If I tell your father that you're becoming unbalanced, he'll have you committed. Make no mistake about it." But her doubts showed on her face.

Molly's eyes turned to mere slits and her voice came icy. "Go ahead, tell him. Tattle. *Do it!* But remember, if I'm crazy, no one will be surprised when I slit your throat. If I have to be locked up, it might as well be for a good reason."

"You don't mean that."

"Try me," Molly snarled. "Try me and find out the hard way, bitch."

"Calm down, Molly, I didn't mean to..."

"Get out!" Molly shrieked, the sound of her voice echoing in the room. "Get your stinking face out of here and leave me in peace."

Rooted with shock, Anne stared at her daughter.

Molly glared at her again. "Are you deaf, old woman? I don't ever want to see you in here again. You're upsetting me, and it's not good for the baby. I'll tell Daddy that, too. Now *get out!*"

Anne backed away. *Was Molly going mad? Whirling around, Anne ran from the room, closed the door behind her and leaned against it. What was the matter with her daughter? She had never been an easy child since, but now she seemed demented. Was she really losing her mind? Suddenly, as though Molly heard her thoughts, Anne heard her daughter's laughter, an eerie, candescent sound that made the dim hallway feel more isolated. Then, accompanied by Molly's rising shriek, something smashed against the door and shattered.*

Anne ran.

THE ADVENT: Excerpts from Chapter Nine

October 1886
Larkin City, Maine

MAUREEN SULLIVAN GAVE BIRTH to a healthy son on October 21, 1886 in the lighthouse keeper's cottage at Banshee Point. Clea assisted in the birth, which was an easy task because the baby came quickly and there was no need for Dr. McGarren to come. The wind was brisk, the day was clear, and Colm rejoiced at the birth of his new son.

After the birth, Maureen lay in bed while Clea tended to the baby in the crib. Colm looked at his new baby and smiled. He had Maureen's auburn hair and Colm's blue eyes, and was crying with all the vigor he could muster.

"What do you want to name him, M'reen?" The pet name bothered her a little, since Molly had used it, but she said nothing as Colm spoke it with such affection.

Propped up on several pillows, tired but happy, Maureen pulled herself to a sitting position. "I like the name Aidan," she said softly. "That was my late father's name. And I'd like him to have two middle names."

"Two? One isn't enough?"

"Not this time, Colm, love. I'd like our son to be baptized as Aidan Jack Kelly Sullivan. The Jack is for my uncle who runs Quinn's Forge in the village."

"Aye, I know. Don't I get a say in the lad's name?"

"Not this time. He has your last name." Maureen smiled.

Colm chuckled. "You win. Aidan Sullivan it is. Excuse me, Aidan Jack Kelly Sullivan. Are you happy now?"

Maureen simply nodded, still smiling at his silliness.

Colm was struck by how beautiful, *truly beautiful*, she looked at that moment, glowing with an inner happiness that softened her face and brightened her eyes. He realized he had come to love her in his own way. Not like the violent and extreme passion he experienced with Molly that left him anxious and distraught, but a calm, steady affection that made him feel secure and warm. There had been no fireworks with Maureen when they had begun having marital relations five years ago, but an affectionate coupling that they both enjoyed at least twice a week. His mind-shattering passion for Molly had been one-sided.

Colm is thinking about Molly again. Maureen could tell by his distant, sad expression. *Why doesn't she just disappear from our lives forever?*

Little Michael, nicknamed "Mick" by his parents, almost four months past his fifth birthday, stood in the bedroom doorway. Mick looked startlingly like Colm, except his eyes were coal black. He glanced askance at his parents. "Do Johnny and I have a little brother now? Do we Daddy?"

Colm smiled at his oldest son. "Indeed you do, Mick. Would you like to see him?"

Mick nodded vigorously.

"Go get Johnny, and you both can see your new brother," Maureen said. "Where is Johnny?"

"He's in the kitchen with Claude," Clea said.

"*Non*," Claude said, leading Johnny by the hand into the room. "He's right here." Colm and Claude had become close friends. There was not much the two did not talk about.

Mick ran over to his twin brother, and Johnny was obviously startled by the fast movement. Mick apologized by rubbing his brother's arm. "Sorry, Johnny. I forgot. Come on, let's see our new baby brother."

Shy Johnny, a much smaller version of robust Mick, was very pale, had red-blond hair and protruding blue eyes. Looking up at Claude, he raised a thin hand to his mouth and coughed.

Claude nodded. "*Oui*, petite monsieur. Go and see your new brother. I will wait here."

Johnny smiled timidly, and said in a tiny voice: "*Oui*, Claude. I mean, *yes*." Mick grabbed Johnny's hand and led him slowly to the crib.

Claude watched smiling, but caught Colm's flash of despair that he hid with a smile. *Something is amiss with Beauty.*

While Mick and Johnny looked at their new brother under Clea's watchful eye, and Maureen rested in the bed, Claude walked over to Colm. "Join me in your kitchen, *Beauty*?" he asked softly. Colm nodded and followed him out of the bedroom. Once in the kitchen, Claude came to the point. "Why do you look so sad when you look at *le petite Jean*?"

Colm sighed and wandered over to the back door. "Johnny gets sick so easily. That's nothing new, I know, but now he has a cough that won't go away. I took him to see Dr. McGarren yesterday, and he said if Johnny doesn't get over this chest cough, it could go into pneumonia, and it could kill him. He says Johnny's little body can't take much more, that his natural immunity to illness has weakened because he gets sick so often. That means it's harder and harder for him to fight these awful colds he gets."

"Keep him warm and inside the cottage," Claude said simply. "He may not like it, but he will stay alive."

"I worry about Johnny. He started out with a disability, and now he has to contend with constant sickness. How can it be that Mick is so strong and never sick, while Johnny seems to have never had a healthy day in his short life?"

Claude shrugged. "This is Mother Nature, *non*? If you take extra care with *le petite Jean*, he will be fine. Keep him close and warm, *Beauty*, and the child will do good. You'll see."

"I hope you're right." Colm smiled for his friend, wanting to lighten the mood. "Enough of my dire doom, aye? How would you like it if you were little Aidan's godfather?"

"This is the new babe's name? Aidan?"

"*Oui*," Colm teased. "Aidan Jack Kelly Sullivan. Will you stand in as his godfather?"

"*Oui*, naturally," Claude said, excited. "I would love that, Colm. I will be honored to be his godfather."

"It's settled then. Now we'll see what Maureen has to say about it."

Claude snorted with humor. "She gave your new son a mouthful of a name, *non*? Certainly she will not protest *moi* as the sainted godfather!"

They laughed as they left the kitchen together.

* * *

MOLLY HAD NOT FARED well. Despite her desire to rejoin society after bearing the

twins in 1881, she could not shake her extreme depression. She rarely left her rooms, and when she did, it was to go up to the vast attic. There she was alone in the dim albeit large stuffy room, reviewing her life, her failures, her shameful acts, and her conscience.

The attic was the last addition John Larkin made to the mansion in 1879. The only way to reach it was through the fourth floor, where the servants were housed, and down a long carpeted corridor, past a massive mullioned window, to a small doorway that led to the attic.

The first level beyond the door was a storage place for supplies, unused furniture, and the normal detritus of households. But then there was another landing, more stairs, and a vast space, endless in both directions, holding more cast-offs and little light.

A rounded carpet on the landing 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. 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. This is where Molly sat, shuttered in the dim grayness of a stormy day.

Molly was annoyed. Much as she disliked being cared for by Clea, she missed her when she was away. It had become a daily game for Molly to see how far she could push Clea with her foul language and her impatient demands, but Clea usually maintained her stiff reserve. Molly quite enjoyed their *tête a tête's*, as Claude called them, but she would never admit to such a thing.

Once in the attic, Molly sat in the chair. It was dark now in the autumn months, although it was barely past five o'clock in the afternoon. Clea had been gone for most of the day, and when Claude brought lunch to her room she could not pry from him where Clea had disappeared to. In a huff, Molly had eaten only part of her lunch, and had refused to speak with Claude, or anyone else, including her brother, Roddy and his wife Sascha, who had visited her after lunch.

Molly felt fortified by the isolation. It was self-imposed, of course, but what else was there to do? She whiled away her days looking out of windows, reading books on the Orient, thanks to Sascha, eating sparsely, bathing every evening and then going to bed. It was not much of an existence, but she simply could not will herself to do anything else.

John sent for several top doctors over the years to try to determine the cause of her worsening six-year-long depression and unwillingness to leave the security of her rooms or the attic. But each doctor said much the same thing: Molly was suffering from some sort of incurable mental affliction. They essentially advised more of the same: isolation, understanding, and patience, which is what she had been getting. They gave her laudanum to soothe her nerves and keep her calm, but the drug only seemed to dull her senses and make her more verbally abusive. They may as well have prescribed pure untreated opium to her she thought bitterly, as good as the laudanum was doing. It seemed to depress her more, if that were possible.

Molly lit a candle and set it on the floor by the chair. She wore dark colors, and always a cap, because she wanted to hide the two grey streaks in her hair. With no interest in food, she was painfully thin and had deep lines by her eyes and the sides of her mouth. Although she was only twenty-two, she looked twice her age.

She still blamed Colm Sullivan for her problems. If it weren't for him, she would have been married to a proper gentleman by now, with a family of her own. Colm was the

root of all evil as far as she was concerned, and no one could convince her otherwise. She would not admit to herself that she had been the initiator and a willing participant in the frolics with Colm. He lured her into his bed, with his evil and ruthless charm, and he held her there with his breathtaking looks and his silver tongue. She escaped him eventually, yes, but she birthed his bastards and her life was in ruins because of that. The stigma of the twins' birth, their virtual bastardy, did not concern Molly. In fact, there was nothing about the whelps that bothered her now. She would not even think of them, because they were part of Colm Sullivan, the trickster, the demon lover, the son of Satan. She had a whole library of names for him, none of them complimentary.

She did not understand why she could not apply her strong will to her own mental weakness and make herself snap out of the awful grayness. She had wanted a new life after the twins were born, she wanted to start over and prove herself to her father, to show him she could be a lady befitting her station and behave with the proper decorum and grace. But it had not happened as she planned, and Molly felt like she could no longer fight it. So she accepted her life as it was, living day by day in the dismal mansion filled with expensive furniture and expansive people. She hid in her room or in the attic, not facing reality, but floating on a narcotic sea of laudanum.

She heard footsteps and tensed. *Who would dare bother her here?*

It was Clea, and she looked tired. Clea was only thirty-one, but the passing of time had not been kind to her, either. Having to look after Molly had sapped her strength and normal resilience. She rarely saw her seven-year-old daughter Layla because of her work load in the mansion. Layla was tended by a kitchen maid, and Nigel helped when he could, but he was kept busy, too, with the demands made by John and Anne Larkin. But Clea was grateful that she and Nigel and Layla had a splendid roof over their heads, plenty to eat, and steady salaries. Sometimes, however, the pressure was just too much.

"Where the Christ have you been all blasted day?" Molly snarled at Clea.

Clea sighed. "Birthing a babe."

Molly groaned. "Jesus God, not another one? Is that all my father pays his servants to do? Screw themselves senseless and keep popping out horrible little trolls, year after year?"

Clea closed her eyes to blot out Molly's obscenities. She should be used to them by now, but she was not. And she was not in the mood for it today.

"Who whelped today?"

Clea opened her eyes and looked at Molly coldly. Clea was weary of her foul mouth and her vicious tongue. With uncharacteristic cruelty, Clea said smoothly: "I'm sure you know them. Cute little couple. They live down on the beach."

Molly was instantly alert. "The only couple living on the beach is that good for nothing former maid of mine, Maureen Kelly, and her son of a bitch of a husband, that *Beelzebub* Colm Sullivan."

"Exactly."

Molly was silent, eyeing Clea. She was lying. She had to be. *Maureen and Colm having a baby?* Impossible! Colm would never sleep with another woman after having Molly the way he had, she was sure of it. His marriage to Maureen was supposed to be in name only. What happened between Molly and Colm had been sacred, albeit evil and atrocious, but it had been between them. How could he ever think of being with another woman in the same way?

"You're lying. Father must have hired an assistant lighthouse keeper to help Colm. Is

that the cute little couple you're talking about?"

"No. Colm is the sole lighthouse keeper."

Molly bit her lip, refusing to accept the truth. "It was that be-damned bitch mother of mine, wasn't it? She put you up to spreading lies to make me think I'm crazy. The old crone hasn't come to see me in five years, and she's still trying to undermine me with my father. The old whore will never learn, will she? The bitch."

Clea looked at Molly with loathing. "No, your sweet mother has nothing to do with this, and you know it." Her voice was cool. "I helped deliver Maureen Sullivan of a healthy baby boy this afternoon, and now the twin lads have a new brother. Maureen and Colm named their new babe Aidan. That's an Irish name, isn't it Miss Larkin?" Clea feigned innocence although she knew her words had driven home.

Molly covered her ears with her hands, squeezing her eyes shut. She did not want to hear anymore, shocked by Clea's unusual generosity with information. Before now, Clea tried to keep things from Molly, making sure she never heard a wisp of anything to upset her further, to add to her depression.

Molly's eyes flew open. "I'll tell my mother you're lying to me, Clea, and we'll see how you fare."

Clea smiled thinly. "Oh, will you? I thought your be-damned mother never came to see you? You could always tell Mr. Larkin, though, but I don't think he will believe you now. You've been sedated for too many years, Miss Molly. There's no telling what you've dreamed up in your head."

"Take me to my room at once," Molly demanded, trying to take control of the situation. "It's your job here to look after me, and I want my supper. *Now*. I don't wish to talk anymore."

Clea smiled triumphantly and took Molly gently by the arm to help her out of the chair. "*I finally shut the bitch up,*" Clea thought with glee. "*Now I know what buttons to push to get her to be quiet in the future.*" Clea doused the candle by the chair, and led Molly out of the attic back down to her room.

Molly made a decision as Clea took her back to her room. An accomplishment, given her state of mind. "*Why should Colm have a new life and be happy? Why should he be allowed to carry on, while I sit here and rot? It's because of him that I'm in such misery.*"

She would find a way out of the mansion and go to Colm. She would confront him with her misery and get the answers she deserved. He had to pay for what he had done to her, one way or another.

"THE ADVENT" INFORMATION

The Advent by Deidre Dalton (aka Deborah O'Toole) is available from Amazon (*Kindle*), Barnes & Noble (*Nook*), Kobo Books (*multiple formats*) and Smashwords (*multiple formats*).

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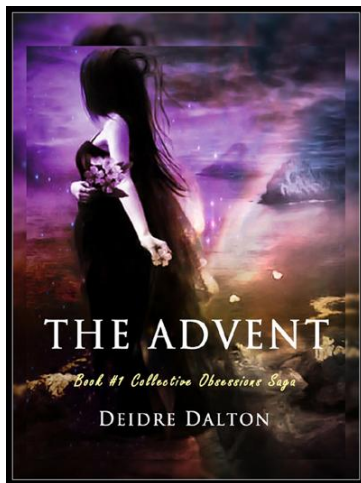
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ABOUT THE COLLECTIVE OBSESSIONS SAGA:

The *Collective Obsessions Saga* chronicles the extraordinary loves and intricate obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one-hundred-forty years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

Follow the twists and turns of the Larkin and Sullivan families, who settle in America in the mid-1800s. John Larkin builds his vast business empire while daughter Molly and lighthouse keeper Colm Sullivan establish a connection that will endure for generations.

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Deborah O'Toole is the author of *Celtic Remnants*, a novel of enduring yet impossible love and betrayal set in the turbulence of Ireland, glamour of London and the wilds of Scotland. She is also author of the uniquely haunting mystery/suspense novel *Mind Sweeper*.

Writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Collective Obsessions Saga," which chronicles the extraordinary loves and obsessions between two families sweeping a span of more than one-hundred-forty years, all set against the backdrop of a Gothic seaside mansion in Maine.

Also writing as Deidre Dalton, Deborah is author of the "Bloodline Trilogy," which follows the uniquely magical journey of one family through time. Books in the trilogy include *Bloodfrost*, *Bloodlust* and *Blood & Soul*. All titles will be released through 2012-17.

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