

JOURNEY BECKONS

By Kileen Prather

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Author's Note:

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Chapter One

Cassie gazed thoughtfully out the window of her apartment overlooking Seattle's Elliott Bay to the hill that was the Queen Anne district in the distance. The condo had glass patio windows with two balconies facing the south and west sides of the city. In the daytime she often watched the parasailers gliding by her balcony with the surreal Mount Rainier to the southeast standing like a sentinel guarding the city.

Spending several months in Seattle had been one of the best things that had ever happened to her. Cassie recalled telling her children she didn't anticipate any drastic changes to her life and yet summering here in this city was something she never imagined in her wildest dreams. Although she knew her time in this city would end all too quickly, for a little while she would be able to leave the sadness behind.

Cassie was living in the popular Belltown section of the city. Her apartment complex, named Harbor View, had panoramic vistas of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains to the west as well as spectacular sunsets each evening.

Many of the buildings in Belltown had murals painted on the walls and Cassie enjoyed looking at them as she walked to the Market Place or over to the Seattle Center complex where the Space Needle was located. She was living halfway between the two areas and spent a lot of time walking through the downtown. Cassie enjoyed watching all the different people, from the homeless to the street musicians as well as the tourists and wealthy, who all contributed to giving this city such a vibrant atmosphere.

Recently turned fifty-two and newly retired after twenty five years as a high school history teacher, Cassie wondered where the next phase of her life would take her.

At one time she had looked forward to retiring and traveling as often as money would allow but now had mixed feelings about leaving teaching. Life had a peculiar way of changing when you least expected it.

Turning from the window Cassie walked towards a mirror across the room by the front door. As she glanced at her profile she began reflecting on her life and how she had come to be in Seattle for the summer.

Her short brown hair showed only traces of gray and her green eyes seemed to sparkle. Many people often commented on their color. Her friend, Jane, had often told Cassie the color reminded her of the green color seen in the Caribbean Sea. Jane was always going off somewhere in the world and when she came back and told Cassie of her adventures, this made Cassie even more anxious than ever to travel.

Cassie was medium height and a size twelve. As she aged, she had to work at maintaining her weight and although she used to complain about making time for exercise, she realized it was also important to her mental health. Not only did it help her keep weight in line, but Cassie had discovered it was the best way to work off her stress.

Cassie and her husband Jim lived in New Brighton, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis. The Minneapolis area had many lakes and Cassie felt a peace, which was better than taking a tranquilizer, as she walked various routes around her neighborhood on her daily jaunts. As Cassie strolled around the different lakes she never grew tired of watching the waves lapping against the shore. Naturally the waves were much bigger on the days the wind was blowing strong.

Cassie and her husband Jim had been married for thirty-one years. Six years before, Jim had been diagnosed with diabetes. He had a job working for Hennepin

County but had enough years to retire. Even though Jim had laughed at the diagnosis he had taken early retirement and sat at home bemoaning his fate.

The doctor had tried to convince him that even though much of his illness could be traced to his family history he could still control the progression and severe side effects of the disease if he took care of himself. Jim ignoring the doctor's warnings had continued to smoke and eat as he pleased. As a result, a year later Jim had circulatory problems with his leg and had to have his right leg removed up to his knee. Naturally Jim had spiraled into depression over his condition, especially since he felt he could never drive again.

Cassie tried to remain positive and keep Jim upbeat but he had just ignored her and continued to smoke while spending his days complaining about how his life was now over. He refused to participate in physical therapy or any other exercise and he angrily refused any depression medication the doctor felt would help him.

As Jim put on weight from just sitting around all day and because of some side effects from the medications he was taking, intimacy between them became nonexistent. His doctor told Cassie he could switch some of the doses or try different drugs but Jim was so depressed by his whole situation he would try nothing to better his condition. He told the doctor if the medications he was now using were taking care of his problems he didn't want to try switching. Cassie had a feeling he wanted to punish her because of his health conditions.

Cassie worried what would happen the next school year when she was officially retired and spent all day at home. She didn't want to think about a life without purpose. Jim was always putting her down when she was at home and Cassie realized he was

jealous of her health. However Cassie knew Jim could do a lot more if he adopted a more positive outlook on his life.

Jim was sixty-two years old and collecting social security disability as well as his retirement money. Their house was paid for and they had managed to save a lot of Cassie's salary over the years and had invested their money. With both of their retirement and investment incomes they would have enough money to live comfortably and even travel occasionally. They had talked about traveling for years but now Cassie knew Jim didn't want to go anywhere. He really had lost all his zest for living.

Cassie kept telling him that he should come to her school and volunteer a couple of times a week. There always was a need for volunteers at her school and she thought it would help him feel good about himself again. But Jim preferred sitting in front of the television all day complaining about how life had not treated him fairly.

Cassie had always believed she would be married forever and this had been reinforced by her religious upbringing. Besides, somehow it didn't seem right to leave Jim in his condition, even though she had had to endure extreme loneliness for the last few years.

Jim no longer talked about the future and never said much of anything to Cassie except to inquire about meals or complain about his health problems. Because he spent most of his time alone in the den, Cassie felt she was living virtually alone in their house even though Jim was physically living there.

Cassie had always told Dr. George, their physician and family friend that her life was manageable but when her blood pressure became extremely high, he had become quite concerned. The doctor knew stress was causing the elevated blood pressure and

told Cassie she needed to take a break from the situation or she wouldn't be around much longer to take care of Jim.

The couple's children, Kit and Gray, had no real idea how difficult it was for Cassie to live with Jim. They were horrified when they came over to visit their dad and Cassie told them about Doctor George's recommendations. Both of the children were married and living their own lives. Even though they lived fairly close in nearby suburbs, Cassie knew they didn't notice how bad her conditions were at home. They were either in denial or they felt ignoring the situation would make it not seem so bad. Basically they were so wrapped up in their own lives they assumed their parents would just deal with their problems.

"I hope you are not planning on getting a divorce, mom. Dad needs you and it wouldn't be fair to leave him now," Kit told Cassie as she paced in the kitchen.

I wonder when things can be fair for me? Cassie thought to herself, remembering how the doctor had insisted she take a break from her care giving.

"I'm not planning on divorcing your dad," Cassie responded. "I just thought it might help me to get away for awhile, although that would involve a separation from your dad for the summer. I'm not sure where I would go or what I would do but I need to start thinking about a temporary change from this intolerable living situation."

"Well who would take care of dad if you went away?" her son Gray asked surprised.

"I don't know what I am going to do. I do know the doctor told me if I don't take a break from your father, I may not be around much longer to take care of him at all."

“I just don’t understand why Doctor George won’t give you some blood pressure pills like he gives dad,” Kit replied.

“I don’t want to take medication if I don’t need it. Besides, blood pressure medicine can’t help when stress is the problem. Don’t worry, I don’t plan to do anything drastic with my life,” Cassie told the two of them.

They left shaking their heads thinking their mother needed to forget the doctor’s advice. Cassie felt so beaten down by her family. It was as if everyone had a right to live their own lives anyway they pleased except for her. It was hard to express what she was feeling and deep down she knew no one wanted to hear it. As long as she said nothing and continued to hold all her thoughts in, everyone around her could remain calm and happy.

Somehow Cassie knew she needed to focus on her own needs for awhile so she could continue to be there for her family. The problem was they couldn’t accept that she needed time to herself. She felt that she was living in a world of dreams that might have been. Presently all she could see ahead of her were long years of incredible loneliness as a combination nurse and mother to her husband.

Cassie didn’t want to become an empty and bitter person because of her situation. She had always had an upbeat attitude towards life. Even when negative situations arose, Cassie always looked for the positive side.

Jane, Cassie’s friend, also helped to keep her focused positively. She had brassy red hair and laughing blue eyes that seemed to fit her personality. Jane had been divorced for several years and seemed to find fulfillment in her travels. She met wonderful people from all over and kept in contact with them. Jane’s husband George

had been unfaithful and since she had left him she cultivated many men friends but she had never let anyone get close to her again.

Jane kept reiterating that she couldn't remember the last time Jim had said something nice or even smiled at Cassie. They had been friends a long time and Jane was extremely concerned about the mental and physical health of her friend. She knew Jim had always been a little selfish, expecting Cassie to be the "perfect wife". Jane felt Jim took for granted that Cassie would always be around for him while not giving any support in return.

Despite that, the marriage had seemed to work for them and Jane had always thought they were good together. However, Jim's selfishness had gone over the top as far as Jane was concerned and she felt Jim needed a wake-up call if their marriage was to survive.

Cassie realized she had created this "monster" by always catering to him but there was a time when he had been willing to help with work around the house when she needed something done. Now Jim was too depressed to do anything but wallow in self pity and Cassie knew continuing to live in this manner was no longer an option.

Living such an emotionally negative and empty life for so many years was taking a toll on her. Cassie was beginning to agree with Jane's assessment and feared it might be too late for her marriage to be salvaged.

How to turn things around was something she grappled with every day. When she had asked Jim to go with her to talk to a counselor about their life together he had laughed at the suggestion.

After Jim refused to go for marriage counseling, Cassie knew something inside of her had died. She felt no joy except when she was teaching. She couldn't believe Jim didn't see how miserable she felt. But, then she realized Jim couldn't see anything except his own unhappiness.

Although her situation seemed hopeless, Cassie recognized that their life had to change if they were going to stay together.

Chapter Two

Mid April finally arrived and Easter was rapidly approaching. Cassie liked it when Easter fell later because there was a feeling of spring in the air. The new season always seemed a time of hope. Summer was just around the corner and, of course, everywhere Cassie looked love was in the air, especially among the students. It seemed a perfect time of new beginnings, especially since the long winter finally seemed over.

The hopeful atmosphere didn't seem to extend to Cassie's house however. Jim's depression seemed to be getting worse and she was at a loss as to what to do about it. In another month and a half school would be over, and although she was officially retiring Cassie was considering subbing the next year just to get out of the house and having a break from her husband.

Subbing was something she wasn't really looking forward to. She really just wanted to walk away totally from the school scene when she retired and do some community volunteering but Cassie knew substitute teaching would be a good excuse to not have to stay at home with Jim. She hated not having any direction in her life and knew there was no way she could sit around the house all day as Jim did. All thoughts of doing any traveling seemed out of the question at this point.

The most frustrating aspect was that Jim did just fine during the day while she was at school. He slept in and could get dressed and fix his meals while she was gone. However as soon as she walked in the door he needed a drink and this done and that to be taken care of until she couldn't even sit down for five minutes. Cassie was afraid that life

would continue in just that way if she didn't get out of the house on a regular basis in the fall.

She had even started taking her walks after work around her school before going home. A couple of times she had come home to change her clothes but before she could go out the door, Jim began demanding she do something for him and she had ended up not having time to walk. She tried to explain she needed to exercise but he had laid such a guilt trip on her for being away from him all day, she ended up helping him with what he wanted.

The second time that occurred Cassie realized she would have to walk before going home. Jim never questioned what time she got home. He just needed her undivided attention the minute she walked in the door. She had tried again to talk to her daughter about her dad but once again Kit just ignored her plight.

Cassie was hoping Kit would come over one day a week to spend some time with her father so she could have some free time. However Kit was going through problems with her job and told her mother she was just too busy to help. Cassie watched her race out the door to meet her husband for dinner and a movie.

Cassie just sighed after their talk. It appeared Jim wasn't the only selfish person in the family. She knew if she couldn't get Kit to come over one day a week to give her a break, there was probably no use in even bringing it up with Gray.

And she hated asking Gray knowing his circumstances. Kit's job did not have the set hours like her brother's and she had a lot more free time than Gray. Cassie didn't think it would be too heavy of a burden on Kit to come over one afternoon a week to give her mother a chance to get out and away from the stress.

Gray was an accountant and he and his wife Karen had recently started their own business. She knew they were at work by 7:00am and didn't get home until after 9:00pm most nights. Of all the people in their family Cassie knew Karen, her daughter-in-law, understood better than her own children and would have helped if she had the time.

Karen's mother had suffered a stroke shortly after her husband retired and being devoted to his wife he had taken care of her for three years. Karen had lived at home while attending college helping her father as much as possible.

After graduating from college Karen had taken a job with a company that expected her to put in long hours. It was there that she had met Gray. For the first year they dated they only went out on Saturday nights. Besides working long hours, Karen's weekends were devoted to helping her dad buying groceries, cleaning the house, and preparing meals so dinners could be just warmed up during the week.

One morning Karen's father simply didn't wake up. The family doctor said he had died from a massive heart attack in his sleep. Karen was convinced the stress of caring for her mother had led to the heart condition which eventually had killed him.

Karen's mother was told of her husband's death and the morning after the funeral she died in her sleep like her husband. Realizing her mother no longer wanted to live without her husband she had just let go.

Karen was shell shocked. It had been expected that her mother might die but in less than a week Karen had to make arrangements for two funerals.

Cassie knew Karen felt a lot of empathy for her situation and would constantly ask how she was doing and if she needed any help. But Cassie felt guilty asking Karen to

help when she was so busy with the new business and this made Kit's rebuff and denial even harder to bear.

Cassie always thanked Karen for her offer but pointed out Jim was much more self-sufficient than Karen's mother had been. For the present Cassie was stuck and knew she had to let go of the anger she sometimes felt towards her children.

As she walked in the door returning from her day of teaching on the Thursday before Good Friday, Cassie heard Jim yelling for her. She tried to control the anger welling up in her and started thinking instead about the Easter Sunday dinner she would be preparing for the family.

As she took her coat off Jim's voice was farther away than usual. Through a haze Cassie saw Jim come around the corner in his wheelchair with an empty glass in his hand. As the room began spinning out of control she was wondering why Jim couldn't get his own drink as she fell into a swirling black void.

Cassie didn't remember anything else. The next conscious thing she heard was Jane and Kit, with voices raised, having what sounded like an argument in the next room. As she came to, she realized she was not at home. It appeared she was in a hospital bed. She could tell Kit was upset by the tone she was using.

Cassie heard Kit tell Jane that all her mother needed was a new doctor! "If Doctor George had given mother blood pressure medication like he should have, we wouldn't have had to call 911 and she wouldn't be in the hospital right now. She needs to have some pills or something to help her deal with her problems so she won't get sick like this again."

“Don’t you understand? Your mother may die if she continues to live with the stress she’s been enduring for the last few years?” Jane told Kit in exasperation. “Look at what happened to Karen’s father.”

“There’s no use arguing about this,” Cassie heard Gray say. “Mom and dad’s problems are different than Karen’s parents. Let’s wait and see what the doctor says. Mother’s blood pressure is back in the normal range and Doctor George said she’ll be all right tonight. Personally I think we should all go home since mother is no longer in any danger and deal with this situation tomorrow. I know dad is sleeping by now but shouldn’t one of us look in on him tonight Kit?”

“I told dad I would call him if anything changed. He’ll be all right tonight. I’ll go over in the morning and fix him some breakfast before coming to the hospital.”

Jane was extremely upset by the whole situation but realized the children were afraid of what had happened to their mother and were avoiding how to deal with the situation since they weren’t sure what the future might hold. Their mother had always been there to fix every difficult problem and now she was the problem. Kit and Gray just weren’t sure how to deal with this new situation.

Memories of Karen’s parents had Gray feeling pretty shaken but he was afraid to admit it. Not knowing what to do about the situation Gray thought maybe Kit was right; if his mother started some kind of blood pressure medications she would be fine again.

Jane didn’t want the children to get upset with her when she didn’t have any answers at this point. However she did have an idea and knew she would be making a call when she got home. She was hoping for an answer before coming to the hospital the

next day. Maybe she could help resolve this situation to everyone's satisfaction. Well at least to Cassie's satisfaction.

Cassie pretended to be sleeping when she heard the three of them come in and take one last look at her before going home for the night. As she drifted back to sleep she wondered who would fix Easter dinner. Then she realized that she really didn't care.

Chapter Three

The next morning, Cassie woke early when the nurses came in to check her blood pressure and the IV that had been inserted in her left hand to keep her hydrated. She wondered how anyone could get any decent rest in a hospital with all the hustle and bustle that was constantly going on around the place.

At 9:00am Dr. George came into see her. He wanted a chance to talk to her before her family arrived. “Good morning, Cassie, how are you feeling today?”

“I’m feeling much better, Doctor George.”

“Cassie, I’m going to keep you in the hospital until Tuesday. Since it is Good Friday only essential tests will be run today and I need to rule out the possibility that you might have some other serious health problems. I’ll schedule you for tests first thing Monday morning.”

The doctor knew Cassie could go home on Saturday for the weekend but he thought she would be better off resting in the hospital away from the stress of her home life. He knew how Jim was treating her and now she had her children adding to her stress.

“You might be able to go home later in the afternoon on Monday, but you might feel more rested waiting until Tuesday morning. We can talk about that Monday afternoon after I get the preliminary results back. I’ll be honest with you, Cassie. I don’t think we are going to find anything physically wrong with you. I believe your condition is caused by the stressful conditions you are living under at home.”

Cassie was relieved. “Well, if it’s only stress I should be able to deal with it.”

“Cassie, don’t think of it as only stress. Stress is very damaging. Many physical illnesses can be attributed to stress. I want you to take me seriously. The type of stress you’re living under can and will kill you if you continue as you are. You’ll recall what happened to Karen’s father.”

Tears welled up in Cassie’s eyes. “But doctor what can I do? Jim just laughs at me when I say I feel stressed. And, I’ve asked him to go to counseling but he has refused.”

“From everything you’ve told me and what I know of Jim, I realize you won’t be able to change him at this point in time. Cassie, don’t worry right now. I want you to rest and relax while you’re in here. I’ll talk to your family when they come to visit today and I wanted you to know what I plan to tell them. They’ll resist what I have to say, Cassie. People today feel that there is always some kind of magic pill to take that will make you feel better. Your family will insist you get a second opinion.”

“I trust you, Doctor George.”

“Cassie, believe me, if you want a second opinion I will not take it personally. At present I think the best thing to do is to run some tests to rule out any serious health problems. After we get the results back, if you are in good physical condition we can discuss other solutions. And, if you do want a second opinion there are some specialists I could suggest.”

Cassie felt reassured by her doctor’s words. “Unless you find something physically wrong with me I don’t want a second opinion Dr. George. I have always been comfortable with any diagnosis you’ve made. I really believe Jim likely wouldn’t have lost his leg if he had taken your advice in the first place.”

“It makes me sad to say that is definitely true, Cassie. And you need to understand I don’t believe he has any right to make you feel guilty for choices he has made. You have done everything you could to keep him healthy and he has chosen his unhealthy lifestyle instead.”

“I guess this means I won’t be home to fix Easter dinner,” Cassie said as she smiled at the doctor.

“I’ve already talked to your daughter about that, so don’t worry, Cassie. I will be meeting with your family at 11:00am. Your friend Jane called and I told her she should come and visit you anytime. I suspect that she is very good emotional support for you and Jane should be with you when your family comes in to see you after my talk. Maybe they’ll be more reasonable in her presence.”

Cassie thanked the doctor as he left her. As she lay there she thought about what he had said. She knew Kit would be upset because she would view it as one more problem in her world. And she knew Jim wouldn’t believe a thing the doctor said. If the doctor didn’t find anything seriously wrong with her, Jim would just tell her to toughen up and get a grip.

Cassie realized she was almost at the end of her rope with Jim. She felt his resentment whenever she was around him. She didn’t want to hurt him but she knew he had to make changes if they were going to continue living together. And the doctor’s talk had scared Cassie enough to make her realize that things had to change. Her health was just as important as Jim’s.

Before long Jane arrived with a bouquet of flowers and a wide smile on her face. Cassie chuckled at her grin. “You look like the cat that ate the canary Jane.”

“I have some news for you Cassie, but tell me what the doctor said first.”

Cassie repeated the doctor’s recommendations and also confided how her feelings for Jim were changing. Jane was shocked when she heard about Jim’s leg.

“I guess I never realized he might have saved his leg if he had stopped the smoking.”

“Cassie, I have a proposal for you and I don’t want you to say yes or no right now. I just want you to promise me you’ll think about it, okay?”

“Okay Jane.”

“You remember my friend Sylvia I told you about who lives in Seattle?” Cassie nodded as Jane continued. “Anyway she’s going to Europe for the summer. She plans to leave right after Memorial Day and be gone until the first part of October. She has a wonderful apartment condo in downtown Seattle that overlooks Elliott Bay. She told me a couple of weeks ago she is looking for someone to stay in her place to watch over things and take care of her plants while she is gone.”

“What does this have to do with me Jane?”

“I called her last night when I got home from seeing you. She still hasn’t found anyone trustworthy to look after her place. Please don’t be upset with me, Cassie, but I told her you might be interested. I told her she could feel very safe about her things if you lived there.”

At first Cassie was shocked. How could I be gone from Jim for so long she wondered? Aloud she said, “How could I possibly go away like that Jane?”

Before Jane had a chance to answer Kit, Gray, & Jim came in and none of them looked very happy. Kit immediately repeated what Doctor George had told them. She

was extremely upset and told her mother she thought the doctor should just give her some pills and release her from the hospital so Cassie could fix Easter dinner for everyone.

Cassie, with a little smile, just rolled her eyes at Jane. Then Jim started in. Cassie could almost feel her blood pressure rising as he spoke. He never even asked her how she felt and there were no flowers or little goodies from anyone in her family. He insisted she check herself out of the hospital immediately and come back on Monday as an outpatient for the tests. Then he told her he was beginning to wonder if they shouldn't find a new doctor—one who knew what he was doing.

Listening to Jim, Cassie became outraged. She had enough and finally exploded. “What do you want Jim? Shall I get rid of Doctor George and ignore his warning? If I ignore what he's telling me, I could end up with something worse happening, like you did. I don't intend to spend the rest of my life waiting on you hand and foot while you continue to live your life the way you want. And, I don't intend to get even sicker because I resent having to take care of you when it is apparent you couldn't care less about how I feel. You make bad choices Jim and I am not supposed to say anything or rock the boat. I also have a right to a life and I refuse to suffer in silence anymore because of your decisions.”

Turning to her children she said, “And, Kit and Gray I am tired of you two pretending nothing is wrong and that I just need to stay quiet and pretend life is great. You three come storming in here telling me what I'm supposed to do and you don't even ask me how I feel. All you want is for me not to upset your lifestyle in any way. I think the three of you better leave now. You can all figure out what to do about Easter dinner

yourselves, which is apparently the most important thing you care about at the moment. I plan to stay here and figure out what to do with the rest of my life”

Thinking Cassie was just stressed and didn't really mean what she was saying Kit said, “Mom you don't really mean that. We only want what is best for you.”

Cassie was close to tears and taking a deep breath said, “Kit, I asked you to come over and help one afternoon a week to give me some time for myself but you were too busy with your life. Well, I am too busy right now to listen to all of you telling me how I am supposed to live my life. I feel you don't want what's best for me, but what is best and most convenient for all of you. Please just go now. We can discuss this further when I'm feeling better.”

Jane had moved away from Cassie so that she was almost behind the opened bathroom door when Jim and the kids had entered the room. She was proud of Cassie for speaking up to her family. However, as she watched them file out, Jane wondered if anything Cassie had said had even sunk in.

After the three filed out Jane came back to Cassie's bed. “You did the right thing, Cassie. You need to stand up to them. They will keep taking advantage of you and you will continue to be stressed if you don't make your feelings known to them. I hope you'll give Seattle some serious thought. It could be the best thing to ever happen to you. And who knows, maybe you're destined to go there.”

“You're right, Jane. I will give Seattle serious consideration. I can't believe how thoughtless they all are. Maybe if I get away for those few months, my family will learn to appreciate me more. And, if not, at least it will give me some time to myself to think

about what direction I want for my life after retirement. I think life in the Pacific Northwest this summer could be just what the doctor ordered.”

Cassie had no idea that she was indeed about to embark on an exciting journey. She was about to discover that life could be more fulfilling than she could ever imagine.

Chapter Four

Kit stopped in to see her mother on Saturday morning. Knowing her daughter had a lot of errands to run and things to do since it was the weekend Cassie told her Jane planned to come and see her that afternoon and she didn't need to stay. Instead she would look forward to the family visiting her the next day.

Kit seemed relieved she didn't need her to sit with her mother. Cassie could sense the strain between the two of them and was relieved when her daughter left shortly afterwards.

The day passed quickly and quietly. Cassie felt sinful just lying in bed reading a book with nothing to do. Jane stopped in for a short visit and told Cassie all about Sylvia's condo. She was afraid Cassie would not agree to go to Seattle and she was going to do anything she could to try and entice her to that wonderful city.

Cassie's family arrived at the hospital early the next afternoon. It was Easter Sunday and the children and their spouses had taken their father to Easter services and then to a family style restaurant for brunch. This time when they came in, Gray was carrying an Easter lily plant for his mother. Cassie began to wonder if maybe her agitation with them the day before had helped to change their thinking somewhat.

Cassie soon discovered she was mistaken. Before long Jim began grumbling about Cassie staying in the hospital until Tuesday and Kit and Gray began bickering over who would take care of their dad until Cassie came home.

This time Cassie did not get upset nor say anything to them about their selfishness. Simply knowing there was hope for taking a break from all of them had helped to release her frustrations and kept her stress levels down.

She had almost convinced herself that she needed to stay in Minnesota for the summer but once the bickering started she realized nothing would change unless she went away. Cassie could hardly believe how she had swung from one way of thinking to the other so quickly. Of course, this was all based on the assumption that there was nothing physically wrong with her.

Before her family showed up, Doctor George stopped in briefly after his Easter services. She told him how she had felt towards her children and also mentioned Jane's proposal to her for the summer.

"That's an excellent idea, Cassie. We'll wait until the tests come back but I really don't think we are going to find anything wrong with you. We seem to have your blood pressure under control and it's been running normal ever since you've been in here away from the stress and pressure of your home situation. If the test results are normal, with everything I know about you and Jim, I will be more convinced than ever emotional stress is the cause of your illness. I think a four month break from your family would be just what the doctor ordered." The doctor was looking at Cassie with a broad smile.

Cassie had vacillated about going to Seattle for the summer but realized the doctor was right as she listened to her family bickering. She almost felt like she wasn't even in the same room as her family discussed what they should do about her situation.

When the discussion ran out of steam, Kit told Cassie they would all spend the afternoon with her. Cassie loved her family but knew she couldn't stand having them crowded around in her small hospital room all afternoon.

Very carefully so she wouldn't hurt their feelings she explained that the doctor had been in and had told her she needed to rest that afternoon before her tests the next morning. They all seemed relieved when Cassie told them about needing some quiet time and it wasn't long before they filed out.

Cassie realized as they left that Jim had said goodbye but hadn't even kissed her when he came in or when he had left. Suddenly she knew her marriage was in serious jeopardy.

A few minutes after her family left Jane popped in for a visit. Cassie told Jane everything that had happened with the doctor and her family. When she finished she took a deep breath, smiled and said, "Jane, call your friend Sylvia. Tell her if she approves me I would be happy to stay in her condo as soon as I get out of school until she comes back the first of October."

"Oh, Cassie, that's wonderful! I know you are making the right decision. As soon as I get home I'll call Sylvia this afternoon and then I'll call you tonight to let you know what she thinks."

After Jane left, Cassie lay back on her pillow and thought about the decision she had just made as a sudden sense of relief flooded over her. She couldn't believe she had agreed to go to Seattle without giving it a second thought. Then she realized that if she'd given it more thought she might have backed out.

Cassie couldn't believe how excited she was about her up and coming summer in Seattle. She almost felt like a college student, leaving home for the first time.

Cassie spent the rest of the afternoon reading and she had just finished dinner when the phone rang. Jane called to tell her Sylvia had been relieved and excited to know Cassie would stay in her place.

Jane's word on Cassie's reliability was all she needed. Georgia asked Jane to have Cassie call her the following weekend when she knew the results of her tests, so they could firm up the details on her move there for the summer.

Cassie couldn't even imagine how she was going to tell Jim and her children but for the first time in months she felt the heaviness that had been weighing her down fading away. She fell asleep quickly and easily. When the nurse arrived with a sleeping pill she noticed the smile on her patient's face. Since Cassie was sound asleep, the nurse decided not to awaken her.

Chapter Five

On Monday Cassie's tests didn't start until almost 10:00am. The tests for surgery patients always came first and it was a very strange feeling to Cassie to lie in bed with nothing to do. She knew by tomorrow that would change and decided to enjoy her "forced vacation."

It was close to 1:00pm when Cassie finished up and was wheeled back to her room. The nurses brought her some soup and toast since she had missed the regular lunchtime. She was a little tired from the tests and fell asleep after finishing her soup.

It wasn't until after 4:00pm when Doctor George came to her room. "Hi, Cassie," the doctor said. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling really well, Doctor George." Then Cassie told him that if all was well with her medically, she had made plans to go to Seattle for the summer.

"That's wonderful Cassie. As I suspected all your tests came back normal, but you are not out of the woods yet. You'll end up right back in here if you don't keep your stress levels down. Do you want me with you when you tell Jim your decision, Cassie?"

"I plan to call Sylvia this weekend and set up all the details. I appreciate your offer of help but I think I will be fine. Knowing I'll be going away and that you will help if I need it, is all the reassurance I need," Cassie replied with such a satisfied smile even the doctor felt joy.

Shortly after the doctor left, Jim called her. After she told him the tests turned out well he presented such an 'I told you so attitude' regarding her tests that Cassie found herself making up an excuse to say goodbye. Both of her children also called a little later

and Kit agreed to be at the hospital at 10:00am the next day to pick Cassie up and take her home.

Cassie never said anything to her family about Seattle. She decided she would have all her arrangements in place before she sat them down and told them about her summer plans. In that way Cassie knew they couldn't easily talk her out of going when she had everything set up.

Cassie went home from the hospital on Tuesday morning. For some reason Jim left her alone that day and she enjoyed a long nap before fixing dinner for the two of them. Kit had called her school Tuesday morning to let them know she was taking a sick day but would return bright and early on Wednesday.

Cassie's colleagues and her students were concerned about her since she was very rarely sick. But they did sense something different about her when she returned to school. She seemed much happier and there was a new tranquility about her demeanor. Cassie assured everyone she was fine, and everything got quickly back to normal as the week sped by.

Cassie called Sylvia the following Saturday morning. From their conversation she liked Sylvia immediately and felt she was getting the better end of the deal taking care of the condo after she heard Sylvia's description of her home.

Cassie told Sylvia she would drive to Seattle the weekend after Memorial Day. Her teaching duties would be finished by noon the Wednesday after that holiday which would allow her a couple of days to finish packing and organizing for her trip out to Seattle.

Only Jane knew about Cassie's decision and it stayed that way until Mother's Day. Jim, as usual, was too preoccupied with his own feelings to sense anything had changed. Kit and Paul and Gray and Karen arrived with presents expecting she would be making dinner for everyone! Instead she announced she planned to go out to eat.

After her family's protests, Cassie lost the calm she had been feeling the last few days and with clenched teeth said, "Today is Mother's Day and you kids bring me presents and as usual no gesture from your father. However, you and your father expect me to work making everyone dinner. I am beginning to feel my only purpose in this family is to cater to all of your needs. So I have decided to take a break from all of you!"

Before they recovered from the shock of Cassie speaking out, she told her family of her summer plans. She sensed they didn't really believe she would do it, but deep in her heart she knew it would happen.

Without saying a word, both of her children upset with Cassie stormed out the door with their spouses.

"Now look what you've done! We were supposed to have a nice family gathering today and instead you have upset everyone. I don't know what has gotten into you lately Cassie. You might as well get any ideas of going to Seattle or anywhere else out of your head right now. Your job is to be my wife and take care of me. Quit acting so crazy and call your children and apologize."

Furiously Cassie replied, "Jim I'm not acting crazy! For the first time in a long time I feel like I am doing something for myself. Why don't I deserve equal feelings in this family? And who made the rule that I was suppose to cook a big dinner on Mother's Day? I am so sick of your selfishness and refusal to even be kind to me. You just want

everyone to feel sorry for you and cater to you because of your medical problems. I refuse to do that anymore. I am going to Seattle this summer and when I get back after we have both had time to think about our marriage we'll see what the next step will be.”

Without replying, Jim angrily turned his wheel chair back towards his den, slammed the door and turned the TV up as loud as it would go.

Well, that went well Cassie thought to herself. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry. She couldn't believe how relieved she was after telling her family her plans. She had been dreading the confrontation but now that it was over she finally felt free.

Driving to the KFC she bought Jim dinner. When she took the food back to the house Jim was still locked in the den and she knew from past behavior he would stay there all day. She left him a note on the kitchen counter that his dinner was in the refrigerator and that she was going out. If she had any sense she would have let him fend for himself for dinner but at this point she didn't want to do anything to upset things any further which could prevent her from leaving.

She took a bottle of wine from the liquor cabinet and drove over to Jane's house. They had a wonderful afternoon and evening savoring the wine and when Cassie got home the empty box of chicken was sitting on the counter.

Normally it would have upset her that he hadn't even thrown the empty box in the garbage but the fact that it was less than a month before she would leave is what she focused on instead. Cassie found Jim in bed facing the wall. She had no idea whether he was awake or not and after her fun day with Jane she really didn't care what her husband was feeling. Happy Mother's Day to me she said softly to herself as she slipped quietly into bed.

Jim was still asleep the next morning when Cassie left for school and she decided that was just as well. Doctor George had said Jim might react with extreme anger but it still surprised Cassie when it happened. He hadn't even tried to convince her not to go. That probably hurt the most. Cassie felt as if he could care less whether she was there or not except in her role as a maid. Because of that, Cassie knew nothing would change her decision to leave.