

Sample Chapter from *The Journey* by Marina Martindale

The moonlight reflected off the snow-covered mountains, creating a dreamy, picturesque landscape, which could easily hide a deadly hazard. Samantha Walsh stayed on high alert as she drove down the highway.

“Is everything okay, Mom? You seem a little tense.”

Samantha glanced at the young woman sitting in the passenger seat.

“I’m fine, Cassie. I’m just a little tired, that’s all. As soon we get to the next exit, I’d like to pull over and have you drive, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Sure, Mom.” Cassie sounded concerned. “You haven’t been yourself today. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m just tired, that’s all.” She tilted her head toward the backseat. “And now that your little sister-in-law has finally given us a break and gone to sleep, I have some things I’d like to discuss with you.”

“Such as?”

“I’ve decided to sell the diner.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Max and his wife have made a very generous offer,” explained Samantha. “I’d like to accept, but I wanted to discuss it with you first.”

“I understand. So what would you do if you sold the place? You’re way too young for retirement, and somehow I can’t see you sitting on your front porch in your rocking chair.”

Samantha chuckled. “I can’t see myself there either, but now that you’re happily married and on your own, I’d like to finally start pursuing my own dreams. Once was the time when I was going to be a nurse, you know.”

“I know, Mom. You’ve told me the story many times. You were going to college, back in Arizona, but then you ran out of money, so you got a job as a waitress at a truck-stop diner.”

“Back then I was quite the dish, and they tipped me really well.”

“And you’re still a dish. None of my friends believe me when I tell them you’re my mother. They all say, ‘But Cassie, she’s so pretty. She looks so young, and she’s so thin. She doesn’t have any wrinkles or any gray hair.’”

“That’s very kind of them to say, but even if I don’t look it, I’m starting to feel it.” Samantha winced and let out a small groan.

“Are you all right, Mom?”

“I’m fine. It’s just a little indigestion, that’s all.”

“You’re sure that’s all?” Cassie tried to mask the concern in her voice. “So, what do you have in mind?”

“I want to go back to Arizona, at least for part of the year. I’ll keep the house in Idaho Springs and stay here during the summers; but I’d like to spend the rest of the year down there and take some classes at the university. I could still become a nurse, you know. I only had a couple semesters left when I ran out of money, and I was ready to go back when I met your father.”

“I know. And then you got engaged, and then you got pregnant with me, and then he passed away.”

“And then I had you to raise. But you know, Cassie, I’ve never once regretted a day I’ve had with you. You’re what kept me going all these years, and I love you with all my heart.” Samantha winced and groaned again.

“And I love you too. You’re the best mom anyone could have asked for, but right now I’m a little worried about you. Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

Samantha tried to reassure her daughter. “I think so. I must have eaten something that’s really disagreeing with me.”

“But you hardly touched your dinner. I think you may be coming down with something. When we get back to your place, I think we should pack a bag and you can stay with us for a few days. I don’t want to leave you home alone if you’re sick.”

“Cassie, I’m fine. It’s just an upset stomach, although I think you’re right. I’ve probably picked up a bug, but I’ll be okay. I don’t want to bring it to your house and have the rest of you catch it.”

Cassie remained unconvinced. “If you say so, but I’ve also noticed that you’ve been a little down in the dumps lately.”

“I’m just tired and need a change. I’ve done very well with the diner and I’ve got the investment portfolio to prove it. But running the place day after day, year after year, has taken its toll on me. You’ve put in enough hours there yourself to understand that. I think the stress has finally worn me down because I’m starting to feel burned out. The last time I saw my doctor he told me my blood pressure was getting too high. That’s why I’m ready to sell the place and be done with it. And I don’t know why, but for some reason your father’s been on my mind more than usual lately. I’m even starting to dream about him again. Must be because you’re out on your own now.”

Cassie turned her attention to the backseat to check on Isabella. “Looks like she’s out like a light.”

“Yes, she is,” agreed Samantha. “So, are you and Jeremy looking forward to spending some time with her?”

“I think so. She’s a good kid and she’ll only be with us for a couple days. Laura says she’s supposed to be back on her feet right after her surgery, so Will plans to pick her up the day after tomorrow.”

“Assuming Laura has no unexpected complications.”

“It’s just gallbladder surgery. It’s an outpatient procedure, and it’s no big deal.”

“I know, but it’ll be good for you and Jeremy to spend some time with her. It could be like a dress rehearsal for having one of your own”

“Mom, please.” Cassie rolled her eyes. “I keep telling you to be patient about that. Our first anniversary was only two weeks ago. We still consider ourselves newlyweds, and we’re not quite ready for kids.”

“I know, I know, but don’t take too long, okay?”

Samantha winced again. She took her left hand off the steering wheel and began flexing her fingers. She appeared to be in distress.

“Now I know you aren’t all right. What is it?”

“I don’t know. All of a sudden I feel kind of strange. My left arm is starting to hurt, and my fingers are getting this weird, tingly sensation.”

“I think you better let me drive.” Cassie’s voice sounded urgent.

“I’m going to, Cassie. As soon as I find a safe spot, I’ll pull over and let you take the wheel.”

The car suddenly swerved.

“Mom!”

They were sliding off the road. Cassie looked at her mother, suddenly slumped against the door. She heard another car honk its horn as she braced for impact. Time seemed to slow down. She felt the car tilt sideways, as if they were in a free fall, before it tumbled downward, crashing into the trees below. As it rolled, Cassie watched her life pass before her eyes. The last thing she saw before her world went dark was Jeremy’s face.