



Autumn Dreams

By Gayle Roper

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Chapter 1

“Aunt Cassandra.”

Two words. Four Syllables. Utter despair.

Cass Merton looked at her sixteen- year-old niece Jenn, the drama queen, seated across the breakfast table. She was regal, demanding, and very full of herself.

Whatever possessed me to think I could do this? Cass wondered. What did she know about raising the beautiful Jenn and her hulking eighteen- year-old brother Jared?

After two months of *in loco parentis*, she was ready to ship them off to their mother and father in Saudi Arabia and fie on the dangers. Certainly the risk to Cass’s own sanity was more real, more urgent than the uncertain threats of Islamic terrorists.

Jenn’s face crumpled, and Cass braced for whatever was coming next.

“Everybody’s going!” Her face was a study in distress. “It’s all they’ve talked about for the past week. Please, Aunt Cassandra, I can’t be left out.”

“I’m not going,” Jared said around a spoonful of Cheerios.

Jenn ignored him, clearly thinking he had no place in her discussion. She opened her eyes wide, going for the innocent look. “Don’t you trust me, Aunt Cassandra?”

Cass was impressed in spite of herself. Jenn changed tactics like a chameleon changed colors, and each time she had the look down pat.

“Trust is not the issue here, Jenn.” Cass thought she sounded the epitome of reason and logic as she reached out and petted Glossy Flossy who lay half on the table, half on Cass’s placemat. The old cat’s black head was so close to Cass’s plate that her ear twitched when the long hairs touched it. The cat arched her neck for a better scratch under her ancient chin, her purr rumbling through the room. “Wisdom and obedience are my concerns.”

“I knew it.” Jenn pouted. “You don’t trust me.”

Cass watched her niece in fascination. How did the girl manage to look so adorable with that lower lip stuck out beyond the tip of her nose? Whenever Cass pouted – which wasn’t often these days; almost forty- year-old women weren’t allowed to pout – all she ever looked was infantile.

“You’re an idiot, Jenn.” Jared rose from the kitchen table and took his cereal bowl and juice glass to the sink. He rinsed them both and put them carefully in the dishwasher. He tossed the empty Cheerios box in the trash, the fourth he’d consumed this week. “Aunt Cassandra’s right about this one.”

Jenn spun to her brother, pout forgotten. Now the delightful rosy color in her cheeks and the fascinating sparkle in her Elizabeth Taylor eyes were caused by anger. “Butt out, Jared. If I wanted your opinion, I’d have asked for it.”

“You never ask for it,” Jared said with a calm that irritated Jenn further. “And believe me, you need it.”

“Like someone like you knows from popular!” Jenn’s voice dripped with scorn.

“Jenn!” Cass was appalled.

Jared just smiled sadly. “At least I’m smart enough to know a party the cops are going to bust before the night’s over.”

Cass swallowed. She hadn’t thought about a raid. Certainly she’d been worried about underage drinking, the scourge of too many adolescent parties. And Derrick Smith, the party’s host, she didn’t trust an inch. She just hadn’t thought as far as the police. She shuddered. Cops at the door of her B&B, escorting a belligerent and/or weeping Jenn home in the middle of the night. Now there was something that would be great for business as well as create a marvelous memory for the girl. Or Jenn in a holding cell in the company of who knew what unsavory women, waiting to be bailed out. Either situation would do wonders for the girl’s development.

“Like Derrick’d let the party get out of control,” Jenn scoffed.

Jared looked at her with a mix of pity and bewilderment. “Wise up, Jenn. Derrick will be the drunkest one there.”

Jenn stared, flabbergasted. “He will not!”

Jared shook his head. “For a smart girl, you can be awfully dumb.”

Jenn looked deeply offended. “I am not!”

“Yes, you are,” Jared said, placing his paw of a hand on her shoulder. He towered over her by ten inches. His eyes were full of sympathy.

“Smart or dumb?” Cass wasn’t certain she was following the conversation. “Which?”

“Both.” Jared slid his arms into his green letter jacket with the big gold S on the back. “Almost as smart as me –“

Jenn blew a raspberry at him.

“—and much, much dumber.” He opened the back door and walked through, automatically ducking. “Later, Aunt Cassandra.” He sketched a little wave.

Jenn tossed her shining auburn hair over her shoulders with a loud snort of disbelief. Her perfectly polished green fingernail with the little gold stars shining on the lacquered surface jabbed in the direction of her brother. “Are you going to let him talk to me like that, Aunt Cassandra?”

How many thousands of dollars does a ticket for immediate travel to Saudi Arabia cost? I might be able to afford two if I cash in my IRAs, providing the penalty isn't too steep.

Jenn grabbed her purse and book bag and stalked toward the door. “I’m going to that party tonight!”

Cass stepped in front of the girl. She hadn’t moved so fast in years and was proud to note she was barely panting. “You aren’t going tonight, Jenn.”

Jenn blinked up at her in surprise and took a step backwards. Cass made herself as tall as she could though she doubted size would intimidate Jenn who was too used to her father and brother, to say nothing of her three uncles and grandfather, giants all.

“You tell Derrick that he can come here if he’d like to,” Cass said, all reason and generosity, “but you are not going to his house.”

The drama queen struck an appalled pose. “Don’t tell me you believe Jared?”

“Only because I already checked things out for myself.”

“What?” Horror and disbelief filled Jenn’s face. “You checked? How?”

“Derrick’s parents will be away for the weekend. The party will have no adult supervision.” Cass watched the girl’s eyes narrow as she took in that piece of news and tried to figure a way around it. In Cass’s opinion, there was none. “Jenn, you are not going.”

“Please, Aunt Cassandra. Please.”

Cass expected Jenn to drop to her knees and grab the hems of her jeans any minute now. Instead Jenn restrained herself and dropped a green-nailed hand onto Cass’s arm.

“I mean, think about how special it is for a sophomore to be invited to a senior’s party as his date.”

Like that bit of cajolery would sway a thinking adult. “No.”

The anger returned. “What if I defy you?”

It was Cass's turn to blink. Didn't the girl know you weren't supposed to tell people ahead of time that you planned to defy them? Not that she herself had ever defied anyone, but she'd grown up with four older brothers who had had no trouble at all ignoring the rules if they felt the situation called for it. As the daughter of Cass's third brother Tommy, the king of defy-ers, Jenn came by her rebellious tendencies naturally.

Cass stared Jenn in the eye. "If you flout me, I'll come and get you."

"What?"

"I'll march into the house calling your name. I'll tell everyone I've come for you because it's past your curfew. I'll call all the boys 'handsome' and the girls 'honey'. I'll grab your hand and hold it while I drag you outside."

Jenn blanched. "You wouldn't."

"I would. And I'll bring Uncle Hal and Uncle Will along for good measure. Maybe Aunt Ellie and Aunt Lucy too."

Jenn was obviously shaken at the thought of her two huge and very voluble uncles, their petite but extremely mouthy wives in tow, crashing Derrick's party, though she struggled not to let her distress show. She sent Cass what was supposed to be a scathing look. "Why not fly in Uncle Bud and Aunt Jane too?"

Cass nodded. "Not a bad idea. Colorado's not that far from New Jersey. Maybe your mom and dad could even come home for the weekend. Then we could have a family reunion at Derrick's."

With a snort of disgust Jenn stomped out the door and off to school, doubtless planning to make all her teachers pay for Cass's uncooperative spirit.

Cass sighed. Her brother Tommy was on a one-year business assignment in Saudi Arabia doing something he had never bothered to explain to Cass, whether because it was some sort of secret government mission or because he deemed her too dumb to understand she wasn't certain. He and Rhonda were due back in the States at the end of August. Cass glanced at the calendar hanging on the wall by the family phone. October 15 today's date read. Cass sighed again. It was going to be a long year.

Cass gathered up Jenn's juice glass and small plate, brushing the toast crumbs off the table onto the floor. It needed to be swept anyway. She wiped off the tiny table stuffed in one corner of her cramped kitchen, taking care not to bother Glossy Flossy who still slept on the place mat. As she whipped the broom around the room, Cass reviewed the coming busy weekend, smiling with satisfaction that her bed and breakfast would be filled.

Later today, Friday, nine guests were due at SeaSong, eight for the weekend and one for an indefinite stay. She didn't have many guests who booked for an unspecified amount of time, and certainly she couldn't accept someone like that in high season. But it was fall, and the later it got, the fewer reservations there were. This guest's presence wouldn't cost her income like it might in the summer if she had to turn away a definite future booking because he might still be here.

He was to have the second floor front left, the premier room with an actual view of a wedge of the ocean two blocks away. There was a small private balcony off the room where the guest could enjoy the brine-scented breeze that blew almost constantly from the water. If the current run of Indian summer days continued, he could sit outside and bask in the sun's kiss for hours.

Cass grinned. She sounded like she was writing brochure copy again. *Enjoy the sun's kiss on your own private balcony at SeaSong, Seaside's premier B&B.*

The family phone rang. Cass stared at it. What had Jenn forgotten today? She answered cautiously.

"Cassandra? This is Mrs. Martin."

Cass's heart sank at the sound of the high, slightly shaky voice of the old woman.

There was only one reason for Mrs. Martin to be calling at this hour – or at any hour. "Mom?"

"She's sitting in my living room right now." Mrs. Martin made a tsk-tsk sound. "She's come looking for Elsie."

Cass closed her eyes. "I'll be right there."

"Don't rush. She's calm for the moment, drinking a cup of tea."

Cass grabbed her red sweater, her keys and purse, patted Flossy quickly as she rushed past, and raced to her car parked in the paved area off the back alley. What was she going to do about Mom? And where was Dad, for heaven's sakes?

Oh, God, what do I do?

Thankful that her parents lived in Seaside and only a few blocks from SeaSong, Cass turned the corner onto Scallop Street, a residential neighborhood full of small, cozy retirement homes set back five blocks from the ocean. All the houses were neat and tidy, all lawns small with neat but unimaginative plantings, all except her parents' home where mums, marigolds, and petunias still bloomed in clusters of lush color while a clematis vine with small, sweetly scented white flowers climbed the porch rail.

She pulled up in front of her parents' white clapboard home and hurried up the walk past the porch planters of still glowing if slightly leggy red geraniums. Maybe Mom had come home. She opened the front door. "Dad? Mom?"

"I'm in the kitchen, Cassandra," her father answered. "Come on back."

Cass walked through the jam-packed living room where floral covered chairs too big for the space sat cheek and jowl with a monster plaid sofa that could be pulled out into a queen sized bed, had there been room to open it. The clutter and colors always made Cass shudder. Home décor had never been Mom's strong suit, and recently that shaky skill had deteriorated even more.

"I can't give up my treasures," Mom had said when she and Dad moved into the small Seaside house from the much larger one in the Gardens at the north end of the island where they had

raised Cass and her brothers. Mom had not only held on to almost everything, but she'd added considerably to her stock courtesy of all the garage sales she faithfully attended.

"Look at this beautiful vase." Or picture or little statue. "I thought of you as soon as I saw it."

Somehow a matador on black velvet didn't seem the perfect gift to Cass, though her lack of enthusiasm never deterred her mother. Sleazy treasures appeared mysteriously in her antique-filled B&B.

After years of trying to convince her mother that plastic flowers and little gnomes with their noses chipped didn't go with SeaSong's decorating scheme, she'd given up. She couldn't deal with the flood of tears that filled Mom's pale blue eyes at the criticism. Instead she rounded the knickknacks up after Mom left.

Since Mom never remembered what she'd put where, the only price Cass paid for her lack of appreciation for her mother's eclectic taste was a backroom full of atrocious oddities. She'd have a garage sale of her own if it weren't so bad for business. Tacky. Plebian. When you aimed to be the best in the county, maybe even the state, and when you had guests paying a considerable sum for the privilege of staying at SeaSong, such things mattered.

"Where's Mom?" she asked her father as she walked into the kitchen, bright with sunshine and the yellow and white color scheme. The yellow was so brilliant and the paint finish so shiny that Cass invariably got a headache every time she spent more than fifteen minutes in the room.

Dad sat at the kitchen table and barely looked up from the papers he was playing with. "I don't know. Upstairs, I guess."

She looked at his bent head. He had beautiful white hair, thick with barely any receding at the hairline. His slim mustache matched his hair, and he kept it carefully clipped. When he was younger, she'd always thought he looked like Errol Flynn though she never told him so.

"Those people involved in movies are in league with the devil," was one of his favorite lines as she and her brothers grew up. To be compared to one of the hedonists, even a handsome, swashbuckling one, would have insulted him. Instead she told him he looked like Walter Cronkite, the Most Trusted Man in America.

Right now he was bent over a collection of sweepstakes envelopes and forms. They were his latest passion, and she shook her head at the waste of time they entailed. But what else should an eighty-year-old man do?

Cass left him and started upstairs to the two small bedrooms, his and hers. Dad snored so much Mom refused to sleep in the same room. He in turn refused to talk to the doctor about easing the affliction.

"She's just a grouchy old lady," he'd say. Then he'd grab her and kiss her, a real smackeroo, he called it. She in turn would punch him softly in the stomach as she preened under his love.

Cass had always wanted a man to love her as her father loved her mother. Ardently. Faithfully. It was one of life's sorrows that it had never happened for her.

“Mom?” Cass peered into her mother’s rose room, the bed with its rose quilt neatly made and covered with every rose, pink, magenta or crimson pillow Mom ever found at a garage sale. No one was there.

Cass peered into her father’s room, stark in its lack of amenities. Cass often wondered if he was unconsciously reliving his Army days during the Good War, the glory days when he accomplished great feats. If it weren’t for the blue paint and the plain blue quilt, the room would look like a barracks.

She hurried downstairs. “I’ll be back,” she called though she doubted Dad heard. When he was filling out the forms for all those prizes he was convinced he was going to win, he heard nothing. She hurried across the street. A straw wreath sporting some wellweathered dried flowers and a bedraggled scarecrow hung on Mrs. Martin’s front door. The scarecrow’s hair, made of Spanish moss, reminded Cass of Mrs. Martin’s permed curls. Cass raised her hand to ring the bell, but the door opened before she had a chance.

“She’s in here.” Mrs. Martin, a solidly built woman who should really buy her clothes a size or two larger, stepped back for Cass to enter. “She didn’t want to go home just yet. She’s convinced Elsie’s coming to my house today.”

Cass shared a sad look with Mrs. Martin, a young thing at a mere seventy-two. Mrs. Martin was as aware as Cass that Aunt Elsie had been dead for over ten years.

Charlotte Merton sat primly on Mrs. Martin’s floral sofa, looking pleased as could be to have the opportunity to wait in such a pleasant place for her sister. Her face was carefully made up, her cheeks a soft pink, one eyebrow carefully drawn, the other a bit too heavy for her fragile bone structure. Her soft perm made her hair stand out like dandelion fluff, and when she saw Cass, she smiled sweetly.

Cass smiled back as her heart caught. Mom’s eyes behind her trendy specs were glassy and vague. Where had the intelligent, wise woman Cass so admired gone? Who was this stranger in her mother’s body? “Hello, Mom.”

Mom blinked, and the vagueness diminished. “Cassandra Marie! How wonderful to see you, dear.” She set her cup of tea carefully on the end table beside her. The powdered sugar doughnut in her hand was liberally dusting both her chin and the navy blouse she had on. “Would you like a cup of tea while we wait for Aunt Elsie? She should be here any minute.”

“Would you like some tea?” Mrs. Martin asked, clearly uncertain what she should do in light of her neighbor’s strange behavior.

Cass gave Mrs. Martin an appreciative look but shook her head. “Thanks but no. Mom and I have to get home.” She held out a hand to her mother.

Mom waved her away. “If we leave, we’ll miss Elsie.”

“Mom, I think that if Elsie comes, she’ll come to your house, don’t you? I don’t think she knows Mrs. Martin.”

Mom looked at Mrs. Martin in surprise. “Is that right? You don’t know my sister? I thought everyone knew Elsie.”

Mrs. Martin shook her head. “We never met.”

“Oh.” Mom stood, befuddled. “How sad. Elsie is a lovely person. When we were young, people always said she was the brainy one and I was the pretty one. It took Lew to figure out that I was both pretty and bright.” She simpered, like a child might. It both broke Cass’s heart and grated across her nerves.

Mom took her teacup and drained it in one great swallow. She carefully set it on its saucer, picked up her napkin and carefully blotted her lips. Unfortunately the action missed most of the sugar on her chin.

Cass took her mother’s arm and gently led her outside. Her eyes met Mrs. Martin’s, and she nodded her thanks to the woman. Mrs. Martin, her eyes sad, nodded back.

Reminder: never let Mrs. Martin move from Scallop Street.

“You’ve got some sugar on your chin, Mom.” Cass pointed as they walked to the street.

“Oh, dear.” Mom brushed at the offending powder. “Is it gone? I don’t want Lew to see me looking sloppy. He always says I’m the best looking girl in Seaside.”

Cass nodded, knowing her father often made that very comment, thinking how wonderful it would be to have someone say something like that to her.

Mom stopped at the curb. “Oh, Cassandra Marie, look!” She clapped her hands like a girl. “There’s Elsie’s car, right in front of our house.” She giggled. “Imagine. You were right.”

Cass glanced at the only car sitting at the curb in front of her parents’ home. “That’s my c--,” she began.

She got no further. Mom pulled free and dashed into the street, waving her arms. “Elsie, dear, here I come.”

“Mom!” Cass screamed. “Watch out for the car!”

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