

Apron Strings

—MinervaDeannaBond

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This is a bit of a departure for me, featuring Jessica in a rare emotional light. But it's one I've been dying to write for a long time. This touches on a subject that must have been painful for Jessica for much of her life: her inability to have children. It's a glimpse into her thoughts on her infertility and its relation to the upcoming birth of Grady's son, and inspired by Everything But the Girl's song "Apron Strings," from the movie "She's Having a Baby."

Written for the *Definitive Guide to Murder, She Wrote's* Fanfic 100 Challenge. Word: "Stage."

Dear Aunt Jess,

Take a look at your future great-nephew! Donna just had the sonogram done, and the doctor says everything's fine. She's in the middle stage of pregnancy - you know, the one where everything's still kind of sore and the false contractions are starting. Man, I nearly had a heart attack when she had them for the first time, but she got me calmed down. Well, she got me calmed down and off the floor. I passed out because I was so worried. But I'm fine now. So's Donna, now that I'm all right and she's not throwing up anymore.

How's things in Cabot Cove? Is Dr. Hazlitt still coming over for dinner? Sheriff Metzger still keeping everybody safe? Are you still shopping for presents for the baby? I can't wait to see you holding him in your arms, or to hear you sing to him. It'll remind me so much of when I was a boy. You took such good care of me after Mom and Dad died, I know you'll love our baby just as much. Just a few more months left. Keep praying for us.

Donna sends her love.

Love you so much,

Grady

After giving her nephew's letter a fond kiss, Jessica Fletcher set it aside and took up the photos that had been enclosed in the envelope. Her lips curved into a smile and a thrill coursed through her at the black-and-white images of the unborn infant. As Grady had confirmed in the letter, it was indeed a boy, legs reaching upward to kick at Donna's abdominal wall. His little arms were also outstretched, as though hoping to touch the one who carried him... or someone else who loved him.

Despite the amazing happiness welling up inside her from gazing at this precious new life, Jessica couldn't help but feel a strange sadness settling in her stomach. It was a feeling she hadn't experienced in a long time, but it was the worst kind of feeling possible. Not a new one that required a rational explanation; an all-too-familiar feeling that carried the power to torment someone with old sorrow, personal failings... and shattered dreams. A feeling that, almost six years ago, had come rushing back to her over a cup of coffee with a perfect stranger.

"Do you have children?"

"Oh, no. Frank and I were never... blessed that way."

Never blessed. Ever since she and Frank had married, Jessica had wanted nothing more than to be a mother. She had longed for the day when she could curl up in her husband's lap and tell him that she was pregnant; to feel her unborn child growing and kicking; to see her belly swelling and watch Frank caress and kiss her bump. To give birth to and hold her baby in her arms, to nurse it from her breast. To spend many happy years experiencing the first step, the first happy cry of "Mama," school days, birthdays, and so much more. The apron strings were empty, waiting for that precious baby to come along.

And then came the day two things were broken: her dream and her heart. Jessica and Frank had been trying for at least two years to have children, but with no success. Frustrated, Jessica finally sought the opinion of an obstetrician. Days later, the test results came back and delivered the fatal blow: she was infertile. Whether some childhood illness or something else had been the cause, the doctor had been unable to conclude for sure. What was sure, though, was that no matter how hard she tried, Jessica would never be able to conceive and bear her own babies.

A tear fell onto the glossy sonogram photo at this thought. Jessica had wept then, too, the news too much for her to take. Frank had done his best to comfort her, loving her with his words and his body, but the feeling of loss never quite disappeared. Even now, it was painful to think about when it did cross her mind.

Some days, when she was just getting out of the bath, the feeling became the strongest. Jessica would catch a glimpse of herself in the mirror and suddenly see her body in a different light. Her arms had never cradled a child that was a mixture of herself and Frank. Her breasts had never been swollen with milk, nor had an infant ever suckled them. Her belly had never grown round and full with life or borne the stretch marks that she would have proudly worn. She had never experienced the stages of pregnancy and felt a baby's kick grow stronger with each one.

She had never reached the stage of motherhood. The only stage she had ever reached was wife.

The apron strings were still hanging empty. Even now, Jessica looked at young, happy mothers with their babies and felt the same longing pierce her heart. Thankfully, most of these women were willing to let her hold their children if she asked, or even offered themselves when she smiled and waved at the infants. For this, Jessica gave eternal thanks. She had always loved children and always would, even if she had never had babies of her own.

One good thing had come out of the devastation, though. After Grady's parents died in an automobile accident, he had come to live with Jessica and Frank, and the two of them had raised him as though he were their own son. From years of singing to Grady, nursing him through sickness, and loving him with all of her heart, Jessica knew that her nephew was right in what he had said. She *would* do all of the same for his little boy, for her great-nephew.

Grandson, she told herself. *My grandson at heart*. A smile returned to Jessica's face at this point, as she now planted a soft kiss on the sonogram picture. Natural causes had nothing to do with it. Through the bonds of family and love, she had unknowingly reached the stage of mother. And now she had reached the one that she had never thought possible: *grandmother*. Metaphorical, yes, but true in her deepest heart.

The apron strings wouldn't hang empty after all.