

By the Beautiful Sea

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Here it is, the threequel that everyone's been waiting for! The shop-a-thon is finally over and Jessica and Seth are on their way to the beach for some fun in the sun, including a picnic, kite flying, swimming... and a little bit of cuddling by the beautiful sea. There's even some talk about aging, body types, and beauty in this story, subjects that I believe Jessica and Seth would have had some pretty deep conversations about.

The sun was baking the beach a brilliant bone-white and the ocean reflected the dazzling blue bowl of the sky when Jessica and Seth finally pulled up, ready for some well-deserved fun. Amazingly enough, there wasn't that much of a crowd – a few families here and there, two or three teenagers goofing off, and a couple of other folks surf fishing. Other than that, it was perfect. Although, in Seth's mind, *perfect* would have meant a deserted beach with nobody but him and Jessica and the gulls, an opinion which he had no qualms about voicing to his best friend.

"Never fails. You try to get some decent time with someone you care about, and there's always gotta be somebody there to spoil it."

"Seth, they're not bothering anybody! They're just here to have fun like we are."

"Yeah, and *they're* having just a little *too* much fun, if you ask me," Seth snorted, gesturing at a teenage couple on a beach towel nearby, kissing as though they were the only ones on the beach. "Those two need to get a room."

Jessica rolled her eyes. "For heaven's sake, they're *kissing*."

"Swapping saliva is more like it. If they keep it up at that rate, they're going to swallow each other's tonsils."

"Oh, *Seth*..." Jessica chuckled and hooked an arm around his as they walked down to the shore, picnic basket and kites in hand. "Don't you remember what it was like to be young? I know I do."

"It's easy for you, Jessica. Deep down inside, you've never grown up."

"And what's wrong with that? I think that there *should* be at least some part of you that never grows up. How else would we remember our childhood and the joy and thrill of being young, and enjoy our lives today? Just because we're older in body doesn't mean we have to be older in spirit."

Seth had to smile. She was right, as usual. "You're a wise one, Jess. I guess there's a little boy in me that's never really grown up, too."

"Oh, I know there is. I can see that little boy whenever we play chess, when you catch an enormous fish, and when you hold me down and tickle me until I'm crying from laughter." She turned to him, mischief lighting her face. "And I expect to see him today."

"Or what?"

"Or *e/se*." Jessica topped that off by sticking her tongue out at him.

Seth laughed. "You certainly have the part about being young in spirit down pat – although darned if you don't look like you're young in body too."

"And what takes you looking?" Jessica asked, trying to be stern and failing while a blush crept into her cheeks.

"Well, I am a doctor, so I notice these things and I'm giving you my professional opinion." Seth's hazel eyes glittered with mirth and he shot her a wicked grin. "And I just love making you blush," he said teasingly, poking her in the stomach.

Jessica giggled and batted his hand away. "I'm not the Pillsbury Doughboy. Quit poking me!"

"Woman, I will poke you if I want to poke you," Seth teased, poking her belly a few more times and sending her into more giggles, causing her to drop both of the kites she was holding.

"Oh, for heaven's sake! We're never going to get anywhere if you start tickling me here and now." Jessica bent to pick up the kites. "Let's get settled, and *then* you can tickle me if you wish."

"Can I have that in writing?" Seth let out a playful *ow* as Jessica landed a smack on his shoulder and followed her down to the shore.

Once they had chosen a spot (without any further interruptions or attempted tickle fights), the twosome spread out a blanket on the sand and, after sunblocking to the max, began to unpack their lunch. Jessica had provided the main course, chicken salad on wheat, while Seth, as usual, brought dessert – chocolate chip cookies. All during the picnic, a breeze kept blowing in off the ocean, which served as a welcome cue to launch the kites. Sure enough, after the last cookie had been eaten, Seth tossed up Jessica's kite for her and she ran off with it while he got his own kite up in the air. The two of them had a splendid time flying the time-honored contraptions, although there could not have been a more marked difference in the way each kite flew. Jessica's soared along and fluttered on the wind with the grace of a butterfly, whereas Seth's kite yanked on the string, dipped and bucked, and even crash-landed into the sand once. Grumbling under his breath, Seth stumped across the beach to retrieve the kite and relaunched it, only to have it crash again, and this time in a tide pool. His head jerked up when laughter sounded behind him, and he turned to see Jessica laughing her butt off at him.

"Okay, so I have about as much luck with kites as Charlie Brown. You gonna hold a football in front of me and yank it away too?"

"No, but I might splash you when we go swimming," Jessica said, reeling her kite in and jogging over to help him recover his.

"You want a splash, Jessica Beatrice? I'll give you a splash!" Seth said, reaching down and hooking an arm under Jessica's legs to sweep her up into his arms. He knew that she'd lost some weight in the last few years, so he was able to scoop her up with no trouble at all, and she screamed with laughter in response when he carried her across the sand to the water.

"No!" she hollered as he waded into the waves with her still in his arms.

"Yes!"

"You wouldn't dare!"

Seth looked her dead in the eye and grinned wickedly. "Oh yes, I would." And with that, he swung her backward and threw her into the shallows, just far out enough to submerge her. She emerged two seconds later, her blonde hair gone dark as the salt water soaked it through, and splashed him with an almighty wave. He laughed triumphantly and dove in to join her, popping up out of the sea to return her splash. They splashed and dunked and chased each other through the water, getting a good workout and attracting the attention of some of the younger beachgoers, who looked at the elder couple and shook their heads before walking on along the shore. This did not go unnoticed by Seth, who, upon witnessing the somewhat mocking act, hollered after the teenagers, "Yes, old people can have fun too. Just be glad we're not skinny-dipping!"

"*Seth!*" Jessica exclaimed, though she couldn't help chortling. "I don't know what to be more shocked about; that you told them to be grateful we're not skinny-dipping or that you called us old people!"

"Well..." Seth pretended to mull an alternative over as he and Jessica waded out of the water and back onto the beach, where they sat down to dry themselves. "*Older*, how 'bout that?"

"That's more like it. I'm not old and neither are you, despite your opinion to the contrary."

"Maybe so, but I can tell you right now that I am too old to skinny-dip. At my age, it's not skinny-dipping, it's chunky-dunking."

Jessica, in the middle of toweling her hair dry, buried her face in the stretch of terry cloth to muffle her laughter. "Well, it wouldn't have to be that way if you'd work on this a little more," she teased him, poking a finger into his stomach.

"Speak for yourself, woman! If I'm not much mistaken, you've still got a little belly too," Seth retorted, returning her poke in the approximate area of her navel.

Jessica shook her head. "I know. I've lost weight and I'm proud of it, but I still have this." She laid a hand on the gentle roundness of her tummy. "Just the effects of age, I guess."

"It happens to all of us, Jess. Keeping in shape is important if we want to stay healthy, but we have to gain just a little weight as we age. I know you've lost a few pounds, but you're at a healthy weight now, from what I can see." Seth smiled and gave her belly an affectionate rub. "Don't pay any mind to this. I think you look wonderful."

Jessica's smile brightened. "Do you really think so, Seth?"

"Ayuh. Women your age ought to have curves, if you ask me. Heck, younger women need to have curves and be proud of them, instead of worrying about gaining the least ounce of fat. They've all been so brainwashed by this stick-thin body image that they starve themselves to the point of anorexia nervosa. It's good to keep in shape, but being that skinny isn't healthy at all. It's a shame."

"It is. I've learned from experience that most men love curvy women."

"I know I do. I've never wanted some bony woman. My Ruth was a shapely woman, just like you, Jess."

Jessica chuckled. "When I hear that word, I think of women like Marilyn Monroe. I am no Marilyn Monroe, Seth."

"No, and I don't want you to be, either. If you don't mind my saying so..." A touch of red appeared in Seth's face before he spoke, though his eyes were gazing at Jessica with undeniable warmth. "I think you have a beautiful shape to you."

Now it was Jessica's turn to blush. "Is that your professional opinion as a doctor or your personal opinion as my friend?"

Seth grinned. "A little of both. Speaking as a doctor, you're the picture of health. Speaking as your friend... you're just plain beautiful. Curves and all," he said, tickling her belly.

Jessica laughed aloud, but smacked his hands away. "Oh, no you don't, Seth Hazlitt. It's high time you got a taste of your own medicine!" she crowed, launching herself at him and tickling him every bit as ruthlessly as he had ever tickled her. Pretty soon, he was worming under her hands and roaring with laughter as her hands scuttled across his stomach.

"Jess, quit!" he cried, trying unsuccessfully to push her hands away.

"Beg me," she taunted. Her long fingers, well-seasoned with years of practice on her typewriter, picked up speed as they continued their dance over his belly.

"Je-e-e-esssss!" Seth yelled, mirthful tears streaming down his ruddy face.

"Say please!"

"Please!"

Her eyes twinkled. "Well, since you're being polite..." Her fingers ceased their samba and she let him sit up to wipe the tears away. "So, Dr. Hazlitt, how did your own medicine taste?"

Seth chuckled again. "Pretty darn good. Feel free to give me a dose anytime."

"Believe me, I do." Upon noticing the dimming trail of light leading up through the waters of the Atlantic, Jessica turned around toward the dunes and shielded her eyes. Afternoon had given way to evening, and the sun had already begun its downward journey toward the western horizon. Brilliant streaks of fuchsia, indigo, vermilion, gold, and ruby were shooting across the sky, the yellow ball of the sun setting the palette of colors aflame.

"Seth," she breathed, nudging him to get his attention. "Look at that sunset!"

The doctor shielded his own gaze and smiled at the lovely sight before him. "That's a beauty. Nothing quite like a Maine sunset."

"Isn't that the most beautiful thing you've ever seen?"

Seth gave her a sideways look and a mischievous grin cracked his face. "Actually, it's the second most beautiful thing. Number one is sitting right next to me."

Jessica turned around, likewise grinning, and gave his shoulder a smack. "Oh, you!"

"Oh me nothing. I call 'em as I see 'em." His grin deepened as he watched her let out a yawn. "And I see you're getting sleepy. Should we head on home?"

"No, not yet," Jessica yawned, clearing her throat. "I want to stargaze after the sun sets. But if you really want to go home..."

Seth shook his head. "No. If you want to nap for a while, you go right on ahead. Matter of fact, I might just join you." He laid himself down on the beach blanket and patted the empty space next to him. "Snuggle up."

Jessica didn't need telling twice. She laid down, turned herself flush to Seth, and snuggled into the warmth of his arms, resting her head on his shoulder. Before long, the two of them were fast asleep, completely lost in each other's dreams... and completely unaware of the flash illuminating the ocean from miles away.