

The Queen of Tarts

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For those of you who remember the Season 5 episode "Weave A Tangled Web," you undoubtedly remember the classic scene where Jessica was in the bar of the Starlight Motel - dressed like the town tart. My question is, how did she put that outfit together, and how did she get to the bar in the first place? She had to have gotten a ride from someone, and my guess is it was probably Seth. So, armed with this theory, I created this "deleted scene" from the episode, with plenty of humor, heart, and Seth/Jess sweetness.

"Now, Jess, you are not going to nose around the Starlight Motel. Could be very dangerous, and quite frankly, they wouldn't give a nice lady like you the right time of day."

Jessica Fletcher rolled her eyes as she settled back in the passenger seat. As if she didn't already know that. What killed her was that her best friend seemed to think that she didn't. For heaven's sake, she was a seasoned mystery writer. Not for nothing did she know a thing or two about snooping around incognito, and incognito she was going to be, no matter how hard anyone tried to dissuade her. There was still a killer walking free, and Vivian Proctor's reputation was at stake as well. Sheriff Metzger and Floyd were following all the wrong clues, clues that pointed to an illicit affair between Vivian and the victim, Eric Bowman, but Jessica knew better. She was going to find the killer, expose the motive, and help her friend, even if it meant nosing around the sleaziest, shadiest dive in Cabot Cove. Armed to the teeth with this new information about Augie Spector, she couldn't lose. All she needed was the right disguise. But first, she had some shopping to do.

"Seth, don't take me home just yet. I need a ride into town."

Dr. Seth Hazlitt gave her a sideways look as he navigated the Maine town's back roads. "What for?"

"I have an errand to run."

"Where?"

"The boutique."

"*What* do you need at the boutique, *why* do you need it, *where* are you planning to go wearing it and *who* are you meeting it in?"

Jessica shot him an incredulous look. "And people call *me* nosy."

"Jess." Seth navigated them around a particularly snaky section of the already winding road. "I've known you for many a year now, well enough to know when you're deliberately being cryptic."

"Me? Cryptic? Don't be silly."

Seth turned his head toward her and shot her a brief but sardonic look. "Bull. You are still thinking about poking around the Starlight Motel for clues, and don't even try to deny it. That's why you want to go to the boutique, isn't it? You're shopping for a disguise."

Jessica stared back at him, eyes slightly narrowed and her lips upturned in a smile that was half cynical, half enigmatic. Nobody else in Cabot Cove – or anywhere else on Earth, for that matter – knew her better than Seth, or could see right through her intentions. Which was a good thing, because if everyone else could read her like a book the way Seth could, she would be an utter failure as a detective. "All right, you got me. Yes, I need some form of disguise to go undercover at the Starlight Motel."

"If you go out there, you *will* end up undercover, and not in the spying sense, either," Seth said wryly. "Jess, that place has a reputation as a gambling den and an X-rated hideaway. For Pete's sake, it wouldn't surprise me at all if someone was either making dirty movies in the rooms or selling drugs out the back."

"Which is exactly why I need to disguise myself. What you said earlier was right."

"Excuse me?" Seth took one hand off the wheel and cupped it around his ear. "Did I hear you admit that I was right about something?"

Jessica gave his shoulder a smack. "Gloat all you want, but yes, you were right. Nobody is going to give a nice lady like me the right time of day... but they will give a cheap tart the right time of day."

Seth's hazel eyes popped as his head swiveled around to Jessica. "Jessica Fletcher, you are not seriously thinking of going to the Starlight Motel dressed up like some brazen hussy."

Jessica returned his stare evenly. "As a matter of fact, I am," she stated calmly.

Seth looked as though he wanted nothing more than to bang his head against the steering wheel. "Woman, have you completely lost your marbles? Going out to that bar dressed like a bimbo is asking for trouble. Good Lord, you might as well just tape a sign to your back saying 'I'm easy.'"

"Seth, will you relax? I'm not going to let anybody pick me up, accost me, or anything of the sort."

"You say that like it's no big deal, but what if, God forbid, something *does* happen? Jess, I'm not saying all this because I don't believe in you. Far from it." Seth pulled the car over to the side of the road and parked it, then turned to face his dearest friend, his face creased with concern. "I'm worried that something serious could happen to you. I'm not kidding when I say that place is dangerous. You could be kidnapped, raped, or even worse. And if anything ever happened to you while I knew you were out there, and there was nothing I could do to help because I was too far away..." He closed his eyes, as if hoping to block out the vision that assaulted his mind. "I'd never forgive myself."

Now Jessica understood. Feeling her heart go out to her friend, she reached out and laid a hand against Seth's cheek. "Seth, I know you're worried. I'm worried, too, but I can't let it get to me. I have to do this for Vivian, and for her family. They need to be safe from any further harm, and Vivian's reputation is in danger here. Granted, she does have a lot of explaining to do about her double life, but that's between her and Ralph. I have to prove that she wasn't involved with Eric Bowman and find the killer in the process."

Seth shook his head. "You're a lot kinder than I'd be, given the circumstances. I still can't figure out how you can look at situations like this and not judge people."

"Only God can judge, Seth. I'm in no position to pass judgment on anybody else. All I care about is helping my friend, even if it means sacrificing a little bit of dignity."

The doctor reached up to take her hand and squeezed it. "I know. I just don't like the idea of you being in there by yourself."

A smile touched Jessica's lips. "That's why I was going to ask you to be my backup."

Seth blinked. "What?"

"My backup. I need a lift to the motel anyway, and if you wait out in the parking lot for me, I know I'll have someone to help me should things go wrong – and they won't, Lord willing."

"And the creek don't rise," Seth added. "Jess, are you sure you want me to be your wingman? You probably asked me knowing I'd probably say no, and also knowing I'd gripe to you about how loony this whole thing is if I said yes."

"Of course I knew all that. I'm asking you because you're the only one I can trust to help me."

Well, that was a surprise to Seth. "What about Metzger? He's the cop here."

"Somehow, I don't think Sheriff Metzger would be too keen on my doing an investigation of this kind outside of official police business. He'd say I was nutty."

"You *are* nutty, Jess. You're nuttier than a jar of Goobers for even suggesting this *I Love Lucy* scheme. You'll never be able to pull this off."

Jessica's deep blue eyes darkened a shade further as her eyebrows descended upon them. "Don't say *never* to me. Not when there's a life and a family at stake."

Seth stared at her with a mixture of frustration and love swirling inside him. He hated the fact that she was willingly putting herself in danger and stubborn enough to ignore every excuse he threw at her, but he also admired her readiness to sacrifice – dignity or otherwise – for the well-being of another. It was this combination that made Jessica such a great detective, and if it helped to catch Eric Bowman's killer and possibly bring down a well-known gambling shark in the process... then he knew exactly what he had to do.

"You're sure you'll be all right?" he asked, after releasing a sigh that seemed to come from his toes.

One corner of Jessica's mouth lifted. "As long as you're outside waiting for me and keeping watch, I know I'll be fine."

Seth sighed again. "Then call me Robin." He started the car again. "Come on, Batman. We need to protect your secret identity." He finally cracked a grin as Jessica laughed on their way back into the heart of Cabot Cove.

Two hours later, Jessica was back in her bedroom at home, preparing for her undercover mission. The afternoon's shopping at the boutique had been a success, and now she was ready to transform herself into... well, she hadn't quite given her planned disguise a name yet. *Perhaps the radio can give me some inspiration.* Reaching for the portable radio on a stand near her vanity, Jessica turned the knob and scanned the stations until she hit the frequency for Cabot Cove's Lite Rock and let the music play. Johnny Hates Jazz's "Shattered Dreams" filled the room. *Not a very fitting song for my situation, but it certainly fits poor Vivian's. Ah well, it's almost over. Just a few more choruses.* Sure enough, the song faded out and the next one began – two drumbeats followed by a "Watch out!"

Jessica laughed aloud as she recognized one of her favorites, "Open Your Heart." *Perfect! I'll be a middle-aged Madonna!* Working a groove through her body and singing along to the irresistible lyrics, she danced over to her bed, where she had laid out her new outfit. "Don't try to resist me," she sang as she pulled on blue jeans and her new blouse. The garment was fire-engine red, splashed with pink, orange, and yellow flowers, and bore puffed sleeves, one of the hallmarks of the current fashion. It also had a sweetheart neckline that took a daring plunge in the front, revealing more

than just a hint of décolletage. Modest as she was, Jessica blushed at herself in the mirror when she got a good look at her reflection. Even so, she had to admit that the color and cut of the blouse were flattering on her. The outfit was soon completed with a belt, red pumps, colorful tulip earrings, and a bracelet dripping with charms on each wrist. *Salome, eat your heart out*, she thought, giving the bracelets a shake. *But something's still missing*. Jessica glanced back at her reflection and this time, her eyes rested right on her face. *Makeup. I'd better do something with my hair, too*.

Twenty minutes later, Jessica had teased her blonde hair into a bedhead 'do and carefully applied blue eye shadow and about two tons of Max Factor mascara to her lashes. The finishing touch was a brilliant red on her lips, which exactly matched her blouse. Facing her reflection yet again, Jessica had to admit that the result was pretty amazing. As she gazed into the mirror, making sure that she had everything she needed to complete her disguise, she took notice of her wedding ring. As much as she hated to take it off, she knew that she would have to part with it just this once. She needed the folks in the bar to think she was a free spirit, emphasis on *free*. With a sigh, she slipped her ring off her finger, and, kissing the white gold band, laid it tenderly on her vanity table. One final check in the mirror and she inhaled deeply, and then let it out in a sigh. "It's now or never, Jessica. Go for it," she said to herself as she left her bedroom behind. Nervous though she was about her impending mission, she couldn't help smiling at one thought that kept her sane. *I can't wait to see the look on Seth's face when he gets a load of this outfit*.

Why does it take women so blasted long to dress? Seth thought irritably to himself as he paced the floor in the living room for the umpteenth time. He'd tried to sit down several times, but his current state of agitation always got the better of him, settling in his legs and making him as twitchy as a frog on a hot plate. He couldn't believe that he was about to help Jessica walk right into the biggest viper pit in Cabot Cove, or that she was upstairs dressing for the part. *Jeez. I suppose I ought to be grateful that she's not snooping around a strip club*. He took a sip of the coffee he'd poured for himself and looked toward the stairs again. *Good grief, Jess, come on!*

At that moment, a door opened and closed upstairs and footsteps sounded on the floor above. Seth breathed a sigh. *Well, it's about time*. He held his position in the center of the room, took another gulp of coffee, saw her

descend the stairs... and, for the second time that day, made a fountain out of himself as he blew his coffee halfway across the room. "Jessica?"

Rather than get angry at the fact that he had just sprayed her floor with coffee, Jessica laughed and twirled around for his inspection as soon as she stepped off the bottom stair. "Well, Doc," she said in the New York accent she'd adopted for the disguise, "Flimflammer –" She pronounced it *flimflamma* – "or mama jama?"

Seth couldn't help staring. The outfit was nowhere near as bad as he'd expected, but it was still racy for Jessica. Nevertheless, he had to admit that she looked beautiful. Her bone-deep class shone through in spite of the sexy clothes. "*Bad* mama jama," he finally said, bringing a smile to her face. "Lord Almighty, woman. What a getup."

"Do you think it's too sexy?" Jessica asked in her normal voice, holding out her arms.

"Considering that you're dressed in screaming red and showing off about a quarter mile of cleavage? Oh no, it's not too sexy at all," Seth deadpanned, relishing the blush that shot through her face.

"Seth! I never thought I'd hear you say something like that," Jessica said, despite the fact that she was giggling.

"I'm only telling you the truth. You look more like Jessica Rabbit than Jessica Fletcher."

"Well, I was going for 'middle-aged Madonna,' but I'll take Jessica Rabbit too."

Seth looked her over once more and shook his head. "Lord, what's next after this outfit? A belly ring and a tattoo?"

Jessica planted her hands on her hips and gave him an impish grin, her blue eyes sparkling merrily. "How did you ever guess? I was just planning on getting my belly button pierced and a cute little teapot tattooed on my fanny."

"To go with the Max Factor truck you dumped on your face? I swear, you look like you've got Fuller brushes over your eyes."

Jessica doubled over laughing. "I do look like the Queen of Hearts, don't I?"

At last, Seth chuckled. "In that outfit? No way. You're not the Queen of Hearts; you're the Queen of Tarts."

"Perfect!" She hooked her arm through Seth's. "Come on, Seth, let's go. We're never gonna get anything solved by standing around bantering."

"Right-o... Your Majesty," Seth said, making a little bow of his head and grunting when Jessica elbowed him. They made their way out to the car and belted themselves in, and Jessica burst out laughing again when the radio came on. The song playing was Juice Newton's "Queen of Hearts." And all the way to the Starlight Motel, Seth had a blast substituting the words "Queen of Tarts" in Jessica's honor.

As it turned out, one mission of espionage at the bar was not enough. The next evening, Seth brought Jessica back to the motel, and this time, she hit pay dirt. Leaving the car keys with Frankie the bartender and then using Augie to nail them both in Eric Bowman's murder had been a stroke of genius, and all it took was a racy red outfit. Best of all, Vivian was reunited with her family, and she'd finally confided her secret to Ralph – which Jessica was now relating to Seth as they sat together eating a celebratory lobster dinner at her kitchen table.

"Well, Ralph was shocked, as you can well imagine, but he loves Vivian too much to be angry with her. He forgave her and welcomed her back home."

Seth chuckled, spearing a piece of lobster with his fork and popping it into his mouth. "And they're living happily ever after thanks to you. Trust you to turn a murder mystery into a fairy tale."

"It's unconditional love, Seth. Sometimes it seems to me like there's precious little of it in this world nowadays."

"Sometimes I think you've got enough love for everyone," Seth said without a trace of sarcasm. "You walked into the hornets' nest and confronted a killer for love of a friend."

"Of course I did." Jessica reached across the table and took his hand. "I'd do the same for you."

Smiling, Seth gently reversed the positions of their hands so that he was now holding hers, stroking the back of it with his thumb. "Right back at you." His eyes met hers and then traveled the length of her figure. Gone was the raiment of the Queen of Tarts. Jessica was back to her normal self: jeans, a baby-girl pink blouse, perfectly coiffed hair, and minimal makeup. Her lips, now painted the same rosy pink as her blouse, curved into a tender smile as she regarded him. "What's on your mind, Seth?"

Seth shrugged. "Nothing. Just thinking about the last couple of days, that's all."

Jessica's cobalt blues twinkled. "Are you missing the Queen of Tarts?"

Seth felt his face flush, but he quickly recovered himself. "Why would I when she's sitting right here with me?" He grinned when she squeezed his hand. "And speaking of which..." He got up from the table and retrieved a box from the kitchen counter. "I picked up a little treat from the bakery." He opened the box.

Jessica howled with laughter when she saw the contents of the white box. "Tarts!"

"Yup," Seth said, obviously pleased. "Cherry, lemon, strawberry, and raspberry. Tarts for the Queen." He set the box down on the table between them and took his seat again. "Go on. Grab a few."

Still chortling, Jessica chose a lemon and a raspberry. "I'm afraid the Queen has abdicated, Seth. The only title I have is Queen of Mystery, and even that I feel I don't deserve." She bit into the raspberry tart. "I'm not a queen at all."

"Sure, you are." Seth bit into a strawberry tart and smiled at her. "You're a queen to me, Jess. Just don't get a swollen head, or your crown won't fit."

Jessica gently backhanded his arm. "We're a fine match, aren't we? The Queen of Mystery and the Comeback King."

"Ayuh. A match made in heaven." Seth held the gaze of those beautiful blue eyes, knowing that one day he would tell her exactly what kind of queen she was to him. Jessica Beatrice Fletcher. Queen of Mystery. Queen of Tarts. Queen of his heart.