

Game, Set, and Match

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Last time we saw Seth and Jessica, they were just leaving the beach as a storm came in. Now, the storm is raging on and Seth is over at the house while Jessica is sleeping, but she's not going to stay asleep for long. She comes downstairs and the two of them play chess - and get deep with their conversation again. Cabot Cove Summer #5.

The clock on Jessica's kitchen wall struck half-past ten, causing Seth to let out an exasperated sigh. An hour and a half later and the storm still had not relented. Rain lashed the windows and the wind howled like a woman scorned, while thunder and lightning played an unseen but constantly heard game of tag in the heavens. *It'd be nice if this whole mess blows over soon. I don't imagine Jess is getting a good night's sleep with all this racket going on.*

At that thought, Seth's eyes darted up to the ceiling. Jessica had gone to bed early after they'd arrived back at her house, and that in itself had been a miracle. They pulled up right as the heavens opened and the rain came pouring down. With the promise that he would stay and watch over things until the storm let up, Jessica had retreated to her bedroom and Seth was now downstairs in the kitchen, nursing a cup of coffee while the squall raged on. "Grief, Lord, what are you trying to do, flood the earth again?" he muttered aloud, starting when a particularly nasty clap of thunder boomed directly overhead. "I was kidding! Good night!"

"Don't ask God that kind of question unless you want Him to shout, Seth."

At the sound of her voice, Seth turned to see Jessica standing in the archway between the dining room and the kitchen, her slim form clad in a pink satin robe and a tired smile on her face. "Woman, what are you doing up?"

"I couldn't sleep. Normally, the sound of rain puts me out like a light, but that thunder and the wind..." Jessica shuddered. "It worries me to death that something's going to happen to the house."

"Nothing's gonna happen to the house. Everything'll be all right. As long as you're down here, sit down and have some coffee. You need to relax."

"I highly doubt caffeine is going to help me relax, Seth. Don't start," she said as the doctor opened his mouth to argue. "I know that's not decaf in that pot. You want to stay awake until the storm lets up, so you brewed some regular coffee, didn't you?"

Seth rolled his eyes. "Yes, I did; thank you, Captain Obvious."

"I thought so." Jessica smiled and touched him on the shoulder as she came over to him. "I appreciate the offer, though. But I think I'll be better off with a cup of tea. Chamomile always helps me relax."

"Anything to help you go to sleep," Seth said, watching her cross to the cabinets and take out what she needed.

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" Jessica asked, shooting him a playfully infuriated expression.

"No, I am *trying* to make sure you get your eight hours. You don't need to be staying up until the crack of dawn at your age."

Jessica barked a laugh. "Speak for yourself, Seth Hazlitt! You are older than I am and you're the one who is waiting up for the storm to pass. And if you keep pouring caffeine down your throat, you will also be the one awake until the crack of dawn."

Seth drew himself up. "For your information, I need this caffeine. I promised you that I would keep an eye on things until the storm let up, did I not?"

Jessica raised her eyes heavenward, as if to say *Lord, spare me from stubborn fools*. "Yes, you did."

"Then I'm staying until Mother Nature's little duck fit is over. I don't like it when you're alone in this house in the middle of a toad-strangler like this."

"Seth, for heaven's sake. I'm a big girl. I think I can take care of myself."

Now it was Seth's turn to roll his eyes. "I know that, woman; I'm not a dummy. My point is, nobody needs to be alone in a mess like this. Heck, even I get the willies sometimes when a hurricane comes roaring up the coast and there's nobody in the house but me. I just need a friend." He shot her a wry, yet warm grin. "And so do you."

Jessica put the teakettle on the stove and set it to boil. "We all do." She left the kettle to warm up and sat down at the table next to her friend. "What have you been doing down here all this time other than mainlining coffee?"

Seth shrugged, glancing down at his half-full coffee mug. "Not much. Just sitting here listening to the wind howl. I did have the country station on for a while, but I turned it off 'cause there was too much static from the storm. Shame, too. 'I Love a Rainy Night' would've been perfect on a night like this." He took a sip of his coffee and sighed. "Not much to do in the middle of a storm other than worry."

His head turned to Jessica as she touched his arm. "I know one thing we can do. We can play a game of chess. That'll take our minds off the weather for a while."

"What about your tea?"

"What about it? We can play while we wait for the kettle to boil, and then I can pour myself a cup and resume play. No big deal." She nudged him again. "Come on, Seth. What do you say?"

Seth pretended to mull it over before his mouth curved into a grin. "I say bust out the pieces and bring on your best game, 'cause I'm gonna beat your socks off."

"You're on." Within minutes, Jessica had fetched the chess set and laid it out in the middle of the table, taking the white pieces as she always did while Seth took the black. And, as always, Jessica got the ball rolling with a good topic of conversation. "So, how horrible was your day of shopping with a woman?" she asked, moving a pawn forward.

Seth chuckled and moved a pawn of his own. "Bad, powerful bad," he joked, pronouncing the words with a thick Southern drawl. "Aside from

offering commentary on something I know nothing about, it was a good day. I just never want to look at another pair of women's shoes again."

Jessica laughed and moved another pawn. "Not even these?" She stuck her pink-slippered feet out from under the table and wagged them at him.

Seth, who had taken his own shoes off earlier, gave her foot a gentle kick with his own. "Well, those I can live with. Just watch yourself. I might tickle that foot of yours."

"You do and you'll get kicked. You remember what happened last time."

"Too well. I've still got the footprint," Seth said, remembering the last and only time he had attempted to tickle Jessica's feet. His fingers had barely even touched the sole of her left foot when she kicked out at him with her right, landing it dead in the middle of his stomach and knocking the wind clean out of him. A dozen *I'm sorrys* later, Jessica explained to him that she hadn't done it on purpose; it was simply a reflex. A powerful reflex, Seth recalled. "Do you remember what I said to you after you kicked me?"

"You told me I kicked like a mule, if memory serves," Jessica replied as she made her next move and captured one of Seth's pawns.

"Ayuh. You kick like a mule and you're every bit as stubborn as one."

"I am *not* stubborn!"

"Oh? Well then, Miss Writer, which adjective would you prefer? Obstinate, bullheaded, pigheaded, stiff-necked..."

"Are you finished?"

Jessica got her answer when Seth continued as though he hadn't even heard her. "Headstrong, mulish, cussed, contrary... ayuh, I like that one. I think I'll call you *contrary* from now on."

She stared him down through slitted eyes. "Two can play at this game, Seth. As long as we're playing descriptive games here, allow me to give you a few adjectives describing you. Grouchy, irascible, hotheaded, choleric, crabby, fussy, quick-tempered, short-fused... hmm, let me see..." Jessica pressed an imaginary dimple into her right cheek with one finger as

she feigned thought. "I think *irascible* suits you best." She moved another piece and snagged the knight he'd moved out onto the board. "Although *feckless* may be a better term as soon as I win this game."

Seth's eyes glittered as he returned her stare. "Put your money where your mouth is, woman." He moved a bishop out and took a pawn. In a few more moves, he had snagged two more pawns and a knight. "Are you ever gonna move that queen, or leave her there beside the king?"

"I notice you haven't moved yours yet, either. I can only assume that we're both waiting for the right time to bring them out."

"Only fair since we can't move our kings very far." Seth shook his head as the game continued, move after move. "That never made any sense to me. If the king is the ruler, how come he can't move very far? The queen is the one who has all the power in this game. She can do whatever she wants and nobody ever questions the moves she makes."

Jessica grinned. "That's probably because behind every great man is a great woman. And history has proven many times that the queen was usually the real power behind the throne."

"She's the one who has all the best moves and calls all the shots. She's contrary."

"Maybe so, but if you think about it, it's all to protect the king – her mate, if you want to look at it in a personal way. She prevents the king from being captured by the enemy; that's why she's the most targeted piece on the board."

"And that's why it's such a challenge to capture her," Seth concluded. "Although, if you want to look at it in a personal way, as you said, she is the only one worth pursuing. I just think it's a shame the king – who she doesn't really know is her mate, if you ask me – can't capture her unless she gets close enough to him."

"It's rare, but it does happen."

"Can it happen?"

"Oh, yes. Only if the queen wants to get close enough to the king."

"Close enough to kiss?"

Jessica raised her eyes to his. "Seth, chess pieces are made of marble. That would be a pretty cold kiss."

Seth glanced at the board. They'd been playing so intensely that he didn't notice how close her queen had gotten to his king. A few more moves and she would have him in check. "Not unless the king really loves the queen," he said softly. "That could melt even the coldest heart."

Jessica watched him move a castle to take her bishop. "It's a beautiful metaphor, isn't it? A woman is out doing her own thing, making all of her own moves anywhere and however she wants, while the man whom she is unaware is her mate waits for her to get close enough to capture. My only question is, how can she be so blind?"

A small smile turned Seth's mouth up at the corners as she made her next move. Oddly enough, she seemed so lost in her own thoughts that she misjudged the move and put her queen right in the path of his king. "I don't think she's aware of just how blind she is." He moved his king to the desired space and captured her queen. When she looked up at him with her huge blue eyes, he simply smiled again. "Game, set, and match," he whispered.

Jessica held his gaze for a good minute. "You haven't checked my king yet," she finally breathed.

"Doesn't matter. I captured your queen. Game's mine."

"Not yet."

Seth shook his head. "You don't have to be so contrary, you know." The words weren't harsh, but rife with emotion.

"With you, I have to be. Nobody else can break my defenses like you." Jessica said quietly, her eyes glistening.

"Nobody else knows you like I do. Nobody else can get this close to you."

Jessica looked like she was on the verge of crying when a soft whistling began to resonate through the kitchen. "I'll get that." She rose from her

chair, crossed to the stove, and busied herself with making her tea, although Seth wasn't fooled. He knew that she was trying to hide her tears, and as she set her now-filled teacup on a saucer, he made his way over to her side at the stove and put his hands on her shoulders. She set her cup down and looked at him, and indeed, her eyes were filled with unshed tears, making them look even more like pools of water than ever. "Are we gonna keep playing?" he asked gently, although both of them knew he wasn't talking about just the chess game.

Jessica shook her head and closed her eyes, and as she did, two teardrops spilled free. "No. You've already won."

"Have I?" Seth unconsciously tilted his head to one side as he saw her do the same, and was only dimly aware of his moving ever so closer to her, close enough to cover her mouth with his... and came to just in time to move to the side and press his lips to her cheek. *Not now. The timing's not right. We're both vulnerable. Our first kiss needs to be happy, not sad.* "The storm's let up," he whispered. "I'd better be going."

Jessica nodded and cleared her throat. "I guess so." She pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. "Good night, Seth."

"Good night, Jess. Sleep tight." Seth watched her depart the kitchen and walk back upstairs to her bedroom, longing filling his heart. *Someday, Jess. Someday.* He then slipped his loafers back on and walked back outside to his car, but as he drove back to his house, he knew that he had left his heart behind with Jessica... his queen.