

Sometimes When We Touch

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I never expected to be six stories into the Cabot Cove Summer series, but let me tell you, I still don't see an end in sight. Last time, Seth and Jessica almost shared a kiss, but Seth went home and Jessica went up to her room. Now, we get a look at her thoughts behind what happened during the storm, and witness a visit from someone very special.

I owe a debt to jesmaine, who wrote a scene in one of her awesome stories that inspired this latest entry in "Cabot Cove Summer." My other debt is twofold, to two songs: "Sometimes When We Touch" by Dan Hill, which provided the emotional crux of the tale, and "Ahab the Arab" by Ray Stevens, which provided the welcome bit of humor at the end.

Her stomach was quivering, her heart was aching, and tears were filling her eyes as she snuggled into the comfort of her bed and wrapped herself in the blankets, as though she were trying to cocoon herself from the powerful emotions tugging at her very soul. But nothing could ease the heartache and confusion that Jessica felt after what had just transpired between her and Seth. What *had* transpired between her and Seth? They had always been the best of friends, so close that there were no secrets between them at all. Certainly, they had been teased plenty of times about being a couple and had heard more than one joke about how they needed to get married since they already acted so much like they were, but Jessica had never given it a second thought. But then again, she was so comfortable around Seth that perhaps she just didn't notice how close they truly were, how their relationship could easily be perceived as more than it was by those outside their little bubble... or just how much she honestly loved him.

Did she love Seth? As a friend, the answer was perfectly obvious. He had been her rock ever since Frank's passing, and she had been the same for him after Ruth died. Shared dinners filled with comfort food, conversations that had started out awkward yet transformed into deep, honest talks, and moments of silence where they simply held each other, that one embrace speaking volumes.

Oh Lord, how she wanted to hold him now. But what would happen if he were here and she was in his arms? What would that embrace say? Jessica knew him so well that she was in tune to every touch, a natural gift for empathy translating the sensory feelings to literal words. A hand at her back, *I'm here to protect you*. A squeeze of her hand, *I'm so glad you're my friend*. A tight embrace, *I'm never letting you go because I love you*.

How did he love her? She had never gotten the impression of any romantic feelings on Seth's part, but was that purely because of their deep friendship or because she was too blind to see it? She, J.B. Fletcher, blind to anything? There was no doubt that she could see and sense feelings in other people, but in herself and her own best friend?

I don't think she's aware of just how blind she is.

As Seth's words echoed like a sonic blast in her mind, all memory of their earlier conversation came rushing back, washing over her like a flood.

"Game, set, and match."

Jessica looked at the board, astonished that he had managed to capture her queen with his king, and then looked back up at him. His hazel eyes seemed like liquid as they met hers. "You haven't checked my king yet," she managed, hoping still to turn the tide.

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

"Not yet."

What exactly were they talking about? Were they talking about the chess game, or were they talking about another game altogether? The answer to those questions became all too clear as Seth spoke again. "You don't have to be so contrary, you know."

The words were spoken with such raw emotion that Jessica's heartstrings tugged uncomfortably, to the point of bringing a lump to her throat. God, he could see right through her. She built up walls and he tore them down like they were nothing, Joshua defeating Jericho. "With you, I have to be. Nobody else can break my defenses like you."

His response nearly broke her heart. "Nobody else knows you like I do. Nobody else can get this close to you."

Thankfully, the teakettle whistled at that moment, and Jessica welcomed the distraction with open arms. "I'll get that." She turned to take the kettle off the burner and pour herself the long-awaited cup of tea, praying that her turned back and fiddling with the cream and spoons would be enough to hide the tears that were now welling in her eyes. But she should have known better than to think that Seth would be fooled. A pair of strong hands, so gentle as they clasped her shoulders in the next instant, told her that he had not been hoodwinked... and, inexplicably, made her heart skip a beat. She didn't want to look at him for fear that whatever she saw in his eyes would finally break her, but compulsion made her set her teacup down on the counter and look up at him. Indeed, his eyes, his entire face, were so tender that she felt an acute pull at the very core of her heart.

"Are we gonna keep playing?" Seth asked softly, never breaking eye contact for an instant.

She wanted to believe that he was talking about nothing more than the chess game, but her heart knew that it was the game the two of them were playing in reality that he was referring to. The real chess game, the one of blind queens and longing, waiting kings, in which Seth, the king, had captured a queen. Her. How could he have managed such a victory in a relationship that she never realized had advanced to such a level? She wanted to fight, to keep telling herself that nothing had changed, but she couldn't deny it. Things had changed between them in the span of one eventful day. Seth's feelings for her were in the touch of his hands on her shoulders, the small smile grazing his lips, and the soft tenderness of his eyes. Lord, those eyes. How had she never noticed how beautiful they were, pale umber flecked with gold and apple green and shining with unmistakable love? How had she never noticed how beautiful he was?

The answer was simple. She was blind. And it was time to stop lying to herself and open her eyes.

"No. You've already won." Jessica thought that the admission would shatter her, but instead, it was as though a burden had been lifted. Despite the two tears that rolled down her cheeks, peace enveloped her like a warm blanket.

"Have I?" Seth asked, the two little words bearing all the hope of the world. She felt his hands tremble slightly on her shoulders and tilted her head slightly to the side; as if they were in synchronization, he did the same, and they slowly began to move closer toward each other, lips about to touch...

But they never did. At the last minute, Seth shifted to the side and pressed his lips against her cheek. A feeling of bewilderment swamped Jessica, wondering why he didn't kiss her on the lips if his feelings were what she thought... but then the feeling vanished as quickly as it had come. In an instant, she knew what that kiss meant. He was telling her that it wasn't the right time, that their first kiss needed to be born out of joy, not tears and tension.

"The storm's let up," Seth whispered. "I'd better be going."

His words confirmed her earlier thoughts. The timing just wasn't right. And as crazy as things seemed at that moment, she understood, nodding and clearing her throat. "I guess so." Unwilling to merely say goodbye, she dropped a kiss on his cheek and offered him a slightly wet smile. "Good night, Seth."

"Good night, Jess. Sleep tight."

As she took her teacup in hand and headed upstairs, Jessica was all too aware of his eyes watching her, but it wasn't a creepy feeling. She didn't have to look back at him to know that there was undisguised longing in his eyes, a wish unfulfilled. And not until she heard him get into his car and drive away did the same longing pierce her heart.

*Jessica heard herself sob quietly as the tears flooded forth, pouring down her cheeks and into her pillow. "Oh, Seth..." she whispered, pulling the blankets tightly around her as though hoping to wrap her arms around him. "How could I be so blind?" She kept repeating the thought over and over inside her head as she fell into an uneasy, restless sleep. *How could I be so blind? How could I...**

"Because you were afraid of betraying me."

*At once, Jessica bolted upright in bed at the sound of a male voice, familiar, beloved, and nearly ten years gone. *No... it can't be.* Her eyes cast around*

the room until she saw him... and wept anew. "Frank?" she breathed, raising a hand to her mouth.

Frank Fletcher smiled and sat down beside his wife in their bed; she stretched out a hand toward him and then pulled back, her eyes flashing with a sudden fear. "Am I dreaming?" she asked.

Frank nodded. "Yes and no. You're still asleep, but this is as real as everything around you. It's all right. You can touch me, Jessie."

Tentatively, Jessica put out her hand again when he extended his, palm up. She laid her palm in his and half-sobbed, half-laughed when his skin touched hers, as warm and tangible as it had been when he lived and breathed. She let herself be pulled into his arms and wrapped her own around him, hugging him as though she never wanted to let him go. "I thought I'd never get to hold you again," she said as he rocked her in his embrace. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too," Frank said into her hair. "But that doesn't mean I haven't been watching over you."

"I know you have. Sometimes when I thought I couldn't make it anymore, I felt my strength renewed, and I knew it was you."

"It wasn't just me, Jessie. Somebody else has been giving you strength all this time, hasn't he?"

The tone wasn't accusatory, but rather, gentle and reassuring. Jessica pulled back in her husband's arms slightly, just enough to meet his eyes. "You knew? You knew that Seth has been looking out for me?"

The corners of Frank's eyes crinkled in that old, charming way that had always captured her heart. "Knew? Who do you think told him to take care of you after I was gone?"

Jessica felt her eyes widen in amazement. "You didn't."

"Yes, I did." Frank laughed at the look of utter astonishment on his wife's face. "Jessie, I know you've always been independent, but everybody needs someone to love. Seth and Ruth were our closest friends, and you

made sure he was taken care of after Ruth died. I knew it wasn't because you loved him in *that* sense."

"At the time, I didn't," Jessica said, amazed to hear the words *at the time* coming out with that statement.

"I know. You just wanted to help heal his wounds, purely out of the goodness of your heart. You brought him back to life in a way I never could have, no matter how many games of chess I threw in his favor." Frank smiled as Jessica chuckled and wiped tears from her eyes. "And then, when my time came..."

Jessica shook her head furiously. "It shouldn't have been your time. It was far too soon."

"We all have a time, Jess. Mine just came; there was nothing I could do to stop it. But there was one thing I could do. Do you remember when I was in the hospital and Seth was the doctor taking care of me?"

Jessica nodded, tears filling her eyes again as she recalled the day her life changed forever. Seth had been the one to hold her after Frank breathed his last.

"I knew how lonely Seth was after he lost Ruth, and how you had helped him through it. When I told him to take care of you and keep you safe, he said to me, 'Frank, I would've even if you hadn't asked. She's been a wonderful friend to me.' You two needed each other, and you need each other still. Jessie..." Frank pulled Jessica close and gave her a squeeze. "Don't be afraid to tell Seth you love him." He laughed when she gave him an astonished, yet droll expression. "I'm serious! I've been hoping you two would get together for a long time."

"What? Frank, how can you say that?"

Frank held up his hands. "Calm down. In no way am I saying I don't love you anymore. Jessie, my darling, I will *always* love you, as long as eternity lasts. But it's because I love you that I want you to be happy. Does Seth make you happy?"

With a sad smile, Jessica nodded again. "Very happy. We've had some wonderful times together over the years. We just had a wonderful time today."

"I know. I was watching. It made me smile to see you so happy, just bursting with joy. That's the Jessie I love, and no doubt it's the one Seth loves, too. He loves making you laugh, doesn't he?"

"He does. After you died, I didn't think I'd ever laugh again, but Seth... he brought joy back into my life. I was so terrified to let our relationship become more than just friends because..."

"You thought it would be betraying my memory." When Jessica nodded yet a third time, Frank kissed his wife's forehead. "Jessie, you're not betraying me. You've never betrayed me, not when we were married and not even after my death. I wanted Seth to take care of you for a reason, and that was for you two to be happy together. Be happy, honey. Tell Seth how you feel about him. You know I'll always love you, so don't be afraid to love again."

It's Frank's love that will help you love again. You've just gotta trust your heart.

Jessica felt the tears refresh as Seth's earlier words surfaced, but this time, they were tears of joy. "Oh, Frank..." She twined her arms around him and hugged him tight. "Thank you. I will tell him."

"Good. I want to see that smile again." Frank grinned when Jessica dried her eyes and gave him a bright smile. "That's my girl. I love you, Jessie."

"I love you, too. Always." Their lips met in a deep, loving kiss...

And she woke up. Jessica opened her eyes to brilliant sunshine streaming through her bedroom window and Frank's kiss lingering on her lips. *I can still feel him*, she thought, touching her mouth. *He'll always be with me*. She sat up and stretched, then rose from her bed and walked to the window, opening it to let the air in. Jessica closed her eyes and breathed in the delicious scent of rain-washed earth, as could only happen after a summer storm.

The storm. Jessica's eyes flew open and darted to her bedside table, where sat her empty teacup. *Seth! I have to tell him... my stars, I'm going*

to tell him. She looked down at her pink pajamas. *But not dressed like this, I'm not,* she thought, grabbing her robe and heading for the bathroom.

After taking a shower and running a brush through her tousled blonde hair, Jessica dressed for the day and applied her makeup, then turned her attention to the phone. Her stomach gave a nervous quiver and she sighed. *Tell him. Tell him not. Tell him.* She rose from her vanity table and was about to pick up the phone when it rang, startling her so badly that she jumped. "My goodness," she muttered, picking up the receiver and holding it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Jess? Did I wake you up?"

"Seth?" Jessica felt her stomach give another tremor at the sound of the familiar, beloved, gruff voice. "No, no, you didn't wake me. I've been up for nearly an hour."

The doctor blew a sigh of relief into the phone. "Thank the Lord. I didn't want to bother you if you were still in bed."

"And here you were, worried that I wouldn't get my eight hours in." Jessica sat down on the side of her bed and crossed her legs. "What's on your mind, Seth?"

Loaded question, Jessica, she thought to herself as there came a pause on the other line. After a long ten seconds, Seth spoke again. "I, uh... I didn't know if you'd care to join me for a little ride tonight. I thought we could get some ice cream and drive out to Cabot Point, look at the stars for a while. Supposed to be a beautiful day and evening after that ruckus Mother Nature raised last night. How's that sound?"

It sounds romantic. "It sounds wonderful," Jessica amended out loud, smiling at the prospect. "Will you be picking me up?"

"Ayuh. Sunset."

"I'll have my bells on."

"Woman, you've always got your bells on."

Jessica giggled. "Rings on my fingers and bells on my toes."

"And a bone in your nose, ho-ho."

The giggle morphed into a full-blown, brassy chortle. "You've been listening to too much Ray Stevens."

"Just be glad I'm not coming to pick you up on a camel named Clyde."

Jessica began to laugh even harder. "Oh Lord, Seth, you've just given me a hilarious picture. You and I riding a camel, dressed like characters from *Arabian Nights*."

Seth snorted. "That'd be a sight. Me duded up like Valentino in *The Sheik* and you dressed in some *I Dream of Jeannie* getup, clomping through Cabot Cove on Clyde the Camel."

Jessica hooted with laughter at that last remark. "Good alliteration!"

"Well, at least it made you laugh." Seth sounded pleased with himself. "Sunset?"

"Sunset. See you later, Seth."

"See ya, Jess."

Jessica replaced the receiver in its cradle and let out a deep sigh. "Sunset," she repeated softly, feeling anticipation settle in the pit of her stomach. An evening with Seth, a ride through Cabot Cove with the wind in her hair and ice cream in her hand... and looking up at the stars and telling him what was on her heart, and then sharing a kiss... A smile curved her lips. "I can hardly wait."