

Far Across The Sea, Jessie

Chapter 1

“Flight 101 for Maine, now boarding. All passengers flying first class please report to gate twenty-nine.”

Jessica heard the announcement and sighed. Digging around in her bag, she pulled out her wallet and placed enough money on the table to pay for her tea and leave a tip for the very gracious waitress. After replacing her wallet, she gathered her things and made her way from the lounge to her gate just a few feet away.

“Hello, Mrs. Fletcher.” The young lady taking the tickets, greeted her with a smile.

“Hello, Lilly.” Jessica tried to smile as she moved up in line.

Lilly looked at her favorite author, and former professor, with a frown, her hands busily taking the tickets handed to her. “Are you ill, Mrs. Fletcher? You look pale.”

“I’m just tired and ready to go home.” Jessica whispered as she handed the young woman her ticket.

“Your Cabot Cove.” Lilly smiled and handed the stubs back to Jessica. “Safe home, Mrs. Fletcher. And try to get some rest.”

“I’ll try, Lilly. Thank you, and it was a pleasure to see you again.” She started to walk away but Lilly’s voice stopped her.

“Oh, Mrs. Fletcher?”

Jessica turned. “Yes?”

“I’ve signed up for your new class.”

Jessica smiled at the enthusiasm of the young woman. “I’m glad. You’re very talented. I’ll see you in class.”

“Bye, Mrs. Fletcher.” Lilly waved then returned to her job, her brow creased with concern. There was something wrong with the woman she admired...and it wasn’t just being overly tired.

~*~

Jessica’s eyes slowly opened when she felt a hand being pressed gently to her forehead. Looking into the worried eyes of her best friend, Seth Hazlitt, she knew something was wrong.

“Seth?” she asked, her voice soft.

“Jessie, you’re sick,” he whispered, his heart pounding at the flushed look of her skin. Even though he didn’t have a thermometer, he knew her fever was high. “You slept through your flight, and then the attendants couldn’t wake you when it was time to go.”

“I’m fine. I...” she started to get up but her head began to spin. “Oh,” she breathed as she sat back down.

“Easy, Jessie.” Seth whispered as he smoothed the bangs from her forehead. “Let me help you.”

“Seth, I...” she looked up at him again, her eyes filled with the pain she felt and glassy with fever.

“Shh, Jessie. We’ll get you home,” he soothed as he took her hand and helped her up. “Nice and easy. Mort is waiting for us.”

“Mort?”

“My car broke down on the way and he was the one who took my call. We didn’t have time for me to go back to town, so he just called for a wrecker as we kept on going.”

Jessica nodded. It was taking all of her strength just to keep herself upright. “I thought I was just tired,” she moaned as they made their way to where Mort waited with Jessica’s luggage.

“Thank you.” Seth nodded to the flight attendant that had helped them from the plane. “Just give her things to him.” He nodded toward Mort.

“Yes, Sir.”

Mort took Jessica’s carryon and purse, then reached out to help Seth when they got closer. “What’s wrong?”

“She has a high fever. We need to get her to the hospital.” Seth whispered then glared at Jessica when she objected, albeit with less spunk than normal.

Mort nodded and began to gather the luggage around him. “I’m parked in front. Just a few more feet and we’ll be to the car.”

Chapter 2

George blinked weary eyes, the ringing of his bedside phone had startled him from sleep. “H’llo,” he answered groggily, sitting up when he heard the voice on the other line. “Seth? What’s wrong?” He listened to the man’s explanation for the call and felt his heart begin to pound.

“Tell her I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He breathed his goodbye then jumped from the bed to shower and get ready.

“Bloody hell,” he cursed when he realized he was getting ahead of himself. “Put yourself into inspector mode, George,” he mumbled to himself.

“You can’t get anywhere acting as Jessica’s love,” he continued to coach himself as he moved back to his phone. Lifting it from its cradle, he dialed his travel agent, knowing that he’d be in bed at this time of the morning, but not caring...and knowing his friend wouldn’t either once he knew it was an emergency.

Several minutes later, George was once again on the phone, this time with his superiors. “I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, Sir. I was only told that she was ill, I don’t know how severe.” Listening to the other man, he sighed, “Thank you, Sir. I appreciate the extended leave.”

Hanging up the phone, he hurried to the bathroom to shower and get himself ready to leave in just under an hour. “Sweet Jessie,” he whispered as he passed her picture. “I’m coming, Lass.”

~*~

“George.” Jessica whispered as her head tossed. The fever that they had thought gone, now raged through her once more.

“Shh, Jessie.” Seth soothed as he wiped her brow with a cool cloth. “He’s coming. Your George is on his way.”

“What’s wrong, Doc?” Mort asked as he stared at his friend, her pale skin damp from the fever.

“She’s picked up a virus somewhere.” Seth growled. “And she’s wore out. This latest book tour was just too much. She’s been running herself into the ground.”

Mort nodded. “I know, Doc. But what I don’t know is…why. Why is she doing this?”

“To avoid thinking.”

Mort frowned. “What?”

Seth sighed as he once again checked her temperature. “This antibiotic isn’t working, either,” he growled. “Mort, that’s a long story, and one I can’t really talk about. Would you come over here and take over? I need to go see about switching her medication. I’ll send a nurse in to take over.”

“Sure, Doc.” Mort took the cloth from Seth’s hand. “When will George’s flight get in?” he asked just as Seth was opening the door.

“He said he’d call before his flight left JFK.”

“Okay.” Mort turned his attention to Jessica after the door closed behind Seth. “Come on now, Mrs. F. You don’t want to look like this for your inspector,” he whispered as he smoothed the cool cloth over her fevered brow.

~*~

“I just don’t know what to do. I was so sure she’d picked up a virus, but the virus we thought it was should have responded to the antibiotics two hours ago.” Seth rubbed his eyes as he looked across his desk to the other doctor. “It has to be something else.”

“What else could it be?”

“I don’t know. We need to do more blood work, but the lab is closed.”

“I can do the labs, Dr. Hazlitt. I was a lab technician before I finished medical school.”

“Thank you, Jon. I’ll go draw the blood.”

“And I’ll be waiting for the samples in the lab.”

Seth watched the young doctor leave, then looked at the picture he kept on his desk. A very young Jessica sat smiling up at her beloved Frank, the happiness of new love shining from every inch of her porcelain skin. It had been taken just after Frank had brought Jessica home from their honeymoon, and Seth had treasured it over the years. He hadn’t seen that look on her face for years after Frank died…not until a certain Scot came into her life.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, he got up and hurried from his office. He had to get those blood samples. Something was telling him this wasn’t just some mystery illness.

Chapter 3

George fingered the silk scarf in the pocket of his coat, remembering what it had looked like wrapped loosely around his sweet Jessie’s neck before the wind had blown it away. He’d found it several days later, lying under a bush in his garden. He’d offered to give it back to her, but she’d smiled and put it in his pocket.

“No, I want you to keep it.” She caressed his face. “We’re so far away from each other, and it’s so long in between times we get to see each other…just keep it to remember me by.” Her eyes twinkled as she stared up at him.

Wrapping his arms tightly around her, he stared down into the most beautiful blue eyes he’d ever seen. “I don’t

need a scarf to remember ye, Lass.” He kissed her lips softly. “The first time I looked into your clear blue eyes, I had your image forever burned in my memory. All I have to do is close my eyes, and you’re there, smiling that beautiful smile. I can see you, and smell the scent of your hair, after you’ve just gotten out of the shower.” He smiled when he saw the blush on her cheeks. “And I smile when I see the blush creep into that beautiful face after we’ve made love.”

*“Oh, George...you do say the sweetest things.” She traced a finger across his lips. “Still, I want you to keep it.”
“I’ll keep it with me always, Jessie.”*

And he had, from that day on.

It was always in one of his coat pockets, and he was always careful to keep it hidden from his mates. The last thing he needed was to have them harassing him about carrying a woman’s scarf around. He sighed, but it made being away from her seem easier and less lonely.

“George?” Mort asked as he walked up to the tall Scotsman. “Are you alright?”

Blinking to bring himself out of his thoughts, George looked at the Cabot Cove sheriff. “Sorry, Mort.”

Mort waved it off. “I’m sorry I’m late. Something came up just as I was about to leave and then I got caught in a traffic jam.”

George nodded. “It’s fine. I think I needed a few minutes to gather my thoughts.”

Mort nodded. “She’s been asking for you,” he spoke quietly as he helped George with his luggage.

George followed Mort out to his waiting patrol car. “How is she?”

Mort bit his lip. He didn’t want to worry the man more than he already was, but he didn’t want to lie either. “Doc thought it was a virus, but when several antibiotics failed to work, he ran some more tests.”

“And?” George asked as he buckled his seatbelt just as Mort pulled out onto the interstate.

“She’s been poisoned, George.”

“Poisoned?” George felt his throat constrict.

“Yes.” Mort frowned, there was more than just panic in that tone.

“Do they know what type?”

“Doc said he’d never heard of it before, and I couldn’t begin to pronounce it right. It’s one that was just added to the database.” Mort shrugged. “I lived and worked in New York City for most of my young adult years. I saw a few deaths by poison, but I was never good at pronouncing the names of most of the more exotic ones.”

“Was it Menajatus?”

Mort frowned. “Yes, that’s it. But...how did you know?”

George closed his eyes. “No,” he pleaded softly. “No.”

“George? What’s going on? I realize you work for Scotland yard, and that you’re a chief inspector, but how did you know about a poison that was added to the database just yesterday?” Mort turned off onto a county road that would get them to the hospital sooner rather than later.

“I don’t understand how.” George mumbled to himself, not hearing Mort, his mind completely fixed on trying to solve the mystery of how Jessica had suddenly become a victim of a serial killer an ocean and another country away.

Mort carefully looked from the road over to his passenger. Realizing George was completely lost in thought, he turned his attention back to the road and sped up. He had a feeling that this was one time he was going to have to break a few speed limits. Something inside him told him that Jessica’s life depended on it.

“Jessie!” Seth shouted. “Don’t you dare leave me, ya’ hear?” He continued shouting as he grabbed the paddles, issuing orders then shocking her, causing her body to convulse off the table then land with a soft thud...her heart still not responding.

“Charge four hundred joules!” he commanded. “Clear.”

Again her body convulsed, and once again the monitor showed a flat line...its eerie sound filling the room, making its presence known even above Seth’s shouts.

“Jessica Fletcher, don’t you dare give up! You’re a fighting Irish...remember?” he growled then pressed the paddles to her chest once more, knowing that this was the last time he could try to bring her back.

Everyone held their breath as her body convulsed then released it with an audible *whoosh* when the heart monitor began to beep as her heart began to beat faster and faster until it was beating as it should be.

Seth closed his eyes as the nurse standing close to him took the paddles from his hands. Taking a deep breath, he opened his eyes and started to once again give orders. “Get her up to ICU.”

“Doc?” Mort questioned as he and George nearly collided with the nurses leaving Jessica’s room.

Seth looked at the sheriff then up at the man who’s eyes seemed to be looking through the wood door. “We just lost her,” he whispered.

“Doc...you...” Mort stuttered to a stop when Seth raised his hand.

“We were able to bring her back, but it was close.”

“I want to see her.” George finally spoke, his eyes never leaving the door until it opened and Jessica’s bed was rolled out. “Jessie...” he whispered as he followed her down the hall.

Seth watched the man. “What’s wrong with him besides being worried about Jessie?”

Mort shook his head. “He knew what the poison was, Doc. I couldn’t remember the name, and he asked me if it was Mena...whatever, and when I told him that was it...” he shrugged. “He’s been like this ever since.”

Chapter 4

George held the soft hand of his love, his heart sick with the thought that his job had harmed her. “I’m so sorry, Lass,” he whispered.

“George...” Seth’s quiet voice broke through the man’s sorrow as he squeezed his shoulder. “Can you explain what’s happened?”

“I honestly don’t know how she got the poison. She was only with me for a day.” He swallowed and caressed the damp hair from her forehead. “We have a serial killer case that we’ve been working on the last several weeks. He uses poison, a poison that he created, to kill his victims. He named it Menajatouis, because of how close it sounds to ménage a trios. The poison acts in three stages, and the killer always works in threes. Three victims in three hours.”

“How many has he murdered?” Seth felt his stomach tighten. “And...what stage is Jessie in?”

George swallowed. “The count is twelve so far. He only kills on the third day of the week.” Finally looking up at Seth, he held the man’s gaze. “I don’t know what stage she’s in. None of his victims have been found alive. We only know that the poison acts in three stages because he’s told us.”

Seth saw the pain and fear in the green eyes staring up at him; he’d seen that look before...reflected back at him when he’d looked in the mirror only hours before. “Has he told you anything else?”

George shook his head. “Not recently, at least not that I know of. I’ve been on holiday for the last two weeks on

doctor's orders, and have been at home in Wick."

"Was that where Jessie visited you?"

"No." Again he shook his head. "She called me and told me she'd be in London for a day and asked if I could meet her there. I went back to London to spend the time with her. She was never out of my sight."

Seth nodded, a small smile on his lips. "I don't doubt that," he whispered.

"Stay with her?" George suddenly asked as he got up from his chair.

"George?"

"I have to make a phone call. There has to be something we can do. I won't sit and watch her die."

"A'yuh, I'll stay with her." Seth grabbed George's arm making him stop. "It isn't your fault, George."

George just stared at Seth, knowing the man was trying to help, but knowing that he couldn't believe that. It was his fault. He shouldn't have let her come to London. He should have insisted that she come to Wick instead.

~*~

"Remember the first time I came to Cabot Cove, Jessie?" George whispered as he sat watching the liquid flowing through the tube and into her veins. His call had been partially successful, even though the antidote they'd prescribed wasn't a positive one.

"Remember all the looks you got when people realized I would be staying with you?" He smiled as he looked down at her, placing a tender kiss to her hand. "Remember what happened?" he whispered, his eyes taking on a far away look. "I remember..."

George sighed as he watched her feminine frame moving about the kitchen cleaning up their dinner. "I can help with that, you know."

Jessica smiled at him. "I know, but it's alright. I'm used to doing it by myself." She regretted the words as soon as she'd said them. "I'm sorry, George."

Shaking his head, he winked at her. "No need to apologize, Lass. I love that you always speak the truth." He moved to stand behind her, wrapping his arms around her and pressing her back against him.

"You're nervous, Jessie. Why?"

"I..." how could she tell him?

"It's alright, Lass." George kissed her ear. "I'm just happy spending the evening with you. I want nothing more."

"George," she breathed. "Yes, you do."

"I should have said it differently." George turned her so that she was looking up at him. "I do want more, but I know that you're nervous. I'm willing to wait for something more as long as you want and need me to." He winked at her. "But don't think I won't be trying my best to maybe...persuade...you a bit."

She laughed then sighed, "Oh George," before leaning into his embrace, her arms wrapping around his waist.

"Come on, Jessie. Let's forget the dishes until later. Come sit with me by the fire. I want to hear more about your life in Cabot Cove."

Smiling up at him, she caressed his cheek. "Thank you, George."

Jessica moaned, her head turning, George's name a whisper on her lips.

"Jessie?" George whispered as he came back from his revelry.

"George," she whispered again, her own mind remembering that very special night.

Jessica bit her lip. It had been so many years since she'd lost her beloved Frank, and even more since she'd felt

this nervous about a man looking at her as George had been looking at her for most of the night.

His green eyes seemed to be darker each time he looked at her. His voice seemed to become deeper with each word he said. The touches that had started off simple and mere signs of affection, were now caresses that sent little tingles along her nerves. The words that had been polite chitchat, now held more than one meaning. His hand held hers a bit longer. His fingers tucked a wayward curl behind her ear a bit more than usual.

Heaven help her.

She was too old for this. It had been too long. She didn't know what to do. She had only ever really dated one man, and she had been married to him for over twenty years. She hadn't been that good with this kind of thing when she was young...and now that she was older...

"Heaven help me," she whispered when she heard George calling her.

Taking one last look at herself in the mirror, Jessica smoothed the satin of her gown and closed her eyes. A definition she'd once given to a student who had been trying to write a love story sounded in her ears.

Desire...to be wanted.

And it felt good to be wanted. Even if she was scared nearly out of her wits.

Chapter 5

Jessica's eyelids felt like lead weights as she tried to open them. Struggling to come out of the darkness that seemed like a never ending abyss, she slowly opened her eyes only to quickly close them against the bright light. "George..." she breathed, his name still a whisper as she remembered the dream she'd been having.

George heard his name and saw her eyes fluttering. "Jessie...I'm here, Lass," he whispered as he sat on the edge of her bed, his hand caressing her face. "Come back to me, Jessie. Come back."

"Thirsty," she whispered then coughed.

"Easy," he soothed then moved to get her a drink.

Finally blinking her eyes enough to adjust them to the light, she watched George as he poured her water and brought it back to her. Never taking her eyes from his face, she sipped at the cool liquid, then settled back against the pillows.

"Oh, Jessie, I've missed those beautiful eyes." His voice was thick with emotion as he traced her face with his finger.

"What happened?" she questioned.

"Why don't we wait for explanations until after Seth has been in? I need to go tell him you're awake."

Jessica nodded. "Okay." She grasped his hand and stopped him.

"What is it, Lass?" George's green eyes gazed down at her.

She smiled. "I want a kiss."

His hearty laugh rang out as he leaned forward, his face only mere inches from hers. "If it's a kiss ye want, then tis a kiss I'll be givin' ye." His lips touched hers tenderly.

Smiling sleepily at him when he broke the kiss, she sighed, "Thank you."

"You're most welcome. Now, I'll be on my way to find Seth."

"Mmm," she hummed, her eyes closing.

"Rest, Jessie." George whispered as he slipped from the room.

~*~

Seth rubbed a hand over his face. “You gave us quite a scare, Jessie.” He looked down at her.

“I’m sorry, Seth. I really had no idea.” Her eyes were closed. “I’m so tired.”

“Then rest, Jess. I’ll be back later. We want to run some tests to make sure everything is alright.” Seth patted her hand.

“George, why don’t you go and get some rest? You’re exhausted and you getting ill won’t do Jess any good.”

“I’ll rest here.” George stared at Seth. “I’m not leaving.”

“George...” Jessica’s voice was barely above a whisper.

George turned to look down at Jessica. “Yes, Lass?”

“You can’t rest here.” She opened her eyes and looked at him. “Go to my house. Sleep and eat. I’ll be waiting right here when you come back. And maybe I’ll be better company.”

Seth watched as the gentle coaxing from Jessica slowly broke through George’s resolve and had him giving in. Shaking his head, he smiled...the tall stubborn Scot wasn’t a match for the blue eyed Irish lass he’d fallen so deeply in love with. Slipping quietly from the room, he made his way back to his office where he planned to take a nap.

“Now, give me a kiss goodbye.” Jessica smiled. “Seth isn’t in the room anymore.”

George blinked and turned to look at the empty room. “When did he slip out?”

“While I was convincing you to go get some rest.” She squeezed his hand with all the strength she could muster. “Kiss me and go.”

Looking back down into the blue eyes he had feared he’d never see again, he kissed her nose then lips. “I love you, Jessie. Sleep well.”

“I love you. Dream peacefully.” She closed her eyes at the feel of his warm lips against her cool brow.

George stayed with her until her breathing evened out and he was satisfied she was asleep. Slipping from the room, he rubbed a hand over his face and wondered how he was going to get to Jessica’s house. Looking up, he saw Mort heading his way and shook his head. That man always seemed to appear at the most opportune times.

Chapter 6

“How long?” Jessica asked as she sipped at the tea Seth had brought her.

“A week before we gave you the antidote, and another week before you came out of the coma you’d lapsed into.” George whispered, his eyes not meeting hers.

Seth knew that George’s guilt was nearly driving him mad, but he also knew that if Jessica knew the whole truth, she’d tell George the same thing he had...it wasn’t his fault. “We lost you once, and nearly lost you a few more times.”

“What poison was it?” Jessica asked even as she watched George closely.

George, his head still hung, twisted the ring on his finger. “Menajatus.”

Jessica blinked. “What?” She couldn’t believe she’d heard him right.

“It isn’t spelled the same, just enough so that it sounds as though you’re saying ménage a trios.” George finally

looked up at her. "It was invented by a serial killer whose case I've been working the last few weeks." Once again he dropped his gaze.

Finally it hit her, now she knew why George had been avoiding looking at her. Looking at Seth, she asked with her eyes if he would give her a few minutes alone with George. After he'd slipped quietly from the room, she returned her attention to her unhappy Scot.

"George," she spoke his name gently as she cupped his chin and lifted his face. "It isn't your fault."

"It is. I shouldn't have let you come to London. I should have told you about the serial killer and his..." George bit his lip, he hadn't told anyone this. "He has a vendetta against me."

"It still isn't your fault. Has he struck anyone close to you so far?"

"Just former colleagues that went undercover and were lost in the life. They're poor and homeless, Jess."

Jessica knew how much helping those people meant to George and it made her ache for him knowing that someone was hurting them just to exact some righteous vengeance. "I'm so sorry, George. So, if he's not harmed anyone close to you, then why would he go after me?"

"I don't know, Jessie. I don't know where you could have gotten the poison."

Sighing, Jessica shook her head. "We'll worry about that later. Right now, I just want to spend time with you." She caressed his cheek.

Looking into her tired eyes, George leaned forward and wrapped her in his arms. "I'll have to return to London soon. I can't take the chance that this will follow me and put even more lives in danger." His fingers played gently with the hair at the nape of her neck.

Jessica nodded then scooted over in the bed. "Sit with me and talk for a while."

Climbing on the bed beside her, George pulled her against his chest and sighed, "This isn't exactly how I wanted to spend time in bed with you the next time we had a chance for alone time."

Jessica chuckled, "Well, it isn't exactly how I wanted to spend alone time with you, either." Snuggling closer, she held his hand. "But I'll take what I can get."

~*~

"Scotland Yard contacted me this afternoon." Mort looked at Seth. "It seems they've received a message for George from their serial killer. They've faxed it to me." He held up the paper.

"He's in with Jessie. I believe they're asleep. At least they were the last time I checked." Seth sighed, "Why can't that woman ever stay out of trouble?"

Mort shrugged. "I don't know. It does seem to follow her around." He fussed with his hat. "I really hate to bother them, but he needs to see the fax."

Seth nodded. "A'yuh. Come on then." They started down the hall toward Jessica's room.

Jessica looked up when the door opened. "Come to check up on me again?"

Seth gave her a smile then moved into the room, Mort following. "A'yuh. You know how we like to pester our patients and not let them rest for more than five minutes."

"Hello, Mort." Jessica greeted the sheriff then frowned. "What is it? What's happened?"

George walked back into the room at the sound of voices. "Hello, Mort. Seth. Has Jessie's test results come back?" he asked then noticed the look on Mort's face. "What is it?"

Mort handed a piece of paper to George. "We received this a few minutes ago."

George looked down at the paper and felt the color drain from his face. "No."

“George?” Jessica’s voice betrayed her worry.

“I don’t know how, but the madman knows that I’m here.” He looked up at Jessica. “I have to leave, Jessie. He’ll follow me if I don’t return home.”

“But...George...” she started to protest, stopping when he held up his hand.

“I’ll be gone as soon as I can arrange it, Mort.”

Mort knew there was no other way, but he hated to see the man being threatened. “I’ll be waiting to take you to the airport.”

“Thank you.” George nodded then turned his attention back to Jessica.

Seth knew that he and Mort were crowding the room so he quietly motioned toward the door and followed the man out. “This is going to worry Jessie sick,” he commented just outside her door.

“Nah, Doc. George’ll make her understand. He’s a good man and he’ll solve the case before too long. We just have to keep Mrs. F. away from London for a while.”

“That can easily be arranged. I’ll call her publisher.”

“She’ll have our heads.”

“I’ll give it to her on a silver platter.” Seth grumbled even as he and Mort made their way toward his office.

Chapter 7

George rested next to Jessica, his arms wrapped tightly around her. “I’m sorry, Jessie. I had planned to stay with you for at least a few more days.”

Jessica nodded against his chest. “You have to be careful, George.”

“I’ll be as careful as I can be, Lass.”

A few moments of silence passed between them as they both became lost in their thoughts. Jessica’s hand was idly caressing George’s chest as his fingers combed gently through her hair.

“George?” her soft voice broke the silence.

“Yes, Lass?”

“Do you know what I was dreaming about just before I woke up?”

George smiled, remembering what he’d been thinking about before she woke. “No. What, Jessie?”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly a dream so much as a memory.” She tilted her head and smiled up at him. “I was remembering our first night together.”

He blinked as he stared into her blue eyes. “Amazing,” he whispered.

“What?” she asked, her face showing her confusion at his reaction.

“I was remembering that same night just before you woke up.”

“Oh,” she whispered then smiled. “It shouldn’t surprise us. It was a very special night.”

“Yes, it was.” He caressed her cheek.

“I was so scared.”

“I know. I was nervous myself.” He grinned and tucked a curl behind her ear.

“You were?” She frowned, not sure she believed him. “You didn’t seem nervous to me.”

George gave a low chuckle. “Ah, Love. I’m a Scot. We don’t show emotion.”

Now it was Jessica’s turn to laugh. “If that wasn’t showing emotion, I shudder to think what would happen if you actually did *show* your emotions.” Her blue eyes twinkled up at him.

His green eyes reflected the twinkle back at her. “Some day I’ll show ye, Lass.”

Snuggling close to him, her head resting over his heart, she sighed and whispered, “Some day soon I hope...”

~*~

George carefully slipped his arm out from underneath Jessica before gently getting up off the bed. Looking down at her, he lightly brushed a soft tendril of hair from her forehead. “I love ye, Lass,” he whispered as he turned and walked from her room.

Mort looked up at the sound of Jessica’s door opening. “Ready?”

“Aye.” George nodded. “Just need to go back to Jessie’s to get my things.”

“Doc wants to see you before we leave.”

“Aye.” George nodded then turned to make his way to the elevator.

“Just the man I wanted to see.” Seth said as he stepped off the elevator, nearly running into George.

“I was just coming to see you, Seth.”

“A’yuh.” Seth studied the man in front of him. “Stoic Scot,” he mumbled.

“What was it you wanted?” George asked, ignoring Seth’s mumbling.

“I wanted to tell you that Jessica’s latest tests came back just fine. She shows no sign of any damage suffered by the poison.”

Before he could stop it, a sigh escaped George’s lips. “Tell Jessie to be good.”

Seth laughed, “Oh I will, but don’t count on her listening.”

George nodded. “Aye. Just try.”

Seth gave the man a smile and shook his hand. “I won’t let her leave Cabot Cove. I’ve already put a call in to her publisher. He’ll keep her here easier than the rest of us, but if I have to I’ll use you as my ace in the hole.”

“Whatever you have to do. I don’t want her anywhere near any big cities.”

“She’ll be angry as a wet hen.”

“I’ll deal with that when I have to.” George looked at Mort. “We’d better leave. I don’t want to miss my flight. The last thing I need on my conscience is this mad man killing even more innocent people on this side of the pond.”

Chapter 8

Jessica paced the small rug in front of her fireplace. It had been nearly two months since she’d been near death. “And nearly as long since I’ve seen or heard from George.”

She was slowly going mad not knowing how things were, and it didn’t help that the only thing she had to do was work on her next book. A book that wasn’t due for the next three months.

“A book that I’ve finished,” she sighed and ran her fingers through her hair. “At least Vaughn will be happy with

me for once.”

“Jessie!” She heard Seth call from the kitchen.

“In here, Seth,” she answered and stared into the fire.

Seth looked at the man behind him and motioned for him to go on in. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” he whispered.

“Thank you, Seth.” George patted his shoulder then turned and made his way to where his love waited.

“Seth?” Jessica asked when she heard the door close. Frowning she turned and stopped in her tracks.

“George!” she shouted and tried hard not to rush him.

“Aye, Lass.” He wrapped her tightly in his arms, his hand cradling her head.

“Oh George...I...” her voice shook as she lifted her head to look into his green eyes.

George was shocked to see her blue eyes swimming with tears. “It’s alright now, Jessie. It’s over.” His thumbs gently caressed away the two tears that had escaped.

“I’ve never felt so...so helpless.”

George was puzzled. Why was she so emotional? “Jessie, are ye alright?”

She shrugged. “It must be from being so sick.” Her hand waved to dismiss it as she tried to stem the tears that once again escaped down her cheeks.

“No, Jessie. You don’t cry easily. What’s really wrong?”

She frowned. “I...was...afraid...” her voice was a mere whisper as she looked away.

Gently lifting her face, he stared into her blue eyes. “No, Lass. Don’t look away. It’s not shameful to admit you were afraid.”

“But I’m not weak,” she protested.

George smiled. “I know that, Lass. And just because ye’ve shed some tears and admitted that ye were afraid, doesn’t make ye weak.” His gentle brogue brought a smile to her lips.

“How long are you here?” She sniffed then smiled when he held out a handkerchief.

“As long as ye can stand me.”

A brilliant smile curved her lips as she wrapped her arms about his neck. “I’m so happy you’re here.”

“Not half as happy as I am to be here.” He cradled her head in his hand when she looked up at him.

“George...” she breathed at the look in his eyes.

“Jessie...” his voice was deep with a sudden rush of want. “I want ye, Lass.”

A shiver ran up her spine. “I’ve missed being in your arms.”

Lifting her and cradling her against his chest, he sighed when her arms went around him and her warm breath tickled his neck. “I love ye, Jessie.”

“I love you, too,” she whispered.

~*~

“George...” she panted out as his mouth did wicked things to her nerves.

“Easy, Lass.” George breathed as his hands slipped beneath her blouse to caress the soft skin he’d exposed.

“How do you expect me to...when you’re...you can’t touch me and kiss me like this and expect me to...” her head fell back, exposing her neck, giving him better access.

“*Greannmhor* (Sweet),” he breathed against the soft skin. “My bonnie lass.” His lips skimmed along her

graceful neck to the hollow of her throat.

Jessica knew what the word meant and shivered at the huskiness of her lover's voice. "*Flaitheanas* (Heaven)."

George pulled back and smiled at her. "Tis good ye've become with the Gaelic, Lass."

"I want to learn..." her blue eyes sparkled up at him. "...and I've had an *amhra* (wonderful) teacher."

George's fingers were once again busy, his lips kissing the corner of her mouth. He heard her sigh at the return of contact, and felt her shiver when the cool air of the room touched her bare flesh as the soft cotton of her blouse slid to the floor behind her.

Her own fingers had been busy, and now her hands caressed over the muscular plains of his chest. Her slender fingers clasped his shoulders when his teeth gently nibbled the soft lobe of her ear, the perfectly manicured nails gently indenting the taut flesh.

It had been too long since he'd held her like this, since his hands had touched the silkiness of her bare skin, since his lips had tasted the sweetness of her kiss. "Ach, I've missed this," he murmured.

A tear rolled down her cheek as she suddenly threw her arms around him and buried her face in his neck. "Oh George I was so afraid I'd never feel your arms around me again."

Holding her tightly against him, he closed his eyes and cursed the man that had done this to her. "No need to be afeared now, Lass. I'm here, and I'm going to love ye until it's all ye can think about."

Jessica, feeling foolish for her outburst, turned away and wrapped her arms around herself. "I'm sorry. I don't know what's the matter with me. I've become a weeper."

George chuckled a bit at her terminology as he pulled her back into his arms. "No, Lass. Don't apologize. I wouldn't call you a weeper."

"But George," she argued when she turned to look at him. "This is the second time I've done this since you arrived."

Smiling, he caressed her face as he nodded. "Yes, it is, but it still doesn't make you a weeper." He studied her a moment as he contemplated the thought that had just crossed his mind. "It does however make me question my earlier assessment."

Frowning at him, she raised an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Jessie, what's really bothering you?" he asked, seeing surprise spark in her eyes. "Don't look so surprised, Lass. I love ye. I've grown very adept at reading you."

Looking down at her hands, she sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "I suppose I do owe you the truth."

"You do," he agreed, his voice gentle.

"It's more than being so close to death. When I said I was afraid earlier," she paused and bit her lip.

"Yes, Lass?" George whispered, hoping to encourage her to go on.

Looking up at him, she cupped his cheek. "I was afraid of losing another," she shook her head, not willing to go on.

Covering her hand with his, George moved it to his lips, kissing the soft palm. "You were afraid of losing another man that you've opened your heart to. Am I right, Lass?"

A tear rolling down her cheek, she nodded. "It took me so long to finally admit I love you. I wasted so much precious time with you. If something happened to you," she didn't finish, letting the sentence hang, knowing that he knew the rest.

Pulling her into his arms, George held her tightly to him. "I love ye, Lass. The years weren't wasted. You gave me what you could, I understood that." Pushing her back a little, he wiped the tears from her cheek. "Let me love ye, Jessie."

She nodded. "We need to finish what we started," she whispered. "I feel silly standing here sans blouse."

George laughed, the sound of it getting lost with the touch of her lips against his. Wrapping his arms around her,

the fingers of one hand tangled in her hair as the other caressed the soft skin of her back, drifting down to her waist. The worries of their world disappeared as they gave themselves over completely to the touch and warmth of each other.

Chapter 9

George read the note, felt his heart stop, his breath catch. Good god, no. Practically falling into the chair behind him, he gasped for air, the paper fluttering to the floor between his feet. The ringing of the phone startled him, and he felt his head pound with the sudden rush of oxygen that filled his lungs as he began to breathe again.

“Hello?” he answered. “Who are you? What did you do? Set that poor sap up to take the fall for you?” He listened to the disguised voice on the other end.

“You’ll know who I am, when I choose for you to. You’ve a pretty lady. Too bad she was so sick.”

“You leave her out of this.”

“Oh if only I could.”

Before George could reply, the line went dead. Hanging up the phone, he sat back in the chair, his eyes staring unseen into the empty fireplace of Jessica’s Cabot Cove home. Staying here with her had been a mistake he realized. How had he been so easily fooled into thinking they had solved the case of the serial killer? Why hadn’t he seen that it was a setup?

“George?” Jessica whispered as she came into the room from the kitchen. Seeing the stricken look he gave her when he jerked his head up, she felt her heart lurch. Moving quickly to him, she knelt in front of him. “George. What is it? What’s happened? Are you alright? Do I need to call Seth?”

Shaking his head, George pulled her up and down onto his lap. Holding her close, he buried his face in her neck. “Dear god, Lass,” he whispered.

Jessica felt him tremble, her mind racing with all sorts of thoughts about what could possibly have upset him. But only one of those thoughts asserted itself as the reason. Only one thing could have upset him this much. “Has someone threatened me, George?”

“He’s followed me here.”

“Who George?”

“The serial killer,” he whispered.

“But George, you said that was over.”

“We thought it was. The man that was killed, the man we believed to be our guy,” he shook his head.

She sighed, “Was merely a fall guy.” Feeling his head nod against her, she pressed a kiss to it. “Oh George.”

“And now you’re in danger again.”

“But I’m not.”

George pulled back and looked up at her. “How can you say that? That was him on the phone.”

“Did he threaten me?” she asked, her fingers combing through his hair.

“Not in so many words.”

“Then he was simply playing with your mind.” She smiled when he gave her an incredulous look. “He knows that as long as you’re here, he can’t get to me. I’m safe, Darling.”

George felt his heart flutter at the use of the endearment. “Jessie,” he whispered.

Jessica smiled, knowing that she'd surprised him. "What is it, Darling?" she asked, using the endearment again, liking how it felt to see the look in his eyes at the sound of it.

"You've never called me that before."

"No," she shook her head. "I haven't. It's what you are, though."

"You're trying to distract me," he informed her.

She nodded. "I am. Is it working?" she asked.

"A little."

"Only a little?" she asked, her fingers tracing down his face.

"Jessie," he warned. "You can't distract me from this."

"Oh?" she breathed, her warm breath tickling his neck as she nuzzled his ear.

"Lass," he groaned as he leaned back in the chair, his head tilted back to give her better access.

Moving her kisses to his lips, Jessica captured them hungrily, taking his breath then pulling back and looking down into his darkening green eyes. "No more thinking about that man or what he'll do to me. We don't even know if he's here or not. You know that mad men like to play head games. That's what he's doing to you. First thing in the morning, we'll call Mort. Until then, we have better things to do."

Caressing her hip, George stared up at her. "I love you, Jessie. I can't help but worry. He nearly killed you once before. You're my Achilles heel."

Tracing his lip, she gave him a smoldering look. "I thought I was your lover," she murmured.

"Jessie."

"Yes, George?"

"You don't play fair," he grumbled.

"Who says I'm playing?" she countered.

"Alright, I give in. But first thing in the morning," he warned even as he stood with her in his arms.

"Will be first thing in the morning," she finished before nibbling at his neck, causing him to shiver and hurry his steps.

~*~

"She sort of," George paused and sighed before continuing. "Let's just say she didn't want me to disturb Mort that late at night."

Seth couldn't help but chuckle, "She's a wily thing."

"Seth." George growled. "This is serious. She says the man is playing mind games with me, but he doesn't play games."

"George," Seth began. "She's right. The man *is* playing games with your head. He'd be a fool to try anything with you around."

"But that's just it." George sighed, dragging a hand over his face. "She didn't see the note I found."

"Note?" Seth asked.

George nodded as he pulled the folded paper out of his pocket. "I don't know how we missed it, but this was in the morning paper."

Seth took the note, his heart pounding in his chest as he read the words written in bold block script. "You have to show her this, George. After she's seen it, you have to go to Mort. He has to know. The three of you have to

make the decision about what to do.”

“She’s not safe as long as she’s with me, Seth. This mad man seems to have some sort of obsession with her.”

“Has he hurt anyone else close to you?”

George hung his head, his fingers combing through the hair at the nape of his neck. “The people he murdered,” he paused. “they weren’t just homeless.”

Seth frowned. “I don’t understand, George.”

George looked up at his friend. “The only homeless the man killed were undercover agents. Some of them were so deep undercover that they got lost in the life and haven’t been ours for years, some were there trying to help bring them back. Others were working cases. All of them were mates of mine. The older ones, we’re all close, we’ve seen so many things change over the years, that we have to stick together.”

“George, does Jessie know this?”

George shook his head. “We haven’t told anyone of the connection. All I’ve told her is that they were colleagues.”

“You can’t keep secrets from her, George.”

“But don’t you see, Seth?” George asked.

“I think I do.” Seth nodded. “The man committing these crimes is someone on the inside.”

“Or someone that was at some point.”

Seth drug a hand over his face. “My god,” he breathed.

“Now you see, Seth. I have to get away from her.”

“And what good would that do her? We can’t keep her locked up here in her house.”

“But as long as I’m with her, she’s in danger.” George argued.

“George, stop thinking like a lover and think like the cop that you are.” Seth told him.

George stared at Seth, startled at the directness of his words. “Jessie has always said you can be blunt.”

“A’yuh, when I need to be.”

George sighed, “Thanks, Seth.”

Seth nodded as he stood up. “Talk to her, George. Don’t keep these things from her. I’ll be going. You don’t need me here.”

George gripped Seth’s hand. “I really appreciate you’re friendship, Seth.”

“You love Jessie,” was his simple answer as he walked out the back door, leaving a very thoughtful man behind.

~*~

“Why didn’t you tell me, George?” Jessica asked, hurt clouding her eyes before she turned to look out the window.

George sighed as he moved behind her, his hands skimming up her arms, resting on her shoulders. “I’m sorry, Jessie. I,” he paused, turning her to him. “Look at me, Lass,” he whispered, waiting for her to give in.

Jessica looked up, her eyes searching his. “Why, George?”

“Because I’m a man in love and forgot everything I’ve learned as an inspector.” Cupping her face, George caressed her cheek with his thumb. “I wasn’t thinking, Lass. All I could think about was that you were in danger.” He shrugged. “I let love cloud my judgment. Forgive me?”

Covering his hand with hers, Jessica titled her face further into the palm. “This was why I was so hesitant about

letting our relationship get to this point.”

“I know, and I’ve proved every doubt you had, but,”

“Shh,” she murmured, her fingers covering his lips. “I forgive you. I suppose I would have done the same. Now,” she started, pulling away from him. “Let me finish getting dressed and we’ll go see Mort.”

“I love you, Jessie.”

She turned at the door, her eyes bright, a smile playing on her lips. “I know. I love you, too.”

“Jessie?” he called, stopping her again.

“Yes, Darling?” she whispered as she turned back, winking at him as she waited.

Sighing, George tapped his heart. “Thank you, Lass.”

Cocking her head to the side, she gave him a quizzical look. “For?”

He winked. “For never holding a grudge.”

Chapter 10

“I wish we knew who this guy is.” Mort grumbled as he stared down at the block letters, their message a threat against Jessica’s life.

“We know that he has to have knowledge of poisons and how to mix them, how to create new ones.” George listed one of the things they knew, not seeing Jessica’s reaction.

“Mrs. F?” Mort asked, noticing she’d gotten lost in thought.

George finally noticed, and saw the look on her face. “Jessie? What is it?”

“George, how many friends do you have here, other than myself?” she asked.

George looked at Mort in confusion, but answered her question. “Other than yourself? You know that Mort and Seth are the only other friends I have here.”

She nodded. “That’s right.” She let her forehead bump against the window. “All along. It’s been me. All this time. So many people. So many lives,” she said softly, her voice tight with emotion.

“You, Mrs. F?” Mort frowned. “I’m confused.”

George nearly as confused as Mort, moved to where she stood and gripped her shoulders. “Come sit down and explain what you mean, Lass.” Gently he guided her to one of the chairs across from Mort’s desk, then sat down beside her, watching as she stared down at her hands.

“You were telling me that you thought this man is, or had been, on the inside at The Yard,” she started, her gaze shifting to George.

George felt his heart lurch when he saw her eyes grey with pain. “Yes. We all believe that. Although we thought it was the man who was killed in a chase through London.”

She swallowed. “He was on the inside, but not how you think.”

“Go on.” George encouraged.

“I have no idea how he wound up in London. He’s been in prison for the last several years. He must have heard something on the streets, something that made him decide to pretend to be homeless to get close to your friends.”

Mort sat and listened as Jessica explained what she’d come to realize over the last few hours. His eyes widened when she explained that George wasn’t who was responsible for everything that had happened, that it was she herself that had brought all of this about. How well he remembered the young woman, hanging from the rafters in

her home, the bully being electrocuted in his garage. He remembered how he'd thought the girl was suicide, how Mrs. F. had convinced him it wasn't. And he remembered how neither of them had realized that both murders were connected at first. If it hadn't been for Mrs. F., he was sure he never would have realized it was the town's pharmacist that was guilty.

"How do you know it's him, Mrs. F.?" Mort finally asked.

She shook her head. "A feeling, I suppose. When George pointed out that it had to be someone who knew about poisons, how to use them, mix them to make new ones," she sighed. "That's all really. I just," she shook her head again and stopped.

George sighed and knelt in front of Jessica after she'd finished. "Remember how you told me none of this was my fault when I was feeling so guilty after you were poisoned?"

"I do," she whispered.

"Well, the same to you, Lass." He smiled gently when she looked up at him. "You aren't responsible for this."

"He's right, Mrs. F." Mort joined in, smiling at his friend when she looked over at him. "Take her home, George," he smiled at the tall Scotsman. "I'll have Andy take first watch." Looking at Jessica when she stood up, he gave her another smile. "I'll make a phone call to the state prison, see what I can find out. I'll see the both of you around supper time."

~*~

George watched Jessica as she slept, wishing that there was a way he could take all of this away, knowing that there wasn't. Hearing her whimper, he gently caressed her forehead then cheek, smiling when she calmed and rolled to her side with a sigh. "That's it, Jessie. Sleep easy," he whispered before getting up and walking quietly out of the room.

Seth looked up when he heard footsteps. "How is she?" he asked, having been told by Mort what had happened.

George sighed as he sat down at the table. Sipping at the tea Seth poured him, he stared into the amber colored liquid. "Sleeping, although I'm not sure how long she'll stay that way. I've never seen her this way before."

"She's blaming herself."

"But it isn't her fault. I told her that. Reminded her of how she'd done the same with me."

Seth raised an eyebrow. "And how well did it work with you?" he asked, a knowing glint in his eyes.

"Touché." George whispered.

"You're doing more for her than you realize, George." Seth told him after a few moments of quiet, both men sipping their tea.

"I am?"

"If you weren't in her life, she'd be going through all of this alone."

"She has you, Seth."

Seth shook his head. "But she wouldn't let me help her with something like this. It's too dangerous." He chuckled, "She can't tell you that because dangerous is part of your job." He sobered. "Besides," he paused, sipping his tea before continuing. "She would never let me see her this vulnerable."

"But you're her best friend, Seth. You've been by her side all these years. You were there when she lost her Frank."

Seth nodded. "And that's the most vulnerable I've ever seen her. She's a strong woman, George. Too strong some times. I can't get her to open up without being accused of being overprotective or cantankerous. With you," he shrugged. "With you it's different because you understand the things she's seen in a way that I don't. I understand death, I'm a doctor, but," he shook his head. "I'm not making much sense."

George smiled across the table at his friend. "Believe me, Seth. You are making sense. D'na thing for a minute that she doesn't appreciate you being overprotective and cantankerous. She does. She only acts that way because she knows you expect it. It's the game the two of you have played, I suspect, for most of your friendship."

Seth nodded. "I suppose it is." Hearing a noise from upstairs, he looked at George. "Go to her, George. Don't leave her alone with her dreams."

"Joining us for supper?"

"I'll fix it." Seth smiled at him. "That will give her more time to rest," he sighed. "If the dreams will let her."

"I'll do what I can." George told him before making his way quickly up the stairs.

Seth sat at the table, staring at nothing, his thoughts on the woman upstairs. She and Frank had been friends with he and Ruth for years. Then, when he'd lost Ruth, they'd been all that he had and had taken him in as part of their family. When Frank had passed, Jessica had leaned on him and they'd grown closer and became best friends. It had fallen to him to take care of Jessica in a way that she didn't know that he was doing it. Although, after the first few times, he realized that she did indeed know he was doing it and was letting him, acting as though she had no clue what he was up to. And that's how their game had begun. His simple promise to a friend on his death bed had turned into the best thing in his life. Being Jessica Fletcher's friend.

But there was one thing he couldn't be. One thing he couldn't do for her.

He couldn't be the man she was in love with. He couldn't be the one she completely let herself go with.

No, that man was the man currently upstairs tending to her, holding her through her nightmares.

He could however be the man he'd always been...her best friend. Cantankerous and overprotective. And a stand in cook when needed.

~*~

Jessica sighed as she snuggled closer to George, the fire in the fireplace not seeming to warm the chill that suddenly filled her. "Thank you," she whispered when George wrapped the throw from the back of the sofa around her.

Pressing a tender kiss to her forehead, he rubbed a hand over her arm as he rested his cheek against the top of her head. "The fire doesn't seem to be doing you much good tonight, Lass."

She shook her head. "The chill I have isn't from being cold," she whispered, her hand reaching from beneath the cover to hold his.

"It's going to be alright, Jessie." George tilted her head up, looking down at her, saddened to see her eyes grey instead of the vibrant blue he was used to. "Would you like some hot chocolate?"

She shook her head, lifting a hand to cup his face. "No. I don't want anything more than what I have."

Feeling a bit helpless, George gently nudged her until she was sitting across his lap, her back resting against his arm. "I like this much better," he murmured before gently kissing her.

Tangling her fingers in his hair, Jessica let herself get lost in his kiss, needing and wanting the distraction from her dreary thoughts. Curling closer to him, she smiled when he broke the kiss. "I like that, myself," she told him in a breathy whisper.

George snuggled her close again, her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry Seth had to rush off."

"Babies have their own timing. Besides, I'm rather glad we're alone."

"Do you think Mort has enough coffee?"

Caressing his chest, Jessica stared into the flickering fire. "I'm sure he does. Maureen takes good care of him."

"Like I try to take good care of you?" he asked.

Pressing a kiss to his shoulder, she looked up at him. "You have been taking very good care of me. I'm sorry if I've made it hard for you."

Caressing her cheek with his thumb, George held her gaze. "No need to be sorry, Jessie. Seth and I talked and he made me see that I couldn't be upset with you for not listening to me about not feeling guilty because I hadn't listened to you when our situations were reversed."

Jessica smiled. "Good ol' Seth."

"He loves you, Jessie."

"I know."

"And he's as worried about you as I am."

"As well you should be."

Jessica turned her head, not really surprised to see the man standing in her living room, a gun pointed at her and George. "What did you do to Mort?"

"Don't worry. I didn't kill him. He isn't who I want."

Jessica shook her head. "No, I don't suppose he is."

"If you had kept your nose out of it. Everything would have been perfect. Was perfect. But no," he growled.

"You just had to do what you always do. Stick your nose into everyone's business."

"You murdered a man and a young woman who did nothing to you."

"He was a no good for nothing abuser and cheater. And she was nothing but a tease who thought she was better than everyone else."

"That doesn't give you the right to take their lives." Jessica countered as she moved from George's lap back to his side where she'd been earlier, putting the throw back in its place on the sofa.

"Now who's judging?"

"She isn't judging." George finally spoke up, his eyes never leaving the gun pointed at them.

"Ah, Inspector. How easy it was to fool you. I enjoyed our game." He laughed and held up a bottle. "I'll enjoy watching my poison work even more this time than any other."

Jessica gripped George's hand. "He did nothing to you. Leave him out of this."

"Jessie." George whispered.

"How very sweet," he snarled.

"How did you escape, Al?" Jessica asked, taking the man's attention from George.

Al Wallace glared at Jessica. "Oh it was easy enough. I earned privileges for good behavior. Since I'd been a pharmacist, they let me help in the infirmary. I knew just which of the medicines to take to make them believe I was sick. Once in the hospital, I bribed a nurse to help me escape. She was such a pretty thing."

Jessica closed her eyes. "Where did you go?"

"After I read about your friend here, I decided I'd go to London. It was powerful, watching all of those homeless people die, knowing that they were all undercover cops...even the drunks and druggies."

"But why? They didn't do anything to you. Why didn't you come after me?"

"I did." He gave her a wicked grin. "Through him."

George pulled her close. "How did you get the drug to her?"

"That was easy. She's so predictable."

"My tea." Jessica whispered.

"Very good. Once I knew you were in London, I watched and waited for the right moment. George distracted

you in the coffee shop at the airport as you ordered your tea. It was easy enough to flirt with the girl behind the counter and keep her attention while I poured in just the right amount of poison.” He walked closer to them, holding the bottle out to Jessica. “Take it.” He pointed the gun at George’s heart when she refused. “I said take it.”

Taking the small bottle from him, Jessica stared at its crimson color. The color of passion, the color of blood. “Now what? What happens when we’re dead? You have to know that you won’t leave town.”

“Of course I will. Mort’s indisposed at the moment. His deputies are bumbling fools.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that.” George commented.

“Shut up.” Al glared at him. “Now,” he started as he looked back at Jessica. “Pour some of that into your cups then have some fresh tea.”

Jessica, her hand shaking, did as told. “So we’re the final pieces of your puzzle.”

“Shut up, and drink.”

Handing George a fragile tea cup, Jessica held his gaze. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“So am I, Lass.” George returned. “So am I.”

Chapter 11

Jessica let her head fall to George’s shoulder, the poison beginning its second phase. They’d had no choice but to drink the tea, Al’s gun had been pointed at their heads. George had insisted that the man just shoot them, but she knew he wouldn’t shoot to kill, only hurt them. He wanted to watch them die. It was something he reveled in, something he enjoyed.

“Jessie.” George whispered.

“I’m right here, Darling,” she answered, using the endearment he grown so fond of.

Putting his hand in his pocket, George pulled out the object he’d placed there earlier in the night. Gently pressing a kiss to her forehead, he smiled when she let her head fall back so she could look up at him. “This isn’t how I wanted to do this. I hadn’t even planned to do this, but,” he paused and coughed, gasping for air, then calming before starting again. “Will you wear this ring? We’re not going to see tomorrow, but I’d be pleased to know that for the rest of the time we have, you were mine.”

“Oh, George,” she whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks as she weakly held out her hand. “I’d be happy to.”

“Oh how very sweet.” Al snarled his nose. “Enough with the mushy stuff.”

Jessica turned to glare at the man but started coughing. Gripping George’s hand, she struggled to stop, her chest aching with each gasping breath she took before calming enough she could speak again. “We’re dying. What did you expect?” she asked angrily.

George patted her hand. “Easy, Jessie,” he soothed then looked at Al. “If you don’t like the way we’ve chosen to die, then either shoot us and end it, or leave.”

“Bossy for a dying man.” Al laughed. “But I’ll not be leaving yet. You still have hours left and I want to watch you suffer just like I suffered all those years in prison.”

“You sent yourself to prison by murdering Sam and Terry.” Jessica told him before she began to cough again.

George tried to sooth her but he began to cough. Wanting to ask for water, he knew it would be futile so he kept quiet and concentrated on stopping his coughing and helping Jessica.

“You’re lungs will soon be filling with fluid. You’re going to slowly drown right here in Jessica’s quaint little

living room.”

Jessica, feeling the effects of the poison even more, curled up beside George. The plan they’d formulated had gone terribly wrong. Mort shouldn’t have been caught, and the poison shouldn’t have worked. They’d replaced it.

“Ah, I see you’re trying to figure out how your plan went so terribly wrong.” Al laughed. “I’ve had years to plan, Jessica. I know how you work. I’ve studied your books to learn your thought processes. Did you really think you could switch the poison? That Mort would come rescue you?”

Jessica closed her eyes, he hadn’t mentioned Seth. He should have realized something was wrong by now. Only one thing could be keeping him, delivering the baby was taking longer than he’d thought. “I see I’ve met my match,” she breathed, her voice raspy.

“Your inspector seems to be fading faster than you.”

Jessica looked up at George and squeezed his hand. “Don’t leave me, George,” she whispered.

“Is al’ight, Luv,” he whispered, his words thick as he slipped into his natural brogue, unable to control it. “Still ‘ere.”

Reaching up, her hand shaking with the effort, she wiped his feverish brow. “You’re burning up.”

“You,” he managed as he looked at her.

She nodded, knowing what he meant. “I know.” Tugging at the throw behind her, she growled that the effort cost her so much, grunting when it was free. Coughing from the exertion, she managed to situate the blanket around both of them.

Al growled. “Maybe I should just shoot you. You aren’t as fun to watch as the others. Why aren’t you begging? Pleading with me for your life?”

“Would be,” George began, coughing then gasping before continuing. “a futile endeavor,” he finished.

Looking out the window, Al snarled. “Well, I really hate to murder and run, but,” he pointed to the window. “It’s nearly daylight and I need to be going. I do hope your death is painful and slow. Enjoy your last hours.”

Jessica watched him leave, her heart racing as she wondered if she had the strength to get to the phone. A commotion outside her home caught her attention and she smiled when she heard Seth’s blundering shout as he came rushing into the house. “Seth,” she whispered when he knelt down and reached out to touch her forehead. “George.”

Seth turned his attention to her companion, noting the sallow look of his skin, the blue tinge of his lips. “Help’s right behind me, Jessie. Both of you just hang on.”

~*~

Mort rubbed the back of his head as he chuckled. “Doc, I didn’t know you had it in you. Evidently, neither did Al.”

Seth shrugged. “Wasn’t about to let him get away.” He looked at Mort. “Want something for that headache?”

“Nah, Doc. It’ll be alright.” Mort looked down at his shoes. “I’m sorry.”

“Now, Mort.” Seth sighed as he sat down across from his friend. “None of us knew the man would know what the plan was. He’s been one step ahead of us all the way. She wouldn’t want either one of us to feel guilty.”

“Yet we do.” Mort whispered, knowing that Seth felt just as guilty as he did.

“A’yuh.” Seth sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. “Of all the times for a baby to pick to be on time,” he grumbled. “Mrs. Jeffries’ babies have always been two weeks late.”

“But not this time.”

“No,” Seth shook his head. “not this time. And of course this baby, being different from the rest, decided to take its ever lovin’ time gettin’ here too.”

Mort nodded. Nothing had worked in their favor. “What about Andy? How is he?”

“Still unconscious, but he’ll make a full recovery. I have a sneaking suspicion that he’s going to be feelin’ guilty as we are once he wakes up and finds out what happened.”

“I know he will. Andy has always been fond of Mrs. F.”

“Everyone’s fond of Jess.”

“Everyone except Al.” Mort snarled. “He’s going to fry for what he did, Doc.”

“Easy, Mort.” Seth looked at his friend. “He’ll definitely get what’s comin’ to him.” Standing, he pointed to the door. “Go home. Let Maureen hold you and put some ice on that head.”

Mort looked up at the unusual tone of Seth’s voice. Standing slowly, he grabbed his hat. “I think I’ll do that,” he sighed. After the night they’d all had, Maureen’s gentle touch would be a balm to his tattered soul.

Chapter 12

After nearly two months, Seth wasn’t sure this was a good idea. A party in honor of Jess and George at Eve Simpson’s just might be a bit much. After all, the woman drove him nearly out of his mind, and he barely had one left...he didn’t need her kind of annoyance. Sighing as he fussed with his tie, he shrugged when it settled into place.

“Black tie,” he grumbled as he slipped into his jacket. “Woman must have a new dress she wants to show off.” Shaking his head at his reflection, he smoothed the jacket lapels then turned and grabbed his keys. “Might as well get this done and over with.” His phone ringing made him raise an eyebrow. “Hello?” he answered, chuckling when Mort growled over the phone. “Yeah, I’ll be there. Don’t think I’m going to enjoy having to be anywhere near Eve Simpson, but I can’t not go. It is in honor of two very good friends, after all.” He laughed again when he heard Maureen in the background yelling at Mort that it was time to go. “You’d better hang up before she leaves without you.” Chuckling again when the line went dead, he dropped the phone back in its cradle.

Looking at the picture on the mantle, Seth sighed, “Everyone will be there tonight. I did the best I could, Frank.”

“No one was a better friend, Seth,” a voice from the past seemed to sound in his head.

“I could have been better at keeping her out of trouble.”

The voice chuckled. “Now, Seth. You know better than that. Even I couldn’t do that.”

Seth smiled and nodded. “It’s just who she is. Seems to follow her.”

“Always did.”

“I still should have done a better job. She,” he swallowed and shook his head.

“I know, Seth.”

~*~

Eve Simpson moved about the crowd in her home, smiling and greeting guests as she went. “Seth,” she cooed, knowing how much that irritated him and enjoying it.

Seth put on his best smile. “Good evenin’, Eve. Nice party.”

“Nothing but the best.”

“I’m sure. Quite the crowd.”

She nodded. “Yes. Excuse me, Seth. More guests just arrived.”

Seth sighed when she left, thankful to be rid of her. He smiled when he looked up to see Mort and Maureen coming over to him. “Hello.”

“Hi, Doc.” Mort chuckled. “I see you couldn’t avoid Eve.”

Seth rolled his eyes. “That insufferable woman. Never did see what Jess saw in her.”

Maureen smiled. “Another lonely soul,” she told them quietly.

Mort pressed a kiss to his wife’s head. “That’s probably right. She always did see things in people none of the rest of us could.”

Seth nodded. “A’yuh. That’s the only thing that explains her friendship with Eve.”

Mort chuckled and shook his head. “Lot of people here. Eve went all out.”

“That woman always goes all out. It’s no wonder she’s always trying to find a rich man to bewitch.”

“Doctor Hazlitt!” Maureen scolded on a choked laugh.

He shrugged. “Just simply stating facts.” His eyes caught sight of someone and smiled. “Look at that.”

The couple with him turned and smiled as they watched the newly arrived couple take off their coats, gently touching and whispering, unaware that so many people were watching their every move.

Eve’s clearing her throat broke the revelry. “Everyone, they’re here.” She smiled and clapped her hands. “Our guests of honor,” she turned and held out her hand, the couple behind her shaking their heads. “Our very own Jessica and her dashing inspector, George Sutherland.”

~*~

Jessica’s head rested on George’s shoulder as he gently moved her to the music. “Tonight has been wonderful.”

Gently nuzzling her ear, he whispered, “The night is still young.”

She shivered and looked up at him. “George,” she breathed.

“I know ye’ve been given the all clear, as was I.” He smiled when she blushed. “It’s been a long two months back to health, Lass.”

She nodded and rested her head back on his shoulder. “Yes, it has. I was so scared of losing you.”

“I know you were. Seth said the reason you didn’t react as quickly as I did was because you’d had the poison before and then the antidote.”

“Do you know that he didn’t even argue with me when I wanted to be in a room with you?”

“He was scared, Jessie. We were both very close to death when he got to the house. That was the second time in just a few months that his best friend nearly died.” George pulled her closer. “But enough about that. I want to think about what we’re going to tell people about the ring.”

She smiled. “Tell them the truth. By now it’s no secret that we’re more than friends. From what Maureen has told me, Loretta’s has been buzzing with the news for weeks.”

George chuckled, “It’s a good thing we don’t mind.”

“A very good thing,” she sighed in contentment, realizing that the song was about to end. “Do you think we could sneak out after this song is finished?”

George smiled down at her when she looked up at him, her eyes the intense blue he loved so much. “I think it will

be easy. We've been sick. We're still recovering. We'll simply tell our hostess we're tired and wish to call it a night."

"And Eve will give me a knowing look." Jessica laughed. "Can't we just simply leave? Not say anything to anyone?"

Laughing, he kissed her nose. "We can try."

The music ended as she smiled up at him. "Thank you. Come on."

Seth watched as Jessica and George hurried out into the hall, gathering their coats and rushing out the door before they're arms were even in the sleeves. He knew what would happen once they got home, and he knew why Jessica had hurried George. She wished to avoid Eve, knowing all too well that the woman would embarrass both her and George with her wink and knowing look if they made excuses to leave.

"She's happy, Seth," the voice from his past whispered once more. "It's all I ever wanted."

~*~

"George," she whimpered as he nibbled at her neck. Tangling her fingers in his hair, she let her head fall back, giving him better access.

"I've missed this, Lass," he whispered against her ear before skimming down her cheek to her lips. Staring into her darkening eyes, he breathed in the sweet breath she exhaled, loving the feel of her soft body against his.

"Umm," she hummed when his hand skimmed down her bare back. "I've missed this too." Looking at her ring, she nuzzled his neck. "I promised a life time."

Pulling back, George looked at her. "We were dying, Jessie. You only have to wear the ring. It's enough."

"No, George. It isn't. Not anymore. I realized that when we were so close to death. Too many regrets were there. Regrets that we spend so much time apart. I don't know how we're going to remedy that, but we have to."

Caressing her hair as he laid her gently back against the pillows, he settled over her, resting his weight on his arms as he looked down at her. "We will, Jessie. But right now," he lowered his head kissing her as he slowly joined his body to hers.

"Oh yes," she breathed, wrapping her arms around him. "Right now."

Slowly he took the time to love her, show her just what she did to him, for him. He loved the soft sounds she made, the way her body responded to his touch. Coming so close to losing her, not once, but twice, made him savor this moment even more. Feeling her grow restless, he gave her what she wordlessly asked for.

Jessica sighed as she listened to George's heart beating beneath her ear. Their hands were intertwined, resting on his stomach, her leg resting over his as they lay listening to the gentle rain that had began tap at the bedroom window some time in the last hour. She didn't know what time it was, had no desire to find out, all she knew was that she was enjoying this quiet time with the man that loved her so completely and thoroughly.

"What are ye thinking, Lass?" George asked, his fingers tenderly combing through her mussed hair.

"About us. About how wonderful you've made me feel."

"I feel the same, Jessie." He lifted their hands, pressing a kiss to the back of hers. "Will the rain turn to snow?"

"It might."

He smiled. "I hope it does. That means I'll have ye all to myself."

She chuckled. "You'll have me all to yourself even if it doesn't. Seth won't bother us and he'll make sure anyone else knows not to. He's keeping up the pretense that we're still recovering and don't need a bunch of people visiting."

"He's a wonderful friend. I'm glad I've had the chance to get to know him."

“I am too. I can’t imagine the man in my life not being friends with Seth.”

“Did he tell you that he knew something was wrong?”

She nodded. “Yes. He’s apologized over and over for not getting here sooner that night.”

“He couldn’t control the babe’s timing.”

“No, he couldn’t, and I’ve told him that.” She moved to look down at him. “Thank you for the ring. For giving me an out. I really meant what I said. I don’t want to go back to the way it was before.”

“I’m happy for that.” He smiled as he pulled her back against him. “I may be far across the sea, Jessie, but we’ll work it out. I promise. We’ll work it out. I don’t want regrets, either. For now, the time I have here with you in the next few weeks will be enough.”

“And it will give us the time needed to find a solution.”

“But you mustn’t get upset if we don’t.”

“I promise, George.” She pressed a kiss to his chest. “Maybe I’ll decide far across the sea isn’t so bad after all.”