

Dancing Barefoot Again

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For those of you who loved Dancing Barefoot, here's the sequel! I got such a kick out of writing a little Slice of Life for Jessica that I thought Seth deserved to join in the fun as well - and here's the grand result! Ah, if only we could have seen something like this on the show, huh?

Seth Hazlitt felt like crap. As a doctor, he'd seen some pretty disturbing stuff and worked some grueling shifts, but tonight officially took the cake for the most grueling and disturbing. Two heart surgeries, four births, and a seemingly endless stream of medical issues that caused Seth to wonder if there was a full moon, because nothing else could possibly have brought out the entirety of Cabot Cove's idiot population. Suffice it to say that he was beat and he felt less like a respected MD and more like something the cat dragged in. Most of his colleagues, when this particular feeling engulfed them, preferred to take off for the Starlight Bar and drink their problems away, but not Seth. Unwilling to make a total donkey of himself boozing, he had quite a different outlet for his gripes: a hot cup of coffee, delicious cookies, and warm, deep conversation with his best friend... who just happened to be the sweetest woman in Cabot Cove.

Yeah, he thought as he drove to the peaceful neighborhood that Jessica Fletcher called home, *that's just the kind of medicine this old doctor needs*. He could always count on Jessica to be there for him, although sometimes he felt guilty about unloading all of his problems onto her. But to her absolute credit, Jessica never complained about it. Whether it was their many years of friendship built on bone-deep trust, the pure goodness of her heart, or both, he couldn't tell, but never did she tell him to get some therapy rather than come to her like some people may have done. Rather, she sat him down and said three little words that were almost as good as *I love you*: "Talk to me." And he poured his heart out to her while she listened with that unfailing patience of hers, waiting until he was done before offering her own brand of comfort to him. Sometimes, if he was just complaining about a mere trifle, she'd confront him with a "Now, Seth" and give him a kind but firm tongue-lashing about his lack of patience. Other

times, when he could turn a day of misadventures into a stand-up comedy routine to make Billy Crystal jealous, she would add her own laughter to his and joke right along with him. And then there were the times when he witnessed certain cases that disturbed him, or if he couldn't save a patient from dying. In those instances, there was neither a tongue-lashing nor japing to be heard. She simply put her arms around him and hugged him close until all of the pain had gone, and that said more than any words ever could.

Tonight, Seth had a feeling that he and Jessica were going to end up joking together, given the stream of bizarre cases he'd had to handle today. When he finally reached Jessica's house, he parked the car by the curb, walked up the driveway, and went around to the back door, where he was used to entering. He had just raised his fist to knock when he caught a peep at what was going on in the kitchen. What he saw put a smile on his face for the first time that day.

Jessica was in the kitchen, all right, but she was neither hunched in front of her typewriter nor pulling cookies out of the oven. She was dancing. Dancing, of all things, whirling and hopping around the room without a care in the world - and in her bare feet, no less! The radio was on, and even through the closed door, Seth could clearly hear the upbeat rhythm of Belinda Carlisle's "Heaven Is A Place On Earth." Part of him wanted to laugh at the fact that she was dancing to one of those cheesy New Wave songs, but the other part couldn't help but be mesmerized watching her. Capering around the kitchen barefoot, she was light as a feather and graceful as a ballerina. And she honestly looked like she was having a ball. A flush threw shades of pink into her peaches-and-cream skin, and a radiant smile lit her entire face - and she was singing, too! Jessica never sang! *She's singing? This I gotta hear!* Knowing that the back door would be open, he turned the knob and pushed it open quietly and slowly, lending his ear to the music. Sure enough, though Belinda was belting the song out with passion, he could hear Jessica's voice above all else. Full-throated and brassy, yet warm and gentle at the same time, the notes soared throughout the kitchen and carried her along as she danced, kicked, whirled again... and slammed on the brakes when she saw him half-listening, half-peeping through the cracked door. Her eyes got as big as plates and she stopped singing in shock, which gave Seth's heart a wrench. *Don't stop, Jess. Let me hear that beautiful voice again.*

"Seth..." She cleared her throat and tried to straighten herself up as best she could. "I didn't hear you knock."

Chagrined, he poked his head in a little further. "I didn't. I know your back door's usually open if you're here, so I thought I'd come on in and see what you were up to."

A flush of a different kind bloomed in Jessica's cheeks. "Well, you obviously saw what I was up to. Go ahead and laugh if you want; I know I must have looked pretty silly."

"No! Well... maybe a little, but not in a bad way. You really looked like you were enjoying yourself."

"I was, until I saw you playing Peeping Tom."

"Whoa there, hold your horses, woman! Peeping Tom turned to stone when he tried to get a glimpse of Lady Godiva."

"Well then, it's a good thing I wasn't naked, or you *would've* gotten a show."

Now it was Seth's turn to blush. *Yeah, this is getting awkward.* "Do you do this all the time?" he asked, changing the subject. "Dancing like a whirling dervish in your kitchen?"

She had the good grace to chuckle. "Not *all* the time! I only do it when I need to relieve some stress. "

"Stress? From what?"

"From being chained to my typewriter for hours, from yet *another* murder investigation, from making endless arrangements for traveling and trying to meet my deadlines. Seth, don't get me wrong; I love my life. I love writing and I love what I do, but sometimes I just need my freedom. I need to clear my head and just be silly for a while, and dancing gives me that freedom."

Wow, Seth thought, looking at his best friend in a new light. The stress thing wasn't new to him, as she had imparted to him before how straining to meet the deadlines for her books and the pressure of murder investigations wore on her nerves sometimes. But to learn that she kept a smile on her face and her spirits up by just getting up and dancing, now that was

something new. "I can understand that. And is there any reason why you dance in your bare feet?"

Jessica looked down at her feet, red toenail polish and all, and laughed. "Well, it *is* a hot summer night, in case you haven't noticed. My feet need a little freedom from the heat!"

At long last, Seth laughed, and did it ever feel good. "All right, I gotcha. Chalk another mystery up to J.B. Fletcher." He chuckled as she aimed a playful smack at his arm. "Anyway, I guess you're wondering why I'm here."

"The thought did cross my mind. Did you come to enjoy the pleasure of my company, or just because you sniffed out my newest batch of cookies?"

For the first time since he'd arrived, Seth caught the delicious smell of Jessica's homemade sugar cookies and his mouth began to water. "Which answer will get me into the house?"

Jessica flashed him that megawatt smile of hers. "Get yourself in here and sit down. I'll fix you a cup of coffee, and the cookies will be done in about ten minutes."

Relieved, Seth stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "You're an angel, Jess."

"And you're full of clam dip." Jessica busied herself with the coffeepot, pouring a cup for Seth and one for her. "Why don't you get some caffeine down your throat and tell me what's on your mind?"

Seth accepted his coffee with a grateful nod. "Tell me something, Jess. What is it about a full moon that brings every idiot in Cabot Cove out of the woodwork?"

Jessica sat down next to him at the table with her own coffee cup. "Let me guess. Rough day at work?"

"Four births, two heart surgeries, and one Hippocratic calamity after another. First I had a guy who'd gotten his tongue stuck to an ice sculpture 'cause he was dumb enough to do it on a dare, and then came a guy who'd broken out in rashes after laying shirtless in poison ivy, and *then* came a

kid with a belly full of pennies 'cause he'd swallowed the contents of his little sister's piggy bank. And don't even get me started on Amos."

"Oh, good Lord," Jessica laughed. "What did Amos come in for this time?"

"Beet juice and a bad trip to the bathroom. You do the math."

It was all Jessica could do to keep from spitting her coffee halfway across the table as she swallowed hard, then threw her head back and roared with laughter. "My stars, Seth," she chortled, her cheeks pink with mirth, "I think that takes the prize for the worst day at work."

"Ayuh, but I bet it's small potatoes compared to some of the crap you've had to go through in your mysteries."

"Why do you think I dance?" Jessica laughed. "It does wonders for stress. And speaking of which, I think it would do you a lot of good."

"What? Me, get up and dance? Jess, I don't dance."

"Well, tonight you're going to. You need to be silly for once in your life."

"I'm *going* to? Are you giving me orders, woman?"

"Yes, Seth Hazlitt, I am. You are going to dance with me and we're going to prove that you do have a funny bone after all."

"I'm not dancing to that artificial music you like so much. If you put on the country station, maybe I'll do a decent two-step."

"All right, I'll make you a deal: you dance to one pop song with me, and I'll dance to one country song with you. Deal?"

Seth grinned. She was irresistible with those big, sparkling blue eyes and that infectious smile. "Deal."

Jessica returned his grin. "Wonderful, but there is one more thing. If you're dancing with me, you have to take your shoes off."

"You want me to dance barefoot?"

"Yes. You dance barefoot or you don't dance at all... and no cookies, either."

"You're joking!"

"Of course I am, but something has to get you to dance." She pointed to his loafer-shod feet. "Off."

Seth shook his head. "Only for you, Jess." He slipped out of his loafers and pulled off his socks, and then rose from his chair and planted his feet on the hardwood floor. "It's cold."

"Oh, quit grouching and let's dance. And listen to that. There's a good song starting right now!" Jessica smiled as DeBarge's "Rhythm Of The Night" began to play. "Come on!" she effused, grabbing Seth's hands and whirling him around before letting go herself. She spun around, throwing her arms up and laughing. "Come on, Seth!"

Seth couldn't will his feet to move, and not because he didn't want to dance. There was something about her that had him spellbound, just as it had minutes before when he was watching her through the door. She was so beautiful and alive, probably because she was free for once in her life. Freedom suited her... and she was probably right. It would do him a lot of good, too. And as much as he hated to admit it, that goldurned song was working its way into his feet, which were now tapping the floor.

"That's it!" Jessica grabbed his hands again and set them both to dancing around. "You don't have to be Fred Astaire. Just be silly!"

"Well, I *feel* like a goober, so there you go," Seth said as they kited about. "We're a couple of dancing fools."

"Well, I'm dancing. You're the fool."

Seth barked a laugh. "Jeez Louise, I oughta start calling you Sassy."

"How can you when you already have a pet name for me?"

"I do?"

"Yes, you do, unless you're just stating the obvious when you call me 'woman.'"

He laughed again. "Didn't think about it that way. But you're still sassy."

"And yet you love me anyway."

Seth smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, woman, I sure do."

At that moment, the oven bell dinged and the two of them stopped mid-whirl. "The cookies are done," Jessica said, skipping over to the stove. The second she opened the oven door, the smell of freshly baked sugar cookies bathed Seth in a warm wave. He watched her eagerly as she scooped the treats off the baking tray and into the cookie jar, which she now brought over to him. "Want one?"

"Do you have to ask me?" He reached into the proffered jar, drew out a warm cookie, and took a bite. "Mmm. They're delicious, Jess."

"Thank you. I slaved all day," she said, giving him a wink.

"Can't have that. I think you need a little honky-tonk dancing right about now," Seth replied, crossing over to the radio and turning the dial to Cabot Cove's country station. The last notes of Reba McEntire's "Whoever's In New England" were quickly succeeded by drumbeats and a tenor saxophone. "All right, Dan Seals! I love this song."

Jessica smiled and shook her head. "I've never heard this one. I'm afraid I don't listen to country music very often."

"Well, you're starting tonight, beginning with this song. After tonight, I'm prescribing a good dose of Loretta Lynn, the Judds, and George Strait, with a little Reba McEntire thrown in for good measure."

"Trying to convert me, are you?"

"You wait and see. I'll have you watching the CMA Awards with me this year, or my name isn't Seth Hazlitt. Now let's dance!" He took Jessica's hands and spun her back out into the middle of the kitchen. He was sporting a goofy grin by this time, but he didn't care. He was feeling like a million bucks.

"It's going to snow," Jessica declared. "You're dancing and grinning ear to ear. I think I've created a monster."

"No, Jess, you've said 'Physician, heal thyself,' but not in so many words. You were right. Dancing really does take the stress away."

"I told you! Maybe now whenever you're stressed, your feet will move instead of your mouth."

"I think my colleagues would pack me off to the looney bin if I started dancing at work. They'd think I'd either lost my marbles or come down with St. Vitus' Dance."

"If they know you, they'll think it's the former option."

Seth laughed. "You're fiery tonight! What's gotten into you?"

"Freedom, Seth. It makes my mouth run away with me."

"And what about all those times when you give jackass cops a tongue-lashing? What's your excuse for your mouth running off then?"

"You make it sound like I rant and scream and curse at them! For heaven's sake, I'm not that mean!"

"I know that, Jess; I was just teasing you. There's not a mean bone in your body. I know it takes a lot to ruffle your feathers, 'cause you're so darn happy all the time."

"Of course I am. I'm happy to be alive and free, to dance, and to have a friend as wonderful as you. What can I say? I'm a happy girl."

Seth whirled her into a hug as they danced into the night. "That you are, woman. And I wouldn't have you any other way."