

Adventures in Babysitting

—MinervaDeannaBond

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How many of you love seeing Jessica interact with children? I always love it whenever she's interacting with kids on the show, and here in this story, we get a glimpse into what it might be like for her to babysit for a couple's child. In this Murder, She Wrote Slice of Life, set in 1988 (Season 5), we are reacquainted with Bethany Hassett, who was first introduced in my story She Don't Know She's Beautiful, and we see what it's like for Jessica to spend an evening playing with, watching, and being a second mother to a little girl.

"Where are you? I'm gonna get you!"

From somewhere in the house, a child's giggle sounded, causing Jessica Fletcher to break into giggles herself. She hadn't played hide-and-seek in the longest time, not since her nephew Grady was a little boy, and the child in her was getting a tremendous kick out of searching for her young charge. Chris and Marilyn Hassett, her friends and neighbors, had asked her to babysit for them while they went out for their anniversary dinner, and they had barely gotten the question out before Jessica said yes. So now, she was conducting a hunt around the house for the Hassetts' two-year-old daughter, who kept releasing excited giggles from her hidey-hole every time Jessica spoke.

"Hmm, let me see. Where could Bethany be?" Jessica peeked under the dining room table. "She's not under the table." She walked into the living room and immediately spotted a little pink shoe peeking out from behind the couch. Pretending not to notice it, she decided to have a little fun. "Well, she's not in the birdcage..." Giggles from behind the couch. "And she's not in this jar," she said, opening a nearby container and closing it again, smiling when she heard more giggles. Finally, she threw up her arms and let out an exaggerated sigh. "Where *is* that girl? Oh, wait a minute!" Jessica crept slowly over to the couch, watching the pink sneaker disappear out of sight. "Maybe she's behind the... couch!" She popped her head around the

back of the sofa and laughed when a two-foot-tall tornado burst out and tried to run past her.

"Oh no, you don't!" Jessica scooped up the wriggling bundle of arms and legs and spun her around in a circle. "Gotcha!"

Bethany Hassett squealed as Jessica twirled her around. "Again! Again!"

"Again? You've hidden from me six times, you little rascal. If you hide from me again, I'll never be able to find you!" She adjusted the child's weight more comfortably in her arms. "Besides, it's time for your dinner."

"Aw, Jessie..."

"Aw, Bethany," Jessica mimicked her with a grin, rubbing noses with Bethany as she carried the toddler into the kitchen. "Come on. There's a peanut butter and jelly sandwich here with your name on it, and a salad with mine."

Minutes later, baby and babysitter were seated at the kitchen table, Jessica spearing lettuce, tomatoes, and artichoke hearts with a fork and Bethany biting into her PB&J – and making a sticky mess of her face in the process. Jessica laughed. "Is it good?"

Bethany smiled, her dimples showing through the peanut butter and grape jelly smearing her cheeks. "Uh-huh!"

"It must be. There's more on your face than there is in your mouth!" Jessica set down her salad fork and, grabbing the dishcloth she'd brought over from the sink, gently wiped off Bethany's face. It did no good, however, as finishing the sandwich only led to more messiness. Jessica shook her head fondly at her charge, whose face was once again a mélange of peanut butter and Concord grape. "What am I going to do with you, child?"

Bethany only giggled in response. "One thing's for sure, you need a bath. You want to splash me?"

Bethany's face lit up at the prospect of splashing her babysitter. "Yeah! Yeah!" She bounced in her seat impatiently as Jessica cleared the empty dinner plates and then walked over to her. The toddler held her arms up. "Up, Jessie, up!"

Jessica pretended to strain, knowing how much it made Bethany laugh. "Up we go!" she groaned, swinging the giggling child up and into her arms. "And off we go!" she then announced, marching upstairs to the master bathroom.

The next fifteen minutes were wet and wild and filled with absolute mirth. Splashes and chortles were exchanged as Bethany and Jessica splashed each other, followed by a game of make-believe with the two rubber ducks Jessica had found in Bethany's bag, and then soap bubbles went ape when hair was attempted to be washed. It was fun, but Jessica knew that she had to calm Bethany down if she was to have a prayer of washing the rest of her. Fortunately, she had just the right trick up her sleeve. When Grady was Bethany's age, one particular song had always calmed him down in the tub, and Jessica knew from previous nights of sitting for the Hassetts that Bethany loved the song just as much as Grady had. Yes sir, it was time to sing.

"Bethany, do you want to hear me sing about the beautiful briny sea?"

If someone had offered Bethany a boatload of stuffed animals and candy, she could not have been more excited. "Yeah! Sing, Jessie!"

Cheered by the child's enthusiasm, Jessica grinned and launched into "The Beautiful Briny Sea" from Disney's *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. As she sang about bobbing along, she soaped Bethany up, gently patting the toddler's belly in time to the music. And Bethany was so enchanted with the song that she stood as still as a statue, allowing Jessica to rinse her off, let the water out of the tub, and bundle her up in a towel. By this time, Jessica had finished the song.

"Sing again!" Bethany cried as Jessica lifted her, towel and all, out of the tub.

"What do you say, Bethany?"

"Please."

"Thank you." Rather than begin another chorus of "The Beautiful Briny Sea," Jessica began to sing "Substitutiary Locomotion," lifting the towel-clad Bethany onto her lap and bouncing her as she dried her off. The girl burst into a giggle fit every time Jessica said the magic words "treguna,

mekoides, trecorum satis dee" and was soon trying her best to sing along. Before long, Jessica had her dry and in her pajamas.

"Now turn around and close your eyes," she said to Bethany. "I have to get a little dry myself." Bethany obeyed, shutting her eyes and putting her hands over them. Once Jessica was sure she was safe, she quickly shucked her wet blouse and slipped on the dry one she'd brought with her, then scooped Bethany back up into her arms. "Come on, Bethany Lynn. Bedtime."

Fortunately, after six games of hide-and-seek and frolicking in the bathtub, Bethany was beginning to conk out. Her little eyes were fluttering closed even as Jessica laid her down in the bed in the guest room, and after one run-through of *Dr. Seuss's Sleep Book*, she was fast asleep. Smiling at the sleeping child, Jessica kissed Bethany's forehead and pulled the blankets more snugly around her before taking her leave.

Once she was out, Jessica set about cleaning up first the bathroom, then the kitchen. After all was right, she sat down at her typewriter and began working on her newest book, with the local easy listening station on the radio for company. While Richard Marx sang about holding on to the nights, Jessica hammered away at the keys, weaving yet another tapestry of intrigue, mystery, and murder.

"Julia suddenly found herself in the middle of a darkened room, dank with the smell of molding plaster and brackish water. From somewhere in the distance, she could make out the odor of something else... something metallic. Though every instinct told her to turn around and run while she had the chance, her feet seemed to move forward of their own accord, carrying her toward the source of the smell. She rounded a corner into another, darker room, and the smell became overwhelming, iron burning her nostrils. She prayed that it was nothing more than some ancient metal structure, but the cold dread gripping her stomach told her otherwise. Swallowing hard, Julia fumbled in the darkness on the wall behind her, felt a light switch beneath her hand, flipped it on to flood the room with light... and screamed."

No sooner had Jessica typed the word *screamed* than a scream did indeed tear the peaceful fabric of the atmosphere, and her eyes went wide as she realized who was screaming. *Bethany!*

"Jessie!" Bethany cried from upstairs. Yanking her glasses off her face, Jessica leapt from her chair and ran upstairs as fast as her legs could take her, all the way to the guest bedroom where Bethany was. She pulled the door open and rushed inside to behold the child sitting up in bed, wailing as though she were lost. The instant Bethany saw her friend, she reached for her and Jessica was at the bedside in a flash, sitting down on the bed and taking the crying little girl into an embrace.

"Bethany, darling, what's the matter?" Jessica asked, rocking the toddler in her arms and stroking her back to calm her down. "Did something scare you?" She felt Bethany nod her head against her breast, where the child had buried her face. "Was it a bad dream?" Another nod. "Oh, sweetheart, it's okay. It's okay. Nothing's going to hurt you. I'm here." When Bethany's sobs seemed to abate, Jessica hugged her close and sang a lullaby – one that her own mother sang to her a long time ago.

*Golden slumbers kiss your eyes
Smiles await you when you rise
Sleep, pretty darling, do not cry
And I will sing a lullaby*

*Cares you know not, therefore sleep
While over you a watch I'll keep
Sleep, pretty darling, do not cry
And I will sing a lullaby*

Jessica sang the verses until Bethany's tears were gone, her eyes were closed, and her breathing was deep and even once more. But she didn't lay the child back down immediately. Rather, she held Bethany in her arms and smiled at her, stroking her baby-fine blonde hair. "I love you, sweet girl," she whispered, kissing the top of Bethany's head. "Nothing's going to hurt you while I'm around." Sitting in the silence, she reflected on the evening. No two babysitting jobs were ever alike and every one was a new adventure, but all of them were equally precious to her. Jessica had a lot of love in her heart and had long prayed that she could have a child to give that love to. Although she and Frank had never been blessed with children of their own, God had answered her prayers later on. He had turned a tragedy into a blessing when Grady came to live with them after his parents died, and Jessica finally knew what it was like to be a mother in raising her nephew. Now, the Lord had answered her prayers again with Bethany. She sent up a silent prayer of thanks that Chris and Marilyn trusted her with

their baby girl, for giving her the heart to love her, and for the adventures that came with babysitting... and she prayed for many, many more.