

# Past Meets Present

## Part 1

Jessica wasn't sure about this trip. It had been several years since she'd found Neil, and she hadn't been in touch with him since she'd gotten involved with George.

Which was what was causing her to doubt the wisdom of this trip.

Turning her head, she smiled down at the sleeping form of her husband. He'd started off with his head on a pillow, but that hadn't lasted long once he'd fallen into a deep sleep. She wasn't surprised when his head wound up on her shoulder, though she had been surprised when his arm had moved around her waist.

She shouldn't have been. It was where his arm usually spent most of the night when they were at home in their bed, no matter which home they were in.

"Jessie, ye thoughts be loud." George murmured against her neck then sat up, blinking a bit to clear his eyes. "What is it?" he asked when he was fully awake.

Jessica chuckled and shrugged. "Sorry for thinking so loud. I'm just worried about how Neil will react to you."

"He loves you, yes?"

"I was always his favorite sister-in-law."

"Then I'm sure he will be happy for you." George raised an eyebrow. "I'm not going to have the same problem with him that I had with Marshall, am I?"

Jessica shook her head, laughing at the twinkle in George's green eyes. "No. I can assure you, Neil will be nothing like Marshall."

"Jessie?"

“Yes?”

“Why have you never told him about me? About us?”

Jessica sighed as she stared down at her hands, her fingers fidgeting with her rings. “Neil and I haven’t stayed in contact as well as we should have over the years. Mostly because I didn’t know where he was a lot of the time. Traveling with a circus doesn’t really make it easy to keep up with someone.”

“Why do you think he finally contacted you now?”

Jessica shrugged. “I’m not sure. The address is that of his former home. He’s been dead to that world for years so I’m not sure what we’ll find when we arrive. I do know that Constance is going to have a fit when I show up with you.”

“Constance?”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Neil’s overbearing, unbearable wife. She’s the reason he faked his death all those years ago. Frank never really believed Neil was dead, but I don’t think he ever dreamed Neil would be so desperate to get away from the woman that he’d go to such lengths as to make it look like he’d died while out on the boat fishing.”

George cringed. “So, what you’re saying is, I should be at my best Chief Inspector behavior.”

“Yes, well, that or we’ll make it known you own a castle in Wick. That should satisfy her need for all things grand.”

“Surely you being a famous writer pleases her.”

Jessica huffed. “Oh, it pleases her alright. What doesn’t please her, is that I won’t be used for her social gain.”

“If she starts anything, I’m taking us home.”

Jessica smiled at the tone of his voice. Most people would assume it was the tone he used as a man who was in charge at The Yard. She knew better. This tone was his husband tone. No one was allowed to upset her, not if he had anything to say about it. She could take care of herself, had been doing so for far more years than she cared to think about, but it felt wonderful to not have to do so anymore.

Besides, what was the point of having a dashing Chief Inspector as a husband, if one wasn’t going to enjoy a few of the public benefits?

She blushed as she thought of the less than public benefits.

Those kinds of thoughts were best left for their bedroom.

George watched the blush creep into his wife's cheeks and grinned. He knew where her mind had strayed and it pleased him to know his usually well focused wife could be caught off guard by wayward thoughts of them and the things that went on behind closed bedroom doors.

## GnJ

To say Jessica was surprised would probably have been the understatement of the year.

Constance was dead and Neil had come back to the land of the living after learning he was to be a great grandfather. Said great grandchild's impending birth being the reason for Jessica's invite to visit.

Jessica shook her head.

How had she not known about Constance's death?

She knew about her niece's pregnancy, though she hadn't known the birth was so close.

"Jessie!" Neil smiled as he came into the room, his arms open.

"Neil!" Jessica returned the smile and gladly stepped into his welcoming embrace.

"Oh it's good to see you." Neil gently pushed her back and took her in then frowned when he noticed the man behind her. "Who are you?"

"Neil!" Jessica scolded him for his rudeness. "He's with me."

Neil raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Jessica nodded. "Neil, I'd like you to meet Chief Inspector George Sutherland, my husband."

"Husband?"

Jessica nodded. "We've been married for nearly two years."

George stepped forward and held out his hand. "I've heard quite a lot about you, Mr. Fletcher."

Neil looked down at George's hand then back up into his face, marveling at how tall the man was. "It's Neil," he finally managed. "Why didn't you tell me, Jessie?"

"Where would I have sent the letter?" Jessica asked as she stepped back into George's space, taking his freed hand in hers. "I haven't heard from you for several years, Neil. The circus disappeared so I had no way of finding out where you were." She frowned. "You can't exactly track a dead man."

"You did once." Neil shot back.

Jessica huffed. "That was because you sent that silver leprechaun to Carol. If you'd simply shown up at the wedding and stayed off in the distance as you say you did at Frank's funeral, I never would have found you."

George caressed his thumb over Jessica's fingers, smiling down at her when she looked up at him. He didn't have to say anything, she knew what he was doing. A smile and a wink had her shaking her head.

"Why didn't I know about Constance?" Jessica asked.

Neil shrugged. "I don't know. I only knew about it because I had snuck in to visit Carol."

"Aunt Jess!"

Jessica turned, a smile on her face, arms opened wide for the waddling figure headed her way. "Carol! Goodness!" she laughed when she received a swift kick just before release her niece from the hug.

Carol laughed and kissed Jessica's cheek. "Hello, George," she greeted as she smiled up at the man her aunt had told her about, not knowing that it would cause a problem to arise.

"You knew about Jessie being married again?" Neil stared pointedly at his granddaughter.

Carol frowned. "Of course I did. Even if aunt Jess hadn't told me when I called to wish her a happy new year that year, I would have found out about it in the papers. It was all over the news. How did you not know?"

George had to clear his throat to hide a chuckle that was struggling to escape. The girl had spunk and had just, without trying, put her grandfather in his place. When Jessica looked up at him with a raised eyebrow, he simply shrugged. Turning his attention back to Carol, he winked at her. “Hello, Lassie.”

Carol laughed. “I’m hardly that.” She rubbed her stomach, a soft smile on her lips. “You’ll have to pass the name on to the baby.”

Jessica smiled. “A girl?”

“A girl. We’ve decided to name her Jessica Anne.”

“Oh, Carol, do you think that’s wise? Won’t your mother be upset?”

Carol rolled her eyes. “Mother’s always upset about something, and I’m not naming my baby Constance.”

Jessica bit her lip then cleared her throat. “Yes, well,” she shrugged. “I thank you for the honor.”

“It isn’t as if we aren’t naming her after a mother. Anne after her other grandmother.”

“She isn’t upset about being second?”

“Not at all. She’s a big fan of your books and says it’s an honor.”

Jessica nodded. “Fine then. Now, why didn’t you tell me about Constance?”

Carol shrugged. “I didn’t think you’d care to know since you never liked her. And...I wasn’t sure where you were since you traveling for your book signings.”

Jessica studied the young woman then kissed her cheek. “I’ll accept that, though I still would have liked to know about your grandmother’s passing. You can’t tell me you weren’t upset.”

“I was because mother was, but you know that I was never close to grandmother.”

“I do. Now...” Jessica wrapped an arm around Carol’s shoulders. “Shouldn’t you be resting?”

Carol snarled her nose. “Not you too!”

Neil studied George as the man sat reading the paper. The Inspector was nothing at all like the man his brother had been, and he still had trouble figuring out what it was about him that would have Jessica settling down again.

“She hasn’t settled.” George spoke up.

Neil started. “What?”

“As I tell Jessie when she’s overthinking things, your thoughts are loud.”

Neil frowned. “I said nothing.”

“No, but you were thinking it.” George sat the paper down and looked up at Jessica’s former brother-in-law. “I’m nothing like Frank, I realize that. We do have something in common, though.”

“I can’t possibly see what that might be.”

“Frank loved Jessie.”

“Of course he did!”

“So do I.” George sighed. “This isn’t some fly by night thing, Mr. Fletcher. I’ve known Jessica for several years. We were friends long before anything else. As a matter of fact, she refused to be anything but friends even after I’d told her that I was in love with her.”

“Then how? I know Jessie and that fence she put around herself couldn’t have been easy to scale.”

“Because I was patient and didn’t push.” George answered then laughed. “Fence? Try walls upon walls.”

“I still don’t understand. Being patient and not pushing doesn’t seem like a good way to break down walls.”

George shrugged. “We’ve been through a lot over the years, and I tried several times to take things from friends to more, but there was one final wall I couldn’t seem to break through. She had an accident that scared her and I both, and while I was staying with her to take care of her while she recovered, things changed. That was Thanksgiving, and when she came to see me at Christmas time, she discovered that she could think of somewhere other than Cabot Cove as home so long as she was with me. We were married Christmas day.” Green eyes met brown as the men

stared at each other. “I haven’t taken your brother’s place in her heart, Mr. Fletcher, no man could ever do that. I’ve simply found my own place. I’m grateful for every day she gives me as her partner and husband.”

Neil moved to stare off into the snow that was falling outside the windows of the sunroom. Frank’s death had devastated Jessica, he’d seen that the day of the funeral, but her writing had brought her a way of dealing with her grief. He knew that Seth Hazlitt had been there for her, something he was sure his brother had asked of the man, something he was equally as sure that the man would have done without being asked.

For years he’d wondered how Jessica was really doing under the writer persona she put on in public. He rolled his eyes. Well, that and the calmness she always seemed to present when caught up in another murder case outside of her books. He now knew how she’d always seemed so cool and collected – walls, as Sutherland had put it, protected her.

He also now knew why Jessica had let herself fall in love with the man.

He loved her as Frank had done, but with a difference to fit the woman she was now.

Turning back to his guest, Neil nodded to the man. “Sorry for being so difficult. It was just a bit of a shock to see my sister,” he paused then started again. “Jessica married to a man I know nothing about.”

“She’s still your family, Mr. Fletcher. Marrying me didn’t change that. I’d be happy to answer any questions you have about me.”

“How did you meet?” Neil asked as he sat down in the chair across from George.

George chuckled. “Murder.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “She’s too…” he frowned. “...nosy for her own good.”

“Oh she wasn’t nosy. She was the prime suspect.”

“What?”

George nodded. “You might want a drink before we settle in for the explanation.”

## GnJ

“I’m so happy you’re here, aunt Jess.” Carol sighed as she moved about trying to find the right spot. “Aunt Jess?” she asked after a few moments.

“Yes?” Jessica asked as she turned from looking out the window. “What is it?”

“I think,” the younger woman started then groaned. “I think maybe we should go.”

Jessica’s eyebrows raised. “Carol, are you sure?” she asked then studied her niece. “You’ve been in labor for a while now.”

Carol nodded. “I didn’t want Mom. I wanted you.”

Jessica’s heart melted as she moved to sit beside her niece. “Oh Carol. Don’t you think your mother will be upset?”

“I don’t care, aunt...ooohhh...Jess.” Carol fisted her hands in the comforter. “Mmm, aunt Jess...”

“That doesn’t sound like I’m going to like what comes next.”

“I think I waited too long.”

“Oh dear.” Jessica muttered then took a deep calming breath. “Don’t panic now, Lassie.”

Carol laughed. “You called me Lassie, aunt Jess. You’ve...mmm...” she panted a few moments then continued, “...been around George too long.”

Jessica chuckled and shrugged her shoulders. “Now, as I was saying. Don’t panic. Does Neil know your doctor’s number?”

Carol moaned and panted through another contraction. “Grandfather knows all the numbers.”

Patting Carol’s hand, Jessica stood up and leaned over to press a kiss to her forehead. “I won’t be gone long.”



Neil paced about making George dizzy. “Sit down, man,” he finally snapped then got up and poured a bit of whiskey into a glass and shoved it into Neil’s hand. “Pacing about isn’t going to do anything for the lass. Jessica’s with her, and so is the doctor. They’ll take good care of her.”

“Her husband and parents should be here.”

“You know that they are on their way. It isn’t their fault the sudden storm caused a traffic accident.”

Neil frowned as he stared up at George. “Damned British stiff upper lip.”

George shook his head. “Actually, I’m Scottish, so it would be stoic Scot more than the British stiff upper lip.”

Rolling his eyes, Neil winced when a loud half scream floated down the stairs just a few minutes before the sound of a door shutting wafted down to them. Throwing back his drink, he swallowed the burning liquid in one go. “Well I’m not a stoic Scot and I don’t have the British stiff upper lip. I can’t help but pace. It’s what Fletcher men do when they’re...”

“Worried.” Jessica finished for him.

“Seasaidh.” George whispered as he met her in the middle of the room. “Is everything alright?”

She nodded. “Yes. Carol is fine,” she smiled as she looked over at Neil. “The baby is fine. Go on. Carol wants to see you.”

Neil, still trying to puzzle out the name he’d heard George call Jessica, stood and hurried out of the room then turned and came back, kissing Jessica on the cheek. “Thank you, Jessie.”

George watched the man rush up the stairs then turned his attention to Jessica. Seeing her pale face, he pulled her into his arms and felt her trembling against him. “Seasaidh, what’s wrong? I thought you said they were fine,” he whispered as he rubbed her back.

Jessica let herself rest against George’s chest, the tears she’d held at bay finally freeing themselves from her tight control. “They are fine,” she whispered.

“Then what is it, Lass? You’re crying, something must be wrong.” George was completely confused when a sob escaped. “Jessie, Love,” he whispered and held her tighter to him.

“Old hurts,” she breathed.

“Oh Jessie.” George whispered as he pressed a kiss to her head.

“I’ve never been in with a mother giving birth before. I always just show up afterward. I never let myself be, but she asked. How could I say no?”

“You couldn’t.” Tenderly lifting her chin, George wiped at the tears on her lovely face. “My dear sweet Jessie, always putting her own fears and hurts aside for those she loves. Just one of the many things I love about you.”

Jessica gave him a watery smile and sniffed, laughing when George’s handkerchief seemed to magically appear in front of her. “How do you do that?”

George winked at her. “A husband has to have some secrets.”

Jessica, having taken care of her nose, settled back against George, content to let him hold her and gently sway her from side to side. “You would think the hurt wouldn’t surface after all these years.”

“And why wouldn’t it? That kind of hurt doesn’t ever really go away, it just sort of settles into the recesses. And, I’ll wager, it’s just been waiting, lurking about until you found yourself in a situation where you had to face it again. You’ve not let yourself be there during a birth, you said so. Today, you had no choice, and it snuck up on you. It’s alright, Jessie. Remember, your tears are safe with me.”

Jessica sighed as she wrapped her arms around George’s waist. “My past has met my present in more ways than one today.”

“I think I’ve got Neil on my side.” He shrugged when she looked up at him. “Well, a wee bit, anyway.”

Jessica smiled and lifted a hand to caress his face. “I’m going to go freshen up. I don’t want Neil to ask questions.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. If he asks questions, it will be me doing the answering.”

“Why?” Jessica asked, frowning as she tried to figure out what her husband was talking about.

“He heard me call you Seasaidh.”

“Oh.” Jessica shrugged. “He isn’t the first member of my family you’ve had to explain that to.”

“No, he isn’t.” George agreed, the door opening and shouting echoing through the house kept him from saying more. “What in blazes is that?”

Jessica couldn’t help but laugh. Patting him on the chest, she kissed his cheek. “That is Carol’s mother.”

“Och. No wonder the lass didn’t want her in the room with her.”

Jessica laughed again then pulled from George’s embrace. “I’d better go tend to that or she’ll never stop.”

“I think I’ll just stay in here.”

“Fine, Darling.”

George grinned at the endearment. It wasn’t often that she used it, but he loved the sound of it rolling off her tongue. His grin faded at the sound of the shrill voice of Carol’s mother. Cringing when the woman’s voice hit an ungodly pitch again, he turned to go and pour himself a drink. A good strong bit of Scotch would be needed to steady himself against that ridiculousness.

“Who are you?”

George took a long drink of the amber liquid he’d just poured then turned and faced who he assumed was Carol’s father. “I’m George Sutherland.”

“Oh,” the man smiled and nodded as he moved to shake George’s hand. “Carol’s told me about you. I wasn’t sure if we’d ever meet Jessica’s new husband.” Howard moved to pour himself a drink. “So how did Neil take the news?”

“Not as good as you have.”

Howard chuckled at George’s response. “I was happy to hear Jessica had found someone. She’s a good woman and deserves to be happy. I hope you’ve had a chance to convince Neil.”

“We talked. He seemed to be satisfied I wasn’t replacing his brother.” George frowned. “Why didn’t you go up to see the lassie?”

“I decided to wait until my son-in-law had seen the baby. I tried to talk Audrey, my wife, out of going until Neil had come down,” he shrugged. “That’s impossible. She’s too much like her mother, though much more scatter brained.”

“Jessie doesn’t seem overly fond of your late mother-in-law.”

“Constance...” Howard started then shook his head. “I never did understand how Neil got involved with her in the first place. At least with Audrey she wasn’t always like this. From what I know, Constance was always all about the money and her standing in the community. I guess, though, that when Neil was young and still working, he didn’t much care how she was as he was at work and not around her. It wasn’t until he retired and was home around the woman that he realized he couldn’t stand her.”

“Jessie’s told me the story, but I still don’t understand why a man would fake his own death instead of just simply divorcing the woman.”

“Desperation. If you’d ever met the woman, you would understand.”

“Howard.” Jessica scolded with a wink as she came into the room. “You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead.”

Howard turned and grinned at her then pulled her into a hug. “How are they? I didn’t get much chance to ask before.”

“They’re fine. Go on. Audrey has gone to lay down. I’m afraid that my being the first to see her grandchild has given her one of her headaches.”

Howard rolled his eyes. “I’m sorry, Jess.”

“Don’t be. Audrey has no one to blame but herself. Carol needed someone who could be calm, something that Audrey couldn’t do.” Jessica frowned. “How was she when she had Carol?”

Howard laughed. “Out. She was so drugged, she didn’t wake up until Carol was four hours old.”

Jessica laughed then kissed his cheek. “Oh Howard. Go on now. You have a little girl waiting to meet you.”

Howard smiled and nodded. “Thank you for everything, Jess.”

“No thanks needed.” Jessica winked at him and gave him a slight shove.

George pulled Jessica into his arms when Howard disappeared into the foyer. “I love you, Jessica Sutherland.”

“Mmm,” she hummed as she snuggled close. “I’m exhausted, George, but I don’t want to stay here. I need...”

“Shh.” George soothed, knowing what she was going to say. “I know. Since I know nothing of the area, do you have a favorite place to stay that I could call and see if they have a room?”

Jessica nodded but made no motion to move from George’s embrace. She just needed to feel his warmth and love to gather her strength back, at least enough to last her until she felt comfortable enough to completely let go. What she really wanted was to go home.

“We can go home,” he whispered as if reading her thoughts.

Jessica shook her head. “I’m too tired.”

“Then we’ll find a hotel room so you can rest.” George rubbed her back and kissed the top of her head. “Come on, then, before you fall asleep on your feet.”

Jessica moved from George’s embrace and moved to the phone, dialing her favorite hotel. Speaking quietly, she sighed as she hung up and turned back to George. “We have a room waiting for us.”

Holding out his hand, George smiled as she took it. “Are you hungry? It’s been as many hours since you ate something as it has since you’ve slept.”

“A bit, but we can order something at the hotel.”

“You can take a bath while I order. I’ll make it something light.” George yawned.

“You’re tired, too, Darling.” Jessica whispered as she leaned against his arm.

“Aye. Sleeping in that bloody chair isn’t what I’d call rest, though at least I had a chance to close my eyes.”

“I’m surprised Neil didn’t keep you awake.”

“I might have snapped at him a time or two over his pacing.”

Jessica chuckled then kissed his cheek. “Let me go tell Carol goodbye. I’ll be right back.”

George watched Jessica sleep. He'd laid down with her, but had woken two hours ago when she'd fidgeted in her sleep and whimpered. He'd soothed her with whispered words and gentle caresses then held her for a while until he was sure she was settled then he'd moved to sit in the chair by the bed to watch over her.

They were scheduled on a flight leaving later this evening and he intended to let her rest as long as possible. His wife was exhausted from their flight here topped off with staying with Carol as she labored to give birth to sweet baby Jessica Anne.

He smiled at the thought of the wee lassie that had wrapped everyone around her tiny fingers the minute they held her. He had been no exception. He'd taken her from Jessica and she'd snuggled against his chest and sighed.

But now *his* Jessie was troubled.

Her past struggles to become a mother had come back full force as she'd watched her niece giving birth and held the new baby just moments after she'd made her entrance into the world.

George had never asked his wife to talk about all that had happened during those years of struggle, for fear of hurting her, so he felt inadequate to help her now that she'd been forced to face those painful memories head on.

Taking her home was the only thing he could do at this point because it's what she'd wanted.

He made up his mind as he heard her whimper again.

When he got her home, he'd go to Seth. The doctor knew the things George didn't so there would be no asking questions that would only hurt Jessie even more. Seth was one part of the past that was also part of their present that didn't cause problems. The man was a friend to the both of them, though he would always be closer to Jessie simply because he'd been her best friend for years, and the person that was tasked with looking after her by her late husband.

"George!"

Hearing Jessica cry out his name, George moved to the bed and pulled her up into his arms. "Easy, Jessie," he whispered as he caressed her back and pressed a kiss to her head.

Jessica held tightly to George, her dream trying to pull her back in. “Talk to me.”

Keeping his voice low, George slipped into his brogue, knowing how his wife always reacted to it. Telling her a story from his youth growing up in Wick, he felt her heart rate decrease and her trembling subside. He knew she wasn’t asleep, her breathing wasn’t slow and steady enough, but she was relaxed and that’s all he cared about at the moment.

“There’s a ghost in the castle?” her soft voice questioned when he paused in the story.

“It’s scared of you,” he teased gently. “You’re Irish.”

Leaning back in his arms, Jessica looked up at him. “And what has my Irish heritage to do with it?”

Winking at her as he tenderly caressed her face, George whispered, “You’ll have to ask the next time we’re home in Wick.”

“George Sutherland, you’re making this all up!” she accused, her heart swelling with love for him, knowing that he was doing this to keep her thoughts away from the painful memories.

“I swear on my badge, there is a ghost about Wick Castle.”

“And why have you not told me about it before now?”

“I told you, it’s afraid of you.”

Jessica rolled her eyes then settled back against George’s chest. “That’s ridiculous.”

George chuckled and kissed her head. “We should start getting ready to leave. We don’t want to miss our flight.”

“You’re going to talk to Seth when we get home,” she whispered.

“You’re hurting, Jessie, and I can’t help you. He can.” Lifting her face, he stared down at her. “I’ll do whatever I have to do to help you. Even face you being upset with me for going to Seth.”

“I’m not upset, Darling.” Jessica lifted a hand and caressed his face. “You don’t want to ask me what happened because you don’t want to hurt me. That’s why you’re going to talk to Seth.”

“Yes. He knows without having to ask.”

“I’ll tell you if you ask.”

“I know you will, Seasaidh. I never doubted it. But it will hurt ye and I won’t do that.”

“I love you, George Sutherland.”

“Never as much as I love ye.”

Tapping his cheek lovingly, Jessica shook her head a bit. “Let me go so I can get ready to leave.”

George helped her stand. “I’ll make sure neither of us have left anything lying about, though I don’t think we’ve taken anything out of our suitcases.”

Kissing him lightly, Jessica nodded. “I slept from the moment you laid me on the bed until a few minutes ago, so you’re correct. I didn’t take anything out of my suitcase, at least not until now.” She winked then turned to where George had sat her suitcase, smiling at the fact that he’d sat it on the luggage rack in anticipation of her needing things out of it at some point. “You know me well,” she whispered before unzipping it.

George chuckled, “I’ve traveled with you enough that I know all of your habits.”

Lifting her overnight case, Jessica draped her clothes over her arm then turned and winked at him. “I won’t be long.”

“I know.” George smiled at her then watched her as she made her way to the bathroom. She was putting on a happy face, but he could tell by her walk that she was still struggling against the memories that had been haunting her dreams.

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Seth studied his friends as they sat in the backseat of his car. George had called and asked if he would pick them up at the airport, apologizing for the lateness of the hour. Seth had told him it was alright and that he’d be waiting for them. He’d been surprised at the call, having thought the couple would be staying away longer. Now that he’d seen Jessica, he knew why they were home early...something was wrong.



The question was...what?

George had been more protective of her than usual, something only Seth would have picked up on. Seth also knew that he was the only one beside George that saw beneath Jessica's happy face.

He wanted to ask what had happened, but years of watching over the woman told him to wait. He sensed a feeling of sadness about Jessica, but nothing he thought of could explain it. She'd been happier since she married George than she'd been in years, though even that had been marred when she'd nearly lost him due to an assignment. But that was the only bump in their happiness.

Until now it would seem.

Glancing in the mirror again, he saw George pulling Jessica closer and realized that she'd dozed off.

"George?"

"She's exhausted, Seth, but she's not sick. She was awake for over twenty-four hours before she managed to sleep." George whispered, gently caressing Jessica's back when she murmured in her sleep.

"Why was she awake for so long?"

"Carol wanted her aunt Jess with her for the birth of the baby."

With that answer, Seth knew what wasn't being said, knew what was wrong. "Oh," he whispered.

George knew from the look in Seth's eyes that he'd finally figured out what it was that had been bugging him about what was going on with Jessica. He'd explain more once they got home if the man wanted him to, but he wanted to get Jess settled first.

GnJ

"Why did Carol not want her mother?" Seth asked as he sat across the table from George, sipping tea with the man in Jessica's kitchen.

George arched an eyebrow. "Hasn't Jessie told you what the woman is like?"

Seth chuckled then nodded. “Yes, though you would think she would be calm for her daughter in such a situation.”

“Even if she could have been calm, they were stuck in traffic due to a traffic accident that happened due to the turn the weather took.”

Seth sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “And Jessie’s been having trouble with memories ever since.”

“Yes. You can talk to her and help her. I can’t. She figured out that I was going to ask you to help her so she won’t be upset.”

“You don’t know?” Seth asked, surprised that George didn’t know all there was to know about his wife.

George shook his head. “That’s the only thing I don’t know. I’ve never asked because I couldn’t bring myself to hurt her.”

Seth nodded. Sounded about right for the tall Scotsman. Looking down into his tea, he sighed, “There was a baby.”

George blinked. “What?”

“Jessie suffered several miscarriages in the early years of her marriage to Frank. After the fifth one, that seemed to be the end of her getting pregnant. They thought that for years until one day she showed up in my office thinking she had the flu. This time she carried until she was six months along. A little girl, far too little to survive. Now we could probably have saved her, but back then we didn’t have the know how or the machines needed. It nearly broke Frank, but he held himself together for Jessie. They went away when she could travel. I never knew where he took her. They were gone for so long that some of us began to think they weren’t coming back, but they did and they resumed their lives. To those that didn’t know them very well, nothing had changed. Those of us that did know them...” he paused and looked up at George. “Neither of them were ever the same. Frank told me that Jessie had nightmares every night for that first year. They were closer after the loss of the baby than they’d ever been. Some couples that sort of thing tears apart, but not them, and for that I was grateful. Jessie’s a strong woman, but I don’t know if she could have handled losing Frank and their marriage.”

George felt his heart aching for the pain the young woman his Jessie had been had gone through. “No wonder she never let herself be around for the birth of a

baby.” Hearing a scream from upstairs, he jumped up and rushed to their bedroom, Seth’s, “I’ll bring a sedative up in a few minutes,” catching him just before he disappeared around the corner.

Seth dug around in his bag until he found what he was looking for then wandered into the living room, pausing to look at the photograph of Frank and Jessica that sat on the mantle. “She’s hurting, Frank.”

*“He’ll take care of her, Seth.”*

Seth heard the whispered words as if Frank were there with him and nodded. “Yes. He will. He’s been good for her. He’ll never replace you, but she needed him. He understands the life she leads better than I do.” Taking one last look at the picture, Seth continued on his way, hoping that he’d given the couple upstairs enough time.

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“Jessie.” Seth whispered as he walked over to the bed, smiling at her when she looked up at him. “I’ve brought something to help you sleep. Ah,” he tutted at her when she started to protest. “You need to rest, Jessie.”

George caressed her hair. “Go on, Lass. You know he’s right. This will help you not have the dreams.”

Jessica sighed, “That would be nice, but you know how I hate sedatives.”

Seth smirked as he handed her the pill. “I do.”

Swallowing the medicine, Jessica scowled at Seth. “Don’t be so smug.”

“I would never.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “You’re a lousy liar, Seth Hazlitt.”

Seth chuckled and took George’s place on the bed. “I’m only lousy when it comes to you, Jessie. Now, I’m going to go home and this big Scotsman is going to snuggle into bed with you and help keep the dreams at bay.”

Jessica clasped Seth’s hand and squeezed. “Thank you, Seth,” she whispered.

“It’s what I do, Jessie.” Seth smiled and patted her hand. “I’ll see you later today.”

George shook Seth’s hand and started to walk him out, smiling and nodding when Seth told him he could show himself out, he knew the way. “Aye. That ye do.”

They could hear Seth muttering about Scots and their ayes as he made his way downstairs, both chuckling slightly when they heard, “Aye indeed,” just before Seth moved off the stairs.

George turned back to Jessica and smiled as he moved back to the side of the bed. “Snuggle back down and close those bonnie blue eyes. I’ll be right back.”

Jessica caught his hand, her gaze studying him when he turned back to her. “He told you,” she finally whispered.

“Yes, Seasaidh, he did.” George answered, sitting down on the side of the bed and pulling her into his arms. He had no words to say, all he could do was hold her close and press kisses to her head and temples. He could feel her tears soaking his shirt, and his own rolled down his face into her hair. The pain, though it had been years ago, still radiated from his wife and he marveled again at her strength to have survived such heartache. Feeling her go limp against him, George realized the sedative had kicked in and she’d essentially cried herself to sleep. Gently settling her against the pillows, he took his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her tears then moved to get ready for bed.

As he settled in next to Jessica, George tenderly pulled her into his arms and held her close. One day he would learn what Seth couldn’t tell him about the time Jessica had been away from Cabot Cove after the loss of the baby, but for now...he knew enough.

Enough to remind him just how incredibly strong his wife was.

Enough to know that his precious Jessie loved him so much that she was able to let him see the pain instead of trying to hide it.

They’d come a long way since the beginning.