

Birthday Gifts

Note: To Woo and to Wed takes place from May to July 1818, with an epilogue in September 1819; this bonus scene is set in late February 1821. Happy reading!

It wasn't that Sophie didn't *like* children, she'd always told herself. It was simply that she'd never experienced a particularly pressing desire to have one of her own. It was similar to how she felt about cats, for example.

However, when they all descended upon her home at once—all of her sisters, and their husbands, and James and Violet, and their various friends, and all the assorted offspring attached to each family—she occasionally had cause to wonder if perhaps she *didn't* like children, after all.

Particularly not when they managed to upend a bowl of clotted cream onto her head.

Sophie, who had been in happy conversation with her sister-in-law, sitting on the floor with Violet's baby on her knee, paused, then took a calming breath. *Let's have a birthday party for you, darling*, West had said a fortnight earlier. *Thirty is a milestone. We'll invite all of our friends.*

She had agreed, envisioning a pleasant late-winter afternoon spent in the company of her nearest and dearest, many of whom were newly arrived in town after spending much of the winter in the countryside. There would be tea and cakes in the afternoon, and the children could toddle around the garden, where there was a bed of snowdrops blooming, a sign of warmer, happier days to come. In the evening, there would be a dinner party for the adults, the children squired away in the capable hands of their nannies. The perfect blend, Sophie had thought happily, of family togetherness and more adult entertainment.

But now she found herself wearing a clotted cream hat, watching Maria's twins, Philip and Lottie, laugh uproariously at the sight, and thinking longingly of how nice a quiet birthday evening drinking wine at home with West would have been instead.

"Charlotte and Philip Grovecourt!"

The twins' mother, at least, was not far from them, and swooped into action at this juncture, hustling them away with promises of no dessert in the nursery this evening, prompting howls of protest from the small chaos demons. In the sudden silence that fell, Cecily, Harriet's three-year-old, tripped over to her aunt and stuck a finger directly into the pile of cream atop Sophie's head.

"Your hair tastes good, Aunt Sophie!" she said, beaming, and placed a sticky kiss upon Sophie's nose before scampering away.

Sophie gazed resignedly down at baby Edward, who was blinking up at her solemnly. "You," she informed him, "are going to be my favorite nephew."

"I do think I'm reconsidering whether I ever want him to learn to walk," Violet said thoughtfully; she'd been watching the events of the past ninety seconds with her lips pressed firmly together, clearly to stifle a laugh. Sophie appreciated the attempt not to openly revel in her current circumstances, at least.

"As you should," Sophie said darkly, handing him back to Violet and scrambling to her feet. A dollop of cream slipped with this motion and landed directly on her shoulder, and she sighed. She'd had a new dress made for the occasion, a lovely blue silk that reminded her of the sky on particularly clear autumn days. It had been nice to wear it for all of—she checked the clock above the mantel in the library, where she and Violet were sitting, since it provided a direct view out into the garden where various friends and relatives were milling about on an uncommonly mild late-February afternoon—three hours.

"Sophie, have you seen Jeremy?" Diana appeared in the doorway from the garden, looking flushed. She was pregnant again (a fact she was decidedly displeased about, given her overall lack of enjoyment of the state) and was wearing a red wool gown today that mostly disguised the growing roundness of her belly. "He said he was bringing Isabella inside to get something to eat, but—" She stopped mid-sentence, finally noticing Sophie's overall state of dishevelment.

"Sophie," she said slowly, the way one might speak to someone they were afraid of having lost their senses entirely, "have you noticed the pile of clotted cream atop your head?"

“How would she *not* have noticed?” Violet asked in amusement, standing as well and shifting Edward in her arms to rest against one hip. “Do you think she set it there deliberately and then forgot?”

“How am I to know what people get up to these days, Violet?” Diana asked imperiously, sounding very much like Jeremy’s grandmother in that moment. “I’m very busy chasing around a toddler and gestating some other sticky creature, you know, I can’t be expected to stay on top of all the latest trends.”

“It was Maria’s twins,” Sophie informed Diana gloomily. “They escaped her clutches for a moment, got into a fight over a bowl of cream, and dumped it onto me.”

“It is rather amusing that, of all your sisters, she should have the most terrifying children,” Diana said, an appreciative note to her voice.

“It brings Harriet in particular no end of joy, I assure you,” Sophie said. She glanced down at her shoulder and grimaced, then gave a small hop backwards as this motion resulted in another dollop of cream dropping to the floor at her feet. “I’m just going to go rinse my hair and change clothes—I’ll be back once I’ve cleaned up a bit.”

“Run a bath and hide there until the children have been sent away,” was Diana’s grim-faced advice, and Sophie couldn’t help but laugh, clotted cream and all.

It struck West, as the late afternoon sunlight began to dwindle and even this mild winter day began to take on a decided chill, that he hadn’t seen his wife in some time.

“Have you seen Sophie?” he asked James as he made his way indoors, handing his young nephew (whom he’d been giving a very thorough tour of the garden, to Edward’s screeching delight) back to James.

James pressed a kiss to his son’s head and then glanced at West, frowning. “I think Violet said she had to go wash. Something to do with clotted cream?”

That sounded decidedly ominous—though, given the number of children present, certainly not out of the realm of possible outcomes of the afternoon’s festivities—and West glanced at the growing group in the library, clustering around the dwindling array of cakes and scones laid out on nearly every horizontal surface. “I’ll just go make sure all is well,” he said, and then slipped from the room.

By the time he made it to the second floor, the noise from downstairs had abated, and he took a moment to savor the peace and quiet. He loved his nieces and nephews, and all of his friends' children, too, but they were awfully . . . *noisy*.

Upon entering the bedroom he and Sophie shared, however, all thoughts of children—or family and friends more generally—or anything else at all, really, immediately fled from his mind. Because he was greeted by the sight of his very wet, very naked wife rising from a bathtub.

“Hello,” she said, her face brightening at the sight of him in a way that did complicated things to his heart. Her skin was rosy from the warm water, and her hair was damp; whatever this clotted cream incident was had clearly necessitated more of a proper wash than he'd initially envisioned. She twisted around, looking for the towel a maid had left on a chair nearby, but before she could reach for it, West was there, resting his cane against a chair so that he could use both hands to wrap the towel around her shoulders. She carefully stepped out of the tub, then tilted her head back to smile up at him.

“Hello.” He leaned down to press a quick kiss to her lips; he made as if to pull back, but her hand crept around his neck, holding him in place as she deepened the kiss. By the time she released him at last, his breathing was a bit ragged. “Dare I ask what happened with the clotted cream?”

“The twins,” she said darkly, then frowned, considering. “Philip and Lottie, I mean. Not Harriet and Betsy.”

“I assumed. Harriet and Betsy are at least adults, and presumably capable of avoiding food fights.”

“I wouldn't be so certain,” she said, tugging her towel more tightly around her shoulders. “There was that picnic last summer where a bit of cheese came into play during Pass the Bread . . .”

“I am trying to suppress that memory, thank you,” he said, willing away the recollection of how long it had taken to get a particularly soft Stilton out of his hair.

“Aren’t you glad you married into this family?” she said cheerfully, pressing a quick kiss to his cheek and then turning to towel herself vigorously before dropping the towel entirely and reaching for her chemise.

West’s mouth went dry at the sight, even after nearly three years of marriage. The line of her spine, the nip of her waist, all of her smooth, unblemished skin—it never failed to seem like a small miracle to him, that he was permitted (frequently *encouraged*) to see her like this.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she said as she wriggled into her chemise.

He cleared his throat. “Like what?”

“Like you want to do something to me that would make it impossible for us to rejoin the party anytime soon.” She cast him a cheeky glance over her shoulder as she reached for her corset. She pulled it on, then glanced at him again, batting her eyelashes. “Want to help me with my laces?”

“I would rather undo them,” he said honestly, but he came to stand behind her, lacing the corset with a speed he’d acquired through much practice in the past three years. In that moment, suddenly, the privilege of this moment—standing in the quiet bedroom, the only sounds the crackling of a fire in the grate, the ticking of a clock, and the soft sound of her breathing—hit him like a blow to the chest. The quiet, ordinary joy of his life with this woman that he’d spent so many years convincing himself he didn’t need, could live without.

Life without her, he now knew, would not be much of a life at all.

“What is it?” she asked, feeling his fingers still, and he turned her to face him, her corset half-laced, her damp hair a shade darker than its usual golden, dripping water onto her shoulders.

“I love you,” he told her simply, and leaned down to kiss her.

Her arms came around his neck without hesitation, her breasts pressed to his chest, and it was like a flame to kindling: heat racing down his spine, the heady feeling of her hips flush with his, the noise in the back of her throat that he knew she didn’t even know she made.

He pulled back. “How important is it that we make it back downstairs anytime soon?”

She grinned up at him cheekily, that smile that made his heart turn over whenever he saw it. “I think the *real* question is, how quick do you think you can be?” Her hands were already on the placket of his breeches. “We can call this my birthday present, if we can make it back downstairs in less than ten minutes.”

His hands went to the hem of her chemise, even as he walked her slowly towards the bed. Her knees hit the edge of the mattress and he pushed her gently down until she was on her back, gazing up at him as his fingers dipped into the slick heat between her legs.

He leaned down to kiss her, even as he freed himself from his breeches, gave himself a slow stroke. “Just for the record,” he murmured, a split second before he pushed into her, causing her to make that little gasp that he loved more than any sound on earth, “this isn’t your birthday present.”

But she wasn’t really in any state to argue.

It was only later—after West had hastily helped her dress in a clean gown, and she’d braided her hair back simply, not bothering to ring for a maid; after they’d rejoined their friends downstairs amidst the chaos of crying babies and shrieking toddlers and a loudly meowing cat (Emily had protested innocently that ‘darling Cecil’ had simply snuck into the carriage and that it would have been cruel to send him home), ignoring the knowing looks cast their way by more than one sibling as they reappeared together; after, eventually, the children had been packed away to dinner and bed, and the adults had retreated to their various homes to dress for dinner, only to return a couple of hours later for a long, wine-fueled evening that stretched late into the night, ending with toasts on the terrace at midnight under a canopy of stars—

It was only then, when Sophie at last tumbled into bed, tipsy and laughing and warm, watching as West went about the room extinguishing the lamps, that she rolled onto her side and frowned at the sound of crinkling paper.

“What’s this?” she asked, sticking her hand under her pillow and extracting a slightly yellowed invitation, the ink having faded with time.

“Your birthday present,” he said simply.

She squinted at the script.

... musicale ... hosted by Lady Holyoak ... 13 May 1811

She swallowed around a lump in her throat.

“It’s the night we met,” she said, tracing the faded letters with a trembling finger.

The bed sagged slightly with his weight as he sat down next to her.

“But . . . where did you find this?” she asked, her gaze still stuck on the words before her.

“In the same spot it’s been for the past seven years,” he said quietly. “In the hidden compartment in my desk drawer, where I would know it was safe.”

Her gaze lifted to meet his. “Where was it before that?” she asked, her voice hoarse.

“In my pocket,” he said, his voice even lower, his green eyes not moving from hers. “Where it was every single day that you were married to Fitz—until the afternoon that summer after he died when you told me you’d never marry me.”

Tears blurred her vision. “I’d have burned it, if I were you,” she said, trying to force lightness into her voice, to make it a joke.

“I considered it,” he said, his mouth twitching a bit with the faintest hint of a smile. “But I couldn’t—I put it away, I hid it, but I couldn’t be rid of it entirely, because . . . well, because even when I thought I would never, ever have you, I couldn’t be anything but grateful to have met you.”

Carefully, oh-so-carefully, she set the slightly crumpled invitation on the nightstand. Just as carefully she slipped towards him, until her legs straddled his, and her hands cupped his cheeks, keeping his eyes locked with hers.

She opened her mouth to say—*something*. To try to tell him, somehow, how much she loved him—how happy he made her—how their life together was the only thing she’d really ever wanted. But then she closed her mouth, and tugged his mouth

down to hers, and decided, in the end, that this was a message best conveyed without words at all.

The invitation faded further over the years, the ink becoming more and more difficult to read, but it never budged from its home on Sophie's nightstand. It was propped against a simple willow vase, the last thing she saw before falling asleep at night.

And every afternoon, for all the years of her life, there was a fresh flower in the vase.