

A Little Purple Cake

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The sun was streaming in through the windows of the parlour when Jessica Cobb came down for tea. Despite her trip to the dressmaker yesterday, she wore the same plain, brown dress and heavy utilitarian boots she'd arrived in two days ago, as none of the new gowns had been finished yet. She entered the gleaming room, feeling judged by the marble fireplace and gold-tasselled armchairs, and hating how the luxurious Persian rug muffled the sound of her boots across the heavy oak floorboards. She felt like a turd on one of the starched white tablecloths, waiting for a servant to come and sweep her away.

To make matters worse, her Aunt Cissy wasn't there when she arrived. Instead, Uncle Billy and Uncle Tom were sitting together in two of the armchairs, talking quietly to each other. They broke off quickly as Jessica approached and she felt their hostility. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should leave and wait for her aunt, but Billy gestured at her irritably and she didn't dare disobey.

'Come in then,' he said, in a distinctly unwelcoming tone, gesturing to a comfortable chair near the window. 'I suppose Cissy told you to come down, did she?'

Jessica nodded, trying to make herself as small as possible as she settled awkwardly into the armchair. Billy frowned.

'Speak up, girl,' he snapped and Jessica jumped as if he'd cracked a whip at her.

'S-Sorry, Uncle Billy,' she stammered, 'and y-yes, Aunt Cissy said to come down ... '

'Then why isn't she with you?'

'She told me yesterday to come down at four ... '

Billy made a frustrated noise, clearly irritated by his sister's insistence that their niece be present in his parlour.

'Of course she did.' He paused, looking his niece up and down, before he added, 'And I thought I said I never wanted to see that awful frock again?'

She blushed; feeling like an animal on display.

'I'm sorry,' she said meekly, looking at her shoes. 'Mrs Marks hasn't finished any of the new dresses yet.'

‘After tea, you are to tell the maid that I want her to look out some of Cissy’s old gowns and she is to adjust them to fit you before tea time tomorrow,’ Billy ordered severely. ‘You are *never* to wear that thing in my presence ever again.’

‘Yes, Uncle Billy.’

Seeming satisfied with her submission, Billy turned away and said no more, but Tom, who had been watching his niece with a piercing, almost violating gaze, spoke up.

‘You look like your grandmother, Jessica,’ he said softly.

Billy turned to look at his brother like he was mad.

‘Don’t be absurd,’ he said, sounding more offended than was called for under the circumstances, but Tom was a match for him.

‘Don’t act blind, Billy,’ Tom replied. ‘Cissy and Harry always looked like Mama; Jessica has it too.’

‘My mama used to say that,’ Jessica said, looking at Tom uncertainly.

‘The single truth your mother ever told, I’m sure,’ Tom said dryly.

Jessica wasn’t sure how to respond to this and the uncomfortable conversation was ended by the arrival of Washington and Liberty, Billy’s old Irish Setters. The dogs padded hopefully into the drawing room and Billy looked at them in good natured exasperation.

‘What are you here for?’ he asked them fondly, and Jessica felt a stab of jealousy. Why couldn’t he speak to her with the same kindness? ‘Come to steal tea, have you?’

‘I’ve told you I don’t like having those damn animals in here.’

Cissy had arrived. She discarded her hat and gloves with no regard for the expensive ribbon and lace adorning them, then pulled her hatpins out of her greying hair with a sigh of relief and threw them carelessly onto a nearby table. She glared at Liberty and Washington with distaste and Billy looked back at her with a placid smile.

‘They came for tea.’

‘I’m sure they did,’ Cissy said darkly, lowering herself into a chair beside Jessica. She gave her niece a warm smile before turning back to her brother. ‘Will there be any left for us?’

‘I doubt it,’ Tom said, turning to face his sister, ‘not if Billy’s feeling soft ...’

‘I am not soft!’ Billy declared, although his eyes were twinkling. ‘And why shouldn’t Liberty and Washington enjoy the finer things in life?’

The playful argument between the siblings was ended by the arrival of Mr. Lawrence, the butler, and Matthew, the young footman. Both were carrying trays filled with delectable looking sweets and Jessica felt her mouth water. She’d seen tea being prepared before, but she’d never been allowed to try the little cakes and pastries, arranged in perfect circles on the tiered platters. Such things were not for the enjoyment of young girls working in laundries.

Lawrence set the tea tray down on the table and began to pour, while Matthew waited patiently with the platter of sandwiches and cakes that Jessica was itching to try. She caught his eye and couldn’t help grinning. The young man grinned in return.

Tom noticed. ‘Are you hungry, Jessica?’

‘Oh, um, s-sort of.’ She blushed, wondering if she’d been rude.

‘Sort of?’ Cissy asked, looking mildly bemused. ‘Either you’re hungry or you aren’t.’

‘I’ve never had tea before,’ Jessica admitted.

Cissy gave a rather knowing smile. ‘Well, you must take your time and savour it.’

‘As long as we’re not trapped here for hours,’ Billy muttered.

‘If your horrid dogs are allowed to enjoy tea, then Jessica is quite entitled to do the same,’ Cissy replied.

Billy muttered something that everyone in the room chose to ignore and Lawrence handed teacups to the siblings and Jessica. His job done, he allowed Matthew to set the silver platter down on the table. The two servants then stood back unobtrusively, waiting against the wall until they were needed again.

In pride of place, on the top tier of the platter, was a small, purple cake, delicately iced and topped with a beautiful sugar-spun flower. Billy reached for it, placing his teacup down in front of him, only to withdraw his hand sharply with a yelp as Cissy rapped him over the knuckles with the sugar tongs.

‘What was that for?’ he demanded, shaking his hand angrily to try and ease the pain.

‘Don’t you dare give that cake to your wretched dogs, Billy,’ Cissy warned, waving the sugar tongs threateningly. ‘Not when it’s Jessica’s first afternoon tea.’

Looking as though he might like to strangle his sister, Billy motioned for Jessica to help herself in a gesture that was barely polite.

‘Go on then,’ he snapped at his niece, as if it had been she who hit him, ‘before your aunt has an apoplexy.’

Cissy gave Billy a particularly nasty look and pulled the tray closer to Jessica. Terrified as she was of antagonising her uncle, the excitement of being able to take whatever she wanted from the plates before her was too much to ignore.

Not wanting to seem greedy she took only one item from each tier, although avoided the little purple cake in favour of a cream coloured one with a small, glazed cherry on top. After that, the siblings helped themselves and there was a strained silence for a few minutes, before Tom decided to lighten the mood.

He reached over and, with obviously exaggerated care, picked up the little purple cake. Despite having had his eye on it, Billy’s pride had prevented him from taking it after Cissy had struck him and he watched his brother with a steely eye.

‘What on earth are you doing?’

‘Enjoying afternoon tea,’ Tom declared.

Cissy raised an eyebrow. ‘That’s vanilla,’ she told her brother. ‘Since when did you like vanilla?’

Tom gave both his siblings a long suffering look. ‘Please tell me that you were not about to start an argument over a *vanilla cake*.’

Cissy blushed deeply and took an overly large gulp of tea to try and disguise it, while Billy looked guiltily down at Washington and scratched his ears. Liberty, jealous of the attention, pushed her brother aside with a whine and was rewarded with an extra scratch herself.

Satisfied he'd made his point, Tom decided to let them off the hook.

'But you're right, I don't like vanilla.'

With that, he plucked the little sugar-spun flower from the top and popped it in his mouth, before shamelessly licking the little cake clean of icing. Then, without the slightest hint of remorse, he put the now naked sweet back on the tray and gave a satisfied belch.

Jessica wasn't sure whether to be shocked or delighted by this, and only just managed to suppress the giggles which bubbled up. Billy and Cissy, on the other hand, looked scandalised.

'Thomas!'

'Yes, Cecilia?' He gave his sister an innocent smile.

'What is wrong with you?'

'Nothing; vanilla is boring and unpleasant ... '

'That is not what Cissy meant and you know it.'

Tom gave his brother a look of utter exasperation. 'It was a cake, Billy. A little. Purple. *Cake.*'

'You can't take a bite out of something and put it back!'

Tom looked delighted with himself.

'Ah, but Billy, I just did.'

Unable to control herself, Jessica burst out laughing.