

THE GIFT

By the time Sharon's birthday rolled around, I knew what I would give her. She had admired my bistro set for many months, so it seemed logical that she would enjoy having one of her own.

During our last get-together, seated at my dining room table, Sharon glanced often at my comfortable kitchen with its gleaming cookware and ceramic canisters, at the bright contrast of colors in the potted flowers and various herbs growing in the large bay window, then she turned back to me and inhaled deeply.

"Coffee always smells better at your house."

"This coffee would smell good anywhere," I said. "It's Swedish, made differently from what you buy in the store."

"And this gorgeous service! It's so elegant."

"Well, that's why I have it."

"Swedish coffee and everything in your house is beautiful," Sharon said, almost wistfully. "Kim, your best asset is that you really know how to live." I no longer responded to this long-familiar observation, but privately, I agreed with her.

Sharon's gift arrived a week before her birthday, allowing me plenty of time to inspect the lovely object while daydreaming of how pleased she would be to receive it. The trim on the coffee-press and its four matching cups was

cobalt blue, a perfect complement to Sharon's kitchen. The cups were glass, in a stylish European design, with cork coasters. The set was completed by a glass sugar and creamer, plus four cobalt-colored spoons. I wrapped the set in paper of pale ivory, topped with a teal bow, and set it aside to wait for the big moment.

Sharon didn't want a party, so she planned a backyard cook out instead. When I arrived at her house, the scene was deceptively calm. I knew immediately that it would be chaos inside.

"Mom, Kim's here!" shouted Erin from the lower level stairwell. Shy Erin hugged me after some encouragement. Gregarious Laura hurled herself into the two of us, then we three made our way to the kitchen.

"Kim – thank goodness, hi," Sharon said breathlessly, handing me a paring knife. "Would you?" She pointed to the counter, where a sizeable group of vegetables, freshly rinsed, waited for slicing. The two girls were dispatched to set the picnic table in the backyard.

"Sure," I replied. "but give me something sharper than this to cut with."

She replaced the knife and I went to work, watching with interest as Sharon alternately shucked ears of corn and pressed enormous globs of hamburger meat into patties. During this time, the phone rang three times. The oven timer went off twice. The family dog stood in the doorway leading out to the deck, bellowing at some unseen danger, and from the patio below came a huge, bright plume of fire.

"New grill," she replied to my unasked question.

Moments later, order was partially restored to the busy kitchen. Sharon and I sat down at the table to chat, keeping our eyes on the various platters of food and the merrily bubbling pot on the stove.

“Do you think Doug needs help out there?” she asked.

“No. I think Erma Bombeck could get a lot of mileage out of a scene like this.”

“Think she’d want to trade lives with me?”

“I doubt it. She already has enough to write about.”

“Maybe so. What’s new in your life?”

“Nothing much. I’m still waiting to see if my promotion goes through, and we’re a little closer to finishing the grant application —”

“That’s professional stuff. What about a personal life?”

“Nothing new.”

Sharon shook her head. “You’ve been saying that for a long time. It’s not good to be alone so much.”

“I’m not alone. I have my friends and a great job and lots of hobbies.”

“That isn’t enough. You need to be out there, getting to know people, dating somebody.”

“No,” I said, more firmly than intended. “That’s not what I need.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, squeezing my arm. “You know best about that, but you’re my friend and I think you spend too much time by yourself. I just want you to be happy.”

"You just want to give me a wedding shower," I said, not unkindly.

"Absolutely. But you'll have to get out of the house first. That whole thing with David is over, has been for years. It's time to get on with your life."

"Of course it's over. That isn't the problem with me, Sharon. I have a dating deficiency. I'm just *no good* at relationships. Meeting new people is very hard for me."

"Hmm," was all she said, but her face spoke volumes. It was a look I had seen before, one that didn't bode well for my safely solitary lifestyle. I gathered up my mental armor, prepared to resist her one more time, when Doug's gentle, cheery voice called up from the entryway.

"Anybody home?"

"We are," replied Sharon. "come on up!"

Sharon's tall husband, Doug, bent to kiss my cheek. "Kim, it's always good to see you." And then I saw him.

He was easily six feet, four inches tall, with a sturdy but slender build and impressively broad shoulders. He paused on the stairs behind Doug, and my eyes registered a sun-weathered face, topped by a blazing shock of red hair, before turning a frantic gaze to Sharon, who stood there looking very pleased with herself. Tongue-tied with shock and terrified at having a stranger thrust at me, my face must have been as white as the knuckles of my hands, where they gripped the back of a chair for support. In just seconds, the entire complexion of the day had changed, and I was now on unfamiliar, unwelcome ground.

They were smooth, my friends. In a fluid movement, Doug introduced me to the newcomer, Alex Fraser, whose hand was very large and warm around mine, then deftly turned the matter over to Sharon, well before I could give either of them the evil eye. From there, we were escorted outside, each bearing a loaded platter (no wonder there was so much food – this man was *huge*), and Doug took up his mantle as king of the backyard barbeque. Between the two of them, Doug and Sharon kept the conversation flowing freely enough that Alex Fraser and I did not have to speak directly to each other, slipping our comments between their gentle, familial bantering.

Smoother still, Sharon made sure that when we sat down to dinner, Alex and I would not be across the table from each other. That was a big relief to me, as I worried for a time about looking attractive while eating corn on the cob. Sometimes it just can't be done.

My friends must have alerted Alex to the fact that I was emotionally challenged. His demeanor was polite and courteous, without being the least bit intrusive. He seemed interested, friendly, and willing to wait until I was comfortable before trying to engage me in more than chit chat. Despite the distress of being acutely aware of his presence in our gathering, by the time we finished dinner, I began to relax.

Shortly after dinner, Sharon was ready to open her birthday presents. She was very pleased with gifts of her favorite videos, a new blouse and a beautiful diamond pendant. Her excitement over my bistro set was genuine. Alex Fraser

offered her a book of photographs which I learned were his own work, taken on location in Scotland, the country of his heritage. They were exquisite photos, and my own affinity for things Scottish made me less nervous with the big man. It seemed that we would be able to talk, after all.

Sharon put her new bistro set to good use that evening, brewing some of the lovely Swedish coffee that accompanied it. The four of us sat outside long after dark, developing a new bond. My relationship with Sharon and her family was close, to the point that they felt like *my* family. Introducing Alex into this group altered that dynamic somewhat by making me an individual again, loved the same amount by them, but in a different setting.

The great, good feeling of security that Sharon's family extended to me might just be possible with others, too. It was a lot to consider, over a cup of coffee.

When I hugged her for the last time that night, Sharon whispered, "Do you hate me?"

"Of course not. I'd have been a nervous wreck if you had warned me beforehand. He seems like a nice guy. It's okay."

"Good. I was a little worried about tonight, but I think it went really well, don't you?"

"It was fine. I just think we need to talk about this devious streak you're developing. It's a little unnerving."

"Call me tomorrow."

“I will. Happy Birthday, Sharon. I love you.”

I left her house feeling that she was not the only one who had received a gift that evening.