

A Morning Like This

By Deborah Bedford

Chapter 1

They sat together at their favorite corner table, two of them alone, absorbed in the candlelight and in each other. He toyed with the dinner knife that lay beside his hand, his eyebrows raised, gazing at her face. She leaned toward him and smiled, her elbow on the table, her chin propped inside the chalice of her palm. Her dainty gold bracelet caught high on her wrist and dangled there.

“I don’t know why they won’t let Braden pitch,” she said. “All he needs is a little confidence. If the coach would just be willing to work with him a little more.”

David laughed.

“What? Why are you laughing at me?”

“Abby. Braden can hit, but he’s probably never going to be a pitcher. He throws about as straight as a jackrabbit runs.”

“He could *do* it.”

David Treasure reached across the table and laid his fingers across his wife’s wrist, giving her his habitual, half-amused grin. “I thought we agreed that tonight we wouldn’t talk about kids.”

“I can’t help it, David. I’m his mother. What do you think? I see everything he ought to be able to do, and I don’t know why he’s not doing it.”

“I think you’re beautiful when you’re all wrapped up in being a mother. That’s what I think.”

She laughed at him then, and felt her earrings dancing like two tiny birdcages against her earlobes. She sighed and shook her arm and her bracelet toppled from her wrist to her forearm.

“Okay. You’re right. We *did* promise each other, didn’t we?”

“Yes.”

“So we’ll talk about something else. Anything else.” She paused. “Something.” She cast about to change the subject. “How about my new little black dress?”

“I like your new little black dress just fine.” He shot her a leering look, raised his eyebrows at her. “I’d like you even better—”

“David!”

He grinned at her, the expressing in his eyes as unguarded and as open as a schoolboy’s. “You wanted to know what I was thinking, didn’t you?”

“Okay. You’re right. I left myself open for that one.”

“You did.” He grinned and lifted his water glass, holding it high so the ice glistened in the candlelight. “Happy Anniversary. Just think what we were doing twelve years ago right now.”

“Twelve years,” Abigail said. “It doesn’t seem possible. We were probably walking down the aisle right about now.”

“Well, no.” He checked his watch. “It’s three hours past that. I was thinking what happens *after* the wedding.”

“David!”

He crossed his arms and laughed and leaned back in his chair, his blue eyes mischievous. “Well, you said you wanted tonight to be romantic.”

“That isn’t *romance*. That’s . . . that’s . . .”

“I’m a man, Abby. That’s romance.”

“Don’t lean so far back in your chair. You’ll fall over and the waiter will have to pick you up.”

He raised his eyebrows and righted his chair.

“To twelve years as Mrs. David Treasure,” she said, lifting her glass. “Hear. Hear.”

David raised his goblet, too, clicked it against hers, and set it down. He squared his shoulders and eyed her for a long moment, the sudden stretch of silence an uncommon thing between them. “You’re the best thing that has ever happened to me,” he said, reaching across the table and, in a sure sign of possession, gripping both of her wrists. “I want you to know that.”

After all these years, the shape of his hands could still stir her. His broad fingers. His powerful, square knuckles. The dusting of blond hair on his arm, showing between the cuff of his shirtsleeve and the band of his watch.

She raised her eyes to his, touched her stomach where the warmth began . . . and blushed.

He grinned and leaned back in his chair.

Anyone watching could see by the relaxed way they chatted, by the way their laughter came in short, sharp bursts, that this wasn’t the celebration of new romance. They celebrated an old, strong love. Conviction and commitment had been tempered by the test of time.

The waiter brought around a cake with “Happy Anniversary” scripted in pink-sugar icing. When Abigail cut David a piece and licked the knife, he inclined across the table and kissed her.

“No fair. You always figure out ways to get more icing.”

Only a few people recognized them as they rose to leave the restaurant; it was summertime and they’d reserved a late table at the Rendezvous Bistro to avoid the tourist crowd. But the friends who did see them here in the newest, classiest eatery in the valley didn’t let them pass without hailing them from across the room.

“Heard about your anniversary on KSGT this morning. That radio morning calendar keeps me up to date on everybody in town.”

“Hey, Treasures. Congratulations, you two.”

“Heard Braden’s pitching’s getting better this summer. Great kid you’ve got there.”

“Thank you.” “Hello.” “Good to see you,” Abigail and David repeated half a dozen times on their way out the door. David hurried down the front walk of the restaurant to bring around their Suburban while Abigail carried the white box with extra cake.

“Are you tired?” Abigail asked when he yawned on the drive.

“Yeah. Boring, huh? I’m an old married man these days, anxious to get home.”

“Just as long as you’re going to the same home I’m going to, we don’t have anything to worry about.”

When they parked in front of their own house twenty minutes later, lamps shone in every window except Braden’s. Abigail grabbed her purse from where it lay beside her on the seat.

“I don’t know why she can’t turn some of the lights off after she gets him into bed.”

“She’s young. Probably still afraid of the dark herself.”

But everything seemed fine when the babysitter let them inside the front foyer. Brewster, their black Labrador, met them with delirious happiness in the hall.

“Everything all right?” Abigail surveyed the living room, making sure all was right in the Treasure territory. “No problems or anything?”

The teenaged sitter examined the scuffed toes of her clogs as if trying to decide whether or not to tell them the whole story. “Not any problems, really. Except Braden wouldn’t go to sleep when I told him to and he kept jumping on the bed. He said he was practicing pitching wind-ups.”

“I’ll have a talk with that young man tomorrow.”

“He threw the ball sideways and it hit the shelf and made his lamp fall off. It crunched a big hole in the lampshade. I’m really sorry.”

David draped his arm around Abigail’s shoulders. “To think that only an hours ago his mother was saying she wanted him to get more practice.”

The babysitter picked up her backpack before she turned back to tell them something else. “Oh, and some lady called and left a message on the machine. I didn’t answer it. I just listened to make sure it wasn’t you needing anything.”

David handed her a twenty and a five—hefty pay for four hours of babysitting these days, but Abigail had encouraged it coming home in the car. Crystal was good and they both wanted to keep her. “You ready to? I’ll take you home.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

Abigail waved them off and smiled to herself as she locked the door behind them.

Well.

Well.

David had certainly been in a hurry to get rid of the babysitter.

She padded into their bedroom, eased her sandal straps off of her ankles with her opposite feet, kicked her shoes halfway across the room, and wiggled her toes in the carpet. She assessed herself in the mirror for a moment before she peeled the spaghetti straps from her shoulders and laid the new dress over a chair. Once she’d slipped into her fancy nightgown and robe, she prowled, telling herself she ought to wander through the kitchen to turn lights off. Which of course was only an excuse to snatch another bite of cake.

In the kitchen, she licked icing off her fingers and stared at the blinking light on the phone machine.

Hm-mmm. She should listen. She ought to check and see who’d called.

But jut then she heard the door, the click of her husband’s key in the lock. He’d scarcely make it inside before he drew Abigail against him and kissed her.

“Let’s check on Braden,” she whispered against his chin. Before she gave herself to her husband, she wanted to make certain all was right within the circle of her heart and her home. She took his hand, leading him up the hallway to their son’s room with its fancy lodge-pole pine bed, Ralph Lauren curtains, and Elks baseball cap dangling from the chair. David crossed his arms over his chest and they stood in the doorway, mother and father shoulder to shoulder, looking at the little blond head on the pillow. Each of them was thinking how this time together had been good for them. Sometimes being busy with children and jobs and everyday life could make a husband and wife forget how to complete a sentence when they were along. Every time they went out they had the chance to start over.

Braden had fallen asleep with his head cradled in his baseball glove. David released Abigail’s hand long enough to slip into the semidarkness and wriggle the tattered leather from underneath his son’s cheek. “Hey, sport.”

The movement roused Braden, who rolled over and squinted his eyes open.

“Dad.” Nothing more. Just the name. Just the word that meant everything. *Dad*. Two arms shot out of the blankets and tangled around David’s neck, pulling him low against the pillow as Abigail watched with a weight of gratitude growing heavy in her chest. Her two boys, David and Braden. They meant the world to each other ... and to her.

Lord, when I trust you, I can trust everything around me. You’ve given me everything I ever wanted, right here.

David readjusted the blankets beneath his son’s chin and kissed Braden on the forehead.

“Love you, Grade.”

“Crystal wouldn’t let me practice my pitches,” Braden mumbled, still half asleep.

“She told us. We’re going to have to work out something about your lamp, you know. You’ll have to do a few chores and earn money.”

“Did you have fun?”

“Yes. It was very romantic. Your mother wore a new dress and made me feel special.”

“G’night, Dad.

“Good night, son.”

Lord, thank you for keeping us secure.

Braden burrowed his face deep into his pillow and his baseball mitt again, his eyelids closed. Abigail said in a hushed tone, “Ah, he’s fine, isn’t he?” She leaned her head against her husband’s shoulder. “I just wanted to make sure. Do you have any idea how much I love seeing you two together?”

“Well, Mrs. Treasure. You’ve seen everything you need to see, haven’t you?” He cupped his fingers around wisps of her hair. “Maybe we ought to finish what we’ve started.”

“Maybe,” she echoed, and this time she couldn’t help smiling as David took her by the hand and led her where he wanted. As they passed through the kitchen, though, the blinking light on their answering machine distracted him. He stopped for a moment and stared at it.

“That can wait, can’t it? With all the things that go on around this place, can’t one of them wait until morning?”

“Exactly what I was thinking.”

“A girl after my own heart.”

“I *am* after your heart. And I think I know just how to get it.”

“”Hm-m-mm.”

Abigail followed her husband into the bedroom that they’d shared since exchanging wedding vows a dozen years ago tonight. Through the open window she could hear the coyotes yipping and the lilting music of Fish Creek and the hiss of night breeze like rain, moving through the pine boughs and cottonwood leaves.

“Love you,” Abigail nuzzled the words against his ear. “Nothing will ever change that, David. Ever.”

“You mean that?”

“Yeah.”

“You promise?”

“I do promise. That’s an easy promise to make.”

“You sure?”

“I am sure,” she answered without hesitating, her voice reflecting all the fervency of her faith in her God and in her husband.

But in the new room, the answering machine waited, the flashing light relentless as it flickered red against the microwave, the dishwasher door, the chrome faucet, against every shiny surface in the kitchen.

Blink. Blink. Pause.

Blink. Blink. Pause.

All through the night.

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