

## The Birthday Gift

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Matthew had been so cold during the past few months that Anna was beginning to feel weighed down with despair. What had she done wrong? How had she failed to live up to the impossible standards of wifely virtue that Matt seemed to expect? She felt like an automaton, wound up to perform the myriad tasks of parenthood, wifehood, and her other, paid job, and on the whole she believed she was making a pretty fair fist of it all. The kids had been behaving well. She couldn't think of any infringement, any challenge to his authority or lowering of standards.

Which made Matt's coolness hard to understand. It wasn't consistent, that was one of the problems. In bed he was as keen as ever, however tired she was. She didn't mind that. She liked sex; and if she drifted off now and then he didn't seem to notice. The fact that he still wanted sex was reassuring.

It was the lack of verbal communication that was worrying her. He'd never wanted to hear about her days at work, but that was okay; he liked the money coming in, she did know that. But he wouldn't talk to her about his own work, either, and she'd had to learn from the wife of one of his colleagues that he'd been promoted. When she suggested that they go out to celebrate he'd curtly refused, though of course affording it wasn't an issue. It was deeply worrying.

Anna tried talking to his mother, with whom she'd always got on well, but she'd had nothing to offer. 'He's just the same as usual,' she'd said. 'Is it work, do you think?'

Anna had shaken her head. If it was something at work that was bothering him he wasn't about to talk about it. Not to her. And, apparently, not to his mother.

Matters didn't get any better, and after weeks of this the children were beginning to tiptoe around him, desperately quiet and unnaturally polite. Anna felt sorry for the little things, but what could she do? There hadn't been any games out in the yard for

months, now that she thought about it, and he'd always liked chucking a ball about with them, and listening to their reading. He'd seemed to, anyway. Anna was beginning to question the very foundations of their family life.

Then one Sunday morning over breakfast Matt cleared his throat and spoke to her.

'I thought we might go out to dinner. We haven't been for a while and that new Italian place has had excellent reviews.'

Anna was astonished. Her birthday was coming up and it looked as if he'd remembered. 'Yes, fine,' she said, careful not to sound too enthusiastic: Matt despised what he called 'gushing women'. 'That sounds good. When?'

'We can leave the kids with Mum. Make a night of it.' He looked over and smiled at her, leaving her disconcerted: she'd been invisible to him for so long that she was suddenly conscious of her unwashed hair and lack of makeup.

'Who would you like me to ask?' Matt liked to go out with another couple or two; it made conversation easier, and that way they got to sample more of the dishes.

He gave her a long, silent look. 'No. Just the two of us, I thought.'

Anna's heart gave a jump. This could be the breakthrough! Whatever the trouble had been, was it over now? With fast-beating heart she dared to hope. 'When? Do you want me to book?' She was the one who made all their social arrangements.

'No. Leave it to me.'

Still feeling unreal Anna smiled at him, but his attention was back on the newspaper. 'Fine,' she said, knowing he wasn't listening. 'That would be great.'

He'd booked for the Saturday before her birthday, which fell on a Monday this year, and made arrangements with his mother to have the children overnight. He even managed to tell her in time for her to have her hair done and think about what she'd wear.

While they were dressing he was more abstracted than usual but Anna was so excited and relieved that nothing had come up to interfere with the outing that she scarcely noticed. They were going out together somewhere special, and things would be just like they'd always been before Matt had gone all quiet and moody. As they left the house she found she was humming *La Vie en Rose*; and as Matt, looking unreasonably handsome in his best suit, held the front door open for her she smiled at him, feeling her love for him well up in her heart. But he didn't smile back.

After Matt parked the Beamer he handed her the car keys. He always expected her to drive home after they'd been out, but she didn't mind. The restaurant was crowded, of course, on a Saturday night, abuzz with conversations, glittering with beautiful people. Buoyed up by her happiness, Anna felt herself to be the equal of any of them as she followed the Maître d' to their table and let him fuss over her. She'd always enjoyed Italian men, and Matt was observing the mild flirtation with the quiet gravity that she loved.

When they were settled and supplied with menus and the wine list she reached across the table and laid her hand on his. 'Thank you for tonight,' she smiled. 'I really appreciate it.' But he scarcely glanced up from the wine list to acknowledge that she'd spoken. Mentally, she slapped her wrist: Matt's concentration on the task in hand had always been absolute, and choosing their wine was a serious business.

She turned her attention to the menu. Her copy didn't include the prices and for a moment she was disconcerted: what if the things she chose were the most expensive? Matt didn't like extravagance. Then she shrugged it off. What the hell. They hadn't been out for months, and this was her birthday treat.

She wondered what present he'd bought for her. Would he give it to her tonight, as part of the evening's festivities? Or would he keep it until Monday morning, perhaps, after they'd made love; or make the presentation over breakfast? Suddenly it really did begin to feel like her birthday. Last year he'd given her a pair of diamond earrings. The stones were tiny, but they were real diamonds, and it was the thought that counted. She was wearing them tonight ... had he noticed?

She ran her eyes down the page. It all sounded wonderful. Seafood first, maybe? She settled on the *Spiedino di Grandi Pesce*, skewered seafood morsels served with polenta; to be followed by ... yes, quail. Italians treated the little birds so well. For the pasta course she'd sample their pumpkin ravioli; she'd tried making this herself once, but it hadn't been a rousing success.

After taking her order the waiter poised to take Matt's. Matt was smiling in his urbane way and letting the Italian roll off his tongue as if he actually spoke the language. 'I'll have the *Anguilla alla Demetria*,' he said, 'If the eel's really fresh?'

The waiter bowed his head. '*Si, signor.*'

Matt nodded. 'And the duck liver *risotto*, followed by ...' he hesitated for a

moment, brow furrowed with the difficulty of making the choice, '*Fagiano al Tartufo.*' He snapped the menu shut and handed it to the waiter, looking pleased with himself.

Anna had resisted the temptation to order the pheasant for herself: with truffles it had to be exorbitantly expensive, but if her husband was going to have it, she regretted the decision. She caught the waiter's eye. Should she change her order now, before it was too late? This was her birthday dinner, after all. But habit kicked in and she remained silent, simply smiling at the waiter as he left their table. The quail would be delicious.

The food came and Anna began to be sorry that there wasn't another couple with them; Matt was as silent as he'd been at home, and even his appetite seemed to have deserted him. As she licked the last of the quail's garlic butter from her fingers she realised that he was staring at her, his pheasant untouched. She wondered whether she had butter all over her face.

'Anna,' he started to speak, then seemed to choke. 'Anna ...' He took a breath and leaned forward, playing with his knife. 'Anna, this is very difficult for me ...'

No, this wasn't about the way she looked. What the hell was he on about?

He cleared his throat. 'Anna, I've fallen in love ... with someone else. I'm leaving you.' He was very white. She looked at him with total astonishment while she struggled to take in what he'd said.

Then, as if a veil had been lifted, she saw that the man seated across the table from her was a stranger, and in a moment of startling clarity she realised that her Matthew, the man she'd loved and thought she knew so well, had been gone from her for months; that this stranger was the reality. A tiny spark of anger began to burn: this man was telling her this here, in this crowded restaurant, so she wasn't likely to make a scene.

The anger flared but she kept it under control. Tomorrow she'd have a better idea how she felt about all this, but right at this moment the pieces were all falling into place with deafening inevitability. Of course, he was leaving. Of course, he'd had another woman ... for how long? Somewhere in the tangle of emotions was the dawning of relief, like sunlight breaking through clouds. 'I see,' was all she said, surprising herself with her coolness.

He seemed disconcerted by her response and rushed into the silence. 'Elizabeth's pregnant.'

Of course she was.

Anna stared at the plate of pheasant cooling in front of her husband. It was wasted on him. She pushed aside her own plate, empty but for the clean bones of little birds, and reached across to take his. The pheasant looked and smelled wonderful, and slowly and deliberately she began to eat it. She'd never had black truffles before and wasn't sure at first whether she was disappointed in them, but the pheasant itself was utterly delectable. When she'd finished she glanced up at Matthew. He was still staring at her, white around the nostrils—not a look that became him—with that fixed expression on his face that told her he didn't know what was going on but couldn't admit that he wasn't in control.

'Well,' Anna said, 'that was delicious.'

The waiter came and took the empty plates and poured more wine; Anna smiled thanks at him and turned to her husband.

'Well, Matthew, if you've made up your mind, there's nothing more to be said.' She watched his face as she spoke. 'I'm assuming you've moved out of the house as of now.' She picked up the car keys and jangled them. 'I'll drive the Beamer home. I'll need the bigger car, with the children. You can pick up my Suzi in the morning, and all your clothes. Make it ... eleven o'clock.'

He was still staring at her, looking stunned. What had he expected? That she'd weep all over the tablecloth? Tear her hair? Take him home to bed with her, after that?

She took a deep breath and, with calculated dignity, rose from her chair, smiling graciously at the waiter holding it for her. To Matthew, she inclined her head: 'I know you'll understand if I leave now.'

The Maître d' had materialised beside her. '*Signora*,' he murmured. 'Is everything ...?'

'*Grazie*,' she smiled pleasantly at him. 'Everything's fine. I won't wait for dessert. The gentleman will be staying a little longer, I think....'

On her way out to the carpark Anna felt the beginning of excitement. This changed everything. It wouldn't be easy—she could already imagine the problems she'd have fitting everything into her days without Matthew there to help, not that he'd been much help in recent months. It would be a challenge.

But her overwhelming emotion was one of relief: she wouldn't have to tiptoe

around her own house, eternally compromising her wishes to accommodate Matthew's dictates; she was free now; free to stretch, and grow, and to help her children to grow with her.

Still savouring the lingering aftertaste of the pheasant—and the truffles—Anna unlocked the Beamer; and as she opened the door and slid onto the leather seat a new thought bloomed, filling her heart with joy: he might not know it, but Matthew had just given her the best birthday gift she could possibly have imagined.

Forget diamond earrings: he'd given her her life back.