

## *Desert rose dessert*

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- Must start with the word 'new'
- Must include a list
- Must include the word dessert

New arrivals, bursting with flowers. Four desert roses, arrived just in time: tomorrow was Kirsty's anniversary, and the roses were her husband's present. The present he'd never know he'd received.

Desert roses formed a floral border around Kirsty's garden. They were her marriage emblem: delicate flowers for the world to see, toxicity lurking inside. The new arrivals brought the set to nineteen. Nineteen plants for nineteen years of marriage. Twenty would never be needed.

She'd chosen each plant with care, and for her they formed a list that catalogued her marriage. Soft colours for the early years, when marriage was easy and hopes were high. Variegated petals as it started to sour – pink at first, deepening to red and purple as the years progressed.

Year nine was red edged with near-black, marking her first time in hospital. He was sorry then, and the colours were paler for a while. Then darker shades again. Year twelve was near-black variegated with cream – the year started well, but ended in hospital. Year fifteen was deep crimson for the lost baby she'd longed to carry.

The new arrivals took their place on the far side of the garden. Hybrids made to special order – orange, purple and blue in mismatched combinations for the chaos of her life. Number nineteen was a symbol of this anniversary: white centres for an untroubled future, near-black edges to mark the funeral she wouldn't attend.

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Kirsty had his dinner waiting. 'My anniversary wife. Still my home angel after nineteen years.' His embrace was strong, as though to demonstrate ownership.

She'd cooked to re-enact their first date. Three perfect courses. Crisp white wine. Candles in the courtyard. Desert roses as the backdrop.

Finally, the chocolate cake. He frowned slightly. 'That's not right. It was slices, not individual cakes. And no raspberries. Just cream.'

Kirsty was ready with her obedient-wife smile. 'It's specially for you. The same recipe, baked more beautifully. A grown-up version of what we had on our first date. Just like us.'

Kirsty started to breathe again as he accepted the story. 'Happy anniversary darling,' she said, as he picked up his fork.

He pushed his plate with a grunt of satisfaction. 'No berries next time. Something bitter about them. No coffee now. Time to take my wife to bed.'

He was breathing hard, as though he'd run up a hill. 'You're excited tonight,' she said gently, hoping the alcohol and food would mask the symptoms. She pressed him gently to the bed, laid him straight and pulled off his shoes. 'Are you ready for your anniversary present my husband?'

'What have you done?' he whispered.

'You're excited. Flushed with wine and love.'

'Heart. Beating. Too. Fast.'

'Happy anniversary.' Kirsty closed the bedroom door quietly. She took her time to clear the table, stack the dishwasher, tidy the kitchen. As a parting gesture, she placed desert rose number nineteen on the table. Then she was gone.