

DEADLY PRESENTS

by A.A. Abbott

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“More Prosecco?” Sara asked.

Louise nodded. Her friend could have afforded champagne, she thought. Sara was married to an MP, after all.

Sara stood to her full five feet, opened a second bottle and topped up their glasses. Her eyes whisked over the top of Louise’s head, an event that rarely occurred and was only possible because Louise was sitting down.

“I can see grey hair,” she told Louise. “Why don’t you colour it like I do?”

Louise made an effort not to grimace at Sara’s aubergine bob. “I prefer a natural look,” she said.

"If you made more of yourself, you could do better than that bearded anarchist boyfriend of yours. You're tall, but most men don't mind. Even Garth says you scrub up well."

"Dan's just a friend." Louise didn't want to discuss her love life. There was only one man who mattered to her, and she would never tell Sara about that. "What are you getting Garth for Christmas?" she asked.

Sara shrugged. "What do you buy the man who has everything? I've no idea. What do you think?"

Louise was tempted to suggest nipple clamps, which she knew Garth did like. "Whisky," she said. He'd told her he couldn't stand it, ever since his first student hangover. Anyway, Sara would probably just recycle a gift she'd received from someone else. Last Christmas, Louise had unwrapped a sparkly box from her friend to reveal black tights in a petite size. The year before, it had been wired earrings, even though Louise had never pierced her ears.

Sara sighed. "I wish Garth would spend more time at home. Do you think he has a roving eye?"

"No," Louise said, although the answer was undoubtedly yes, and it annoyed her too. She poured herself more fizz.

Sara looked askance. "You drink too much," she said.

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The next evening, Louise had a chilled bottle of Chablis on the table. Garth was late, and she'd drunk half of it by the time he arrived, tousle-haired and handsome as the day they'd met

twenty years ago when he'd walked into the library where she worked.

Perhaps it was the booze that made her bold. "When are you going to leave Sara?" she asked. "I could have given you six children by now. It still isn't too late."

Garth's rueful smile and reply seemed too polished. "Cupcake, you know how fragile Sara's mental state is. I can't leave her. I'm sure you understand, being her best friend."

Louise kissed him, and plied him with wine, inwardly seething. She'd had enough. It was time to enlist help from Dan and his anarchist cookbook. She envisioned a bomb masquerading as a bottle of prosecco. Sara would never be able to resist it.

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As the festive day neared, several parcels arrived for Sara from Garth's sycophantic constituents. All such items were swiftly repackaged and sent to close friends. She'd just returned from the Post Office when Tash rang. Sara couldn't quite understand. "You want his password?" she said to her husband's secretary, barely managing to withhold her disdain and surprise. By Garth's account, Natasha was a dumpy old maid and stupid with it.

"Yes, there's an important email about a trip to New York that he wants me to see. His old password was SexyBoy1, but he seems to have changed it."

"I have no idea." Sara tried not to laugh. SexyBoy1 indeed! She would have words with Garth later.

Call at an end, Sara logged onto Garth's computer. To her surprise, SexyBoy1 took her into Garth's email straight away. Silly Natasha must have got it wrong. There was indeed an invitation for an all-expenses paid stay in NYC, but also an email from Louise. Curiosity got the better of Sara. She found herself gazing in horror at a photo of her best friend, lipsticked and false eyelashed, and totally nude except for three strategically placed cupcakes.

Sara waddled to the fridge for champagne to drown her sorrows. She would certainly be having words with Garth now. Bitterly, she regretted rewrapping that lovely boxed bottle of prosecco in a Christmas jumper for Louise. She wouldn't even bother with a card next year.

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The bottle of prosecco exploded under Louise's silver tinsel tree on Christmas Day. Luckily, Dan, visiting with a seasonal gift of mulled scrumpy, smothered the flaming branches with his alpaca poncho.

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Unable to persuade anyone she hadn't deliberately bombed Louise, it was six months into the New Year when Sara saw her husband again. She was cosy in an armchair, watching television in the secure hospital's sitting room. Garth was on the local news, arm around a pretty and heavily pregnant blonde as he spoke to his interviewer.

"I have supported Sara through her mental health issues for many years," he said. "Unfortunately, the strain on my

marriage has been too much and we have decided to part. Luckily, Natasha has agreed to become my wife once the divorce is finalised." He patted the blonde's bump.

Through her drugged haze, Sara felt a pang of loss, followed by a moment of triumph as she realised Louise would be chagrined too.

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Louise stood at the farmhouse door as Dan, rugged and muscled, returned from a day's work in the Welsh fields.

He grinned. "How's my baby?"

"Kicking again." She smiled. A juicy Daily Mail Online feature had informed her that Garth had paid a huge divorce settlement, after fathering a child with his secretary. Louise didn't care. Dan would make a better dad, and their smallholding suited a family far more than a city flat.

"Fancy a home brew?" Louise asked him. As Dan hugged her, she allowed herself a quiet smirk. She loved their new life.