



The Secret Gift: A shocking seasonal short story

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Giving gifts has never been so deadly...

When Brenda partakes in a game of 'Secret Santa' with her friends, she is expecting some harmless festive fun. But she gets a lot more than she bargained for when she makes a shocking discovery, one that turns the simple act of swapping gifts into a deadly game of revenge, murder and mystery.

Some gifts are best left undelivered...

A fast-paced psychological thriller short story full of twists from the bestselling author of UK #1 *The Doctor's Wife*, *The Couple's Revenge* and *Til Death Do Us Part*

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Nothing spoils the sight of a beautiful Christmas tree more than two dead bodies lying underneath it.

The tree itself was magnificent, tall, wide and well decorated, but the victims at the foot of it looked meek and small, and the constricted shape of their bodies was in stark contrast to the sprawling confidence of the pines above them.

The red baubles on the tree matched the colour of the blood that had leaked across the marble floor, while the white tinsel was as pale as the lifeless faces of the man and woman who had lost their lives here.

Discovering this gruesome sight was sure to ruin what was a magical time of year for every one of the people who stared open-mouthed at the Christmas corpses. This was not what this time of year was supposed to be about. It was about gathering with cherished family and friends, overindulging on food and drink to a backdrop of familiar festive tracks and movies. It was a time for mulled wine, eggnog, carol singing, Nativity plays and looking at the stars with childlike imagination for any sign of Santa and his sleigh.

What it was not supposed to be about was death.

But for the unfortunate souls gathered in the sprawling ground-floor foyer of this office in the centre of London, that's exactly what Christmas meant this year. Soon, there would be police officers, forensic experts and a Scrooge-like detective with several imposing questions. But for now, it was just the dozen employees and the two poor, deceased people beneath the tree.

What had happened to them? Who had killed them so close to Christmas? And why had their bodies been left so dramatically for anyone to see?

It had all begun with a secret gift...

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brENDA

‘Gather round, everybody. It’s time to play Secret Santa!’

The excitable cry from my boss, Mariah, causes everybody to stop typing and look up from their computer screens. Everybody but me because I wasn’t typing. I was killing time by doodling a sketch of a Christmas tree on a spare piece of paper on my desk.

Not for the first time, I think about how I should have followed my passion for art rather than take this safe corporate job. But here I am, pondering the futility of my life as the year draws to a close, another year when I feel like I have got further away from my dreams rather than closer to them.

I suspect I’m not the only one who feels that way.

Merry Christmas.

‘Come on, look alive, people,’ Mariah says as I watch my colleagues wearily rise from their seats and make their way over to where the boss wants us all to congregate, which is a space in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city. Through the glass, I see the spectacular sight of St Paul’s Cathedral standing proudly amidst the December gloom. It’s a frigid winter day out there, and while I’m not particularly thrilled about being at work, at least it’s warm inside here.

‘Make a circle. Move in closer,’ Mariah urges us. ‘Don’t be shy. We’re all one big

family.'

I see Kirsty, my work bestie, roll her eyes at me, and I stifle a giggle, but Mariah doesn't notice because now everyone is in position, she can begin.

'Okay, as you saw in my email yesterday, I thought it would be a fun idea for us all to participate in a game of Secret Santa this year,' Mariah says, beaming widely, her white teeth almost as dazzling as the diamond ring on her wedding finger. 'I have put everybody's name into this bowl, and I will now pass it around. When it gets to you, take a name, and that's the person for whom you will be buying a gift. But don't show it to anybody else. It's a secret, remember!'

Mariah really does seem enthusiastic about this game. This is the first Christmas she has been the boss here, but I guess the following Christmases are going to follow this routine too. Meh, I suppose it could be worse. She hasn't insisted on playing Christmas songs in the background while we work or suggested hanging a piece of mistletoe in the staff room. To be fair, daring to do the latter would probably be a Human Resources nightmare.

Nobody puts workplace harassment on their Christmas wishlist.

So far, all there has been to show Mariah's love for Christmas is the giant tree that was erected and decorated in the reception area yesterday by a team of three young men who looked like they were severely lacking in festive cheer. But now she is taking things further by introducing this game for us all to play.

As the bowl begins to be passed around, I watch as my colleagues take turns to pick up a small, folded piece of paper before they carefully open it to read the name written inside. But as in keeping with the spirit of the game, nobody divulges who they have drawn, so the 'Secret' part of this game is still safely intact. Now all we have to do is play the 'Santa' part.

As the bowl with all our names inside gets nearer, I start to worry about who I might draw out. Whoever it is, I'll have to buy them a present up to a value of ?0, as dictated by the rules in Mariah's email. This will be much easier if I draw the name of somebody I know well here, making it easier to pick a gift they might like or at least find funny. The ideal person would be Kirsty. I could just buy her something silly, something that she would guess came from me, and we could have a giggle about it. What I don't want to happen is to have to buy a present for somebody I barely speak to in this office, of which there are a few people who fall into that category. They're mostly the I.T. guys who keep themselves to themselves, presumably because they're far more adept at dealing with technology all day rather than human beings. But if I do draw out one of their names, maybe I'll be able to find a cheap cup or fridge magnet with some kind of witty laptop joke on it or something.

'Thanks,' I unenthusiastically say as the bowl is passed to me, and I put my hand inside it.

Running my fingers over the pieces of paper that are left, I try to make out like I have some tactic here and this isn't just a totally random thing. But in the end, I just give up and select a piece of paper before passing the bowl on.

As the colleague after me takes their turn to select, I open the paper to learn who I have got.

Please have mercy on me, Secret Santa.

Then I see the name I have drawn and rue my luck. It's even worse than I could have imagined, and now I'm wishing I'd got one of the boring I.T. guys. That's because the stakes have just gone up.

Of all the people I could have had to buy a gift for, why did I get her?

I got the boss.

That means I have to buy a present for Mariah, and judging by how excited she is about us all playing this game, I better make it a good one.

Or else.

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MARIAH

‘Has everybody picked a name?’ I ask my team, and while they are lacking in enthusiasm, they at least muster up enough energy to answer me by nodding to confirm that they all now know who they have to buy gifts for.

‘There are still a couple of names in there,’ I’m told as the bowl is handed back to me, and when I look inside, I see that they are right. But that’s okay because it makes sense.

‘Michael and Nat still need to pick,’ I say, referring to our two colleagues who are currently out of the office to attend a meeting with a client. ‘I’ll get them to do it when they get back.’

Satisfied for now, I prepare to let everyone know they can go back to work, but just before I do, I feel it important to stipulate the deadline for this game. It was in the email I sent, but as everyone who has worked in an office knows, sometimes, people don’t read their emails properly.

‘Remember, everyone needs to have bought and wrapped their presents by Friday and placed them under the tree in the reception area. Okay?’

Everyone mumbles back in the affirmative before I thank them and turn to go back to my office.

I enter my private workspace before closing the door, enjoying the quiet in here as opposed to the constant hum of voices that exist in the open-part section of this floor. A perk of being the boss is getting your own private room to sit in, and as I take a seat at my desk and look out over London, I smile to myself at another job well done.

It might not seem like it now for those who just pulled a name out, but this game of Secret Santa will be fun. Come Friday, when we're all gathered around the tree downstairs opening our gifts, there will be jokes and laughter and, most of all, Christmas cheer. That's why I want to do this. It's good for team spirit.

But having made everyone else partake in this game, it wouldn't be much good if I didn't keep my end of the bargain, so with that in mind, my thoughts turn to what I am going to buy for the person I randomly drew out. And it was random, even if somebody might not think so if they find out who I got. That's because I got Michael, my husband and fellow owner of this business. What were the odds of that? I suppose 15:1 because that's how many of us work here. But I'm not going to feel bad about having an easy person to shop for because it's the luck of the draw.

I already know what I'm going to buy for Michael with the ?10 budget. Despite the pair of us being millionaires, and alongside his penchant for the finest food, suits and hotel stays, one thing he doesn't mind being cheap is his white wine.

'Why pay more for a bottle?' he always says. 'The cheap wine will get you drunk just as quickly as the expensive stuff.'

I suppose he is right, and in this case, it makes knowing what to buy him very easy. There's a bottle of white wine I know he loves, and it comes in under budget, so I'll get him that. He'll figure it came from me, but that doesn't matter.

I quickly add 'Buy Hubby's Secret Santa gift' to the full To-Do List on my phone before temporarily putting aside all thoughts of Christmas for the time being and

getting back to the task at hand, namely running this company. But despite my best intentions, I can't help but think of the game and, more specifically, wondering who it might be who is tasked with buying a present for me.

Who drew my name out of the bowl, and what are they going to buy for me?

I guess I'll find out soon.

I hope it's worth the wait.

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brENDA

I know we've got until Friday before the Secret Santa presents are unwrapped but considering who I have to buy for, I am keen to make an early start. Assuming the game remains secretive, no one will know that I am shopping for the boss's present, but that doesn't mean I can relax and just buy anything. I need to do my best and put some thought and care into it, just in case someone finds out.

If I have to buy Mariah something, it has to be good.

But what can I buy her? She's the woman who already has everything. The handsome husband, the flashy job title and presumably, given what she earns here, a big house full of all the things she's ever wanted to buy. How am I supposed to get her something that she wants and on a budget of only ?10? It seems like an impossible task. She probably spends that much on her morning latte from some fancy café in the city, so how can I buy her a gift that will make her smile?

I have no idea, which is why I'm going to spend my lunch hour today shopping.

I leave my desk and head for the elevator, only pausing to tell Kirsty that I have a few errands to run, and she doesn't enquire any further, probably because she is in the middle of processing a pile of reports for a meeting this afternoon. I decided not to tell her that I was going out to get a head-start on the Secret Santa shopping because she would probably laugh and mock me for taking it so seriously. But she wouldn't do that if she knew the name I had drawn out, though she can't know because nobody

can know.

The rules of the game must be preserved.

As I'm buying for the boss, that's more important than ever.

I ride the elevator down to ground level then step out onto the magnificent marble floor of the reception area. When I do, I see the giant Christmas tree in all its glory only a few feet away from me, the red and white decorations looking splendid but the base of the tree currently bare.

There are no wrapped presents beneath it yet.

But there will be soon...

I smile at the receptionist before I step outside and instantly feel the cold December air on my face. Fortunately, it's the only part of my body that is exposed to the cool conditions because the rest of me is wrapped up appropriately for the current climate. I have my coat, my scarf, my hat and my gloves – everything a person needs when venturing outside in England at this time of year.

As I make my way along the busy streets, I pass hundreds of other people out on their lunch break, as well as tourists in the city, seeing sights or shopping for souvenirs. I'm envious of the tourists – their afternoon will surely be more interesting than mine – but it's not their fault they're on vacation and I'm not. Besides, I'll get some time off soon. The office closes for a week over Christmas, so I can relax then. But the thought of it soon sends a shiver down my spine that isn't caused by the weather I'm currently enduring. Instead, it's caused by the reminder that, for me, this Christmas is going to be a lonely one.

This is going to be my first Christmas without Paul, the man I loved and the man I

was engaged to marry before he sadly passed away in a car accident last January. His death hit me hard, and it continues to churn away at my insides whenever I think about him. Despite the period after Christmas typically being one for renewal, I know that in the new year, the first thing I'll have to endure is the anniversary of his death. But I try to remember the good times, like how he made me laugh, the holidays we shared together and, of course, last Christmas, which was the day he proposed to me during our short trip to New York.

I was stunned to discover that my present from Paul last year, on top of the whirlwind visit to NYC, was a sparkling engagement ring, but I couldn't say yes quickly enough, and once that ring was on my finger, I was proud to wear it daily. I can't see the ring now because it's hidden beneath the glove on my left hand, but it is on there, and while I might remove it one day, I'm not ready for that day yet.

What would Paul have bought me for Christmas this year? What would I have bought for him? It doesn't matter. The reality is that we'll never exchange gifts again. But I do have someone to buy for this year.

I need to find my boss a present.

So what is it going to be?

I'm considering everything, from a box of chocolates to a book. Maybe I can find a discounted paperback in a bookstore sale somewhere. But are those good ideas? Does Mariah eat chocolate? Her slim figure suggests not. As for books, does a woman as busy as her have time to read? Or will whatever novel I buy her be tossed into a drawer in her desk as she tuts and comments to her husband about her disappointing present?

I need to give this more thought, and as I walk down the street, I'm hoping I might see something that sparks my imagination. But while I do see something, it doesn't

help me decide what present to buy for Mariah. It does involve her, though. That's because I see her husband, also my boss, walking parallel to me on the other side of the road.

I'd recognise that fine head of hair, the confident gait and the smart winter coat anywhere. Michael really is a good-looking man, and I feel a pang of envy that Mariah will be waking up next to him on Christmas morning. I'd prefer my Paul, but Michael certainly would do if I was being picky. But as I watch him, I see that he is not alone. He's walking alongside Nat, short for Natalie, our head of Finance, and it makes sense because I know the pair were attending a meeting together this morning with a client. But the meeting must be over now, so why are they walking in the opposite direction to the office?

The street is incredibly busy, but I keep pace with them, my eyes on their bodies despite pedestrians and cars passing between us, and that's how I see the pair eventually stop outside a grand hotel, the kind with a butler on the door who can offer assistance with any luggage. But Michael and Nat don't have any luggage; they only have each other, so they are able to walk up the steps to the hotel and approach the doors with ease. Such ease, in fact, that just before the butler opens the door for them to allow them inside, I see Michael place his hand on the small of Nat's back.

Perhaps he is just being gentlemanly and guiding her inside, prompting her to go first. It could be an innocent touch, right? But then his hand lowers, and all innocence is lost.

Is Nat comfortable with her boss putting his hand where he has just put it, on the back of her skirt, a place that it surely doesn't belong? But as she turns her head and smiles, I would say she isn't just comfortable but was almost expecting it.

I watch as the pair disappear inside the hotel, the sight of the two of them so intimately close still burnt into my memory.

Something is clearly going on between them, and the question is - is it just inappropriate flirting and affection? Or is it a full-blown affair?

I don't know.

I'd bet Mariah doesn't know either.

Suddenly, I realise what her gift needs to be this Christmas, although it's hardly a gift in the traditional sense. It will be given with her best interests at heart, though.

I need to tell her what her husband is up to behind her back.

If I make it a part of the game, I can do it anonymously, and while it's not quite what I had in mind for a secret gift, this affair does qualify as a secret.

Or at least it does until I expose it.

MARIAH

It's snowing outside by the time my husband returns to the office from his meeting. It's a meeting that clearly overran, given it's now mid-afternoon and he left hours ago.

'What happened? You were out for ages,' I say to him as he closes our office door and begins the process of removing his coat, scarf and gloves. His hair is a little wet, so I guess he didn't make it back before the snowdrops began to fall, though they have quickly melted after coming into contact with his body heat.

'Sorry. The meeting went on and on,' Michael says as he hangs his coat up. 'But it went well. I think we have a new client.'

'That's good,' I say, relaxing as he approaches my desk, and I catch a scent of his aftershave, the same one I bought him for his forty-fifth birthday a few months ago.

I'm hoping he's not going to lean over my desk and try to give me a kiss because I've told him about doing that here in full view of our employees. They could see us through the glass panels of this office, so I'd prefer to keep any unprofessional affection at home, away from prying eyes. But Michael has not always been one to follow the rules, and he demonstrates that again by leaning in for a kiss, and while I turn my face away, he still plants his lips on my cheek. Then he starts humming a Christmas tune as he makes his way to his desk.

‘Somebody’s in a good mood,’ I comment as I see him take his seat and lean back, his hands on the back of his head and a satisfied smile on his face. ‘It really must have been a good meeting.’

‘I guess I’m just full of Christmas cheer,’ Michael wistfully replies.

‘Well, that’s good because you need to go and buy a Secret Santa gift,’ I remind him then. ‘You and Nat are the only two who haven’t drawn a name out of the bowl, so come on, time to pick yours.’

I carry the bowl to his desk then and hold it out for him to select one of the two remaining pieces of paper inside. But his smile has faded, and he doesn’t seem quite so festive now.

‘We’re not playing this, are we? I thought I told you it was a silly game.’

‘It’s good for office morale,’ I say, not for the first time since I discussed playing Secret Santa here. He didn’t like the idea then, and he obviously still doesn’t like it now, but it’s too late.

‘Come on, pick,’ I urge him, and he reluctantly takes a piece before unfolding the paper and reading the name written on it. Then he rolls his eyes, but I don’t ask him who he got because that’s the rule.

‘I guess this last one is for Nat,’ I say. ‘I’ll go and let her pick it now.’

‘I can take it to her if you like,’ Michael suggests.

‘No, you stay there. You’ve spent enough time away from your desk today. Get on with some work,’ I say teasingly before leaving him behind and heading in search of the last colleague to participate in this game.

I find Nat at her desk applying some lipstick, but she quickly stops what she is doing when she sees me approaching and tries to pretend like she is busy working. But I smile to let her know that she's not in trouble.

'We're playing Secret Santa and did the draw while you were out,' I tell her as I show her the bowl. 'But there's one name left for you. Happy to pick it?'

'Err, yeah, sure,' Nat says, still looking a little nervous, but she takes the paper, and with that, all the players are now in the game.

'Buy a present and put it under the tree in reception, and we'll all open them on Friday lunchtime,' I tell her cheerfully. 'Sound good?'

'Er, okay.'

I'm about to leave it there but decide to give her praise where it is due.

'Michael said the meeting went well. Congratulations.'

'Thank you,' Nat replies, still appearing a little on edge, but she always has been like that around me, and I guess some people are just a little nervous around their boss.

I smile at her before walking away, the empty bowl in my hand and feeling like I have done a good job of injecting a little fun into this workplace with my suggestion of the game. But just before I get back to my desk, I notice I'm being watched.

The person looking at me is Brenda, and it's strange, but she seems to be staring.

'Everything okay?' I ask her with a smile as I stop by her desk.

'Erm, yeah, fine,' she replies, before quickly averting her gaze, and I shrug before

heading on. But when I get back to my desk and take a seat, I glance back in her direction and see she is watching me again.

‘Everything okay?’ Michael asks, noticing my apparent unease.

‘I think so,’ I say, but I’m not so sure.

‘Cheer up, it’s Christmas,’ Michael says with a chuckle, and I guess he’s right, so I get back to work.

I hope Brenda does the same.

brENDA

I've spent all week internally debating what to do based on what I saw on the street during my lunch break. Michael and Nat are having an affair, and I assume Mariah doesn't know anything about it.

But I have the evidence. That's because I didn't just watch them enter that hotel in an intimate manner. I actually followed them inside and saw them checking-in at reception for a room together, him with his hand draped over her shoulder and her with her hand wrapped around his waist. They were so brazen about it, but that's only because they thought they were in a safe space, away from prying eyes.

They didn't know I was there watching them.

They certainly didn't know that I was taking photos of them on my phone.

What to do with those photos has been playing on my mind ever since I took them. This evidence I possess is damaging to so many people.

To Michael and his marriage.

To Nat and her future career.

And more importantly, to Mariah and her heart.

Telling her that her husband is cheating on her with one of their employees could destroy my boss. Does she deserve to have her feelings hurt? Maybe not, but is it fair to allow her to keep living oblivious to what is really going on?

I've thought long and hard about this.

And I've come to my decision.

It's now Friday lunchtime, and the time has come for us all to gather around the Christmas tree and open our Secret Santa gifts. I don't just need the clock on my computer to tell me that because Mariah is doing a good enough job of communicating it to us all.

'Let's go everybody. Time to open some presents!' she calls, making everybody rise up from their desks and head for the elevators, some more energetically than others. But I stay in my seat, at least until somebody notices.

'Hey, are you coming?' Kirsty asks me.

'Yeah, I'll be down in one minute,' I say. 'I just need to send this email.'

'Okay, but don't be too long. The boss is waiting,' Kirsty tells me with an ominous smile before she follows everybody else out, and within minutes, I'm the only person left on this floor.

I quickly get out of my seat and head for the desk I need access to. It's a desk I doubt I'll ever sit at myself because of all the hard work, and luck, it takes to earn a seat there.

It's the boss's desk.

It's Mariah's.

Aware that she, her husband and everybody else is currently gathering around the Christmas tree downstairs, I am safe to enter here and do what I need to do without risk of getting caught. But I can't take too long in case Mariah notices I'm not with them all, so I hurry up.

Taking the envelope with Mariah's name on it from my pocket, I place it down on her desk beside her laptop and then leave quickly, hurrying to the elevator before taking it down to the ground floor.

As the doors slide open, I see the backs of all my colleagues as they stand in front of the tree, but nobody turns to look at me joining them because they're all too busy watching Mariah and Michael handing out the presents. They look so good as a couple standing side by side, yet I know the truth. I notice Nat standing to the left of them, looking like just another member of the team, but she is so much more than that, or at least she is to Michael.

It's weird being the only one who knows the biggest secret in the office.

And now it's time to play Secret Santa.

We were all told to write the name of the person the gift is for on the wrapping paper, so it's easy for them to be distributed, and as everyone impatiently waits to open their gift, it's all still a mystery as to who purchased it for them.

'Brenda, this one is for you,' Mariah says, and I step forward to receive my present.

'Thank you,' I say, taking the wrapped box from her, and she still has no idea I just snuck into her office and left behind something meant for her only a few moments ago.

It only takes a few more minutes for everyone to be handed their presents and with that, Michael triumphantly declares we can now open them.

I am still feeling anxious about what I have done but need to fit in with the crowd, so I open my present and when I do, I get a touching surprise. My gift is something that means a lot to me and as I stare at it, I feel more than a little emotional. It's a snow globe with the New York City skyline inside it – the place Paul and I went to last year at Christmas shortly before he died. It is something that Paul would have bought for me if he was still alive. But he's not, which means somebody else bought this for me, somebody who knows that New York at Christmas will always hold a special place in my heart. I have a good idea who that might be because there's only one person in this office who I told about my Christmas trip to NYC.

It's Kirsty, the person I've talked about Paul so much with during brief breaks from work, in times before losing him and afterwards. She's been somebody I have confided in a lot, beyond our desks, in wine bars after-hours, including on some of the loneliest nights when I was missing my man and couldn't bear to go back to my apartment alone. Not only was she so supportive but she could understand my pain because she had lost her own partner a few years earlier. He had died suddenly while home alone and she had discovered him, which must have been awful. But she had somehow got through it, and she told me that I would somehow get through my loss too.

I look over at Kirsty, wanting to thank her for this gift, but she is occupied opening her own, so I decide to wait until we are back upstairs. As I think about the time when we'll all go back to our desks, I feel my stomach churning because I know what is waiting for Mariah on her desk when she returns to it.

Is it too late for me to rush back up there and remove it?

It's too risky. A few colleagues are already drifting back to the elevators, their Secret

Santa gifts in hand, so I can't do it now. They'll see me. I'll get caught. Mariah will know it was me who left the gift for her. So all I can do is stand and watch her open the other gift I got her, the harmless one, the one that is her 'official' Secret Santa present. It's a box of chocolates. I figured she could do with the calories and the comfort when she sees the other present waiting for her.

The unofficial one.

The one that is going to blow up her marriage and potentially the lives of everybody who works here.

MARIAH

‘Thank you so much to whoever bought me these!’ I say as I look up from the box of chocolates I have just unwrapped and at the faces of my employees. ‘They look delicious, and I can’t wait to tuck into them.’

I have no idea who had the great idea to buy these for me, which is the whole point of the game, but whoever it was, they have done a great job. Christmas is no time to be starting a diet, so I will open these chocolates and eat them guilt-free very shortly, maybe even as soon as I get back to my desk. But first, I want to see that the person who I bought a gift for likes their present too.

I watch my husband carefully as he unwraps his gift, but given the shape of it, there must be little mystery in his mind as to what it could be. There aren’t many things that are shaped like a wine bottle, and sure enough, as he sees it, he smiles to show he is pleased but not surprised. Then he looks at me because he has guessed who got it for him. But he’s sensible enough to keep up the pretence of the game in front of our colleagues.

‘This is brilliant. Thank you so much to whoever my Secret Santa was,’ he declares with a wide smile, and I know I’ll have to make do with him thanking me privately when we are back in the privacy of our office.

I look around then to see if everybody else has finished unwrapping their gifts, and it seems like they have. Then I make a quick check under the Christmas tree to ensure

there are no unclaimed gifts still lying under there. But below the tree is bare, which means the game has gone off without a hitch, and now everybody is the proud owner of their present. But perhaps proud is not quite the right word for some people because I notice that a few of the presents are on the 'jokey' side. Like the pair of handcuffs that one of my male employees, Bobby, has opened, which must be an in-joke between him and whichever colleague got them for him. Or the Hawaiian shirt that Jose in Marketing has just unwrapped, which causes him to laugh and make reference to it being a reminder of a bad night out he had once.

Some of the gifts are useful, some are just cheesy, but all in all, it looks like everybody has had a good time here, so that's the main thing.

Everybody except Brenda.

I notice she is looking at me with a very sullen expression, though she quickly averts her gaze when she catches me, before following a few of her colleagues to catch the next elevator. That's not the first time I've caught her staring at me this week, though I still don't know what might be causing her eyes to linger on me.

'Chocolate and wine. It looks like we both did well,' I hear Michael triumphantly say as he sidles up beside me. 'I guess we can't drink alcohol during working hours, but I do hope you are planning on opening those chocolates when we get back to our desks.'

He is eagerly eyeing up my sweet treats, so I guess I'll be sharing them with him shortly.

'Come on, let's get back to work,' I tell him, as I pick up a few stray pieces of wrapping paper that have fallen onto the reception floor, before we follow the last of our colleagues heading back to work.

When we return to our floor, I hear the office ablaze with excited chatter, and it makes me smile because it's another strong sign that the game was a success. Rather than everybody quietly and methodically getting on with their work, they are talking about the gifts and showing their co-workers what they got, and that's nice to see because it all builds team morale. I make a mental note to definitely play the same game with them all next year, and not just because somebody gave me chocolates. Then I re-enter my office, following behind my cheerful husband.

'I guess a thank you is in order,' he says to me as he opens the drinks fridge he tactically had installed in here when this office became ours.

'A thank you?' I reply as I watch him put his bottle of wine into the fridge.

'There's no need to keep up the charade,' Michael says with a laugh. 'It was you who bought me the wine, right? I mean, who else would know it's my favourite kind?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' I try, but the wry grin on my face ends the last bit of pretence I was holding on to, and Michael knows it.

'Thank you. I look forward to drinking it,' he says before taking a seat behind his desk. 'Just like I look forward to trying one of those chocolates in a moment.'

I walk over to my desk, the chocolates still in my hand, and as I sit down, I'm preparing to open them and share them with my hungry husband. But just before I tear into the box, I notice an envelope sitting on my keyboard. It wasn't there when I left to go downstairs, so somebody must have put it here.

'I'm afraid I'm going to have to give you some bad news,' Michael says suddenly, causing me to look up from the mysterious envelope. 'But I'm hoping the chocolates will cheer you back up once I've told you.'

‘What is it?’

‘I’m going to have to work late tonight,’ Michael replies with a sorry shrug. ‘It’s that report. It needs to be done by Monday morning, but I still have quite a bit of work left to do on it. I either work late tonight or take it home for the weekend, but I’d rather just get it finished today and then I’m free to enjoy the weekend with you. Is that okay?’

It doesn’t sound ideal, but it is plausible. I know that report’s deadline is Monday morning, and I know how much Michael hates work taking over his Saturdays and Sundays, so I guess I have to agree.

‘That’s a shame. I was thinking we could have gone out for dinner tonight,’ I say, ruing the loss of the Italian food I was hoping we could have both shared this evening.

‘Maybe tomorrow night,’ Michael says as he types something on his laptop. ‘I’ll get my work done tonight, and then we have all weekend to eat great food and drink some wine together.’

That sounds better than nothing, and working late is unfortunately just a part of the process sometimes when we’re the boss.

‘How about I stay back with you, and we can work on it together?’ I suggest. ‘That should speed it up, right?’

‘No, it’s okay. No point both of us losing our Friday night. I’ll be fine by myself. You go home and relax. Watch a movie. You deserve a rest after this week.’

Michael gives me the same charming smile that he has flashed me multiple times since we first met, and it’s an expression that always makes me feel good, so I leave

the conversation there and accept it for what it is.

That means my thoughts can return to the envelope on my desk, and I pick it up before opening it. Michael is busy typing away, so he doesn't stop to ask me what it is that I'm looking at, which is good, because for a moment after opening it, I'm not even sure what it is that I'm looking at myself.

It's a photo, but it takes me a few seconds to realise who is in it and what they are doing.

It's Michael, and he's with Nat. He has his arm around her shoulders, and she has her arm around his waist. They appear to be standing at a hotel reception desk. And they look very, very close.

I look up at my husband as if to ask him what the hell this is. But before the question can leave my mouth, the words catch in my throat and no words escape. That's because I'm suddenly too shocked, and afraid, to ask him what is going on in the next photo.

It's also because I don't need to ask him.

It's obvious to anybody who looks at this image what is going on here.

My husband is having an affair with one of our employees.

Is that why he seems so happy to stay back in the office tonight? Is she staying here with him? How long has this been going on behind my back? Under my nose? In this very office?

The questions flood my mind before another one rises up and takes hold at the top of the pile.

Who took these photos and left them on my desk for me to find?

Who wanted me to know about this affair?

Who in this office has just given me the gift of knowledge this Christmas?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:14 pm

brENDA

It was a long and slow weekend, the kind I've sadly become accustomed to since losing Paul. Most people wouldn't complain about the weekend dragging on because anything has to be better than being back in the office on a Monday, right?

Not so for me. I'm looking forward to getting into work.

Or at least I was until I saw what was waiting for me there.

The first hint that something is wrong comes after I have used my access card to enter the building, which is when I spot several of my colleagues standing around in the reception area. They should be heading to the elevators rather than congregating by the Christmas tree, so I wonder what is happening.

It can't be another round of Secret Santa because that was on Friday.

So what is it?

As I step closer, I hear lots of murmuring, and bizarrely, it sounds like somebody is weeping. Then I hear somebody enquiring if the police have been called. It's all very strange, and I'm just about to ask a colleague what is happening when I see it for myself.

When I do, I gasp.

As my hands come up to cover my mouth that hangs wide open in horror, my eyes stare at the two bodies lying beneath the Christmas tree. I recognise them instantly, despite the fact they aren't wearing any clothing and have blood on their naked bodies. It's not how I have ever seen this pair before, but I know exactly who they are.

It's Michael and Nat.

'There's no pulse,' Kirsty says solemnly, and I turn to look at my best friend who I hadn't even noticed was here until she spoke. 'They've both been checked, and they're both dead.'

'Oh my God,' is all I can muster, and that seems to be the sentiment that sums up this awful discovery because as more people arrive, they say exactly the same thing.

'The police are on their way,' I hear a male voice say behind me, but I don't turn around. I wish I could, but my eyes are stuck on the deceased pair beneath the tree.

'What happened?' I ask Kirsty, as if she might have any idea, though she quickly assures me she does not.

'I don't know. We just came in and found them like this. They might have been here all weekend.'

'All weekend?' I cry, thinking back to Friday, when I left this office.

That was the day we played Secret Santa.

The day we all exchanged gifts.

The day I left those photos on Mariah's desk.

I've spent most of the weekend regretting what I did, second guessing my decision to tell her and wondering what the consequences of it might be. But now I can see those consequences with my own eyes, it's obvious that I made a big mistake telling her what her husband was doing behind her back.

I mean, this has to be her, right? She killed them when she discovered the affair, didn't she?

I don't know the grim details of how she was able to kill them both and leave their bodies beneath this tree, but it must have been her.

She had the motive.

But does anybody else know that but me?

'Where's Mariah?' I ask Kirsty quietly.

'Nobody has seen her yet,' comes the reply. 'That poor woman. What a horrible way for her husband to go.'

'You don't think she already knows?' I ask, turning to my friend and frowning because to me this is obvious.

'No. She's not here, is she?' Kirsty replies.

'They must have been having an affair,' I say then, gesturing to the dead pair.

'Why do you say that?'

'Well, look at them. They're both naked.'

‘The killer could have left them like that.’

Suddenly, two police officers enter the building, and they immediately tell us all to stand back.

My workplace has now become a major crime scene, and a murder investigation is underway.

I already know who the prime suspect should be. But do the police know?

Where is Mariah, and how does she plan to get away with this?

Worst of all, am I reason this has happened?

MARIAH

I take a deep breath before beginning my prepared speech.

‘I know you have all suffered a terrible shock, and I deeply regret that you had to see such an awful sight on your way into work that terrible morning,’ I say as I look across the faces of my employees, all of whom are hanging on my every word. But their interest has nothing to do with my ability to hold their attention as a charismatic leader and more so to do with them all eager to hear what I, the grieving widow, am about to say to them.

‘As has been made clear to you ever since that day, there are support services available to any of you who feel you need it,’ I go on. ‘If so, simply speak to our Human Resources team, and they will get you all the assistance you need, for however long you need it.’

It’s important I clarify that point, which backs up the multitude of emails that the HR team have sent out since the dead bodies were discovered, because the last thing any of us needs is to be sued for failure to support our staff. There are bound to be some people here who are traumatised by what they saw, some who have suffered with nightmares or sleepless nights since, and that is why I would prefer that they seek professional help rather than find solace in substance abuse or by filing legal cases against my company.

With that important part covered, it’s on to what I assume most people here want to

hear me talk about.

‘Just like you, I was shocked and appalled to learn what had happened to two of our beloved colleagues,’ I go on, as everybody gawks at me. ‘Nat was a valued member of our team, and, of course, Michael was a great leader of that team.’

I pause for dramatic effect then.

‘As you all know, he was also my husband, which has made this particularly hard for me to process...’

My voice drifts off, before somebody rushes forward and hands me a tissue. I dry my eyes as I feel their hand on my shoulder before forcing myself to continue.

‘As you also know, the police have been conducting their investigation, and it was imperative that we didn’t speculate about what happened to Michael and Nat until that investigation was complete. None of us wanted to get in the way of the truth, and I am proud that we all did our best to cooperate with them so they could do their jobs.’

As I say that, my mind is filled with the images of the police officers swarming over this office, searching desks, speaking with staff who looked as nervous as rabbits in headlights, and trying to ascertain if somebody here was responsible for the murders.

‘Unfortunately, despite everybody’s best efforts, the exact events that led to their deaths remain a mystery, meaning Michael and Nat’s killer is still at large.’

I pause again, not that I need to because those words are heavy enough without adding weight to them.

‘But I want to assure everybody here that this is a safe workplace, and neither the

police, nor I, see any risk to any of you, so please don't worry about anything like this happening again. I promise you, this is over now.'

I want to leave it there, but somebody in the crowd speaks up, presumably on behalf of everyone else here.

'So what actually happened?' they ask, and everybody else nods as if desperate to know too. Everybody but Brenda, who I notice is just very, very still.

'The police's best guess is that somebody broke into this office to steal something but was interrupted by Michael and Nat being here. So they panicked and drugged them and...'

I purposely allow my voice to drift off, as I'm struggling to control my emotions if I keep speaking.

'But...' somebody else interrupts before hesitating slightly. 'They were found naked.'

Now everyone wants to hear my response to that, so I better have a good one.

'I don't want to speculate about things that none of us were witness to,' I try, but I have a feeling that is not going to be good enough, so I try again. 'But unfortunately, it's possible Michael and Nat were conducting a relationship that none of us here knew about. Most of all, me.'

I figure everybody here has already assumed that Michael and Nat were having an affair, but at least I have made it clear that I was as clueless as they were about that affair. Or at least I have pretended to.

Before I can be asked any more questions, I decide it is best to leave the rest of this in the hands of my HR Manager, so I turn and walk back to my office. As I do, I hear a

barrage of enquiries being fired in her direction, as I suspected they would be because I've hardly cleared everything up for them. Questions like:

'But what exactly happened to them?'

'How can the killer not have been caught?'

'Somebody must know something, right?'

I can't wait to get into my office and close the door and when I do, the incessant chattering recedes into the background, and I can breathe a sigh of relief. As I take a seat at my desk, I remind myself that the questions will die down in time. It's still early, only a few weeks since Michael and Nat's bodies were found, and while Christmas has come and gone and a new year has begun, this is obviously something that is going to dominate the conversation around here for a while yet. But people will move on because that's what they do. Something else will happen to spark some office gossip eventually, perhaps not something quite as dramatic as two dead bodies underneath a Christmas tree, but there will undoubtedly be something to give them all another thing to talk about soon. Like whether or not the next round of pay rises are fair, or if there will be another bonus this year, or who is going to take over from Michael to help me run this business?

It's that latter issue that I need to address, and I've already got a few candidates lined up. But it's not been easy to do, given the police investigation taking up so much of my time. There were so many questions to answer from them, questions that were far more probing than the ones any of my employees could fire at me.

Question: 'When was the last time you saw your husband?'

Answer: 'When I left the office to go home on the Friday night. Michael told me he was staying back to work late.'

Question: 'Did you know Nat was going to be staying late too?'

Answer: 'No, I didn't.'

Question: 'At what time did you think something was wrong?'

Answer: 'I didn't. Michael text me to say he still had lots to do and was going to sleep at the office. He had done that before.'

Question: 'So at what point over the weekend did you start to worry?'

Answer: 'I didn't. Michael was a workaholic. I presumed he was okay because he kept texting me to say he was.'

Question: 'Why weren't there any cameras in reception? Or anywhere else in the office?'

Answer: 'We're not a bank. We never thought we needed them.'

Question: 'So the first time you knew something was wrong was when you arrived at work on the Monday morning?'

Answer: 'Correct.'

Question: 'Do you have any idea who might have wanted to hurt your husband or Nat.'

Answer: 'No.'

Question: 'Why do you think Michael and Nat were found naked?'

Answer: 'No idea.'

Question: 'Could they have been having an affair?'

Answer: 'An affair. Oh, my gosh, no, I don't think so.'

So it went on. Lots of questions and lots of answers, over multiple days, before finally, the police stopped pestering me. They stopped because there is nothing they can do to link me to the murders. No evidence that I killed the pair. I used my access card to swipe out on Friday while they were both still alive, and as far as they can see, I didn't use it again until Monday morning, when they were already dead.

They don't need to know that I have a way to access the building without using my card.

As for the text messages that were sent between mine and my husband's phones, the messages the police have seen and used to determine I am innocent, they were easy to fabricate. All I needed was access to my husband's phone, and I had that as soon as I had dealt with him.

I leave my desk because focusing on work feels impossible at this time and decide to seek solace in the fridge, where my husband so often sought his. I open it up and take out the bottle of wine inside before pouring myself a glass. If any of my employees catch me, I doubt they will begrudge me of this. Not after what I have been through.

Unless it's Brenda, because she might see this for what it really is.

I'm not having a drink because I'm depressed, or stressed, or need a quick way to relax.

I'm having a drink because I'm toasting to a job well done.

As I savour the white wine in my glass, I think about the wine my husband consumed on the night he died. It's the same wine he would have shared with Nat, and because I had a feeling they were both 'working late' in the office together, I made an addition to that bottle my husband kept in the fridge. I unscrewed the lid, added the poison and then put it back.

The poison was something I had always kept in case of emergencies. A friend had told me about how to acquire it many years ago, a friend who was also a work colleague, and she had deployed it herself when she had discovered her own partner cheating. I never thought I'd actually have to use the poison that Kirsty told me about many years ago. I didn't think Michael would have an affair. But then I saw those photos and I felt the same anger Kirsty had felt in her own life shortly before she killed her cheating partner and made it look like a heart attack. That's when I decided to use the same poison too.

All Michael and Nat had to do was not drink it. If they were working, doing their jobs and being professional, they would be fine. But if they were using the office to carry out their illicit affair, and adding a little alcohol into the equation to spice it up, then they would suffer the consequences.

The consequences won.

The pair must have drunk the wine and been having a little 'fun' downstairs in the reception area. That's where I found their naked, poisoned bodies when I snuck back into the office hours later. I could have left them where they lay, but I was wearing gloves thanks to the frigid weather outside, so I dragged them underneath the tree and left them there instead. A little dramatic, perhaps, but it certainly filled me with some Christmas cheer.

I killed my cheating husband and my cheating employee, and so far, I have gotten away with it. But will I continue to do so?

I'm confident, except for one thing. One person in this office knows what the police, and everybody else, do not. One person told me about the affair while Michael and Nat were still alive. That person seems to be keeping that fact to themselves.

But for how long?

It's time to find out.

It's time to give my Secret Santa something in return.

brENDA

All of this, from the two dead bodies under the tree to the ensuing police investigation, started the moment I decided to leave a gift on Mariah's desk. The envelope with the photos inside telling her that her husband was having an affair was the catalyst for the craziness that has ensued since. That's why, as I return to my own desk after a lunch break, I feel my heart skip a beat when I see an envelope waiting for me.

I don't want to pick it up. I don't want to know what is inside.

But an envelope has to be opened, doesn't it?

Especially one with my name written on the front of it.

I do just that, and as I take out the paper inside, I see there is a written message for me.

Thank you for the gift. Please come to see me now because I need to give you one in return.

I stare at the handwritten message and figure it has to have come from Mariah. She's the only person I gave a gift to, although I suspect she is not referring to the box of chocolates here. She is talking about the photos featuring her husband's affair. But how does she know I'm the one who gave her that? It was supposed to be a secret.

But it seems the secret is out, and worryingly, that's not all.

She has something to give me.

As I stand up from my chair, my legs feel heavy, and I am wondering if they have the strength in them to carry me to where I need to go. But I manage to start moving, although as I do, I think about the person I am on my way to see.

Mariah.

My boss.

And the person I suspect of murdering Michael and Nat.

I knock on the closed office door before I hear Mariah's voice telling me to enter. It's firm, authoritative, strong, as a leader's voice should be, but I don't feel any of those things myself as I open the door and walk in.

I find Mariah sitting behind her desk, and she looks relaxed when I enter, as if she was expecting me and also as if she doesn't have a care in the world. That seems strange considering her husband was recently murdered, but if she did kill him, like I fear, I suppose she wouldn't be as devastated as she could be. But she could at least try and pretend, right? I assume she pretended with the police, which must be why they seem to have dismissed her as a suspect, but right now, she looks calm and cool, which only serves to make me more anxious.

'Brenda. Nice to see you. Please, take a seat,' Mariah says, gesturing to the vacant chair on the other side of her desk, and I close the door before sitting down.

I'm still holding the letter, and when Mariah sees it, she smiles.

‘So you read it,’ she says with a knowing nod. ‘Which means you are here for your gift.’

‘I’m not sure what...’ I start, but Mariah raises a hand, and I fall silent.

‘I know you were the one who put the photos on my desk,’ Mariah says, confirming my worst fears.

‘What photos?’ I try lamely, but Mariah just rolls her eyes, so that prompts me to give up and ask my next question. ‘How?’

‘I use the webcam on my laptop to record important calls,’ Mariah tells me. ‘And it just so happened that I had a call just before we swapped Secret Santa presents. But I’d forgotten to turn the camera off, which meant when I came back to my desk and saw the envelope, all I had to do was check the recording to see who had put it there.’

I can’t believe my bad luck, and Mariah even goes as far as to acknowledge it.

‘You might think that was unfortunate on your part, but I’m glad I know who it was. That way, I can say thank you. You alerted me to my husband’s affair and for that, I will always be grateful.’

The elephant in the room, at least from my point of view, is what Mariah did after she got that information. Did she kill Michael and Nat? I can’t exactly just ask her, can I? What if she says yes? I’d have to tell the police or else I’d be in trouble for withholding information on a crime. But would I even get the chance to tell them, or would Mariah kill me too to silence me?

I decide to say nothing about what might have happened between her, her husband and his mistress, at least not yet, anyway, and instead, mention something else.

‘The note you left on my desk said you had a gift for me,’ I remind her, and Mariah claps her hands together.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ she says. ‘Although, like your gift to me, I am afraid it is bad news.’

I frown. What is she talking about?

‘You remember the Secret Santa present you got?’ she asks me, and I nod.

‘The New York snow globe.’

‘Who do you think bought that for you?’

I’m about to say Kirsty’s name, but Mariah’s expression tells me that assumption would be wrong. But if it was her, it begs the question: how did she know the sentimental value of such a gift?

‘You’re wondering how I could have known the meaning behind what I gave you,’ Mariah says, as if reading my mind, and I nod my head. ‘Well, this is the part where I give you the same bad news you gave me. This is the part where I tell you that your partner was cheating on you.’

I stare at Mariah, horrified that she would even suggest that Paul had been seeing someone else other than me before his death.

‘What are you talking about?’ I cry, feeling disgusted, but Mariah remains calm.

‘I understand this is a shock. Just like it was a shock when I saw the photos you took of Michael and Nat. But I’m afraid it’s the truth. Paul was being unfaithful.’

‘How do you know this?’ I ask nervously, and Mariah pauses before answering me firmly.

‘Because I’m the one he was being unfaithful with.’

The room falls deathly silent as I stare at my boss and try to figure out all sorts of things in a matter of seconds. Is it true? Could it be possible? Could she have been sleeping with Paul?

‘No,’ I say, shaking my head. ‘Why are you saying this?’

‘Because you deserve to know. You gave me the gift of knowledge this Christmas, so I’m returning the favour. I know it’s shocking, and you probably hate me right now, but it is the truth. Paul and I slept together after you brought him to the summer party. You remember, the one on the rooftop.’

I recall the party, that balmy summer night eighteen months ago. I also recall that the partners of employees were invited, which is why I brought Paul along. And of course, I remember introducing him to Mariah, telling him that she was my boss. They shook hands, and he made a joke about having to be on his best behaviour around her. That joke now feels very, very ominous.

‘He’d had a few drinks that night, as had I,’ Mariah goes on as I continue to recoil in horror. ‘We flirted a few times when it was just the two of us, and we made a lot of eye contact during the party when we were separated. I can’t actually remember which one of us said we should swap numbers, but we did, and then we met up privately a week later. I’m sorry, Brenda. I feel terrible, but you deserve to know that he wasn’t the perfect man. Just like I deserved to know Michael was not the perfect man either. The truth is, none of us are perfect, are we?’

I need to get out of this office and maybe even out of this job, so I stand to leave, but

before I can go, Mariah says...

‘You did me a favour, and I hope that, in time, you will see that I have done you a favour. If I hadn’t told you, you would have gone the rest of your life grieving that man. But this should make it easier for you to move on. Now you know he was deceitful, so it should make the memory of him feel less painful to you. One day, you will thank me for this, just like I thanked you for leaving the photos on my desk.’

I don’t know what to say to that, and given the delicate situation, I decide it might be best to bite my tongue and not say anything until I have had more time to plan my next move. As for that plan, I intend to just walk out of Mariah’s office and go back to my desk. But just before I do, I pause, and the question comes out of my mouth before I’ve had chance to keep it in.

‘Did you kill them?’ I ask, staring at Mariah and trying to get a read on her.

She stares back at me, not flinching in her eye contact.

‘Like I said before, thank you for telling me about their affair,’ is all she says, but it’s enough to answer my question.

As I walk back to my desk, I realise several sad things are true.

One, my boss slept with my partner before he died.

Two, my boss is a murderer.

And three, I am stuck here working for her.

But by the time I get back to my desk, I realise I don’t have to be as powerless as I currently feel.

Just like Mariah did when she found out she had been cheated on, I could take action.

I could do something about this.

The only question is what?

brENDA

We all say the same things every single year.

‘Where has the time gone?’

‘How is it December already?’

‘Can you believe it’s almost Christmas again?’

I’ve certainly said it a few times recently, and I’ve heard it a lot too, especially in this office. I’m definitely hearing it a lot now as we all stand up from our desks and make our way down to the Christmas tree in reception to do what has now become an annual tradition here.

It doesn’t feel like it’s been twelve months since we played Secret Santa.

But it has.

That means it’s time for more gifts.

As I join my colleagues around the tree, I see the organiser of this game standing beside it. Mariah is here, front and centre, ready to distribute the gifts again, and just like last year, she is joined by the person she runs this company with. But it’s not Michael because, of course, he lost his life twelve months ago.

Instead, there is a new man in his place.

Frank is now the person standing beside Mariah, the person who was hired to replace Michael after his death and a person we have all got to know well since then. Some people here have got to know him better than others, and as I watch the way Mariah laughs at one of Frank's jokes, it's clear there is more going on between them than just a working relationship.

It was the worst-kept secret in this office that these two were a couple as well as working alongside each other, and it was confirmed when we heard they had arranged a shotgun wedding in Las Vegas a few months ago. Theirs is certainly a whirlwind romance, and Mariah has certainly moved on quickly from Michael, which only makes it more obvious to me that she killed him and got away with his murder.

But we're not here to judge our bosses and what they get up to in their private lives. We're here to open our gifts, and as I receive the wrapped present with my name on it, I tear it open, intrigued to see what I have received this year. Unlike last year, when I got a gift with sentimental value that turned out to be laced with a shocking truth, all I have this time is a pair of fluffy socks. It's a benign present, a sweet and simple gift, and I smile so that whichever one of my colleagues bought it for me will see that I am happy enough to receive it. Then I look over at Kirsty as she opens her gift because I'm the one who bought it for her.

It was a relief to draw my best friend's name out of the bowl rather than my boss's, because it certainly made shopping for a present less stressful. I bought Kirsty a cup with the words 'Office Babe' written on the side of it and an image of a frazzled-looking woman, which is supposed to signify that it's impossible to look our best here with the stressful workload. It's the cringeworthy, lame type of humour that one comes to expect working in an office, and Kirsty regards the present in the manner it was intended, rolling her eyes and forcing a laugh, and that will do for me. Then I look over to Mariah, who is opening her present, and as I watch her unwrap a scented

candle, she seems happy enough with her gift too.

I'm happy that she is happy, which might seem strange because Mariah slept with the man I loved and then told me about it. I also feel like she has gotten away with the murder of two people, so her having a big smile on her face hardly feels like justice. Especially not now she has already moved on with the hunky new guy here.

Unlike last year, this game of Secret Santa has been far less stressful and dramatic, or so it would seem. But the reason I'm in such a good mood is because I know that, just like last year, the secret gifts don't end underneath the Christmas tree. There is always time to leave presents on people's desks, and there is another one waiting right now on Mariah's, just like there was last year.

I can't wait for her to open it.

Once the gifts have been distributed, we all return upstairs to our desks, but as I reach mine, I notice something waiting for me. It's a present wrapped with a neat little red bow, and while I didn't see who left it here, I have a pretty good idea who it came from. That's why I make sure to open it discreetly, out of the sight of Kirsty and any of my other nosy colleagues, and I do that because I have a feeling it is something that could start a lot of gossip if anyone but me sees it.

I unwrap my secret gift in the privacy of a locked toilet cubicle, and I smile when I see the lacy, red lingerie inside. This might seem like a very inappropriate thing to receive in the workplace, and it is, but I don't care because I know who it came from.

This gift is from Frank.

That's right, my new boss, and Mariah's new man, has just secretly gifted me a very naughty present. But I'm not shocked. I'm actually laughing.

I can't wait to wear it for him, and the best part of this is, I won't have to wait long.

I won't even have to wait for a time when Mariah isn't around.

That's because when she opens the secret gift on her desk, she isn't going to be around for very long...

MARIAH

‘I told you Secret Santa was fun,’ I say to Frank as we re-enter our office. ‘It really does help boost morale.’

‘You were right, as always, darling,’ he replies with a sarcastic tone, which makes me laugh. He’s good at doing that, making me laugh. He’s good at lots of other things too, which is why I feel so happy with him. Frank came here to help me run this business, and us becoming lovers was not intended, but it has been a very happy consequence. Who would have thought that murdering my former partner and his mistress would lead me to be so happy, just a year later?

It’s safe to say I have no regrets. I don’t even regret that Brenda still works here. Sure, she might suspect that I am a killer, but she has not said anything. She might be scared, or she might just be smart enough to mind her own business. Whatever the case, she has been no trouble to me, so I have been no trouble to her. We are all getting on with our lives. It’s just that some of us are getting on with them better than others.

As I recline into my luxurious new office chair, I think about how good it is to be me. A woman who gets what she wants and if I don’t, I do something about it until the world corrects itself. Right now, I have everything I need. The career. The man. The power.

Then I notice I have something else too.

‘What’s this?’ I ask when I notice the wrapped gift by my keyboard.

It wasn’t there when I left, and for a moment, I flashback to last year, when I returned to my desk to find the photos of Michael and Nat waiting for me, the photos that Brenda took and the photos that led to me taking two lives.

What is this?

And could history be repeating itself?

‘Looks like Santa isn’t done being so secretive yet,’ I hear Frank say, and when I look up at him, I notice the mischievous grin on his face. The expression tells me he is behind this mysterious gift, and that relaxes me because it means it is not from Brenda, or anybody else who might be about to tell me another grim truth.

‘You did this?’ I ask him as I reach for the gift, and Frank shrugs.

‘I just wanted to get you something to show my appreciation,’ he says, still smiling. ‘Not just for us as a couple but for you helping me settle in here professionally too. For being such a good colleague. For all the hard work you do, especially after all you have been through in the past.’

Frank doesn’t know the half of what I have been through. All he knows is that my former husband and another colleague were murdered, and the killer was never found.

That is all he needs to know.

‘You really shouldn’t have,’ I say in that self-deprecating way a person does when they are pretending they didn’t need a present but are secretly delighted to have been given one.

I then waste no time tearing through the wrapping paper to reveal a box containing a very expensive bottle of white wine.

‘Wow, how much did this cost you?’ I ask, estimating it to be three figures, at least.

‘Don’t worry about that. Just worry about filling up your glass,’ Frank says before he hands me a sparkling wine glass, one of the two we keep in here.

‘I can’t drink it now,’ I say, looking at the time and seeing that it is not even 3pm.

‘Yes, you can. You’re the boss,’ Frank says breezily. ‘I’ve seen your calendar, and you don’t have any more appointments for the day. It’s Friday afternoon, and it’s Christmas. I could tell everybody they can go home early. Nobody will come in and bother you.’

‘You’ve got it all worked out, haven’t you?’ I say with a wry smile, and Frank winks. ‘I suppose you do make a compelling argument.’

With that, I slide open the box and take out the bottle before unscrewing the lid and pouring myself a glass. Just as I have done so, I notice Frank preparing to leave.

‘Aren’t you joining me for one?’ I ask him, looking around for his glass.

‘I’ll tell the staff they can go home early, and I just need to go over something with the Accounts team before Monday. But it won’t take long. I’ll be back in half an hour, and you better have a glass ready for me then.’

‘I will,’ I say, excited to share this wine with him in thirty minutes. But for now, it looks like I’m drinking alone, and as Frank steps out and closes the door, I have the privacy to do just that. He is right. It’s Friday afternoon. It’s almost Christmas. I’m the boss. We can send everyone home early, and no one will bother us. So it’s fine for

me to enjoy a little alcohol at my desk in the middle of the afternoon.

I put the glass to my lips and savour the sweet liquid inside as it goes down my throat.

This really is good wine. Almost too good to share, in fact, though I will definitely be sure to save some for Frank when he returns.

But for now, I have half an hour, and I'm going to enjoy this glass all to myself...

brENDA

There's been no snow yet this year and barely even a frost. Maybe it's global warming, or maybe the climate is just being random, but so far, this festive period has been quite mild. But that mildness extends beyond the weather and into my personal life too because this year, for the first time in a while, I'm planning on it being a very calm Christmas.

It's been two years since that first game of Secret Santa, the same year I discovered Michael and Nat's affair before they both ended up dead beneath the tree. And it's been one year since the last time I played that game, a year that proved to be just as eventful in the end.

So will I be partaking in a third consecutive game of Secret Santa as Christmas draws close once again? I give the answer to that question a few seconds after I have been asked it.

'No, not this year,' I say to Kirsty after she has entered my office to find out if I want any help organising the game. 'I thought we could all do with a year off.'

'That's probably a good idea,' Kirsty replies, looking relieved. 'Any more dead bodies and us employees will be outnumbered by ghosts.'

I chuckle at the joke whilst at the same time feeling relief that if ghosts are real, they don't seem to be frequenting this office. The reason for that relief is because I would

most definitely be haunted by at least one ghost if their spirit chose to return from beyond the grave, and that would not be pleasant. It would also make my new job here a lot harder.

But it would probably be what I deserve.

‘I won’t take up any more of your precious time, boss,’ Kirsty says then with a smirk, the same smirk she always displays whenever she calls me the ‘B’ word.

I smile as she leaves, knowing full well that the pair of us will never truly get used to the fact that I am now her boss. But at least I’m a good boss, a fair one, and I like to think I’m everybody’s friend here. That’s important because I wouldn’t want any of my employees to hate me.

I certainly wouldn’t want any of them to kill me.

As I lean back in my chair, I think about the woman who sat here before me. It was Mariah, the woman who is no longer with us.

But she didn’t leave this company to take a job elsewhere.

She left this company in a coffin.

I gaze out over the streets of London and think about how cold the ground must be where Mariah’s body now lies in the cemetery. She was buried last January, a few weeks after she died, because it took extra time for the police to determine her cause of death. When they found out what killed her, they realised she had been murdered.

The only thing they are yet to find out is who did it.

The bottle of expensive white wine that Mariah found on her desk last year was from both me and Frank, her new man. We gave it to her, complete with poison inside,

because we knew that once she drank it, she would be out of the picture, leaving the pair of us to not only continue our relationship but for him to hire me to take over her position.

Poison isn't as hard to find as people might think. It certainly isn't when a good friend comes to you and tells you where to get it. It was certainly a surprise when Kirsty told me she not only felt Mariah had used poison to kill Michael and Nat, but that she knew how to get it. But I had the feeling that rather than sharing this story out of concern, Kirsty was sharing it because she knew I needed help. She knew Mariah was dangerous and she knew I was possibly embroiled in something deadly with her.

Why did I kill Mariah? It's simple. When I first realised Frank was getting close to Mariah, I offered him a quiet word of warning. I told him, despite what the police and everybody else thought, I knew who had murdered Michael and Nat. I told him I felt Mariah was a killer because he deserved to know. He deserved to know the danger he was putting himself in by being with her.

Not only did Frank thank me for such a warning, he started to spend a lot more time with me. Inviting me into important meetings, working late with me and offering to take me for a drink long after everyone else had gone home. The pair of us became close, and given what we both knew about Mariah, it didn't take long for us to start plotting against her. Why wouldn't we? If we were going to embark on an affair, surely it made sense to get rid of the woman who we both knew would kill us if she ever found out.

Frank would be safer if she was dead, and I certainly would be too. I didn't like the idea of Mariah having a hold over me forever, but with her gone, I would be free. Free to work here without fear. Free to have a relationship with Frank. And free to one day assume her role and become joint boss at this company, with Frank alongside me once he promoted me.

Of course I felt bad. But whenever I did, I reminded myself that Mariah had admitted to me that she had been sleeping with Paul. She hurt me, so I hurt her back. Eye for an eye. Or, as it was Christmas, a gift for a gift.

Mariah drank that poisoned wine, died in her office, and Frank called the police when he discovered her body. When the police investigated who had sent the wine, all they discovered was that it had been posted to the office by an unknown person, meaning there was no way to trace who had sent it. All the receptionist could say was that she had taken delivery of a package for Mariah and had it put on her desk.

So far, Frank and I have gotten away with what we did. But I will not push my luck any more. Enough is enough now. I've got everything I need. The job. The man. The freedom.

There's no need to disrupt any of it by taking a silly risk, or rather, playing a silly game.

There will be no more Secret Santa in this office on my watch.

There will definitely be no more secret gifts...