

Secret Santa

Laura C. Brandenburg

“I signed you up.”

“For what?” I asked my older sister as I rescued a sliver of cookie dough from the batter-covered spatula in my hand, ignoring the fact that she’d breezed into my kitchen unannounced.

“The Secret Santa site.” The mom of two boys, Caitlyn delivered the line like she was announcing what’s for dinner.

When my jaw dropped, and no words tumbled out, she draped an arm around me. “Oh come on, Han. I told you I was going to do it.”

I tossed the spatula in the KitchenAid bowl, wiping my hands on my apron with attempted nonchalance. “Well, what did you say about me?”

She squealed and pulled out her phone. “I knew you’d be excited.”

When Caitlyn had not-so-subtly hinted she wanted to sign me up for a Secret Santa site, I’d argued and resisted for as long as I could. It wasn’t the first dating site she’d tried to get me to join, and so far, I’d held her off despite her usual reasons—I’m not getting any younger, the boys need cousins, I need more social interaction, and her favorite, I’m too pretty to be single. But my objections this time fell on deaf ears, for one, because her selling point hinged on it being a Secret Santa site and not, she emphasized, a dating site.

Oops. I realized she’d been scrolling through my newly published profile page. “I think this will be good for you, Sis,” she was saying. “Really. The holidays are so lonely, and we’ll be in Indiana for two weeks this year with Josh’s family, and this is actually my gift to you, a distraction for the next month.”

She shoved the phone in front of my face. “Do you like it? I spent hours on this, and I’m not the wordsmith you are. You’ll have to come up with your wish list.” Her eyes pleaded with mine. “One gift a week for four weeks. And with only one person to think about, how hard could it be?”

Focusing on the screen for the first time, I frowned. “Who is Wendy Hill?”

“You are, silly. I can’t use your real name. At least Nate suggested I not.”

“Nate?” I picked up the spatula and began collecting chunks of dough to roll and cut out with the new Christmas collection I’d bought this afternoon.

“He said pseudonyms—yes, he actually used that word—should swap the first letter of your first and last names. So, Hannah Wagner, meet Wendy Hill. We couldn’t agree on an *H* last name, so we just went with ours.”

I balled a portion of the sugar cookie dough and then tossed it into my mouth. Apparently my nine-year-old nephew and everyone else in the Hill household had plotted my profile. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Had I really become so pathetic?

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As usual, my sister was right. I’d been skeptical about the whole ordeal—how to exchange gifts without giving up my address to potential psychos. But the site—a genius business endeavor created only for Metroplex zip codes—allowed users to search the site for an appropriate twenty-dollar gift, click “send to Wendy” and, voilà, the gift magically arrived at its targeted destination: Keller, Texas.

My Christmas beau turned out to be a snore who’d scoped the site and made a wish list so specific it required no thought whatsoever. DC comics and 90s movies and cheap Xbox games. The guy practically screamed: I live at home, in my mom’s basement.

“You know, I happen to think all three of those are excellent gift suggestions.” Dustin leaned against my five-foot cubicle, stroking his beard that he proudly sported even though No-Shave November had passed five days ago. “And look how ruggedly handsome I am?” He grinned, the smile lines next to his gold-flecked espresso eyes creasing, and my heart skipped a beat.

I faced my computer again, willing my pulse to slow as I pretended to scroll through leads. “And I bet Jenny finds your arrogance—I mean, confidence—attractive too.”

“I guess not.” His voice dropped two octaves.

I spun around, brushing a lock of hair out of my face to study his. Still leaning over my cubicle, his muscular arms draped across the top, he shrugged and offered a half smile, not nearly as car-stopping as the usual grin. I cleared my throat in an attempt to find my voice. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Eh, it’s all right. We had a good run. Made it a full month, I think.” The lighthearted smile returned.

“Hey, that’s about three and a half weeks longer than the last girl.”

He winked. “Call me crazy, but I know my wife’s out there somewhere. God’s timing will be perfect.”

With that he pushed off and returned to his side of our three-by-four personal workspace, and I concentrated on breathing once again. His wife? God’s timing? Friends and cubicle neighbors for a year, I was beginning to think I didn’t know this guy at all.

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My wish list had turned out to be a question. Perhaps a little cryptic. Maybe my uncertainty over the whole ordeal had played a role, or maybe I just wanted the guy to have a little challenge, but I’d written my “list” with a smug smile on my face: *If Catherine Linton and Mary Berry could be morphed into one body, what would she want for Christmas?*

The first package that arrived at my house got my attention—a collection of new cookie sheets tied together with a bow and a typed note that read, *For all your Christmas baking needs*. But the second gift really piqued my interest: a beautiful, brown leather-bound journal with a wrap-around flap and a thin leather cord that tied at the edge. The note, a little more clever this time: *When the Brontë inspiration hits you*.

I smiled and breathed in the rugged scent. My Santa was certainly doing his best to know me based on one little question. I supposed I could at least give him a gift that mattered and drop him a note in response.

And I knew just the gift to give him.

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“Well, isn’t that romantic?” Dustin shoveled another bite of his hamburger into his mouth, those chocolate eyes teasing.

We sat on the patio of the café adjacent to our office building, enjoying our usual Friday lunch outside. The crisp December air cooled my face, but with my scarf and sweater, the breeze turned out to be the perfect temperature. I’d just shared my Secret Santa’s third gift—a Jane Austen collection box, complete with all my favorite works. The note read: *Jane Austen couldn’t pen a heroine as admirably complex as you*. “It is romantic. He gets me. You wouldn’t know because you don’t have a romantic bone in your body.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Is that so?”

I continued to chew and wondered why my heart felt like lurching out of my chest every time his eyes met mine. This is Dustin. We’re just friends. And we’d been just friends—eating lunch together, competing with clients, bantering over the leader board—for almost a year. But the whole wife and God’s timing comment had my head spinning for two weeks. In all honesty, I’d begun to think he had an inner romantic after all.

Clearing my throat, I racked my brain for a new topic. “How’s the wife search going?”

“Eh.” He reached for his Coke and took a long sip. “No new leads, but quit trying to change the subject. We’re talking about your love life.”

Another stomach flip flop. We usually talked about *his* love life. Not that my Secret Santa could be considered a real love interest. I didn’t even know the guy, but I guess it’s the closest I’d come to a boyfriend since, well, college. Either way, I wasn’t about to tell Dustin that my mystery gift-giver had ignited a spark—so much so that I’d tried to contact the site administrator to find out whether I could get his identity. I was pretty sure the handsome man in front of me—a twenty year old trapped in a thirty-year-old’s body who argued Xbox games had cinematic-worthy features—would call me a stalker. And he might be right. But how could a complete stranger know me so well?

“What’s your final gift going to be? I mean, two mediocre Xbox games and a copy of *You’ve Got Mail* don’t exactly reflect the same measure of thought he’s putting into this.”

“Hey!” I stole one of his fries and tossed it at him. “That 90s movie happens to be my all-time favorite. It was a personal gift. From my heart.” My face flushed, and I studied the men and women in suits coming and going from the downtown Dallas buildings. “Besides, I didn’t think I’d really care about this whole Secret Santa thing until—well, I guess he has my attention.”

Dustin dipped the fry in ketchup and dropped it into his mouth, swiping his tongue across his lips to clear a rouge dollop of condiment. “He does, does he? I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“Nothing. So—the last gift?”

I searched his face, wondering whether my suspicions were justified. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” I winked as I stood and collected my trash, exhaling at last once I breezed through the exit and willed my heart to beat again.

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The final gift, neatly wrapped with a red bow, slid across my passenger seat as I screeched my brakes and reached out to grab it before it launched into the floorboard. It didn't matter that I'd lived in the Metroplex my entire life, the morning traffic still irked me.

"Earth to Hannah? Or do I need to call you Wendy to get your attention these days?" My sister's voice blared through the speakers of my Accord.

"Har. Har. Traffic is awful this morning."

"So, the carving?"

"Right. He carved 'Catherine + Heathcliff = Love Forever' on the bottom of the stump. You know, one of those cut outs people use as serving platters."

"And that means something?"

I rolled my eyes. "Didn't you read *Wuthering Heights* in Mrs. Garrett's class?"

Her silence confirmed she'd be giving me her *What do you think* stare if I could see her face.

"So you're just gonna leave the gift on his desk? And then what?"

"And then I'm gonna hope to God I'm not a complete fool. Because if I am, you know this means I have to find another job. In another country. Maybe on another planet."

Caitlyn laughed. "And you say I'm dramatic."

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I prayed I wasn't the biggest dolt in the world as I placed the *Action Comics No. 500* on top of the many paper piles covering Dustin's desk before leaving work. He'd disappeared somewhere but left his phone, so I figured this was my window if I was really doing this.

Slipping away, undetected, I'd made it halfway across the pavilion before he yelled after me. My heart stopped. Giving him the gift took all the courage I had. Facing him felt like Mount Everest.

Within seconds, he'd matched my stride and tugged my arm, sending a bolt of electricity through me and bringing me to a halt. "I love it. Best gift ever—even for a snore who lives in his mom's basement, right?"

I chewed on my lower lip and shoved my hands in my coat pocket, searching for the words, but his Hollywood grin left me speechless.

He stepped closer, his woodsy scent colliding with the wintergreen gum he chewed. “When did you figure it out?”

My smile curled sideways. “Well your cubicle walls are covered in DC comics stuff, and you talk non-stop about movies and Xbox, so it really should’ve been obvious.” I cocked my head to the side. “But I couldn’t remember telling you about *You’ve Got Mail*.”

“What are the odds we’d be matched, Hannah? I’d call that God’s timing.”

Pulling me in with one strong arm, he buried his free hand in my hair. Our lips came together slowly, naturally, as if they were familiar magnets, connected again. When I could catch my breath, I offered a grin as wide as his own. “I wanted it to be you.”



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A lover of language and grammar, Laura spends her days trying to inspire college students to love writing as much as she does. She lives in rural West Texas with her handsome husband and two surrogate children, an 80-pound Weimaraner and a rescued Wheaten Terrier.

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