

The background of the cover is a vibrant, colorful collage of Christmas-themed elements. It includes a Christmas tree, wrapped gifts in various colors (red, blue, yellow, green), and a white envelope with the text "A SHORT STORY" printed on it. The title "Secret Santa" is prominently displayed in the center, surrounded by a decorative border of white starburst patterns.

Secret Santa

A SHORT STORY

TERESA TRENT

The snow fell steadily as I parked my green Toyota in front of the Chamber of Commerce. It was the Monday after Thanksgiving and it was already starting to look like a Currier and Ives Christmas card. I stopped to put my money in the meter and watched Mercedes Johnson going into the small storefront building.

She smiled and waved, "Good morning, Molly." Mercedes was from the savings and loan and the only one who seemed to be making any money this month.

Everybody in this town needed cash ... quickly. Ever since the plant closed down last July, the number of participants in the weekly Chamber meetings had lessened drastically as business after business closed down. There was a rumor that another industry was looking at the old plant, but it was only a rumor and the chance of something happening seemed to be somewhere far off in the spring. Even my little store was feeling the crunch. Usually this time of year, my store, Christmas Sensations, was packed with the holiday crowd. Customers would come through the door and get knocked over by the smell of holiday cinnamon and then be entranced by lilting carols over my sound system. Twinkling at them were rows and rows of crystal angels, shiny Santas and Christmas villages complete with twirling skaters. I had seven fully decorated trees placed strategically around the store full of smiling elves, blinking lights, heavenly angels and reindeer who looked as if they could fly off the tree and around the room. It was a wonderland to behold, if you liked that sort of thing.

Unfortunately, now that the plant had closed, many people were making do with whatever Christmas decorations they had. December had always been the month that paid the bills for the rest of the year, but this year I might have to visit old Mercede's at the savings and loan.

I hit the snow off my red leather boots at the door and entered onto the freshly polished wooden floors. The president of the Chamber of Commerce, a local Realtor, looking sleek in a black Christmas vest, a suede skirt and black boots tapped her gavel.

"This year because many of us are suffering from slumping sales, we are going to do a little something to boost morale."

Marcus from the antique store nodded over his morning paper at Doris the dog groomer who was brushing dog hair off her black fuzzy sweater. Mrs. Fisher, who ran the convenience store, was sitting next to the Mr. Tran the dry cleaner. She nodded as she sipped at her coffee. The door in the back of the room opened and in walked, or should I say bounced, the owner of the fitness studio that had just opened up last month. I gave her three months before the out of business signs would adorn her windows. She had on purple spandex tights sticking out from her black ski coat and her hair was in a shimmering blond ponytail. She flashed a freshly whitened smile and sat down next to me. Joy. That was her name. Joy. The Chamber president droned on.

"And so here we have put all of your names in this lovely Christmas box." She lifted up a large box wrapped in red and green foil paper. "Get ready to receive a fun little gift every week from your Secret Santa. When you are playing 'Secret Santa' be sure not to let out who your identity is until the final meeting here on December 24th. "

"Oooh!" Joy squeaked. "I can't wait!"

Oooh, I echoed in my mind. One more person to buy for this busy Christmas season. When the box came to me, I drew out and unfolded a small piece of paper. Of course, it contained Joy's name, and I barely had a chance to conceal it before her boppin' ponytail bounced my way.

That day is what started my Christmas of the Secret Santa. During the next week my business started picking up, but my sales were still half of what they had been the previous year. The next Monday morning, I rushed to my store before the breakfast meeting and grabbed a little Christmas bell and stuffed it into a gift bag before entering the chamber. I was met at the door by the president who quickly mixed in my bag with all the others. We went through the weekly business and then the brightly colored gift bags were passed out to the excited business owners. I saw Joy get hers and give the expected "Oooh!" when she looked at the bell. Everyone in the room seemed to have received something beautiful and fitting for the season except for me. The president of the Chamber walked over and handed me a plain envelope with my name scribbled on it. I tried to hide my disappointment from the other members who were now all staring at my so-called gift. I smiled at the crowd and ripped open the envelope. Scribbled on a half sheet of paper were these words:

Sorry, it's been a tough week and I didn't get to the Secret Santa thing. IOU 2 Secret Santa Gifts next week.

Your Secret Santa

Before I could hide the note, the president said: "Did you get a gift certificate? I'm sure buying a Christmas trinket for someone like you would be difficult."

I gulped and answered as my small voice filled the silent room. "My Santa didn't have time, but promised two gifts next week."

The room full of Chamber members laughed, and I quietly put the note back in the envelope, and so it followed. The next week I gave Joy some elf wind chimes and instead of two little gift bags, I received yet another envelope, this one with a coffee ring on one side of it. We seemed to be going downhill in the presentation department.

Sorry, another tough week. I really haven't forgotten about being a Secret Santa.

IOU 3 Secret Santa Gifts next week.

Your Secret Santa

Once again I was laughed at in all corners of the room. Who was this no-good, lazy, unthoughtful person? How come I had to be the lucky one stuck with the procrastinator of the year? My business was going nowhere fast and my Secret Santa was a joke. I looked around the room. Who could it be? The dog groomer? The dry cleaner? The ever-so perfect Joy? Whoever it was—when the identity of Secret Santa was revealed I was going to be sharing more than the Christmas spirit!

I celebrated for all the wrong reasons the morning of the last Secret Santa meeting. I was finally going to find out who had been collecting Secret Santa gifts, but not giving anything in return.

The president of the Chamber had outdone herself and decorated all of the tables and had even provided some holiday music. The main table was full of gaily-wrapped red and green packages and

gift bags stuffed to the hilt. I immediately began searching for my envelope. It didn't take long. It had been put near the back, so as not to ruin the festiveness of the rest of the display. "Tis the season to be chintzy, fa, lalalalalalala." I mumbled to myself.

The moment finally came to reveal ourselves and deliver our gift bags to the intended victims. I presented myself to Joy and received a boisterous hug. I pulled myself away from her spandex embrace and turned around. There stood Mrs. Fisher, the owner of the convenience store, standing behind me with a sheepish look on her face. She was holding the white envelope. At least today there were no stains on it.

"Listen..." she began, before I could fire at her with the speech I had been saying in my head for the last three weeks, "I've been a lousy Secret Santa. My store's right next to the closed down plant and I've just not had any money. I'm sorry I've been such a disappointment." The older woman's eyes looked tired and a tear dropped down on her discount store Santa sweatshirt.

With the forgiving spirit that comes at Christmas, I stopped myself from preaching at her. A silence passed between us.

"That's okay, Mrs. Fisher. Christmas Sensations has been having trouble, too." I sighed and added. "Don't worry about it."

Mrs. Fisher stared at the floor, still embarrassed by her chain of sad IOU's. She jammed the envelope into my hands and walked out of the Chamber meeting. Thinking it was probably an IOU for next year, I opened the envelope and found a lottery ticket with one last note.

I know this just costs a dollar, but it's all I had.

Merry Christmas

Your Secret Santa

Gladys Fisher

I looked at the lottery ticket and checked the amount of the jackpot printed near the bottom. It was up to 37 million. Yeah, right, like I would win. I walked over to Marcus reading his morning newspaper.

"Hey Marcus, could you look up the winning numbers from the lotto drawing on Sunday?" He didn't look too happy being taken away from the entertainment section of the paper, but shuffled the pages until he found the lottery section.

He read out the numbers, his voice droll and uninterested.

Each number clicked like a tumbler on a lock.

I checked it. I checked it again. I checked it three times.

Two years have passed since that day and I've opened a chain of Christmas Sensation stores with the 37

million I won that day from my Secret Santa. Mrs. Fisher doesn't worry about money anymore because I slightly overpaid her for her store and sold it to Joy who set up a bigger fitness studio to now serve the upscale move-ins working at the new plant.

I may have had the worst Secret Santa to ever exist, but sometimes just giving what little you have is more than enough.