

Santa's Little Helpers

"The Ice Queen has landed." Maddie whispered across to Jen from her workstation. Jen could feel Kirsten stiffening beside her.

It was all the warning Jen needed. She took a deep breath and the smell of Chanel No 5 wafted over her. Swivelling in her chair she watched Audrey approach their workstations.

As she observed the blonde beauty Jen immediately felt scruffy. Audrey's hair was pulled back into its habitual French roll. Her ultra slim form was complimented by the cream silk suit which she had worn until mid-afternoon without it gaining a single crease. Jen was sure that Audrey's razor sharp eyes could see the mark where she had spilt her morning coffee. With Jen's soft well-padded figure there was no way the spilled coffee could land anywhere but right on the top of her chest. When she had left home that morning her long auburn curls had been tamed into a braid but Jen could feel wisps fluttering around her in a halo. Her hair had a mind its own and fought to be free. Jen knew that she was considered pretty in a cute freckled kind of way but she was never going to be competition for the impeccable Audrey.

Jen rose to her feet but the three inch heels on Audrey's patent black leather pumps allowed her to tower over Jen's five and a half foot frame.

"Ladies. I still haven't received your Secret Santa requests," said Audrey.

Behind her Jen could feel Maddie rolling her eyes and Kirsten's smirk. She knew how both of them felt about the new Secret Santa arrangements.

"Yes Audrey, we hadn't forgotten," she said patiently. "If I remember correctly we have until 4 pm today to get that to you."

"Need I remind you there are to be no requests for food or alcohol and nothing over \$20?"

Jen heard Maddie's indrawn breath. She needed to get Audrey out of the area before the shit hit the fan. She smiled and stepped forward hoping that Audrey would take the hint.

"Audrey, we did get the email. We will have our requests to you by four."

"Thank you Jennifer. I'll rely on you to organise Madeline and Kirsten." Audrey turned and returned to her guard post outside Joseph's office door.

Audrey was barely out of earshot before Jen heard Maddie muttering "Yes Jen-if-er because Mad-e-line and Kerr-s-ten can't organise themselves. Bitch!"

"Maddie..." Jen said warningly as she turned toward the other two women.

"I know. I know! But I'm right and you know it. We had Secret Santa every year for nine years very successfully without her interference. It's not like in an office of seven people we can't just get together and pull name out of the hat. She takes over everything. She makes me so mad I want to spit." Maddie flung herself out of her chair, her blonde curls and slim form practically quivering with rage. "And what's with this "ladies" business? We're in our thirties; not seventies!"

"Speak for yourself, you old bag. I'm only twenty nine," Kirsten piped up, laughing. "You have to admit since she took over as Joseph's executive assistant things have been much more efficient." Jen smiled at Kirsten who was always the optimist looking for the bright side.

As much as they might resent it Kirsten was right. In the six months that Audrey had worked in their small suburban branch of the much larger Melbourne based firm Elders Harrison & Elders Accounting things had been much less chaotic. Their principal accountant Joseph now met clients on time, meetings ran to schedule and the women knew that their head office was impressed by the changes. The lack of joy might make the climb up the stairs to their open plan office on the second floor harder and harder every day but Jen kept telling herself it was a small price to pay for the benefits of ultra-efficiency.

But at the start of the Christmas season the unhappy atmosphere was taking its toll. All three women usually loved Christmas. Before Audrey came it had been their responsibility to organise Secret Santa, book the Christmas party and decorate the office. With her small stature and dark pixie looks Kirsten had been the perfect Christmas elf.

This year there was only one small tasteful Christmas tree in the foyer because Audrey thought this would "be professional to the clients". The office Christmas bash was now going to be an elegant, alcohol free lunch in the office and Secret Santa was a tightly

controlled affair with each staff member nominating what they wanted. According to Audrey, this would eliminate unwanted or inappropriate gifts.

"What is Joseph thinking, letting her get away with taking over Christmas? It's always been ours." Maddie wailed the question Jen had been pondering for weeks.

"He always does what makes his life easy. You know that." Kirsten's voice was tight and the other two knew she was right. Joseph might be a handsome and charismatic man with a talent for making and managing money but he invested a lot of time and effort into keeping his work colleagues at arm's length. Audrey's real job was to make sure that Joseph didn't have to deal with the mundane human emotions of daily life and she did it very well.

"Let's just do the damn Secret Santa and get it over with," said Jen. "Then we can spend some time planning our un-Christmas party."

"Ho bloody ho" muttered Maddie as she and Jen sat down. All three women swung back toward their computers.

Jen typed *vanilla scented candles* in an email to Audrey and hit send. She was tempted to put down what she really wanted; a bottle of Vanilla Vodka and half an hour in the stationery room with Joseph. He might be emotionally unavailable but you could bounce coins off that man's abs. She chuckled as she wondered what Audrey would make of that.

The day of the work Christmas party promised to be a hot one.

It was a week until Christmas but Jen had yet to feel the Christmas spirit. She just needed to get through the day. She tugged at the neckline of the pretty floral dress she was wearing. It showed a lot more cleavage than she was usually comfortable displaying at the office but it was a Christmas party after all.

As she rushed out her apartment door she grabbed both the presents she had wrapped the night before. She had the silk scarf that was Maddie's Secret Santa gift. It cost more than \$20 but no one else needed to know. She also had the present for the party she and the girls planned to go to after work. The party in the evening sounded fun and she hoped she would find her Christmas spirit there. She certainly wasn't going to find it at the work party.

Jen hurried to catch her tram. With the CEO coming out to the burbs from the head office for the office party it wouldn't look good if she were late.

The party was going perfectly; just as Audrey had planned it. With appropriate decorations and a light catered lunch it was just what the branch needed to show their Chief Executive Officer Brian Elder that they could hold their own with the head office.

Audrey looked over to see Jennifer, Madeline and Kirsten huddled together in a corner of the office. There was a burst of raucous laughter from the women. She frowned at them. If she didn't know better she would think that they had been drinking. This is why Audrey had insisted that there be no alcohol once she had known that the CEO would be attending. These people were so unprofessional. Just look their floral dresses. Audrey ran her hand down her black sheath dress and smiled at Brian who was talking to Joseph. He was such a distinguished gentleman; exactly as a CEO should be. She hoped that the women's behaviour did not reflect badly on her or Joseph.

They had finally finished distributing the Secret Santa presents. Audrey had tried to convince Joseph not to have Secret Santa. It was unnecessary and childish. "Everyone loves it" had been his response. They had finally come to a compromise when she had realised that he could not be convinced to forbid it.

Audrey had been surprised to find that there was one present left over. There was no nametag on it but when she enquired no one had missed out on a gift. Audrey decided not to make a fuss. If these people were so disorganised that they couldn't even get Secret Santa right it was not her job to clean up after them. Soon it wouldn't be her problem thank goodness. She discreetly slipped the unclaimed present in her desk drawer. Someone else's incompetence could be to her benefit.

Brian coughed to gain everyone's attention.

"Firstly I would like thank everyone for their hard work this year. In a time of economic challenges we are doing well and that's thanks to your sterling efforts. In particular I would like to congratulate Joseph. His hard work over the past six months has really paid off. I would like to take this opportunity to announce that Joseph is being promoted and will be moving to head office in the New Year. Thank you again. I know that this was going to be

an alcohol free event but under the circumstances Joseph and I thought it would be nice if we could all toast his promotion with some champagne.”

Jen, Maddie and Kirsten giggled as Maddie hid the bottle of vodka back in her desk draw.

“Do you think they would notice if we put vodka in the champagne?” Maddie asked.

Kirsten snorted. “I seriously doubt that we need to put any more booze into the booze we have been boozing upon. Wait. Is that a redundant redundancy?” All three women smothered their laughter; looking around to see if anyone noticed.

“Oh look tall, dark and studly coming this way,” Kirsten whispered.

Jen looked across to see Joseph winding his way through the office staff toward them, receiving congratulations along the way. He thanked people as he went but did not stop as he came steadily towards the women.

“So Bubble, Toil and Trouble; how’s the witch’s coven today?” Joseph asked.

The three women looked at him in complete shock. They never imagined that Joseph could be so rude. All three of them bust into unrestrained laughter.

“Didn’t you know your nicknames are Bubble, Toil and Trouble?”

The women laughed harder. They didn’t need to ask which was which.

“Oh my God that’s too funny. Who gave us those nicknames?” asked Maddie.

“Well to be honest, I did” replied Joseph.

Jen was now laughing so hard she began to cry. Joseph handed her a clean white handkerchief.

“Jen, can I talk to you in private?”

Jen raised an eyebrow at the other two women and followed Joseph into his office chuckling all the way.

When Joseph closed the door behind her she asked, “So Joe, what do you know?”

Joseph smiled at her. "I just wanted to let you know that although I don't have the final say I have recommended that you take over from me as principal accountant," he said.

Jen sobered immediately. "Really?" she asked.

"Yes really. You're a great operator and you really know your stuff. I think it would be a well-deserved promotion," Joseph replied.

"Urrm. What about Audrey? Would I have to have her as my EA?" Jen had bypassed sober and gone straight to nauseous.

"Audrey is coming to head office with me. I know she is not the most pleasant of people but her efficiency works for me. With her gone things around here can get back to normal. This was the worst Christmas party ever. You can thank me by promising to invite me to the one here next year."

Jen began to laugh. "Sure."

"Jen. As I am moving to head office. I was wondering. Would you like to have dinner with me some time?" Jen had never heard Joseph stutter before. He looked about as comfortable as someone about to have a tooth pulled.

"Yes Joseph, I would like that very much." Jen smiled at him.

"How about tonight?" he asked looking hopeful and holding out his hand to her.

Taking Joseph's hand Jen replied "What about tomorrow night? I can't tonight. I am going with Maddie and Kirsten to the RSPCA Christmas party for dogs. I even wrapped some dog food to put under their giving tree but I can't find the bag it was in anywhere."