

# THE GIFT GAFFE

BY JORDAN MILLSAPS



“Alright, everyone bring your gift to the circle. Once we’ve all found a seat we’ll get started.”

Melody Sax grabbed her box and followed her coworkers to the circle of metal chairs set up for their gift exchange. Settling into the nearest chair, she balanced the box on her knees and admired her wrapping job. This year she’d challenged herself to wrap all her gifts without using tape, and after a couple of YouTube tutorials, she was pleased with the results. The intricate folds in the brown paper of this particular gift, topped with a bow she’d crafted herself of shiny red ribbon looked great. It had taken so long, though, that she’d only wrapped two gifts, this one and one for her sister.

Truthfully, wrapping the gift was the only part of this whole party thing she enjoyed. Melody had always thought the gift exchange was kind of silly, but in the interest of Christmas cheer and team spirit, she always participated.

“Is this seat taken?”

She looked up to see Graham Highland gesturing to the seat on her left.

“No, be my guest,” she replied, heart pounding as he sat beside her. He’d always had this effect on her, ever since he started working in her department. The last two years had been a montage of daydreams in which he noticed her, asked her out, swept her off her feet, declared his love for her, etc. In reality, she’d only spoken with him a handful of times, and only about work.

He leaned over to make room for someone trying to scoot through beside him and she could feel the heat from his body when his arm brushed hers. She shivered and he turned to her.

“Are you cold?”

“No, I’m fine,” she assured him. “In fact, it’s pretty warm in here.”

“Yeah, it is,” he agreed. “I’m starting to think this sweater was a bad choice.”

Melody disagreed. The sweater in question flattered his toned physique and the blue magnified the color of his eyes. With close-cropped blonde hair and a hint of five o’clock shadow, he basically looked like he stepped out of a men’s clothing catalog.

“Okay, folks,” their manager, Cindy, said from the center of the circle. “We’re going to keep this super simple. On the count of three everyone is going to pass the gift they brought to the person on their left, then we’ll all open them up together.” She took her seat and called out the countdown.

Melody passed her gift to Graham and accepted a green bag stuffed with fluffy white tissue paper from Amanda on her other side. She tugged out the paper and peered inside. “Oh, how cute!” She pulled out a painted glass snowman ornament. “Thank you! I love it.”

“I figured everyone likes snowmen,” Amanda replied with a smile. “It brings back childhood memories.”

“That’s true, and it will look great on my tree.”

Grinning happily, she turned to see what Graham thought of the gift she’d brought and froze in horror.

Graham looked at her with a bewildered smile on his face as he held up his gift. “Well, this is not what I expected.” Displayed in his hands were two pairs of bikini-cut underwear, complete with hippopotamus faces on one and flamingoes on the other, both lined with pink lace.

Her face felt like an inferno as Melody snatched the underwear away from him, shoving them into the gift bag she still held.

“I am so sorry,” she squeaked. “I must have brought the wrong gift.”

Glancing around, she breathed a sigh of relief as she realized no one seemed to be paying attention to them. Her mortification would be limited to an audience of one, though that was bad enough.

“Now I’m disappointed,” he said, with an exaggerated frown. “I thought those were very classy. You have excellent taste.”

Melody laughed, her embarrassment fading just a notch at his good-natured response. “Thank you, I hope my sister agrees. We used to give my mom a hard time about giving us socks and underwear for Christmas, but then after she passed away a few years ago we realized we missed it, so we started buying underwear for each other. It turned into a game, trying to see who could find the most outrageous styles.”

“I hope you win,” he said with a grin. “So, if that gift was meant for your sister, what was in the correct package?”

“A bottle of hot sauce I picked up on a trip to Texas this summer. Now that I think about it, I should have realized this box felt too light,” Melody admitted. “But don’t worry, I’ll bring it to work for you tomorrow if we can just pretend that this...” She shook the bag that now hid her mistake. “...never happened.”

“What never happened? I have no idea what you are talking about.” He winked.

“Perfect. Just like that.”

“I do have one condition for my continued secrecy, though.”

“Okay...” Melody’s stomach clenched. She knew that had seemed too easy.

“I’d like to use that hot sauce to cook dinner for you. I make a mean buffalo sauce.”

“Really? I mean, yes, that sounds great!”

“Are you free Friday evening?”

“Totally free.”

“Perfect, then let’s say my place at seven o’clock?”

How had she gone from utter humiliation to euphoria so quickly? For two years she’d admired this man from afar, wishing she dared to approach him. This was a Christmas wish come true.

“I can’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be.”