



SECRET SANTA



S. RANNIKOV
Shadow Dominion, Book 2

18+

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Secret Santa

«Автор»

2026

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Secret Santa / С. Ранников — «Автор», 2026

Alexandra Belenkaya, the fresh-faced lawyer, thinks shes joined a quirky St. Petersburg law firm. But her colleagues—Artur Gennadievich, the manipulative boss; Elvira "Cruella" Egert, the ice-queen strategist; and Pyotr "Pechkin" Mokin, the wolf in a cheap suit—have other plans. When a pink vibrator appears in her Secret Santa gift, Sasha is thrust into a psychological chess match where desire and deception are indistinguishable. Is it a cruel joke? A test of her limits? Or an invitation into a world where power is taken, not given? As Sasha unravels the mystery, she plays the game—flirting, probing, and teasing—only to realize shes the one being hunted. The offices holiday cheer masks a dark undercurrent of domination, where every glance, every whispered innuendo, and every "accidental" touch is a move in a high-stakes seduction. By the time the masks come off, Sasha discovers the truth: she was the prize all along. The vibrator was just the first step. The real gift?

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Secret Santa

"A gift wrapped in innocence, a game laced with sin—who left the vibrator in her Secret Santa box? The hunt for the truth is as intoxicating as the pleasure it promises."

PROLOGUE

"Well? It's the twenty-third," Artur Gennadievich said, his eyes scanning the office like a weary general reviewing his troops.

"And?" Elvira didn't bother looking up from her monitor. "Artur, if you're about to tell me we're wrapping for the year a week early and you're flying the whole firm to Egypt, just say it."

Mokin let out a dry chuckle, his nose still buried in a mountain of briefs.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I've got a date with Karnaukhov & Son on the twenty-seventh. Artur, you're the boss—why not just cut the Karnaukhov loose? Pay me a retainer, and I'll personally escort the three of you to the Maldives. On the company's dime, of course."

"Freeloader," Elvira muttered, her mouse clicking aggressively through a wall of flickering text.

"Right back at you, Cruella," Mokin shot back, the insult landing with practiced, low-energy ease.

"What a team." Sasha leaned over her contract, her voice a low hum of disbelief. *"My mother warned me this place was a menagerie. I've been here three weeks and I haven't even seen a 'welcome' flower."*

Alexandra Belenkaya hadn't reached the one-month mark at this cramped law firm on the Petrograd side of the Saint Petersburg. Her mother had sold it as a cozy, "practically family" operation, swearing that the owner, Artur Gennadievich—an old classmate—was a man with a heart of gold. She'd promised Sasha that as a fresh law grad, she'd be treated as one of their own. But the narrative had shifted lately. Her mother had recently started quoting old Soviet cinema:

"Remember that movie *"Courier"*? Where the hole puncher falls on the guy's head? Watch your skull, honey."

Artur—or "Arturchik" as the veterans called him when they weren't being polite—was a soft, rumpled man in his forties. He was a landscape of sweaty cheeks, a protruding belly, and unkempt nails. He lived in a rotating uniform of threadbare flannel shirts and a knitted vest that looked like a relic from a 1970s cartoon, paired with trousers so wrinkled they barely qualified as pants.

The outward slovenliness grated on Sasha's nerves. Her mother insisted he was a legal titan—the kind of mind that made the greats look like amateurs. But Sasha hadn't seen him in the trenches yet. The boss didn't do courtrooms. That was for the "warrior and the fixer"—Mokin and Elvira. Yet, whenever Artur glanced at Elvira's trial notes, his brief, surgical strikes of commentary left Sasha floored. He was brilliant, in a quiet, terrifying way.

"No Egypt. No Turkey," Artur muttered, dragging a cardboard box out of the supply closet. "Just a small corporate event. Something to smooth over the... jagged edges... that have developed between us this year. Comrades, we're doing Secret Santa."

"Artur," Mokin finally looked up, his expression a mix of professional respect and genuine annoyance. "I value you as a mentor. I really do. But you're killing me with this. We have a twenty-three-year-old associate who's been here five minutes. What is she going to think of us?"

"Think what you want, but as the Director, I'm making a call," the boss said, scrawling names on scraps of paper and tossing them into the box. "For once a year, we are going to perform an act of corporate friendship. We are going to surprise each other."

"Surprise?" Mokin's smile turned predatory as he glanced at Elvira. "Artur, last year Vitalik surprised Miss Cruella so thoroughly that she lived off his gift for six months, and he ended up resigning. He was a smart kid, too. It took us five months to replace him with Alexandra."

"The idiot gave me a cookbook for *Healthy and Delicious Meals*," Elvira said, finally turning her chair to face them. "Fine, Artur. I'm in. But on two conditions. First: the budget is a thousand rubles. Period."

"Of course, Elechka," he replied, mopping the sweat from his brow with a crumpled sleeve.

"Second: no public unwrapping. We open them wherever we want—at home, in the car, I don't care. I refuse to sit here and perform 'joy' over whatever piece of junk Mokin tries to insult me with."

The Director let out a long, heavy sigh of relief.

"Deal."

"And one more thing." Elvira set down her nail file, her gaze sharpening as she looked at the three men. "If some bastard gives me another book, I will find out who it was. And I will strangle them with my bare hands."

"If I pull your name, Cruella, you're getting a bottle of vodka," Mokin smirked. "So, Artur, remind us of the rules. Please tell me they've changed at least as much as the tax code since last year..."

CHAPTER 1

After a month on the job, Sasha had finally learned to brace herself. The casual jabs, the mockery, the snide remarks that bled through the lines of professional courtesy—it was the new weather of her life. Her mother insisted this was simply how the world worked. According to her, the only places where coworkers smiled and lent a helping hand were in those sugary, vintage director Eldar Ryazanov films.

Sasha hadn't seen a Ryazanov film in years. In fact, she'd struggle to remember the man at all if *The Irony of Fate* wasn't blasted on every TV screen like a broken record every New Year's Eve—a state-sponsored attempt to convince the masses they were all heavenly fools who cherished the movie above all else.

Watching her colleagues now, Sasha arrived at a sobering realization about adulthood: Soviet cinema was a collective hallucination. In the real world, the script was written in envy, sabotage, and the art of the setup.

She was fresh out of college, a long road ahead and the dust of naivety still clinging to her heels. Living alone with a mother who shielded her from every breeze, Sasha lived up to her surname—Belenkaya. White. Pure, snowy white. A dandelion in a gale. If a client walked into the office and asked for Belenkaya one look at Sasha would leave no room for doubt.

Elvira Pavlovna Egert, on the other hand, was anything but white. Mokin, who had a sharp eye for a target, had dubbed her *"Cruella."* It was an uncanny match. All she lacked were the Dalmatians on a leash and a blood-red Rolls-Royce idling at the curb.

Then again, maybe it wasn't Mokin's joke. It might have been Artur. Despite his awkward frame, the boss was dangerously perceptive. Mokin, with that simple brush of a mustache he carried with such unearned pride, was a dead ringer for Pechkin the Postman, only twenty years younger. *"Holidays in Prostokvashino"* is a favorite childhood cartoon.

He was loud, unashamed, and possessed the terrifying confidence of the simple-minded. He and Artur had been through college together and were technically partners in the firm, but everyone knew the truth: Artur Gennadievich was the engine. He was the manager; he was the lawyer; he was the power.

"Alexandra, have you ever played Secret Santa?" Artur asked, his eyes locking onto hers.

"No, never." Sasha felt a hot, inexplicable blush creep up her neck.

"Right then." Artur rubbed his damp palms together in a gesture of predatory anticipation. "Listen up, Sasha—and the rest of you, consider this a refresher. There are four slips of paper in this box. Four names: mine, Elvira's, Mokin's—that's you, Petya—and Sasha's. We take turns drawing. You are the *'Secret Santa'* for the name you pull. If you pull your own name, put it back. And let's be adults about this."

Mokin straightened his spine, a smirk tugging at his mustache.

"So what? I'd be thrilled to gift myself a bottle of cognac."

"Exactly," Artur snapped. "There are only four of us. No tricks, gentlemen."

For thirty days, Sasha had been a ghost, silenced by her own shyness. Her mother's over-protection hadn't exactly prepared her for the social trenches. This was her first real chance to belong, yet a sudden, cold weight of responsibility settled in her chest. She had to choose a gift for a stranger.

"I couldn't just buy Mokin fishing hooks and line—what if he didn't fish? He certainly looked like he spent his weekends in a rubber raincoat and a fur hat, but assumptions were dangerous. And Cruella..." the mere thought of Elvira made Sasha's pulse spike.

If she messed this up, her mother wouldn't be there to fix it.

"Now, the ground rules," Artur continued. "Budget is a thousand rubles. Go over if you're feeling generous. You know who you're buying for, so don't go buying perfume for someone who smokes cigars."

"How simple," Sasha thought, her mind racing. *"If I pull Cruella, I'm going to have a breakdown. A total panic attack."*

"Oh, please, Artur!" Elvira snorted, her voice dripping with indignation. "Where on earth can you find perfume for a thousand rubles? I refuse to douse myself in the cheap swill they sell on street corners."

"Please not her... please not her..." Sasha's lips moved in a silent, desperate prayer.

"Buy it, wrap it, and bring it in," Artur commanded. "Today's the twenty-third. Let's say the twenty-sixth, right here under our sad plastic tree. Put a note inside, but don't use your own handwriting—get creative. I'll handle the names on the outside so the handwriting is uniform. We won't unwrap them in public; Elvira requested privacy so that one person's joy doesn't trigger a wave of professional jealousy."

Sasha nearly raised her hand like a schoolgirl.

"Can I ask... why is it Secret Santa? Why not just Santa?"

Artur stepped closer, his hand coming down to rest on her shoulder.

"Because, Sasha, the mystery is the point. The recipient doesn't know what's inside or who gave it. It gives you time to dream. To wonder. Or..." he added with a thin smile, "to conduct an investigation."

"Oh, the things I dream of..." Elvira murmured. "If only there were a man to take me there." She turned away, her gaze fixing hard on the monitor.

"The heart of this game," the boss began, his voice taking on that polished, corporate vibrance, "is to forge a real sense of unity. We're here to share a little holiday spirit before the year's out, to bury any lingering grudges and leave them where they belong—in the past."

He looked down at his newest hire again. His hand remained anchored to her shoulder, a heavy, familiar weight.

"And, of course, to help our newest teammate find her footing and feel at home in our little family."

He gave her shoulder a final, firm squeeze.

"It's going to be super-duper. Just you wait."

"What a way to put it," she thought.

CHAPTER 2

"Lucky. God, I'm so lucky."

Alexandra paced the aisles of Krasnoye & Beloye, her eyes darting across the ranks of cognac and whiskey. She'd pulled Mokin. Pyotr Evgenievich Mokin. She had waited, letting everyone else pick their lots first, hovering at the back of the line until she was the last one to reach into the box.

When she finally retreated to the restroom, Sasha was buzzing so hard she could barely keep her balance. She scrambled into a stall, heart hammering, and stared at the small, ragged square of paper until the ink blurred.

Pyotr Mokin. A strangled, giddy sound—half-laugh, half-sob—escaped her throat. The rush was indescribable. It's simple, she told herself, clutching the paper like a winning lottery ticket. Just buy a decent bottle, wrap it up, and you're done. Easy. Perfect.

But the high crashed as quickly as it had hit. Her eyes drifted to the price tags she'd just seen, and reality set in with a cold thud. Neither cognac nor whiskey lived within her budget—not in this economy, anyway.

"I can't just give him vodka, can I?" she muttered, the store's fluorescent lights suddenly feeling too bright.

"Pyotr isn't some drunk. You don't just sip vodka with a twist of lemon." Her mind raced, grasping at straws. "Maybe the wrapping will save it. I could scavenge some paper from Lenka's design studio and do it myself. And the Noah... the Armenian cognac. It comes in a box. That looks classy, right?"

Sasha felt a lump form in her throat. She'd have to ask her mother for the money. Again.

"It's not a big deal," she lied to the empty aisle.

She turned away from the top-shelf displays, let out a long, shuddering sigh, and walked out into the cold.

Mokin's voice exploded through the receiver, so sharp and jagged she winced as if he were standing right over her, screaming directly into her ear.

"I've got the Karnaukhov hearing in thirty minutes. Fifth floor, Central Court. There's a black folder on my desk—I left the damn thing behind. Grab it. Now. Get it here!"

"Yes, Pyotr Evgenievich!" Sasha's heart leaped into her throat as she began a frantic dance around the office. "What does it look like?"

"It's black! You can't miss it! Catch a cab and run. Elvira's calling you an Uber on the company card. Move!"

The line went dead. Sasha spun toward the desk, her hands hovering over a chaotic sea of paperwork. "Elvira Pavlovna, Pyotr Evgenievich said—the taxi—"

"I heard him," Elvira muttered, already thumbing through her phone with practiced indifference. "Man screams loud enough to wake the dead."

"Oh God, I'm not going to make it. I'm never going to make it!" Sasha's pulse hammered in her fingertips.

The labels on the folders blurred into a gray smear. In a sudden burst of desperation, she scooped up every black folder on the desk in one messy heap and lunged for her coat.

"White Kia, plate two-three-two," Elvira called out without looking up. "And breathe, honey. It's all going to be super-duper."

"Right. Super-duper," Sasha whispered, already bolting through the door.

“Well, Boss, I took Karnaukhov and his son to the cleaners!” Mokin beamed, splashing a second double of cognac into his glass before snatching up a lemon wedge.

“We took them, you mean,” Elvira countered, hoisting her glass. “I’m the one who dug up the precedents, and Artur Gennadievich mapped out the entire strategy. You’re just a silver-tongued devil—the kind women can’t resist. I saw Judge Yaremkina; she couldn’t take her eyes off you.”

The room erupted in laughter as they knocked back their drinks. Sasha forced down her second round, her pulse hammering. A hot, feverish flush crept up her neck and pooled in her cheeks.

“Seduction is strategy, Elechka,” Mokin said, sucking the juice from a thin yellow slice. “A judge is no different than a jury—they need to like the lawyer. Hell, they need to be attracted to him. Just like you are to me.” He gave a playful wink, then turned his focus. “But the real MVP here is Sasha. She kept her head, hauled every last file into that courtroom, and didn’t miss a beat. Her first time in the trenches, and she nailed it!”

He draped a heavy, muscular arm around her shoulders, pulling her firmly against his side.

“To Sasha!”

Artur Gennadievich offered a quiet, approving smile as he caught the girl’s eye and tipped the bottle for a third round.

“Damn good job, Sasha,” Mokin said, raising his glass to his lips. “Everything’s gonna be super-duper from here on out.”

“Super-duper,” Sasha echoed. She took a sip, the liquid sliding down her throat with deceptive ease this time, burning through her like molten lead.

CHAPTER 3

Mom chipped in another thousand rubles. Now, the budget finally allowed for a decent cognac—the kind that came in its own cardboard box, which we could disguise in heavy gift wrap.

"If I were you, I wouldn't rush into this," Mom said, her voice trailing with a warning. "He'll forget that cognac the second the bottle runs dry. It's not the kind of thing that leaves a mark. Besides, you're staying in the shadows. You won't get that immediate 'thank you,' and believe me, giving a gift without feeling the gratitude come back at you... it changes the math. You'll end up regretting it. Do yourself a favor: buy a tin of coffee for yourself and use whatever's left on him."

"Thanks, Mom," Sasha said. She had a way of absorbing her mother's advice, weighing it. "I'll give it to him after my first paycheck. Maybe Artur Gennadyevich will come through before the New Year instead of making us wait until January. It's a holiday, after all."

"I'm in no hurry," her mother replied, her tone softening into a quiet, knowing kindness.

The vibrator was a masterpiece in blush pink. It didn't try to mimic a real penis; instead, it was curved like a sleek, stylized banana, tapering to a soft point with sides as smooth as a torpedo. It looked like it would find its mark with surgical precision. Sasha was already half-obsessed with it.

She'd been vibrating with anticipation since she'd tucked her gift into the communal box that morning, slyly masking it with a Mokin lipstick the chef had left on the table. By the time the office lunch on the twenty-sixth finally rolled around, her patience was shredded.

Artur Gennadievich, looking ridiculous in a red Santa hat he'd unearthed from some dusty closet, was busy decorating a cheap plastic tree with Elvira. A meager string of lights and six lonely baubles were supposed to constitute "holiday cheer," but the cloying scent of pine needles and peeled oranges actually managed to sell the lie.

Finally, the boss—mopping sweat from under the brim of his hat—stood with mock solemnity.

"And now—the Secret Santa reveals!"

Mokin held a beautifully wrapped package to Sasha's ear, giving it a mischievous shake.

"I hear sloshing. Feels like a solid seven hundred and fifty milliliters. Whoever you are, Santa, I owe you one!"

Sasha had promised herself she'd wait until the end of the day to open hers. But the resolve lasted all of five minutes. As the formal party dissolved into fake smiles and the usual exodus toward the kitchen or the smoking lounge, she couldn't take it anymore.

She picked at a sad diet salad; her nerves frayed to the point of hysteria. Finally, she shoved the light, pretty box—marked with a tiny Sasha sticker—into her bag and scurried toward the restroom with the frantic gait of a woman who'd just been surprised by her period.

She'd never owned a toy. It had always been DIY—mostly her own hands, or the occasional hothouse cucumber. More than a "couple" of times, if she was being honest. Dozens, really.

Her body had only known two men, and those encounters had been so fleeting they barely counted. She was perpetually pining. She was high-strung, her sensitivity spiking at the slightest provocation: Mokin leaning over her shoulder to point at a spreadsheet, or Artur Gennadievich beckoning her to his desk. The closer the man, the more she felt that familiar, heavy heat pooling between her thighs. It was a constant, demanding ache.

The device sat in a lightweight box with a clear celluloid window. It was petite—maybe five inches—perfect for a handbag. The diagrams next to the foreign kanji promised a rotating tip that moved like a burrowing creature and a three-speed motor.

Sitting on the toilet with her lace panties around her ankles, Sasha slid the blister pack open. The material was shockingly soft.

The texture triggered a flash of muscle memory—her first taste of a man.

High school graduation. Romka, from the other class, had led her out of the cafe into the pre-dawn chill and tucked her into his father's car. The parents were all long gone, leaving their children to stumble into adulthood in the dark. Romka had been so tender to the touch. She remembered how he felt in her mouth—the marvel of that living biology. How it had trembled and grown until it filled her completely, finally erupting in a thick heat that forced her to swallow again and again.

She was already slick, and she hadn't even managed to pee yet.

"I can't exactly lick a cucumber", she thought, a frantic edge to her breathing. *"But this... this is so soft."*

She pressed the velvet-like silicone to her nose, sniffing it like a kitten. It was small enough that she could even try it... behind. The urge was a physical weight. She pressed her lips to the soft casing while her other hand slipped down, her fingers finding the wet heat already waiting for her.

"I can't wait until I'm home," she whispered, a desperate shiver running through her. "Just don't forget the batteries. Whatever you do, don't forget the batteries."

The climax had been shattering. It was the gift, the agonizing buildup, and the act itself—all of it crashing down at once. Sasha felt a flush of triumph; both she and her "little dumpling" were satisfied.

The toy had performed with lethal precision. She licked her own slickness off the silicone and collapsed back onto the mattress, pulling the duvet to her chin, knees pressed tight. If her mother had heard the moaning through the bedroom door, so be it. This was only the beginning.

"It feels incredible against my lips," she thought, tracing the shape with her mind. *And it's light, as long as I cradle it with my tongue while I suck. Roma's felt so much heavier."*

Sasha felt a flicker of regret that it didn't pulse warm cream into her mouth, but she could live with that. She'd just lick the cream off herself later.

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