

Double Take

Her hands shake. She has a nervous tic. Won't be long until she cracks. He lets a little warmth creep into his words and whispers. 'Come on dear, just tell me all about your scam. You know I'll do my best for you.'

She's not having it. He starts to turn away, then swings back with hardened eyes and voice, fist slamming onto the table. 'Tell me what the bloody hell you're up to!'

The grey-haired woman shrinks back from him, but like a cornered animal, there's a glint of survival in her eye. *Alright if that's how you want it, that's how it'll be. My arrest rate has to go up and you madam, will be first on today's list.*

He leans in towards her once more. She can see the bristles in his nose and smell his foul breath. His words become a blur. She wants to go to the toilet desperately. *Please God don't let me wet myself in front this oaf.*

They both turn as the door opens. A tall, well-built grey suited man fills the doorway. The fluorescent light from the hallway haloes his curly, black hair. 'Now then Clarkson what's going on in here?'

'Just asking a few gentle questions, Mr Andrews. Something suspicious about this one.'

'Oh yes, and what makes you think that?'

'Well at the checkout, she looked nervous, very nervous.'

'And?'

'Well nothing out of the ordinary but something not quite right.'

Andrews sighs. 'Another one of your ideas Clarkson?'

'Are you alright Mrs...?'

'Er yes. Jenkins.'

'Is there anything we can do for you, Mrs Jenkins?'

'Well actually, I really need to go to the toilet.'

While she's gone the two men pack the paltry items back into the plastic shopping bag. Andrews can't shake the old habit of checking the items off the docket. A tub of butter, a packet of cheese, one spaghetti, two tins of beans. All the cheapest brands. The last item is surprising...the most expensive box of chocolates. *Must be someone's birthday,* he thinks.

I hate to agree with Clarkson, but I have a gut feeling that something's not quite right, but I can't for the life of me, imagine what it is.

He growls. 'Better pull your neck in mate, or you'll find yourself other side of the door. They're cutting back on security guards you know. Now you make sure she's okay. Got it?'

Back home, Bea makes a cuppa and unloads her bag onto the table. *That was a close shave. Horrible man. I thought he'd sussed it out. Damn, I'll have to go to Westfield Mall next time.* She surveys her catch. Two butters, two packs of cheese, two lots of spaghetti, four tins of beans, two boxes of chocolates. *Not bad.* She carefully packs half of the goods into a small cardboard box for her sister and packs the rest away into her kitchen cupboard.

She keeps out one box of chocolates and puts it into her cotton shopping bag making sure the receipt is safely at the bottom. As she sips her tea, she writes her shopping list.

First, I'll have to return the chocolates. Now what else do we need? Tea, coffee, sugar and maybe some nice bath salts for Jen. It'll be nice to have her home again. She'll enjoy a few luxuries after that awful hospital. Oh, and a birthday card, I'd better not forget the birthday card.

A couple of days later, Clarkson sees Mrs Jenkins again as she walks into a café at the Mall. He's not sure why, but he follows her in. He hears her say 'Can you look after my groceries? It's only for a tick dear, I've been shopping all morning and I just have to go to the toilet.'

'Sure thing. Just pop them out of the way next to the counter here.' The waitress replies.

Mrs Jenkins hands over a bulging plastic bag, but when the waitress reaches out for her shopping bag Mrs Jenkins clutches it to her. 'No, it's alright lovey, this one's hardly got anything in it. I'll keep it with me.'

Puzzled Clarkson turns and leaves the café. A couple of minutes later, out she comes. *Ah, she's not off to the toilet after all, but to the supermarket. Straight to the Customer Services counter. Returning those expensive chocolates by the looks of things.*

She looks around anxiously before taking an empty plastic bag from her pocket. *Off she goes.* He follows discretely. *Shopping list in hand. Nothing wrong with that. Only it's not a list is it? It's a docket.* He watches as she puts tea, coffee and sugar into the plastic bag then heads towards more luxurious items. She pops bath salts and wrapping paper into her own shopping bag before turning to choose a birthday card. At the till, she hands over the bath salts, card and wrapping paper.

Clarkson edges closer and hears her say 'I can't believe I forgot a birthday present for my wonderful sister, Jen'.

The guy at the checkout doesn't bother responding to her chatter but is more interested in the plastic bag of groceries. It's when he asks 'What about those groceries?' Clarkson thinks *Gotcha!*

She flushes as she waves her crumpled docket at him. 'These, oh I bought them earlier. Look here's the docket.'

Back at the café he lowers his large body into the seat opposite her. 'Two bags, one receipt. Very clever!' She flinches before explaining. 'We just can't afford to live. The rent keeps going up and the dollars won't stretch. I got the idea if I did my shopping and kept the receipt. I could fill up a second bag with the same items for my sister. If anyone challenges me, I have proof of purchase. Two lots of shopping for the price of one. At the till I just tell them I've forgotten to buy something and pay for the new items.'

He grins. 'I knew you were up to no good, but I couldn't work it out.'

'What are you going to do?' She asks.

'Nothing' he replied. 'I was just curious, but you don't have to worry. I lost my job yesterday. They're saving money by getting rid of as many staff as they can. In fact, I don't know how the wife and me are going to manage.'

She reaches over to him, and gently pats his hand saying, 'Well there's always the two-bag trick.'