

## Shopping

Alec stepped inside and blinked as his eyes adjusted. The room was bare and dusty-cornered, its concrete walls painted a shade of desperate grey, the two barred windows high and distant. A double fluorescent strip fizzed quietly above an ancient grease-stained desk. Carol sat there, chin propped on one hand, her face curtained by thick dark hair. She looked up as he entered, but didn't acknowledge him.

He stepped inside, his footsteps echoing tinnily, then scraped the second chair across the floor and sat facing her.

'Carol?' he said. 'What's going on? The pig outside says you've been arrested for shoplifting.'

She looked at him now. 'Hello, Alec,' she said flatly.

'Of course it's got to be a mistake,' he went on. 'What would you want to go and nick a few bottles of perfume for? I mean, you're successful. Your business is worth a hundred thou, at least.'

She shook her head, as if ducking a mosquito. 'A hundred thou...'

Alec plunged on. 'Now, don't worry. I – I told them, they've got the wrong woman. It's got to be someone else – someone who looks like you. That's it. Yeah. I'll call Roger, get him over here straight away. Criminal law's not his thing, I know, but he's a good man – one of the best. We'll get you out of this, Carol.' He paused, and swallowed. 'We've got to.'

Carol leaned back and watched a fly banging itself on the light fitting.  
'They caught me on CCTV,' she murmured.

He leaned across the table. 'No,' he said slowly, as if explaining it to a slow child for the third time. 'It was someone who looks like you.'

'And they found the stuff in my bag.'

Alec swore. 'You're not trying to tell me you actually did this, Carol? What the hell were you playing at? You're risking everything, for a couple of bottles of cheap perfume. What'll happen if word gets out? It'll ruin you.'

'And a fine supportive husband you're turning out to be,' she said with a sneer. 'You're only worried about what it'll do to you.'

'How – how can you talk like that?' he spluttered. 'You're the one who's – let me get this straight, Carol, you've actually been caught shoplifting?'

'Well, I'd got out of the shop by the time they caught me,' she said brightly. 'And halfway down Church Street. Sorry, did you say something? I did think about trying to fight them off, but they were very big guys and they didn't look happy.'

Alec slumped onto the table, whimpering. 'I was waiting for you in the car park,' he whined. 'We were going to go out to the lake, remember? Just you and me – I wanted some special time together. And now this!'

She shrugged. 'And by the way,' she went on, tapping him on the top of the head with a very sharp fingernail. 'They weren't just *any* old perfumes, husband dear. Chanel and Yves Saint-Laurent, or nothing. Couple of hundred quid a bottle.'

Suddenly he sat up and slammed a fist into the table. 'Why?' He ground the word out between clenched teeth. 'Why did you do this?'

She leaned back and looked into his eyes. 'Let's say I did it for you,' she said.

The silence wasn't total. There was the floor-shaking grumble of the HGVs that passed within feet of the windows, and the pinging of the still-persisting fly; and there was the popping of blood around Alec's sinuses. Otherwise you could have heard a bottle of perfume drop.

A lot of expletives went through Alec's head, as did thoughts of actual bodily harm. 'You're mad,' he said at last. 'What d'you mean, you did it for me?'

She talked at the wall. It was easier that way, and anyhow she was used to it. 'I think it was the Wednesday before last,' she said, with a sigh that echoed around the cell. 'Anne had finished early, and asked me to go for a coffee. We went to Antonio's.'

'Antonio's? Er, don't think I know it...'

'I've always liked the seating in there. Those benches, with the high backs. Little compartments, like on a train. It feels really cosy. Bob took me there once, before we – before he went to Australia.' She was seeing something far away through that wall, Alec thought.

'Bob was a long time ago, Carol. What's he got to do with it?'

She spared him a glance. 'Bob? Nothing. I was talking about the booths at Antonio's. Nice and cosy. Private. It feels like you can tell all your secrets there, and no-one will hear.'

'Where's all this leading?'

'But you can't, you see.'

He licked his lips, and moved around to the window. It was too high for him to see out, but now he was behind her. 'Can't what?'

'You can't tell your secrets. If someone sits right at the end of the bench, the sound echoes off the wall, and they can hear everything that's going on in the next booth.'

She sat up a bit straighter, conscious now of how close Alec was standing. 'Two people were talking, you see, about a pension fund. The man was saying how easy it was to siphon money off, and he mentioned an account in Saudi. She was asking him sensible questions, like whether anyone would find out, and what about his wife? But he – well, he was the kind of man that women always seem to believe – until it's too late. I didn't catch what he said about his wife, but when the waitress came he ordered a skinny latte, with a cinnamon dusting. That's how you like your coffee, isn't it Alec?'

Still she was looking straight ahead; still she hadn't turned to see what he was up to. She could feel the heat from his body, could almost hear his heart pounding.

'Five hundred grand is an awful lot to take out of a pension fund. But that's what those two were talking about – stealing from people who've spent their lives saving up for a bit of security in their old age. But they thought it was

funny. She said she'd book the flights to Brazil for two weeks' time – I make that the day after tomorrow, don't you?'

His hands were on her shoulders now, rubbing softly. She remembered how, on their first date, that simple action had turned her on so much. She'd thought then that she could never leave him, no matter what he did. No matter what...

'You've always been a bit of a romantic, haven't you?' he said quietly. 'Always liked to make things up. Quite an imagination you've got in that pretty head.'

'I wasn't really worried,' she said, ignoring him, 'until MachineCo phoned up yesterday.' The grip on her shoulders tightened. 'I didn't mind the idea of you going off with another woman – Selina, from the office, isn't it? I recognised her from the Christmas party. I stopped loving you pretty soon after we married, Alec. It made no odds to me whether you stayed or went. And God forgive me, I didn't really care about the pension fund. It happens all the time, doesn't it, some fund or other going bust and the government having to bail it out.' She half-turned her head. 'But I did wonder why someone who was about to leave for Brazil was suddenly hiring a chainsaw. And I found all those bin liners you'd bought. So I began to think our trip to the lake today might be my last.'

'Carol, I can get you a psychiatrist. You need help...'

'That's when I went to the police. Have you checked your Saudi account lately, Alec? You might find it's not quite as full as you thought.'

She'd known he could be vindictive; she'd known he could be cruel. But nothing had prepared her for the speed with which he threw her to the floor,

making her head crash into the concrete. Already he was squatting on her, hands tightening around her throat as her vision blurred and the fly banged again and again on the distant lights...

And then it was over. She felt and heard, rather than saw, something hard hitting him on the side of the head; white-shirted shapes dragging him from her; a blonde-haired policewoman helping her to sit up, asking was she all right. Grunts and the slippery scuffling of feet as her vision came back. Pain in her throat.

'Bitch! Bitch! he was growling as one of the officers handcuffed him. Then there was a lot of shouting as they began to frog-march him away.

'Wait!' gasped Carol.

They let him turn, and there was granite in his stare. 'You never did any shoplifting, did you?' he said.

She thrust her chin out, and words pushed themselves up her bruised throat. 'The only thing I shopped,' she said, 'was you.'

He was gone. The effort over, the pain in her head began to overwhelm the rest; the dim light felt like a laser in her eyes. She allowed herself to be led down the corridor to a cool room with drawn curtains and a low bed. A cold compress; paracetamol ('There's a good girl. You get these down you...'); ointment on her poor throat.

The policewoman was holding Carol's hand; she realised she'd been crying. 'Did you get enough?' she croaked.

'Oh, yes,' the policewoman said. 'He'd hardly have gone for you like that if he was innocent, would he?'

Carol groaned, and put a hand to her forehead. 'He's so stupid,' she murmured. 'If he'd been paying attention all these years, he'd have known I never wear perfume.'