

Lorraine

Yer wan... 'the wrecker' – is shaking out all the neatly folded polo necks and throwing them back onto the shelf. Don't even have that many on display, but in the space of two seconds, she's managed to make three shelves look like a storm just hit. Refolding as quick as I can but can't keep up with her. She's moved on to shoes, picking up every pair and dropping them on the floor until she finds her size. Surprised we have them; her feet look huge. Kicks them off, leaving them after her arse in the middle of the floor, moving straight over to cosmetics. Squirts hand lotion on her palm but doesn't like the smell and puts it back with the shower gels. Tries to open the mascara but it has a hygiene seal on it. Tell her: 'Use the testers, that's what they're there for.' Sniggers at me and drops it in with the eyeliners. Sticks a lipstick in the pot-pourri jar.

'Stop it!' I say.

But she keeps going, mixing everything up. Moves over to greeting cards and puts 'New Baby' in with 'Birthdays'. Drag the cards out of her hand and put them back in their proper place. Katarina, a Polish girl that works with me, comes over trying to persuade me to go to the staff room with her. But I can't leave; the place is in a heap. The wrecker picks up a gift bag and I let a roar at her.

'Can ye not just look at it?'

She's shouting at me then.

'Are ye serious? You can't be serious!'

Katarina's saying: 'The customers can look at whatever they want.'

The floor manager is over now, wanting to know what's going on. Katarina says I'm not feeling too well; she needs to bring me outside for some air. The manager asks the wrecker if she's okay. Wrecker says she's very shook up. Manager tells me to go upstairs to be dealt with later. As they're walking away, can

hear her asking if there's anything she can do? Wrecker says if she got a voucher it might make her feel a bit better. The little bitch looks back at me with a sly smile.

HR bird calls me in. Pats a chair for me to sit, then walks around the other side of the desk sitting beside the big fella, Mr Grant. Even though I've seen him around for years, this is the first time I've actually met him. He's wearing a lovely pinstripe suit, the same one the dummy is wearing on the second floor. Opens his leather folder and spreads a few pages out in front of him. Checks my name tag as I sit down. Says my track record has been excellent over the past ten years but the last few weeks have raised some concerns. Would I like to explain what happened today? Not really, but since I'm here, suppose I have to. Tell him: 'She's always in. Never buys anything, just up-ends the place. She's been winding me up since the January sales.'

'Do you think she comes into the shop specifically to annoy you?'

'I don't think it, I know it.'

'And are you aware of any other customers who do this?'

(Pause.)

'No, I don't think so.'

He heard I went home during my lunch hour three times last week, could I explain why?

How the fuck does he know that?

'See, on Monday I thought Amber had left the hair straighteners on. On Thursday, thought I'd left the iron on. And on Friday I'd left the back door unlocked.'

'And had you?'

'What?'

'Left the door unlocked?'

'No.'

'I see.'

Promise myself to never mention anything like this in front of any of the girls again.

'Is there anything you want to share wiv us, Lorraine?' He says.

Afraid to say anything, don't want to stretch my mouth open wider to fit my other foot in.

'Are you sacking me, Mr Grant?'

Looks at HR bird and then back at me. Wonder if he's riding her?

'Not at all, is there something we should know about?'

Telling them fucking nothing, suits have a habit of using things against ye later on. They're waiting on me to answer. I'm wide to this pair.

HR bird takes a quick glance at him then clears her throat.

'Your father was quite ill last year...'

She smiles at me to finish the sentence like I'm in playschool or something.

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Has he made a full recovery?'

She reaches across the desk and touches my hand. Don't remember the last time someone touched me, hugged me, or even bleedin' nudged me.

The tightness in my chest loosens a little bit and I burst into tears. I'm mortified but I can't help it. There's snot running down my nose and everything. Mr Grant hands me a tissue and says I should take some time off. Don't want time off, I'd do me nut in at home all day. Says he'll arrange for me to talk to someone instead. Gives me a card, tells me to make an appointment and says the company will take care of the bill. He's to go to a meeting and asks HR bird to look after me. She

makes me tea and gives me one of the nice chocolate biscuits from the luxury tins that we're trying to sell off in the supermarket. I can sit here for as long as I need to. She turns away and starts tapping on her computer.

**Kay**

*(Sitting on a chair, wiggling around.)*

I've an itch, down there. Seem to spend most of my life in washing rooms and here I am again, after swallowing every tablet, trying every cream and changing my washing powder that many times I've run out of brands. Sometimes, when it's really bad, I open the bottom window in the living room and rest my leg on the ledge to let a bit of air circulate. The doctor opens her door and calls me in. She's a nice girl, very young, foreign. Thinks the itch is stress-related. Have you ever heard the likes of it? She's going to refer me to see a dermatologist; it could take a few months for an appointment. Think I could be dead by then, but take the letter and thank her anyway. She asks how my husband is. Tell her he's on the mend. The consultant thinks with the right attitude he could make a full recovery. She asks how I'm coping - grand, there's no use complaining, nobody will listen to me. She says she'll listen. Tell her about his appointments, medications and his physio. She stops me.

'That is all very good, Mrs Neville, but you should take some time for yourself, you are not a young woman any more.'

The fucking cheek of her. I've never felt old until now. She wants to know if I get enough help. Who? How often? Lorraine is a godsend. I couldn't manage without her, and now and again neighbour drop in and sit with him.

'You need more help, Mrs Neville, you look very, very tired.'

Gem doesn't like having people in his house all the time.