

Choices

Jonas Taylor slipped through the door of the Dawn Colley tea rooms in South Melton, trying to make himself as small as possible. He felt the reassuring bulk of the knife in the right-hand pocket of his bomber jacket – at the same time it troubled him, he was sure someone was bound to notice it. He decided to do the job right away. Straight in and straight out – get it over with.

But – damn! Half-a-dozen people were queuing up to pay their bills. For a second he considered bolting out and forgetting the whole thing. But the drive to prove himself was too great. Deciding to wait for a more opportune moment, he turned left and slunk into one of the Dawn Colley's three dining rooms. A two-seater table by the window was free, and he slipped into one of the chairs. Trying to look inconspicuous he picked up a menu and pretended to study it. It could have been in Chinese for all he was actually reading it.

In fact, rather than being inconspicuous, he quickly noticed that a couple at a nearby table – both 30-somethings, dressed smartly in almost-matching blue suits – were staring over at him with very amused expressions. Embarrassed, he looked away. And then saw the cause of their amusement – he had the stupid menu upside down. Cursing himself, he turned it over, and the rather starchy matron pictured on the front of it – the Dawn Colley of the tea shop's name, he presumed – seemed to smile at him mockingly.

He'd chosen the Dawn Colley as his target within a few days of arriving in South Melton. He'd quickly ruled out any banks – too security-conscious, and he was, after all, only an amateur; and most of the shops clustered around the small town centre didn't seem to have much custom. The only shop he could see with a large regular clientele was the Dawn Colley. Being Friday, they must have a week's takings by now. The tea shop was far and away the only choice.

He felt his usual sense of inadequacy. Any real villain would have been able to break into the tea rooms after dark, crack open the safe, and have it away to the other side of the country before opening time the next morning. He could hear his father's voice: "Call yourself a robber, lad? More like a flippin' rubber." Every muscle in his face tensed. *Rubber Johnny* – old-fashioned slang for a condom – had been his father's favourite insult nickname for him growing up. Well, he wasn't Johnny any more, he was Jonas – after Jonas Armstrong, who played Robin Hood in the telly series. And now he was going to rob from the rich and give to the poor – himself. He'd show the old so-and-so.

A soft footfall sounded beside him, and he jerked his head up, feeling guilty. It was one of the waitresses – a nice-looking young brunette, pad in hand. "Good afternoon, my name's Sally, what can I get you?" she asked. He was disappointed to find that her voice was a mixture of Rosie Webster from *Corrie* and Peggy Mitchell from *Eastenders*.

He pretended to study the menu again. "Tea," he muttered.

She stood there, statuesque and statue-like.

“What?” he said, confused.

“What sort of tea you want?” she asked, pen poised above her notepad.

He stared at her. He was aware of the smart couple at the other table trying not to laugh.

“We got Black Teas, White Teas, Green Teas, Herbal Teas, Organic Teas and Oolong Teas,” she said, as if she thought she was being helpful.

“Er, white.” *Can’t drink it without milk*, he thought.

“White tea.” She still didn’t seem inclined to move. “What flavour?” she added after a moment.

Jonas carried on staring. The waitress took up the menu from in front of him and pointed in the direction of one of the pages. “We got White Pearls, White Gogi Blossom, White Peach, White Silver Needles, Jasmine Silver Needles, White Peony, White Peony With Pink Rosebuds, White Night, White Coconut Crime and White Jasmine & Mint,” she said, and looked at him brightly.

What the....? “Nah,” he said, nice and slowly. “Tea. Ya know – Quick Brew.”

The waitress seemed to fall in. “Oh. Black Tea.”

“Eh?” He suddenly wished the waitress would go away.

“You want Black Tea.” She studied the menu again. “Assam, Ceylon, Darjeeling, Earl Grey, English Breakfast, Keemun, Jasmine, Golden Needles, Russian Caravan, Lapsang Souchong or House Tea?”

Sweat was starting to drip from Jonas’s armpits, and another river trickled down his spine. All these choices were suddenly making his head spin. “House,” he snapped, like someone winning a game of Bingo. “House tea,” he repeated, hoping that “House” meant “Ordinary”. Nice-looking though the waitress was, she was getting on his wick.

“Any cake?”

“Wa’?” He really was starting to feel sick.

“We got plenty,” she went on helpfully. “Earl Grey Cake, Chocolate Brownie, Carrot Cake, Lemon Drizzle, Date & Walnut, Dutch Apple, Bakewell Tart, Treacle Tart, Hot Banana Cake With Butterscotch Sauce, Victoria Sponge, or Scone.”

“Scone,” he rasped, latching onto the last thing mentioned. “Scone.”

“Plain, Fruit or Cheese?”

His head felt like it was going into meltdown. “Plain, plain, plain, plain, plain. No – fruit.”

She patiently scribbled out five plain scones and wrote in one fruit. “Butter or Jam and Cream?”

“Butterrrrrrrr!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“So that’s a pot of House Tea for one and a fruit scone with butter. Anything else I can do for you, sir?”

“Nah, nah,” he said through clenched teeth. He just wanted her to go.

She went. Jonas spent the next few minutes getting his breathing back to normal.

Gotta do it quick, he decided. Can’t stand any more of this flippin’ game. Most of the customers who’d been there when he’d arrived had now filtered away. The only ones still left were the 30-somethings. Summoning his courage, he stood abruptly. He’d do it now.

He strode out to where the till stood, fingering the knife as he walked. The brunette waitress was just opening it up. Perfect – that would save time. She turned as he marched up. “Caniyelpyou?” she said.

He produced the knife. “Give us the money!” he rasped.

She turned back to the till. “What sort you want?”

He gasped. “You *what?*”

“We got fivers, tenners, twenties, pound coins, fifty-ps, twenty-ps, ten-ps, five-ps and – oh yeah –” she produced a limp-looking note from the drawer “– one fifty pound.”

He stared at her, aghast. Was she totally thick? “All of it, yer silly cow. Now!”

Calmly, she started unloading the contents of the till. “You want separate bags?”

“Just load the bleedin’ stuff,” he yelled. “Come on!”

Suddenly, a hand grasped his wrist from behind, wrenching it backwards. With a cry of pain he dropped the knife, hearing it clatter to the floor. A voice, male and firm, said, “Right, stay where you are, sonny. Dawson – got the cuffs handy?”

Another voice, female, said, “Sure, Sarge.” It was the 30-somethings from the other table. There was a pause, then she added: “Which ones do you want, the chain, the hinged or the solid-bar?”

“Mmmmm,” Jonas groaned. It was bad enough he’d been nicked. The last thing he wanted to hear was more bloody choices!

“The solid-bar, I reckon,” he heard the sergeant say.

“Single or double-lock?”

“Mmmmmmmmmmm.”

“Oh, double, definitely.”

“Lever lock, push pin or slot?”

"Aaaaaaaaaaargh!" Jonas screamed in anguish and threw himself backwards, colliding with the sergeant's nose. It took both the officers five minutes to subdue him. The handcuffs hurt, even though he never got to find out what type they were.

Still struggling, they led him outside. "Right, round to the station with him," the sergeant growled, 'accidentally' kicking Jonas on the back of the leg just below the knee. He collapsed, and the couple dragged him upright.

"Shall we take the patrol car, Sarge, or do you want to walk?"

"Aaaaaaaaaaargh!"

The sergeant kicked him again. "Reckon it's a nice day," he said. "It's not far. We'll walk."

Once at the station, Jonas just glowered when they asked him which cell he'd like to spend the night in. Having no solicitor of his own he was asked to choose one from a selection of duty solicitors – "We happen to have a few on the go at once," the female constable, Dawson, told him cheerfully. "Most of the blaggers we arrest don't get a choice." Jonas jabbed a finger at the first name on the list and tried not to scream again.

He was actually relieved when the case came to court and he was sentenced to three years for a first offence, though even the jury's choice of Guilty or Not Guilty made him whimper in pain. When the judge asked him which prison he'd like to serve the sentence in, he broke down and cried.