

Fox

by Francesca Ryan

It was just a little past five by the time Shona got there. The day was all but dead; the last of the winter light was surrendering its strength to the evening, a flow of weary commuters was starting to fill the pavements. She stepped into their favourite cafe; the door made a sulky tinkle as she entered the warm fug, a sharp draught following her. A middle-aged man sitting at the nearest table looked up, daring her not to pull it shut properly and provoke his irritated comment.

She took a long breath while she scanned for the familiar face. Not here yet. She squeezed through the closely packed tables, china wobbling a little in her wake. A near miss as her handbag brushed an empty cup, but no calamity apart from a sharp whine from the floor; a paw withdrawn in indignation. She found the most private place she could, near the back by the toilets. Conversation bounced off the walls, so it wasn't easy to hear your own conversation here, let alone anyone else's.

The text from Paterson announced he was running late. Not uncommon; there'd been many times he'd cried off with some work emergency. Working as a police lab technician seemed to be an erratic job (he preferred the term forensic scientist.)

"Got to do a bit of juggling, babes. Catch you later." Which sometimes meant the next day. Or on one occasion, five days when she hadn't heard from him at all. She hoped to hell he wouldn't be a no-show today when she'd wound herself up to say her piece.

The world had shifted yesterday, in one moment. She'd waited till he left her flat to pick up a kebab supper from the Cypriot place.

"Extra garlic sauce no chilli on mine," she recited.

"As if I'd ever forget," he grinned back at her, "and a bottle of rosé for my lady? Got any cash, doll? They always bitch when I use the card."

After he left, she went through the little canvas knapsack he always carried. No phone, taken it with him. Well, you would if you were having an affair, wouldn't you. Was he phoning her now? Stop it Shona, this is shameful; he's booked a romantic weekend in Bruges, contrite after you'd had that row about not spending enough time together. This time next week, they'd be on the Eurostar. She felt right to the bottom of the bag: his Kindle, and his passport. Better make sure it's in date, no excuse for another no-show. But this can't be right. It's not his. It says Peter Sullivan. Peter Sullivan?

The photo is of him though, unmistakably him. Carefully, she put everything back in the bag and propped it up exactly where he'd left it.

He wasn't in the flat when she got back much later, after the emergency call from her mother. She'd phoned him to let him know she was going over there. He never picked up on a ring, so if her voice had sounded wobbly on the message she'd left, he would assume she was anxious about mum. This wasn't the first fall she'd had, and Paterson had always listened sympathetically to Shona's anguish about her. He could be so kind when she was upset or agitated. And thoughtful about little things. Last week, he'd remembered their two-year anniversary with flowers, even though they were forecourt carnations. Shona poured herself an enormous glass of rosé. Dealing with mum on automatic had been a kind of relief, steadying the thoughts chasing through her mind. Back in her own place now, she couldn't escape them as they scabbled around the new reality.

She ordered another coffee. How would he react when she confronted him about the passport? Perhaps he was involved in something criminal. Although it might explain a lot, it was hardly better than the thought of his having an affair. Six o'clock now, the day was done, the steady evening rush filling the streets. The coffee shop felt as dismal and empty as her spirits; only the two baristas clearing up now, and the man by the door shutting his laptop. She checked her phone one last hopeless time, and rose to go.

As she put her hand to the door, the man said quietly, "he's not coming."

"Sorry?" she paused her step.

"You won't see him again, ever." She turned a bewildered face towards him.

"Let him go, Shona. It's better all round in the long run."

"How the hell do you know my name?"

He shook his head gently; the door gave a final tired tinkle as he stepped past her, out onto the street. She followed him, into the stream of people hurrying towards the tube.

"Please, you can't just..." she called out after the hurrying figure. "Please!" shouting now.

But the night swallowed him up like a thieving fox.