

The Gentle Touch

by Francesca Ryan

“Shona Fadden.” She straightened her security pass.

The young man on reception took his time scrolling down the list. Enjoying his brief authority, she thought. The power to keep someone waiting, perhaps the only taste of it he got in this place. He seemed young; the acne on his cheeks had gone, but the pitting remained. He had never been a good-looking youth. Did he have a girlfriend now? You could smell the toxic waft of longing and resentment coming from a man whose desires were not likely to be met. Shona was familiar with that.

“Wait over there please madam, I’ll notify them you’re here.” He busied himself with his screen.

“Will this take long?” she tried a smile.

He shrugged, indicating the seating area with his eyes. They followed her and lingered as she sat down, looking for a tissue in her handbag to avoid further contact with him. The security check had been thorough: body scan, temporary phone confiscation. The large building had an air of cool impersonality, matching its anonymous façade.

The middle-aged woman who bustled through the doors to fetch her was warmer, human.

“So sorry to keep you waiting, Ms Fadden. If you’d like to come this way.”

Her comfortable figure and kind voice seemed out of kilter in the place. Up three storeys, down a long corridor with dismal fluorescent lighting, into a brighter room with windows. There were two chairs set at right angles a little way from each other. They were almost cosy in comparison with the fixed hard plastic in reception. A small bowl of pot-pourri on the little table between them. Shona sat in that room the colour of egg yolk for two hours while the officer got her story down.

“And you’ve had no contact with him since then?”

Shona was suddenly taken back to that miserable afternoon in ‘their’ coffee shop when Paterson failed to appear. How she had returned home to find all traces of him gone. How the next day, all likenesses of him in her photo library had disappeared, although his texts and WhatsApps remained. After two weeks with no word from him, she had screwed herself up to contact the police forensic lab where he worked. No record of a Paterson Tiller, they had said.

Although when Shona described him, the voice on the end of the line seemed to change. A little later, she received a call to say they would try to help her with finding him.

“It was as if I had never known him. I felt like I was going mad.”

“That must have been painful.” The woman leaned towards her, a slight frown in recognition of Shona’s feelings. “And the passport. A shock, I should imagine. Sadly, it’s not unusual for individuals to claim they work for the police when they don’t.”

A delicate pause. “No evidence that he was financially compromising you in any way?”

Shona shook her head.

“Did he have money problems?”

“Not that I knew of.”

“Were there any other relationships that you were aware of?” The eyes in her round face rested on Shona. “Had he for instance had any homosexual friendships?”

“I don’t think so, no”

“You don’t think so.” Again the calm silence after the question, the warm space into which Shona could confess anything. It reminded her of the time she had seen the school councillor about her eating disorder.

The next few questions concerned Paterson’s habits, his routines, his family background. It occurred to Shona how little information she had about him. She found herself compensating, talking freely about herself instead, sinking into the encouragement coming from this person sitting alongside her. There was all the time in the world for Shona and her story.

“I suppose I didn’t know him as well as I thought I did” Shona looked bleakly at her feet. She was tired and the tears had drained her last reserves. The woman murmured something in sympathy and rose to her feet.

“I’m so sorry. There’s nothing much we can tell you at this stage. We’ll be back in contact if anything comes up but please bear in mind, if a person is found and doesn’t want to be contacted, there’s very little we can pass on to you.

Shona stopped at reception to hand back her pass. She walked towards the big doors and waited to collect her phone at security. There was a small bottleneck. She felt wrung out, disorientated somehow; she badly needed to get out of there. Two hours with a woman whose name she couldn’t now remember, although she’d introduced herself as the officer in charge of the enquiry. Her questions had been gentle. There was no hint of interrogation in her voice. Yet it had been exactly that, Shona realised; an interrogation, expertly done. A man with a lanyard hurried past security and was swallowed up into the building.

Shona recognised that face. She could still hear his voice telling her she wouldn’t see Paterson again.