

Suspicion

by Siren of Brixton

The pencil trembles more violently the closer it gets to her lips. Libby silently curses her weakness and tries again but the shakes take over. Her yoga instructor's calm voice comes to mind: deep breath in through the nose. She closes her eyes and tries it, and as she slowly releases the breath her hand steadies. She traces the outline of her lips, concentrating hard.

She puts down the pencil and regards her image. There's no sign of her jangling emotions.

'Not bad for an old bird.'

Robert's familiar quip comes to mind unbidden and tears of fear and self-pity well up and threaten her careful work. She grabs for a tissue and dabs at her eyes, thinking 'deep breath in through the nose.' She picks up the matching lipstick, quickly fills in the colour and stands abruptly, smoothing the creases from her skirt.

"Right-o," she says, testing the sound of her voice in the empty room. Her nerves quail. She pulls her posture erect and blinks back all fear, all thought.

In the dining room Robert's phone is a beacon, its glossy black screen impassive, keeping its secrets safe. It gives Libby vertigo: she feels its pull asking her, willing her to jump.

She picks up the cursed thing and wipes away the oily finger marks that mar its perfect surface. Tension grips her chest, hollows her stomach. Deep. Breath. In. She puts it down again.

'Don't go snooping unless you want to find something.' Who even said that? Mother? But the late nights. The phone calls from 'no one'. The new clothes. What would you do, Mother? What did you do? She picks up the phone and switches it on. The air in the room gets thinner. The walls close in.

Email or phone? Phone. She opens the call log. Brian, of course. Ted. The boys. Me. The most common one seems to be Aishe, his PA. She pictures the bossy Irish woman. Surely not? Part of her hopes he's at least above that cliché. She switches to the SMS log and

starts opening the messages, half expecting the worst with each click. But there's nothing, just work. It's no relief; the anticlimax stews with the tension. She repeats the process with the sent messages. Nothing. A shaky breath, almost a sob, judders across her lips.

'Stop now', a part of her urges, 'you've looked, there's nothing, it's your imagination.' But there's no turning back. She opens the emails: fourteen unread messages.

Somehow this is a step too far. A violation. Even though two are from women, women she doesn't know. She scrolls back and forth over the messages, but can't bring herself to click. 'Not yet', she thinks.

She scrolls down, clicking open the ones from women, the ones with odd subjects. She scans the text, clicks them closed again, slowly being lulled by the mundane exchanges of office life. I can't make that time, can we reschedule. The chief executive will give a briefing to staff on financial forecasts. Please find attached our new policy. So this is Robert's life. Tension and anxiety dissipate under the banal balm. She switches to the sent items folder, driven now more by curiosity than fear. This husband, this professional man, is one she rarely sees. She smiles to see his notes are full of bad jokes; Dad jokes, as the boys call them. They'd skewer him if they knew he was like this at work.

The thought makes her nauseous. The shame of Robert and the boys knowing she's stooped to this washes hot and cold over her. She closes the application, hands shaking again. If Robert knew...she closes her eyes against the thought. Deep breath in.

Enough. She dials Aishe's number.

"Robert! Where are you? Brian's been trying to reach you."
Libby's bright in response.

"Hello, Aishe, it's Libby. Robert seems to have forgotten his phone. I thought you might get it to him"

"Oh that man! I tell him all the time, you'd forget your head if it wasn't screwed on. Thanks for calling, Mrs Hanson, I'll organise a courier. Let me call you back with the details."

Comforted by action, Libby goes to the study for an envelope. As she's addressing it, the phone rings: it's Aishe. Libby notes the details of the courier and rings off just in time to hear the front door open, and Robert call out her name. Guilt and shame assault her anew and the phone slips from her hand.

"Libby?"

"In here." Part of her mind is racing for a plausible story, the rest is urging, 'confess, confess'. Robert's footsteps approach.

"Have you seen my phone?" his big voice precedes him down the hall. Collecting herself, she walks out to greet him saying, "I was just arranging with Aishe to courier it to you, I found it in the bedroom." In your briefcase. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

And there he is. Grey now. No sign of that New Romantic she fell in love with. Husband. A wash of gratitude passes over her guilt, pricking it to life again. She smiles at him. He smiles back; stiff, fixed.

As she holds up the phone, it buzzes an alert. A bubble announces 'new message from Katrina Flowers'. Robert's closing the space between them, that fixed smile still in place.

"It's Katrina," she says.

"Give me that." Is it his tone or the grabbing hand that gives her pause? She grips the phone, pulling it to her body.

"What's that about?" Her tone is light but her heart is pounding. He's agitated, jiggling on his feet.

"How would I know? Come on, Lib, don't mess about, I'm late already."

Libby's world slows. Robert's eyes are locked on her face. She closes her eyes to shut him out. It's now or never. Deep breath in.

"Let's see," she says, swiping the message open. He's reaching, saying 'no', even as the screen displays the message. 'Your room's ready, Mr Hanson' reads the text. Then a picture: the woman who babysat their children. Trusted friend. Lying back on a hotel bed in black and red lingerie.

Time stops. Libby's blood dries in her veins. Her skin, her body turns to so much dust. All of her life; everything she built,

everything she believes, crumbles around her and blows away. She looks at Robert, at the stranger shaped like her husband, and sees the truth.

