

## The Silver Fox

The corner office, belonging to Katie Weisler, had one lamp, a tall bookshelf, and a desk with a padlock on the bottom drawer. Flowerless vases, decorative bookends, and the business equivalent of self-help books, unopened, occupied the shelves. On the desk, was a teddy bear cactus. Only two of the items had been purchased by Katie.

Katie pulled into the parking lot at 9:00am and had her hand on the door to the main office at 9:03 which was as close to on time as she could manage. Taking short strides in her heels and pencil skirt, she crossed the room smiling and nodding to her coworkers until she reached her own office in the corner. Flipping the light switch revealed that the cleaning crew had been in over the weekend; the vacuum had left the rust-red rug striped maroon and mahogany. Through the window, Katie could see that the forecasted afternoon rain had gotten an early start. She took a seat in her swivel chair, glanced at the door which she'd left slightly ajar, and reached for the padlocked drawer. A knock on the door caused her to sit bolt upright, dropping the key and banging her knee on the underside of the desk.

"Come in," she said, crossing one leg over the other and composing her look.

A well-built man of average height wearing pressed gray pants and a crisp, blue, button-down shirt stepped into the room with a folder of stuffed with papers.

"Good morning, Katie," he said.

"Morning, Liam" she said.

"Good weekend?" he asked then, barely pausing for her answer, said "Good. Splendid."

He set the papers on her desk. "These are the notes from Friday's meeting. Type them up and send them out - before noon please. There are also some invoices in there and..."

The list was essentially the same every week and Katie had stopped listening six months ago. Go through the pile of papers, ask him if she had questions. Got it.

He left, leaving the door ajar again, and after waiting a minute, Katie picked up the key, unlocked the drawer, and pulled it open. A few confidential files crowded to the front of the drawer, but Katie pushed these aside and reached beneath them to pull out a pair of blue and yellow fuzzy socks. Unstrapping her heels, she pulled them off and slipped on the socks instead.

"Alright Sam," she said to the teddy bear cactus. "It's Monday. The weekend is only five days away. We can make it."

Then, folding her legs sideways beside her on the chair, she turned on her computer and got to work on the stack of papers.

*I pause in writing to note that the man who just walked in the cafe is quite attractive, though prematurely gray, and that I have seen him before. I cannot remember when.*

It was raining quite hard by the time Katie left the office. While other people hurried through the parking lot with briefcases and sweaters held over their heads, Katie resigned herself to getting wet and stalked through the puddles with eyes half shut against the raindrops. Turning up the heat in her car to dry herself off, she pulled out of her spot and headed for home. The office was just inside the limits of the city, almost suburban, but her apartment was downtown, above a shop in a semi-historical, mostly-touristy part of town. The shops were cute but the apartments were old which made them affordable for the likes of Katie. She parked around back and climbed the stairs to her door.

The air inside her apartment was warm, humid, and slightly musty, but it smelled like home. It was a small apartment with many windows which, on any other day, would have let in plenty of light but today only amplified the sound of the rain outside. The walls were painted a sunny yellow, matching the yellow cushions on the pale beige couch, complementing the chestnut floors, and clashing curiously with light green kitchen table and chairs. A short, leafy plant sat comfortable and happy in its round pot on the windowsill.

Katie pulled off her wet clothes and put on yoga pants and a T-shirt. Then she poured herself some cereal, sat at the kitchen table and ate it dry. As she ate, she surveyed her apartment. Every Monday, she told herself that when the weekend came, she would clean it. Every Friday, she changed her mind. So on this Monday, looking around her apartment, she found it as messy as it had been the previous week. Dirty dishes had piled up in the sink, to be washed only when she ran out of clean ones. Clothes draped over the backs of chairs or curled up in corners with discarded shoes and piles of junk mail. She was kind of a slob, when she thought about it. She put her empty bowl in the sink, then paused and reluctantly washed it. With a sigh, she washed the rest of the dishes too and put them in the drying rack. Then she stared down her dirty laundry before gathering it up and taking it to the laundromat.

*Pardon the interruption; I have just remembered where I have seen the man before. He is himself a writer and lectured earlier this week at the university. Somehow, in a cafe full of strangers he seems to me even more a celebrity than he did on the stage the day before. It occurs to me that this cafe, though unfamiliar to him, is nevertheless a natural habitat for any writer.*

Katie's usual laundromat was closed so she turned the car around and followed her GPS to what it identified as the next closest. The place was a dark little hole in the wall with a mere three washers, one dryer, and no attendants. One of the washers was wrapped in caution tape. She loaded her laundry into one of the two functional washers then took a seat by the rain-spattered window to wait. She had forgotten to bring a book so she pulled a well-worn paperback titled *The Silver Fox* from a small pile of books and magazines in a basket in the corner. Careful to keep it from shedding its fragile cover, she cracked it open. Inside the cover was a handwritten note addressed "R—", or perhaps "K—", and signed illegibly. The note read "Find your ending." Following was an address. Katie thought little of it and turned to the first page where she was introduced to a hermetical old mystic who read the future in cards and books and animal bones. She read, engrossed, until her laundry was washed and dried and then, glancing around to ensure that there was indeed no one else in the laundromat, she took the book with her.

*The writer has ordered and is waiting for his coffee. He shifts his weight between his feet as if his height makes it difficult to balance, long hands drifting to hips as he surveys first the cafe and then the street, through the window. I am trying not to stare, but his hair is such a clever mix of slate and silver that it is hard not to watch the light turn it from black to white and back again every time he turns his head.*

*Don't be getting any absurd notions; this is not a romance. The man is at least thirty years older than me—thirty-four years older in fact; I just Googled him—and that is many years too old for me. But as long as he is not looking at me, there is no reason to look away from him. I heard him speak yesterday and—damn that British accent—I want to hear him speak again. He is a very clever speaker.*

*I will talk to him. Did he order his coffee for here or to go? I slip my headphones and laptop charger into my backpack, prepared to slip out the door and casually bump into him in the street if he has ordered to go. But no! The barista hands him a mug—a small mug. I see the writer is displeased with the size. Maybe coffee comes in bigger sizes in England. But he accepts it nonetheless and brings it to a table near me.*

*I will talk to him! But what will I say? People approach him all the time, undoubtedly, and tell him that they are such big fans, that his new book was simply amazing, that they yada yada yada. He's heard it all before. And he has surely come to this cafe for a purpose, which I will be interrupting. He is a writer after all, and famous, and I am not even a graduate student. Still, we are writers! He will talk to me.*

*We will converse and he will learn that I too am a writer and he will ask to see my writing. I'll show it to him—not this piece, of course—and perhaps he will like it. Perhaps he will offer to show it to his publisher. Or maybe he will offer some suggestions and give me his email so I can send him the revisions.*

*My pulse is making itself known. And how am I supposed to speak to him when my hands won't stop shaking? I can barely type, let alone open my mouth.*

*He opens his though, and sips his coffee. He takes out a book and begins to read. Now I would be interrupting for sure. My pulse resumes its normal activities as I relax into the safe posture of watching.*

On Tuesday, Katie declined a lunch invitation and instead stayed at her desk and read of the abduction of the mystic. She shut the door and turned off the lights because Liam had a tendency to use lunchtime for impromptu meetings with any sucker who had not left the office. Sufficient light came in through the window in any case and so, with book in one hand and coffee cup in the other, she read.

Over Wednesday's lunch hour, she reached what she had expected to be the end of the book only to find it missing. She flipped to the back cover in disbelief, then back to the last page. Someone had torn out the final pages of the book. The inscription on the inside of the front cover came back to her and she turned to it. "Find your ending." And an address. Annoyed at the ending thief, Katie was forced to admit she was intrigued and so, against her better judgement, she entered the address into a search online. It wasn't as if she had to show up there. She just wanted to know. The search returned the name of a shop only 10 minutes from her apartment. Not that it mattered, she told herself. She wasn't dumb enough to be lured into whatever creepy trap was waiting for her there. But, still desperate to know the ending, she searched the name of the book. The term was, of course, too broad and the results unhelpful. She added the author's name. Nothing. She added the publisher. Still nothing. Katie threw the book into the drawer and tried to forget about it.

The following Monday morning, the book was still in the drawer and on Katie's mind. She wanted the ending. After work, she took the book from the drawer and went to her car. She would just drive by the shop. If it looked suspicious, she would leave.

It was a beautiful day, if crisp, and Katie drove with the windows down until she reached the smells of the city. She had to loop the block to which her GPS directed her twice before she saw the shop tucked away between two much bigger, happier buildings. The street was busy and Katie was forced to park across the road from the shop where she could inspect it from a safe distance. A sign like those identifying taverns stuck out from the front of it. On the weathered wood was a simple painting of what appeared to be a wolf, or a white fox. A bright red door with a brass knocker stood out from the

rest of the brown-painted store front. Not exactly frightening, but far from charming, the shop seemed to be undecided about the ambience it wanted to project. But it was a nicer part of town and there were more than a few people passing on the sidewalk. She would go in and just ask about the book. If anything went wrong, she could be out among the public in a matter of seconds.

Katie got out of her car.

*The writer has finished his coffee and he stands. My chance is now or never. I snap my computer shut, push it into my backpack, zip the bag up, and meet him as I put my mug on the counter, next to his. I look up as he turns to leave and I'll be damned if he isn't even taller up close. There are wrinkles too, that I hadn't noticed from my seat, nestled comfortably in his skin. Instead of making him look old, they give him an air of prestige. I want to look at his eyes, see if they retain their secretive smile or if they too change when you see them up close, but if I meet his eyes, I must speak to him. I raise my head, eyes trailing after, following his silver-blue tie up his chest, to his neck, then his chin, then up, and, to my horror, he is looking down at me.*

*"I—" I stutter! "I—" I don't know what to say! His speech yesterday, his book, his writing—I could compliment any one and a conversation would be underway. I just have to speak.*

*"I— I like your tie," I say.*

*"Thanks," he says and walks out, leaving me alone with my childish fantasies.*

Katie never found out what was in the odd shop because as she crossed the street to take a closer look, she was hit by a bus.