



Silver Lining

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As she trudged down the alley, Vanessa saw a narrow beam of yellow light, zigzagging wildly in the distance. It looked incongruous against the drifting snow, like a summer wasp gone mad with the cold. She cinched her hood tighter, squinting her eyes to help them focus. The hour was late, around midnight. What could it be? she wondered. Why would there be a light on, when the first blizzard of the season had completely knocked out the town's electricity?

Suddenly Josh grabbed her sleeve. “Get down!” he hissed.

She blinked into the darkness, snowflakes clumping on her black eyelashes. “Why?”

“Just do it!” he hissed, pulling her behind a filthy gray dumpster.

As they crouched together in the darkness, the light sharpened. It was not a wasp, it was flashlight—and there was a voice, too: a woman's voice. She sounded gruff—bellicose—maybe a police officer, or some crank from the Internal Revenue Service. Josh put a finger to his lips, his green eyes pleading with Vanessa not to make a sound. The rancid stench of grease from the dumpster nearly made her retch, but she pursed her lips and tried to breathe as evenly as she could. From inside came rustling sounds: mice—yuck—or was it rats?

Vanessa was inwardly fuming and ready to explode. Josh was not a model boyfriend, to say the least. He was the king of excuses, and he made dishonest “mistakes” all the time. Well, he'd pay for this one, all right.

Finally the flashlight moved off to the south and the voice faded. Vanessa turned to Josh and complained, “In case you haven't noticed, it's January. I'm freezing my butt off! You'd better have a damn good explanation for what just went down.”

“Of course, I do,” he whispered. “But not here. Let's go.”

Arms crossed across her chest, she planted her boots firmly in the snow. “Go where?”

“You'll see.” He smiled broadly. “Trust me.”

“Trust you? That's a laugh! Why should I trust *you*?”

“Because I love you, ma chere.”

“Then why did you cheat on me?”

“I didn't,” he said firmly, his musical French accent softening her resolve.

“Then why did I see all those texts from Gina on your phone? – Who's Gina?”

“I'll explain when we get there.”

“Get where?” Vanessa threw her mittened hands into the air.

Josh was now so exasperated with her that he refused to answer. He pivoted in the heavy powder, gestured for her to follow, and left the alley, covering his tracks in case he was being tailed. Glancing furtively over his shoulder, he led the way northward, away from town. Snow fell in a thick white curtain, obscuring the roads. They clomped over the Hopmeadow Bridge, across the old cemetery, and through heavily forested Buck State Park, where a sign for the Living History Museum read *Closed For the Season*.

The eighteenth-century wooden buildings were forlorn and gray against the pristine snow. All was silent but for the icy wind that had picked up, whipping Vanessa's long black hair against her face. She wondered how much farther she could go before collapsing from exhaustion, but fortunately Josh came to the rescue. “Ah, here we are,” he said, withdrawing a skeleton key from his pocket and using it to open the plank door of the one-room schoolhouse.

They entered the dim interior, closing the door against the elements. Josh immediately struck a match and lit a fire in the iron potbelly stove as Vanessa looked on in suspicious astonishment. The room was neat, but full of dust. Thick, ropy spider webs hung in the corners like fishing nets. Vanessa's teeth chattered as she asked, “Is this some kind of game? Where did you get that key? And why is the fire all conveniently set up right here, *exactly* where you need it?”

“Gina did it all,” he explained, “the canned food, the bottled water, the coffee pot. She's on staff here in the summer, so she still had the key. Don't tell anybody, but she's been sneakily living in this schoolroom for the past few months, trying to save money on rent.”

Vanessa's eyebrows rose. She said indignantly, “Well, isn't that just so cozy for the two of you!”

Josh explained, “It's not what you think, Vanessa, not by a long shot. Gina works in my lab, or should I say *worked*—she's dead.”

Vanessa clapped her hands with sarcasm. “Oh, hooray!”

“I'm serious,” said Josh, knitting his brow, “and if they find me, I'm next.”

“Good,” Vanessa frowned, “you deserve to die. Cheating on your girlfriend is a capital offense!”

“I didn't cheat on you, and I never would. As I said, I love you: je t'adore.”

“Then why did she text you fourteen million times yesterday?”

Josh rose, opened a can of soup, poured it into a pot, and set it on the stove to heat up. Then he took two wine glasses from the wooden storage cabinet and poured a generous glass for each of them. With a sigh he said, “It's about the creatures.”

Vanessa laughed suddenly, accidentally spilling wine all over her shirt. “The creatures?” she asked. “That's pretty wild—definitely your lamest excuse so far!”

“Wild, oui, but it's true.” His green eyes looked wistful.

She sat back. “I'm all ears. Now, what the heck is going on?”

Josh drained his glass. “It all has to do with work. At the lab, we were doing an experiment on brown recluse spiders.”

Vanessa interrupted, “I hate spiders.”

Josh went on, “And we inserted some human DNA.”

“That's bizarre.”

“And then we gave them somatotropin.”

“What's that?”

He looked away, as if embarrassed to meet her gaze. “Human growth hormone.”

Her eyes widened. “Why would you do a terrible thing like that?”

“It's classified,” he answered with a shrug. “Sorry, but I'm sworn to secrecy.”

“That's ridiculous. You're telling me that Gina is dead and you're on the run, but you won't tell me the objective of your study?”

“Let me put it this way: it has to do with the Super Soldier program.”

“And you can't say anything more?”

“If I tell you, they'll kill me *and* you—both of us.”

Vanessa thought for a moment. The scientific world was getting weirder by the day; there was no doubt about that. Finally she asked, “So what happened to the spiders?”

“They got big: really big. And then they multiplied and a bunch of them got loose.”

She settled in her wooden chair. “How big is 'big'?”

“Gigantic.” Josh gestured with his hands. “They're ten feet tall.”

“So why can't the cops just shoot them?”

“Because the brown recluse spider is deadly poisonous. And because these in particular are partially human. It's an ethics violation.”

Vanessa sipped her wine. “This whole thing is crazy! What were you thinking?”

“I was just doing what I was told to do. The grant for the project was enormous, and the lab really needed the money.”

The wind howled outside. A branch brushed against the thin window, but Vanessa was too tired to be startled by it. She tried to make sense of what Josh was saying. “But you still haven't told me who is trying to kill you.”

“DARPA.”

“Darpa who? Do I know him?” she asked, trying not to shout out of sheer frustration.

“DARPA stands for Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency,” he sighed. “It's a Department of Defense wing that produces futuristic military stuff, like killer robots, high-frequency microwave weapons, cameras that can see through walls, and nanotechnology.”

Vanessa threw her hands into the air. “Why would they want to kill you? Are they ridding the world of cheating boyfriends?”

Josh was not amused. He said, “Imagine what would happen if this made the news. They're tying up loose ends, and they don't want anyone talking. They've got a real mafia mentality.”

“So you're about to get the cement shoe treatment?”

“Merde. They won't catch me! I'm getting out of Connecticut.” He covered a wide yawn.

A tear slid down Vanessa's cheek. “You mean you're going back to France?”

“No, I can't risk flying,” he replied, his face a bland mask. “I'm heading up to Quebec, crossing the border in Houlton, Maine. I can fit in pretty well there while all this mess dies down.”

“Can I go with you?”

“No, ma chere, it's way too dangerous for you. I wouldn't want you getting hurt.”

Vanessa started to cry, softly at first, then deepening into sobs of grief. Josh hugged her gently, overwrought from all that he was going through. After a while Vanessa stopped crying. Her voice wavered as she pined, “But when will I see you again?”

Josh softly patted her shoulder. “Maybe six months from now—possibly—we'll have to see.”

“So let me get this straight,” said Vanessa. “You're running off to Canada, and I'm staying in the States, with deadly giant spiders running all around. What if they have oodles of baby spiders? What if there's a full-blown, end-of-the-world spider apocalypse? What will I do without you? I don't want you to go!”

He tried to reassure her. “But I have to go. They'll kill me if I don't. You saw them today, searching for me when we were in the alley!”

Vanessa sipped her hot soup. She asked, “But what will you do for money? They'll probably shut down your accounts.”

“I don't know,” he said sadly, hanging his head. “I'll have to get by somehow.”

She straightened her posture, asking, “How much money do you have with you?”

He turned out his pockets and opened his wallet. “Not much: one ten, two fives, and a twenty.”

“Well, then,” she said with a cheery smile, “Aren't you glad you reminded me to stop at the bank today? Here's the two thousand dollars I took out.”

“No, but thank you.” He shook his head firmly. “I couldn't do that.”

“You can, and you will. Here you go.” Vanessa reached into her back pocket, extracted out a thick green wad of cash. She put it into his palm and closed his fingers around it.

Josh looked misty-eyed at the wad. He said, “Cherie, I can't take your money.”

“You're taking it, and that's all there is to say!”

Lulled by the pleasant warmth of the schoolhouse, Vanessa fell fast asleep soon after that. But she awoke the next morning with a start, a cold steel gun pressed against her left temple. A stocky woman with thick red curls was eyeing her, venom in her stare. The woman demanded brusquely, “Mornin', sunshine—where's Josh?”

Vanessa's head pounded with a hangover. She blinked around the sunny schoolroom, daylight streaming in through the windows. "Who are you?" she asked, her mouth bone-dry.

The woman took the gun's safety off. She said, "I ask the questions around here. Now, who are *you*? Another finagler?"

Vanessa answered vaguely, "I have to pee."

The woman's tone was stern. "Too bad, little lady. When we're done talkin' here, you can use the outhouse."

"How can I pee when you're holding a gun to my head?"

"You won't need to pee at all if you're dead."

Vanessa asked, "Are you from DARPA?"

The woman tossed her head, jostling her red curls. "DARPA? Never heard of it. What is it, some stupid TV show?"

"You mean you're not here because of the giant spiders?"

"Lady, you've had too much to drink."

Puzzled, Vanessa asked, "Then what are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for Josh, grumbled the redhead. "That damned deadbeat son-of-a-bitch stole my jeep—and my money."

"Wait a minute," said Vanessa. "Is your name Gina?"

"Yeah." She lowered the gun. "How do *you* know who I am?"

"Josh told me you were dead, but obviously you're not. He said you work in the lab."

"What lab?"

"His lab—the UCONN lab in Farmington."

"Nah," she said with a smirk. "Josh ain't no scientist, he's a bartender. We work together at the Silver Lining. A real con artist, that's what he is!"

"But then—I don't get it—why do you want to kill *me*?" asked Vanessa.

"I don't," Gina holstered the gun. "I was just messing with you, trying to find out where that hustler went." She added, "But, judging from the bankrupt look on your face, I suppose he swindled you, too!"

“Well, Gina,” said Vanessa, shaking her head in embarrassment over Josh's ploy. “I guess you'd better save your bullets for the giant spiders. I can't believe I fell for that one!”