

## The Silver Lining

The street was deathly quiet at nine o'clock that night. The sound of tired footsteps echoed on the sidewalk, the soft slap-slapping of worn canvas soles sharp in the stillness. Occasionally, a car would race by, sleek and smooth, glare from the headlights slicing through the darkness. Alone on the cold fall evening, Emmy plodded on towards the park, her thin jacket pulled tightly about her waist, her fingers ice-cold. The small pack she carried seemed to weigh a thousand pounds in that instant, and Emmy compared herself to poor Sisyphus and his eternal burden, a never-ending uphill journey.

Cresting the hill, she came upon the tiny city park. In preparation for the holidays, the barren trees lining the sidewalk were wrapped in thousands of twinkling lights that cast a golden haze over the concrete pathway. Emmy stared up at them, wishing for the millionth time that she was back home in her bed, curtains drawn, reading one of her favourite novels. Being home had had that same sort of feel, of warmth and light and happiness. *No*, she reminded herself, *that was before*. Before the stepfather, the fights, the hopelessness. Now she was free from one nightmare, but trapped in another.

Sinking onto a bench between two trees, Emmy stretched out her legs and looked up past the fairy lights at the black expanse of the sky. It was a clear night with no clouds to speak of, the moon an invisible sliver of silver. She glanced across the path at the small sidewalk café, at the groups of red chairs positioned about round, white tables. Her stomach growled, reminding her that it had been two days since she'd had something decent to eat. She eyed the plastic candy machine that sat innocently outside the café's glass doors, and wondered if it would be worth it to break the stupid thing, if only for a few sweets. Then, the gleam of chrome caught her eye.

There, chained loosely to a street light, was a bicycle. It was simply built, with a slender silver frame, white wall front tire, and a single gear, but in Emmy's eyes, it was beautiful. She stood, and walked over to the bike, admiring the shiny fenders and elegant design. Then, she noticed the lock. The owner had neglected to close it fully, and it hung loosely, as if inviting her for a ride. Emmy was no fool. In the city, a bike could mean a different life. She could travel from one end of the city to another, or secure a job running errands. With this bike, she could build a new life. Taking a furtive glance over her shoulder, Emmy cautiously approached the bicycle. Up close, she could see the handle bars were slightly worn, and the tire treads almost non-existent. With another quick look around, she unhooked the lock and clambered on, just as a boy wearing a black pea coat exited the café, coffee and muffin in hand. He saw her, sitting astride the silver bicycle, and broke into a run. Emmy only caught a glimpse of his face before she panicked. Quickly she pushed off, pedaling away as quickly as she could, the wind whistling past her ears, whipping her long hair into crazy knots. A smile stretched across her face. For the first time in three days, she felt light as air.

She only slowed her pace when she approached the canal, the river filled with the misty reflections of hundreds of lights. Gliding along, her feet now resting on the pedals, she was hit by the full comprehension of what she'd just done. The fact that she'd sunken this low, resorting to thievery in her sorry state, was something new for her. A bridge crossing the canal appeared on her left, and Emmy watched a couple, maybe as young as she, lean over the dark waters, hands clasped tightly on the low railing. She thought of the boy at the café, his face suddenly coming to mind, the shocked, then panicked look in his eyes. *He'll never trust himself again, she thought, much less anybody else.* Watching the girl on the bridge lean back, arms wrapped around the boy keeping her from plunging into the canal, Emmy knew

the girl was lucky, lucky to have something to put a rock-solid trust into. The anonymous girl laughed, and Emmy turned away, feeling somehow like an intruder.

Riding into the city, she followed the main road, cutting through a parking lot fair to get to the downtown core. Dismounting, she walked the silver bike past rides that whirled and dove, past cotton candy stands and carnival games that lit up with flash bulbs and music. On the outskirts of the carnival, a small girl sat on the curb between her parents, pulling pieces of pink fluff from a cloud of cotton candy. As Emmy passed, she heard the little girl say, "Where are her Mommy and Daddy?" Her mother tickled her, and said the girl with the bike was a grownup, and her parents were probably waiting at home for her. "If only," Emmy muttered to herself, mounting the bike and racing away as fast as she could from what she had lost long ago.

It was now close to ten-thirty, and Emmy had begun to tire. Her pace slowed, and she finally stopped, the burst of adrenaline fuelling her finally spent. Lifting her head, she was surprised to see that she had halted in front of a grand old church, stain-glass windows lit with the candles from the late Mass. Parking the bike outside, she climbed the stone steps and yanked open the big wooden doors. Warmth and light flooded her, sending her blood singing through her veins and bringing a blush to her cheeks. Wandering into the deserted sanctuary, Emmy chose a pew close to the back, and settled in, preparing herself for a full night's rest.

No sooner had she closed her eyes, than there was a gentle *tap-tapping* on the pew above her head. Puzzled, she opened her eyes to see the smiling face of the minister. Groaning, she sat up and started collecting her belongings, but the man stopped her. "You won't break anything?" he said. She nodded. "You won't steal anything either?" She nodded again, less sure this time. "Then you are welcome in the house of God." The minister dipped

his head once and turned to go. "And by the way," he said, without turning around, "that is a lovely bicycle you have there. Be sure to return it when you're finished with it." Emmy barely heard him, her mind already faded into the fog of sleep.

To her surprise, Emmy woke up warm. She'd been wrapped in a fleece blanket, another tucked under her head. She sat up and stretched, and began packing up her things. Overnight, the silver bicycle had been brought inside, and it glinted dully in the early morning light. Grabbing the bike by the handles, Emmy crept out of the church, her doubt left behind.

Riding through the city streets, Emmy thought about her night. It had been, by far, her best night on the run, and she knew that the arrival of the silver bicycle into her life had been the cause. At the same time, she knew this couldn't last. There was still one good deed that needed to happen today, and she needed to be responsible for it. Waiting until dark, she approached the tiny park, wheeling the bicycle towards that same lamppost. She removed the lock from her pocket and with a feeling of finality, clicked it into place.

She turned to leave, but stopped when she nearly ran into the person standing directly behind her. Emmy looked up and into the face of the boy she had seen running after her the day before. He had a wry smile, was tall with messy blond hair, and held a small black key on a lanyard that dangled from his outstretched fingertips. Confused, she looked from the key to his bright grey eyes. "I think you need this more than I do," he said, pressing the key into her palm. "You look like you've been through a lot these past few days. Think of this as a...silver lining of sorts." Having said his piece, he walked away, whistling, and Emmy watched in wonder as the night swallowed him in shadows.

**The End**