



Black Widow

By Lindsay N. Marshall

At 6:24, on an average Friday night, I paint my lips in red, leaning in close to the mirror.

I brush and brush my hair, trying to tame that one stray bit of baby hair that stands up like a dirty blonde horn growing out of my forehead. I put on a black cardigan and take it off when I'm not sure how it looks with this flower-print dress. Then I put it on again. I double check the details in my phone for our date.

Seven p.m., the Palm Pavilion. Derek, six foot two, dark hair.

I study the picture in my phone. Chiseled jaw, athletic build. Handsome. If I saw him on the street, I might give him a second glance. But I'm always afraid on date nights that I won't recognize the guy in person.

At least I don't have to worry about being catfished. The picture was sent directly from another woman.

I study my reflection in the mirror. Five foot four, slim build, a smattering of freckles across my nose and cheeks. I practice my smile. Too many teeth. Not enough teeth.

Nonthreatening. Always be nonthreatening.

I pick up a small handful of crickets and mealworms and carry them to my terrarium to feed my black widows. My favorite, Belladonna, greets me at the glass while I drop her food in.

"Be a good girl," I tell her, pressing my hand to the glass. "I'll be back soon."

I check the contents of my purse. Wallet, phone, charger, keys, mace in the shape of a lipstick tube (just in case), vial of clear liquid. I double check it and toss in a pocketknife just in case too before heading for the front door.

I arrive outside the Palm Pavilion at 6:57. Right on time. I wonder if he's already inside, his name on a list. Or at the bar, downing well whiskey like water.

I gave up on the apps years ago. After one too many dick pics, catfishes, and the rare date always ending in disaster, I turned to a new form of dating. The whisper network of women. All my dates now are set-ups, blind dates, and they never end in disaster anymore. At least not for me.

Giving up my search for "the one" seemed to help too.

"Alison?" a voice says behind me. I turn to find a tall man with a dark untrimmed beard smiling down at me. My fight-or-flight senses kick in, but I fix the smile I practiced in the mirror on my face. I don't resist when he bends to hug me.

"Hi," I say, forcing my voice to sound pleasant. "You must be Derek."

"The one and only," he says, laughing. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long."

"Oh, not long at all," I say.

At 7:09, we sit at a table making awkward small talk with nothing but water glasses between us. I fidget with my hands in my lap, itching to make a move. But it's too early. There is an art to a Friday night blind date.

"You know," Derek says, leaning across the table, his breath warm in my face, "I love a girl unafraid to slide into my DMs."

I smile at him again. The same conversation they always start.

It's an ego boost, a girl making the first move. They never know they were recommended to me. It's better that they don't know, at least until later in the date.

"I'm not just any girl," I tell him. *I'm your worst nightmare*, I want to add. But I don't.

He licks his lips, then reaches his hand across the table for mine. I let him take it.

“I can tell.”

He looks around the restaurant like he wants to hail down a waiter to take our drink orders, but I can see the gears turning in his head. How he’s already five steps ahead, planning the end of the night as if all the steps leading up to it don’t matter. I plan every step meticulously. The steps matter. Finally he looks back at me.

“I’m gonna go order us drinks at the bar,” he says. “What would you like?”

Don’t drink anything you didn’t see poured, Emilia told me when she gave me his name and photo.

It’s not my first rodeo, I told her. *I never do.*

Okay well just know, roofies are his drug of choice.

Noted, I told her. *And thank you.*

“Don’t worry about it,” I tell Derek. “I’m sure a waiter will be here soon.”

Perfect timing, as always, a waiter appears. Derek orders a whiskey on the rocks, and I order a Sprite. I don’t drink on date nights. I need to be present in my head. Besides, the effects of Rohypnol are intensified by alcohol. Not that I intend to be drugged, but this is a small measure of protection.

I wonder where he keeps the drug. In his wallet or pocket. Whether it’s somewhere I could reach without him noticing. If I could convince him to accompany me to the bathroom before the first course arrives. I picture the poetic justice of using his own weapon against him. But I can feel the weight of my own drug of choice in my purse. A concoction of my own design. My vial is meant to kill.

“So, Alison,” he says, taking another swig from his third whiskey. “What do you do for work?”

It’s 7:43 and the first question he’s asked me about myself.

“I’m an arachnologist,” I say. His blank expression tells me he needs more. “I study spiders.”

“Gross,” he says involuntarily. It makes me smile genuinely for the first time tonight.

“They’re beautiful creatures,” I say. “Do you know where a black widow spider gets her name?”

He burps, a disgusting sound, too loud for such a quiet restaurant. “No, and I’m not sure I want to.”

“Sexual cannibalism.”

“Excuse me?”

“Sexual cannibalism,” I repeat. “The females eat the males after mating. Therefore, widows.”

“That’s... great,” he says. I can see him losing his color. It’s my favorite spider fact to share, but I can always tell the kind of man who finds it sickening. That’s why it’s my favorite.

“Are you alright?” I ask sweetly. “Do you need to go to the bathroom?”

“You’re a freaky chick, you know that?”

“It’s okay if you’re scared,” I tease. “I’ll never ask you to kill a spider for me.”

I watch his gears turn once more, this time impacted by alcohol. Torn between wanting to be defensive at being called scared, or excited that I’m implying there will be future dates. He chooses somewhere in the middle.

“I can still protect you,” he says, a smirk sliding into place. “Spiders aren’t the only things lurking in the dark.”

“Oh they certainly are not,” I say, then take a long sip of my drink.

It’s like a game of chicken, staring into his eyes. One of us is bound to break first. He’s itching to drug my drink, I’m itching to drug his. But neither of us have left our booth yet. The opportunity has been nonexistent. I don’t break eye contact as I take a careful bite of pasta. I remember my last victim with a similar arrogance.

His name was Jason, and his crime was refusing to comprehend the word “no.” Rebecca, who reached out for my services, gave me her story, but I noticed it at dinner as well, when he continued to order for me without consulting me. Of course I knew what would inevitably happen if I agreed to go home with him, and the three drinks he bought me against my will went directly into the plant I was seated next to. He tried his best, but I was better. The moment he turned his back to head to the bathroom, my vial went upside down into his red wine. I didn’t go home with him, but I know he was dead by morning.

It took a few failed attempts before I got the recipe right. My own personal brand of venom meant to inject victims with a secret formula, tasteless and untraceable in the blood.

“Wanna get out of here?” Derek asks. It’s 8:32 and he hasn’t used the bathroom once. The vial still sits unused in my purse, my plate of pasta nearly clean. I want to go home to my spiders and a glass of wine poured by me, but I owe Emilia a death. I owe the women of this city a death. It shouldn’t be so difficult, but perhaps I just need a bit more time with this one.

“Sure,” I say, giving him my best fake smile yet.

At 8:47, we arrive at Derek's brownstone on the south side of town. Things I learned about him at dinner include that he works in finance, but also comes from generational wealth that he refuses to acknowledge, so whether he inherited his home or earned it is a toss up.

"Wow," I say as I walk through his living room. For once my awe doesn't feel faked; the space is big and open, cozy and inviting. Everything that Derek is not.

"It was my grandmother's," he says, and I nod. Inherited it is.

He tosses his coat on a rack by the door and slides his shoes off. I keep my layers pulled tight, trying not to think about what comes next. Derek doesn't seem to notice as he meanders to the couch and plops down, his arm thrown lazily on top of the cushions.

"Do you wanna watch something?" He picks up a remote and flicks the tv on. I continue to walk around the room, pretending to look at everything.

"Tell me about the last date you went on."

He laughs, and I can sense just the tiniest bit of uncertainty. "Why do you wanna know about that?"

I shrug, looking at a picture of a small boy next to a hard-faced man. Derek and his father, no doubt.

"The last date I went on ended badly," I say. "Just curious if yours tend to feel the same."

"No," he says. "It was great. She came back here, stayed the night..."

He smiles, lost in a memory.

"But you didn't see her again?" I ask. "Why am I here if your last date went so well?"

He shrugs, pats the spot on the couch next to him. Reluctantly, I take the seat and his arm drops to my shoulders.

“It was one and done,” he says, staring into my eyes again the way he did at dinner. “I think we both got what we wanted.”

“Did you?” I ask sweetly. “What was her name?”

He blinks. The uncertainty passing over his face more clear now. I put my hand on his chest and repeat my question.

“It doesn’t matter.”

My other hand fishes in my purse for the pocketknife.

“It doesn’t matter, or you don’t remember?”

“Why do you care?” This time he sounds defensive. My hand wraps around the knife and I pull it out, pressing it gently to the side of his neck.

“Her name is Emilia,” I say as I flick open the blade. “She sends her regards.”

Using the knife is not ideal. A blade is messy, both leaving blood on hardwood floors and leaving more room for error. My venom is safer, cleaner, impossible to trace. No one has connected the recent string of deaths in the city, just unrelated young men dying after what appears to be an average Friday night on the town. But the women know how to find me. That’s the important part.

Derek fights back the moment he feels the cold blade press against his skin. He twists, grabbing my wrist, trying to pry it away from me. His nails dig into the skin of my hand, leaving small moon-shaped claw marks. He knows he’s stronger than most women, but I’m smarter than most men, and he’s drunk enough that I can overpower him.

I slice open his palm grabbing for my knife, and when he flinches, I pull my wrist free. I launch myself on top of him and reach for the pressure points on the side of his neck. The light leaves his eyes, and it's almost satisfying to see.

My watch reads 9:13. I should be home with Belladonna and the girls now. Derek's body should be growing cold.

Instead, a bruise blooms on my wrist. The tiny cuts bleed on the back of my hand. I feel the sweat sticking the baby hairs to my forehead. But I stand above him, a hunk of dead weight on the couch. He looks peaceful. Sleeping. Like I'm sure Emilia looked to him that night.

The thought incenses me and I flick open the knife again. This one will die bloody.

I could, of course, force my venom down his throat. It's less likely to wake him than a slash to both wrists would be. But his blood is already on my knife. It's too late to undo that now.

I bend down and lift his wrist, wrapping his hand around the handle of the pocketknife, his fingerprints leaving their own oily smears. I guide his hand and the knife to his opposite wrist and slice across it, leaving a bright red line. He jerks involuntarily, but his eyes stay closed.

Blood rushes to the surface of the cut. I'm not convinced I went deep enough.

I move the knife to his other hand, specks of blood falling on the handle. I'll have to leave this knife behind and buy a new one. What a shame.

The knife slides smoothly over his right wrist, deeper now, and he jerks again, this time his eyes popping open.

“What the...”

He reaches for me, clumsy and blind. I can see the “bitch” he's dying to say behind his lips. But then his brain finally registers the injuries, and he screams out in pain.

The second genuine smile of the night crosses my face.

I stand back to watch him die.

The alcohol in his system thins his blood, so he bleeds out faster than he would have otherwise. It pools in the crevices of his couch, leaving red lines dripping from his fingertips. At 9:29, there is one less predator in the world.

It's a beautiful night out. Crisp, cool air and clear skies. Couples pass by me, hand in hand. Young men jogging, young women walking dogs. It's 9:43 and Derek's been dead for less than half an hour, although it could be days before anyone finds his body. The downside of living alone, I presume.

It's thirty-some blocks to my apartment, but now I'm not in a rush to get home. I delete the Instagram account I used to contact Derek as I walk, then delete the string of texts I had with Emilia. The evidence is still there if someone knows where to look for it, but they haven't thought to look for it yet. I'm at half a dozen kills and I've not been questioned once.

I stop in a bar halfway between the brownstone and home and order a cheap wine. Partly as a way to celebrate another success—this one hard-earned—and partly to ensure that someone sees my face the night that Derek dies.

“Is that blood?” the bartender asks as he sets the glass in front of me.

I pull the sleeve of my cardigan down over my hand, rub at it in a way that I hope looks absentminded. I give him the fake smile I worked so hard to perfect and say, “I'm an arachnologist,” as if that answers his question.

He smiles awkwardly and walks away. I feel the weight of the unused vial still in my purse, calling to me, begging to be used. How much easier it would have been than the knife. How less messy.

How now there's someone who's seen blood on my hands.

I watch the bartender flirt with two girls sipping martinis, the blonde laughing open-mouthed at something he's said. I wonder if he's hurt anyone, or if he's had to stand in my shoes defending a customer. I wonder if he's seen the effects of a drink being roofied. If he's ever tried to use the drug himself.

At 10:32, I order my second glass, and I ask him.

“Do you know where a black widow spider gets her name?”