

The vampire's final breath left his pale lips like a sigh.

I toed his corpse with the tip of my heeled boot just to make sure. *Yep, he's dead alright.*

Deader than dead, really, since he could have been changed years ago. It takes a while, but their hearts *do* stop beating. That bit was true.

Strange then, how ramming a metal stake through the soft tissue and muscle killed them. I mean, if it wasn't beating anyway...

I shook my head—I'd never really cared how it all worked, just that it did. I knelt down on the asphalt, careful not to kneel in the rapidly growing ring of deep red around his broken body and used his denim jacket to wipe off my stakes before sheathing them back into the leather rings on my inner thighs beneath my leather skirt.

Leaning in, I peeled back his eyelids.

"*Damn,*" I whispered, pushing the pale flaps of skin back down to cover his unseeing green eyes. He wasn't the one I hunted. But he had fangs and the wreak of fresh blood on his breath and that was evidence enough against him in my books.

Rising, I stretched out my back and cracked my neck. Sighed. I searched the deserted area around back of the bowling alley. It was a Tuesday night—well past midnight. I didn't like leaving the bodies out in the open like this, but I didn't see I had much other choice this time. This one had been a bonus. I wasn't out to hunt—with my truck, tarp, shovel and rope. I'd been doing my laundry at the 24hr joint down the strip and left for some air and a cup of coffee when I saw him.

The bloodsucker looked like he'd just come from a feeding. With color in his cheeks and the metallic reek of blood on him. I only hoped he'd left his victim alive, otherwise the police would

be dealing with two bodies in the morgue tomorrow. Notifying one family that their sister, aunt, friend or father wouldn't be coming home ever again.

I shuddered.

*Ah!* A dumpster. The green metal bin crouched against the weathered brick of the building, a few paces from a door marked 'employees only', but a staggering twenty feet or so from where I stood with the decaying vampire at my feet.

"Hope you're not as heavy as you look," I said to him, and hoisted his body onto my shoulder, grunting with the effort. His blood dripped down my shoulder, staining my shirt.

"You owe me a shirt," I said, exasperated.

His limp corpse proved heavier than I anticipated. But nothing I couldn't manage. I'd conditioned my body for this. How else could a human woman take out fully matured vampires?

Practice.

And patience.

And a little something *extra*.

They were the only reasons I was still alive and so many of them were dead. I lifted the lid of the green bin and shoved him inside, a horrid smell wafting up from the black bags beneath him the moment he hit them. *Ugh*. I reached into his pocket and fished out his wallet, glad to see there were more than few hundreds tucked inside the flaps.

Score.

Reaching into the knot of black hair at the back of my head, I tugged free the small rosebud I'd tucked there before leaving the motel and tossed it atop the vamp's chest. The lid fell closed and I stepped back, holding my breath to ward off the stench.

I felt sorry for the poor employee who found him. It looked like rain tonight, but tomorrow would be hot as hell if the weatherman was to be trusted. And there's nothing worse than the smell of dead guy in the morning.

Here was hoping the little old lady back at the Soap 'n Suds had finished her washing for the night. With this much blood on me, I'd wind up giving her a heart attack otherwise.

"Seth!" Someone called from down the street, cursing under his breath. I'd always had great hearing, so when I heard the unmistakable sound of a numbers being dialed on a cell, I flipped open the wallet in my hand.

There, in the little plastic covered card-slot was an i.d. card. Either a very good fake, or this guy was more recently changed. He looked just like in the photo. Seth Carfax.

I rolled my eyes at the darkened sky. *Couldn't I have just one day off?*

Any second now the other vamp would smell the blood of his friend and be around the building.

*Looks like laundry will have to wait.*

But I couldn't risk getting any more blood on my clothes. If I anyone spotted me on my way back to the laundry, I would draw too much attention. I didn't feel like dealing with the local authorities tonight.

The soles of the new player's shoes slapped the pavement in quick steps as he came around the edge of the building. I was already on the ground, feigning injury. Just a pretty girl, helpless and all alone in the dark. No one around to hear me scream.

Worked almost every time.

He froze mid-dialing, and I resisted the urge to loose a sigh of relief. I hadn't checked the one in the dumpster's pockets for a phone, but I knew a ringing dumpster would be pretty fucking suspicious if he completed that call.

His lips parted as he took in the sight of me. Dressed in a low-cut halter and short leather skirt. My boots hugging my calves all the way to my knees.

"Please," I said, in my most pleading high-pitched voice. "Please help me."

The vampire drew nearer, and I saw that I hadn't been wrong about what he was. They had an air about them. I *felt* the presence of them in the atmosphere when they were near. Another learned ability.

He walked over to me, and I hoped he wouldn't see the enormous streak of blood twenty feet away. That he wouldn't follow the drips to the trash bin over by the wall.

But no, his focus narrowed squarely on me.

*That's it. Come and get me.*

The vampire stood tall and lanky. Maybe six feet. Broad through the shoulders with a trim waist. A shock of white-blonde hair offset his dark eyes and sharp cheekbones. He reminded me of someone I used to know. Too bad he wasn't still human—I'd climb him like a tree if he were. Such a waste.

"I can't get up," I said as he approached, doing my best to hold his attention. "My leg, its—"

He leaned down and I got him. His eyes locked on mine—giving me the only leverage I needed.

"Don't move."

He stilled.

I focused my mind on him and only him. It was the only way it worked, and even then, it could falter.

He opened his mouth to speak as I rose to my feet. “Quiet,” I commanded.

His lips sealed closed. A crease formed between his brows. His lips curled in distaste. They really didn’t like it when I used their own ability against them. Compulsion was *their* power. On top of speed, agility, heightened senses and immortality.

But it was also *mine*.

“You’re wondering what I am, aren’t you?” I asked, my voice teasing as sweat beaded on both my brow and his. The focus of keeping him bent to my will exerted me more than any street fight could. My pulse soared and my chest tightened, constricting my breath to small, sharp inhales. I’d learned to get used to it, though. I could hold him like this for nearly an hour if I tried hard enough.

I shrugged when he didn’t answer, smiling to myself knowing that he couldn’t even if he wanted to.

“I’m lucky, I guess.”

It was all I would allow myself to think. The fact I shared this trait with my victims made my skin itch. I hated it, but it was necessary. And very likely the only reason I hadn’t been drained dry yet. And the only reason I got away with doing everything I did.

“But you,” I said, circling him. “Aren’t so lucky tonight.”

I pulled out one of my metal stakes from between my legs and twirled it in my fingers, making sure he caught the glint of the cold hard steel in the moonlight. He made a strained sound in his throat, and I crouched down in front of him, meeting his eyes again, disappointed to find that they were both a dull brown. Not the guy, either.

“What was that? Speak up.”

He took a short, gasping breath, his eyes wide as he sputtered. “The Black Rose.”

*Huh?*

“I know who you are,” he said in a rush and my blood chilled. “They’re coming for you. They’ll kill—”

“That’s enough,” I ordered. I was losing my edge. The compulsion slipping as his words wreaked havoc on my nerves. Stupid of me to allow him to speak at all. It didn’t happen often, given that only the strongest and oldest of them could compel at all...but if they compelled me before I could compel them...

Well, let’s just say I didn’t ever want to know what would become of me if that happened.

“Time to meet your maker,” I said, my tone bored as I reeled back and plunged the sharp edged metal into his hunched back, throwing all my body weight into the swing to make sure I broke through the bones of his ribs and hit my target.

His breath left him in a great *whoosh*. He choked a bit on the inhale, and then he fell. My compulsion releasing him at the same moment his unnatural life ended.

*The Black Rose.*

I wiped off my stake on the ass of his jeans.

So, they had a name for me now?

I mulled over the new information, fighting against the logical half of my brain that screamed this was a very *very* bad thing. Listening instead to the twisted little minx who whispered in the dark recesses of my mind that that shit was *badass*.