

*W***ITHERED**
BY TAMARA CRITZER

I have never once taken a life. With my hands around their neck and their breath slowing to a stop, I have never once taken a life.

I love all of my victims. I love all of them so much that I bring them back immediately. I collect the mental image of their last breath and lock it away forever. That memory is mine, and no one else can have it. And then, they're breathing again. I place my hand on their chest, and they're alive. Only dead for a few moments. Just a few. Just enough for me to savor.

By the time they come to consciousness, they are safely back in their home, unaware that I have brought them close to the River Styx but not given them a boat. I have done this for seven years now, killing and reviving, savoring and getting away with it. I never see my victims again. There's just no need to when I have that positively perfect memory in my head. I wish I could stay with them longer. I wish I could look upon their lifeless body for just a night or two.

But I'm scared, I'm paranoid, and I'm shy. I'm scared my powers won't work if they've been dead for too long, and I'm paranoid they will remember me. And I am shy, even when I'm with their corpse. I don't feel so lonely, but I still don't know what to say. They're always much too beautiful for me. What could I say to people that beautiful?

I broke my rule today, though. I found a woman different from the rest. She isn't strikingly beautiful, but she's a hidden gem. And when I watch her, she's always quiet. Pensively judging those around her in silence. Everywhere she goes, she doesn't say a word. She doesn't smile. She makes no mark on the world.

But I couldn't help myself. I killed her twice.

I killed her twice, and I plan to do it again.

THE FIRST DEATH

Sera is unlike anyone I have ever killed before. The first time I brought her to my house, she awoke from her drug haze quietly. She did not scream or try to run away from me. She lay on my couch silently, staring up at me as I stood, towering over her.

Her eyes studied my own. “Are you going to kill me?” she asked quite indifferently.

I tilted my head. “Yes.” How could she have concluded that so suddenly? The beauty of my work is that I am so unpredictable. I’m tall, but I’m not too tall. I’m clean-shaven and somewhat attractive. I think my silence and naturally brooding countenance makes me even more attractive than I am to women. I use it to my advantage, but I have never actually had any interest in those things.

I like to kill women, but I never touch them inappropriately. And I never will.

Sera’s eyes closed. “Do it, then.”

It honestly was one of four times in my life I had even been genuinely surprised. My eyes widened ever so slightly, and I’m sure she could see my shock through closed eyes. I leaned down and put one hand on the back of the couch and one on the lip of the seat, caging her in between my arms. I hovered menacingly, or at least I tried to. “You’re not afraid to die?”

Her eyes opened, revealing a blue-grey hue I had not noticed before. She quirked an eyebrow as if she was challenging me. “If you went through the trouble of drugging me and bringing me to this place, I’m assuming there is no way to talk you out of it. In fact, my only chance is probably to not resist, because that’s what *people like you* feed off of.”

I mean, she wasn’t wrong. I liked to feel powerful. It’s why I targeted women. It’s why I had given up on trying to kill men. And I got no joy from killing children. But *people like me?*

Sera was a new real estate agent with no social life or family. I know this because I followed her for weeks. How could she possibly know people like me?

I tried to arouse some type of fear in her. I crawled onto the couch and straddled her waist. My hands gripped her shoulders firmly, and I stared into her eyes, never blinking. Then again, nor did she.

“It’s not going to work.” Her voice was soft and yet demanding.

She was testing me. She was calling me out for a bluff I didn’t plan to make. It honestly thrilled and infuriated me. If she was going to try and call me a liar, I would do the same to her.

My hands moved from her shoulders to her neck. I never wore gloves, because my victims never remembered anyway. And I was too stealthy and quick of a man to ever be caught capturing them or dropping them off.

I was perfect.

I could feel her pulse under my forefinger. It was...slow. Never in my life had I felt a pulse so calm. I was sure even my own was racing compared to hers. I applied pressure, and she kept staring. I broke eye contact and glanced to her unkempt burgundy hair. It splayed across the pillow so messily and yet beautifully that she looked like art. She looked like a living, breathing painting. It made me want to kill her even more.

I squeezed harder, and a small, nearly inaudible squeak escaped her mouth. I leaned down as I choked her and put my lips to her right ear. “This marks you as mine for all of eternity.”

Instinct must have kicked in, because she did end up grabbing my forearms and digging her nails into them. She was weak, however, and it did not take long for death to find her. After a

few moments of silent struggle, she breathed no more, and her arms went limp. I stared down at her in awe, and I remained seated atop her waist for a very long time. Too long, perhaps.

I moved over to lie beside her, and I cradled her corpse to me. I put my nose in her hair and closed my eyes. She smelled like shampoo. Nothing fruity or flowery. Just shampoo.

And so it was just us for a few hours. I stroked her hair and kept her back pulled into my torso. My arms were strong around her, comforting and quieting any worries a dead person could ever have. I was perfect for her.

Her sleeve slipped off her shoulder and revealed her bra strap. Being the gentleman I was, I corrected her sleeve and covered the strap. I think I fell asleep for a few minutes, because I couldn't tell how much time had passed after that.

She took a little bit longer to revive than the others. It scared me, honestly. I wouldn't care if my victims remained dead, but it saved me worry and cleanup time to simply let them resume their normal lives, breath in their lungs and all. And I did love them, dead or alive. I was their God, deeming them worthy of resurrection.

It normally took placing my hand on their chest to restore their life, but I had to wait for several seconds before she began to breathe again. She was almost as beautiful asleep as she was deceased. But I had to let her go. It was my rule. One kill per person. I could never see her again after I returned her to her house.

THE SECOND DEATH

I killed three other women after Sera, but I felt a void each time. Nothing satiated me. I had even gone so far as to stabbing one of them violently to try and stimulate my particular needs. It had not worked. All I had felt was frustration over the bloodstains on my new carpet.

I don't know why I found myself dining at the coffee shop outside of Sera's work, but I did. I mean, I did like coffee and sweets. The shop was thirty miles from my house, but perhaps I just wanted to try something new? Maybe this coffee shop in particular looked like it had better coffee?

It didn't. I ordered a black Columbian brew, and it tasted weak and old. But I found myself sucking it down as I sat outside and watched Sera leave her workplace. She wore a blue dress today. Odd. Sera never wore dresses. I squinted as she walked toward the street to hail a cab. She was wearing lipstick. Sera never wore lipstick.

I downed my coffee, paid my tab, and decided to follow her. Why wouldn't I do that? She was my friend, and something was definitely up. I had to make sure she was alright.

I got in my car and followed the cab, careful to remain three cars behind. When we turned left on Kettle Street, I knew we weren't going home. I could feel my blood begin to boil. Where was she going? Who was she going to see?

The cab stopped at an Irish-styled tavern. It seemed relatively busy inside, so I knew I could spy on her without being noticed. Once inside, I sat across from her at the bar. I ordered a gin and tonic and peered at her over the food menu.

After five minutes or so passed, a man sat next to her. They shook hands. Sera was notably uncomfortable. They must have met online, because I could tell by Sera's reaction that he did not look like who she thought he was.

Four hours.

She drank for four fucking hours listening to this dipshit ramble on about politics and how feminism was destroying the nuclear family. I could tell she was over him by the way she

nodded her head and only responded with one-word answers. I wanted to rescue her, but I couldn't risk exposing myself.

Sera got up to go to the bathroom, and I watched the very ugly man quickly rifle through his suit pocket. He pulled out a capsule and dropped its contents into Sera's drink. With a quick stir, he dusted his hands off and glanced around casually. I made sure to not be looking in his direction when he stared my way.

I smirked.

I didn't often display emotion, but this was an especially deserving event. I couldn't harm the guy for simply being a sexist asshole. I could, however, hurt him if he meant to hurt Sera.

When Sera returned, the man made some lame joke about how it was his turn. Perfect. When he left to go to the bathroom, I watched Sera. She drank from the drink, and I wouldn't stop that. I couldn't be seen communicating with her, so she would just have to suffer another forcible drug intake.

I walked into the bathroom and crouched down to look at the stalls. No one besides Sera's date and I were inside. He used the urinal furthest away from the door, and by doing so he signed his own death warrant.

I walked over and stood next to him. I could tell he was inebriated by the way his reaction was delayed and awkward.

"There are ten other urinals, pal. You gay or somethin'?" he asked me with snark.

The grin that spread across my mouth was so wide, it hurt. I stared at the drunken man, his dick out and all, and I pondered the question he posed to me in my head. Am I gay? I originally had targeted young men as victims before switching to women because they were

often easier targets. But... I just felt no sexual stimulation by anyone. I loved control, and I loved blood.

And since this man would soon shed blood by my hands, did that then make me homosexual? I technically would feel some inkling of stimulation by killing him, but not of that kind... I could not answer his question, I told myself, withdrawing my knife from the inside of my coat's breast pocket.

I did not know, I thought silently, flicking open the knife's blade.

'Do I want to have sex with men or women?' I stabbed him in the neck so he could not scream. 'No, I don't think that I do.'

My knife went back in my pocket, and I left the restroom. This was my first kill without plans of revival, I thought frantically. Was there anything that could link him to me? No cameras, no weapon. I would burn these clothes.

He had challenged me. How could I have spared him? He dared threaten my Sera like she was *his* Sera, and that just could not be. My eyes looked for her, and I was glad they did, because I caught a glimpse of her stumbling out of the exit.

I remained inconspicuous as I strode through the bar. I walked out the door with a nod to the hostess. I felt my heart racing with euphoria and excitement. This was thrilling! I had to tell Sera. She of all people would want to know.

"Sera," I called, catching up to her. It was dark now, and the sidewalks were empty. She hugged the brick wall of the bar and walked onward. "Sera, you'll never guess what just happened."

Her steel-colored eyes hazily glanced up to me. "I don't know you. Get away from me."

“Oh, Sera. I killed that man for you. That’s the first time I’ve killed to benefit someone else. I thought I should tell you so you could tell me how proud you were. So go on. How proud are you?” My smile was small but genuine.

She scrunched her eyebrows together in confusion. Ah, the drugs. “Get away from me, you psycho.” Her words were cold and bitter, much like she was as a person. I didn’t mind the frigid tone, but I did not enjoy being insulted like that.

“Sera... Don’t call me names. That’s the first sign of a lost argument, you know.” My smile persisted as I tried to help her walk.

The brunette jerked away from me and stumbled. “I said leave me alone!” She was loud, very loud. This was bad.

“Please keep your voice down,” I told her as I leaned to her level and once again tried to help her. “I don’t want people to get the wrong impression.”

“I said get off!” she yelled and slammed a hard fist into my jaw.

I felt my eye twitch. I had never been struck before. How dare this woman strike me after I went to such great lengths to protect her? Had she no tact? What a disgusting woman she must be to treat me like that. I did what any man would do, and I pushed her down an alley. My hand quickly covered her mouth, and my other arm became an iron bar across her chest to pin her to the wall. She was drugged and therefore slow. She scratched at my arms like she had before.

I put my lips to her ear and frowned. “It’s pathetic wretches like you that drive me to do this. Always so beautiful and small. Don’t you know what I could do to you? What I *have* done to you?” I pressed against her more harshly. No space remained between us. Only my anger and resentment for having chosen her as the object of my affection. “I thought I could trust you, but I see you are no different. I quite prefer you as a corpse, my dear Sera.”

At this point, she was nearly unconscious. I did not care, however, and I showed no vacillation in shoving the same knife from earlier into her stomach. She made a gurgled cough, and I stabbed her again. She died quickly, but I relished in the feeling of her slumping against me. I fell to the ground with her body and sat, holding her in my lap.

I could hear sirens in the distance. They must have discovered Sera's date's body in the restroom. Sera and I were a few blocks away, but it still wasn't safe. I carried her body down the alley and exited through the back.

AN ENDLESS CYCLE

I decided to use Sera to test the extent of my powers. I kept her in my cellar. I killed her many ways. Each time, she took a little longer to bring back. Eventually, it began taking several hours to revive her. I was growing scared.

"Could you please just decide what you're going to do with me?" Sera pleaded quite apathetically from her seat on the floor.

Oh, yeah. Another thing: she started retaining some of her memories.

"I really don't understand why you treat me like trash, Sera. By being together, I am essentially your assurance that you will never die." I plopped onto the ground next to her. She was bound—loosely—due to a bit of wild behavior over the past few days.

"We are not together. I don't know you. I don't know your name."

I ignored her and reached over to grab my notebook. I had been logging the events of her deaths and resurrections. "Tell me, how do you feel? Any pain?"

"Hungry."

I rolled my eyes and scribbled down some notes. “You refused my homemade chicken alfredo.”

“It tasted like hot garbage.”

My pen snapped in half. I turned my eyes to Sera and grabbed her by the neck quite violently. “Stop insulting me!” I yelled. My voice was deep and commanding, but it did not shake a girl like Sera. No, instead, she lurched forward and slammed into me. The hollows of her eyes were deep, and though she had no use of her arms, she still seemed quite capable of movement. She sat on top of me and tried to slam her head into mine, but I caught her forehead with the palm of my hand.

I quickly reversed our positions and pinned her to the ground. “Do you want me to kill you again so soon? Is that it?!” I grit my teeth as I seethed. Something about Sera made me love and hate her in the same breath.

I felt a sharp pain in my forearm. I blinked in confusion. It took me a second to realize she had leaned over and bit me. Hard. Blood swelled in her mouth and trailed down my arm. I cried out loudly and jerked my arm away from her, ripping my flesh further in the process.

“You...!” I sat back and stared at her, but what I saw silenced me. My breathing quickened. The look she gave me *scared* me. She looked...

Hungry.

I swallowed hard. My anger had already dissipated, even as I clutched my wound. “Sera, how are you feeling?”

“I’m...” Even she did not understand what was going on. “I’m hungry.” She stood up, arms still bound, and loomed over me. There was a madness in her eyes that I had never seen

before. Always stoic, Sera now looked possessed by a demon. Her hair was frazzled, her skin was pale, and she stepped closer to me.

Was this truly happening? Was this the effect of bringing someone back to life? I had killed so many before, but I had never revisited them. If they ended up like this, I would have never known. She passed all of my medical testing. Heart rate, blood pressure, temperature... It all concluded she was very much alive.

And yet, here she was, staring down at me like I was meat.

And what was I to do when she looked so beautiful like that?

What was I to do when I loved her so much that I wanted to see this side of her? Blood dribbling down her chin, she was gorgeous. A true embodiment of perfection. And I could not wait to share these moments with her. I was ready.

With haste and hunger, Sera descended upon me.