

Red Snake, Dead Girl

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Her graffiti was gone.

Not cleaned off or painted over. Just gone. Bobby knew the difference. She had witnessed countless of her art-pieces destroyed for the pleasing blandness of a smeared brick wall. She didn't mind, now. Used to though. The first time a piece she had worked on for six hours had been erased, she had cried herself to sleep.

She took a drag from her cigarette, holding the smoke for a second before blowing it into the humid summer air. Where the bright red snake had been, not a trace remained.

Another day, she might have passed it off as being drunk from one too many cheap beers. Problem was, she wasn't drunk. And the empty red spray can still hung in her hand.

One minute. That was all the time she had spent turning around, rummaging through her bag for a lighter.

And then, no snake.

Barbara "Bobby" Blake should never have turned out like she did. Her parents had too much money, went to church every Sunday, handed out charity event pamphlets during school festivals. Hell, her mum made pancakes for breakfast on fucking Tuesdays. But Bobby had fallen in with the wrong crowd early, and then everything had gone to shit.

She smelled Gary in every cigarette she wasn't supposed to smoke, saw Clarisse on every *F*ck the police* sticker in town. And Susie ... well, she felt Susie's hands on her skin every night in her dreams. But that was another story.

No more Susie, now. No more Gary, either. Clarisse might still be around somewhere, if she went searching. But what was the point? Her old life had gone up in flames and her new life felt like a car that tried to ignite but never went past that first coughing, empty stutter.

Bobby took a long drag from her cigarette. Dropping the butt on the pavement, she carefully stomped out the glowing end with her sneaker, and went home.

Her room was dark, and her eyes fixed on the ceiling. She couldn't get that empty wall out of her head.

Where had that snake gone?

Bobby rarely painted anything else these days. The image of those tight, red scales on bronze skin haunted her. Blinking away tears, Bobby curled into a fetal position. She hated feeling. It hadn't helped her outside that burning farmhouse, screaming herself

raw against the hands of people holding her back. It hadn't prepared her for the death of her girlfriend, either. She tried to keep them out, most of the time. But tonight, she couldn't hold those pictures at bay, those images that might have been memories or fantasy, horror and reality coming to life in her head. Bronze skin blistering and bursting open like overripe fruit. Red braids slowly burning away, acrid, black smoke choking the air.

The shadows turned thicker. Bobby sat up slowly, staring at the spot right next to her window, squinting her eyes. Was that ...

A snake slithered from the wall and fell to the floor. It's long, plump body curled neatly against the carpet as it slowly approached the bed. Bobby didn't breathe. She fumbled for her nightlight, missing the switch twice before she finally flipped it. A bright cone of light fell on the animal that stopped in its tracks.

It was red like blood.

"You are fucking kidding me." Bobby stared at her graffiti made real, smaller maybe, but still undeniably hers. Now that she had light, she could even make out the sprayed edges.

The snake hissed, lifting its triangular head and staring at her with black, beady eyes.

Hello Bobs.

"OH MY GOD!"

Bobby had never jumped off her bed so quickly. Before she knew what she was doing, she was on the other side of the room, pressed against the wall.

"Everything alright, love?", came her mother's voice from downstairs.

The snake hissed. It sounded ... amused?

"Yeah ... yeah, just bumped my toe!" Bobby called back. She slowly drew away from the wall. "You can speak" she whispered. "This can't be happening."

Of course I speak, you dimwit.

"Rude?!" Bobby shot back. Her heart was still hammering out of her chest, but she held herself together.

Oh, now she cares about manners ... The snake coiled up its gleaming body. Two years make all the difference, huh?

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The snake flicked its tongue into the air. *There was a party, remember? Got a little heated later, though my memory of the details is a little fuzzy towards the end.*

Bobby felt cold trickle down her back. Her mind happily supplied more fragments of that day. An abandoned farm, a rust-colored, grimy couch. Sloppy, drunk kisses. Loud music blasting from old speakers. Clarisse leaving early, Gary passing out on the floor. Bobby's cigarette flicked into a corner, like so many other nights.

And then, much later, the smell of smoke.

"How do you know that? What sick shit is going on here?"

Oh, come on. Haven't you realized yet? Who else calls you Bobs?"

Bobby's legs turned to jelly. She went to her knees, staring at that red reptile, the exact replica of that snake tattoo, the details of the image seared into her mind from trailing her fingers over it every night.

"S-Susie?"

Wow, that took you a while. Guess you forgot me already. Can't say I blame you. I was always a shit influence.

"No, no, nonono." She crawled forward, gingerly reaching out a hand to the red snake, but it hissed and curled away. Bobby let her hand drop.

The memories flooded her now. The air cooking, searing heat scalding her skin. Hands

grabbing her, carrying her outside, coughs rattling her weakened body. Burns on her skin. Screams from inside, rotten beams collapsing. The popping of burning wood so loud it drowned out Bobby's howls.

"I am SO sorry, Susie." Bobby swallowed back a fresh barrage of tears. Now was *not* the time. "It was my fault. I never wanted this. Any of this. I love you, Susie. If I could trade places with you right now, I would, I fucking swear it." She reached out again. The snake pulled away, but without hissing this time. Its black eyes studied her carefully.

No touching. Doesn't work. Though I wish it did. Just one last time.

"Susie ..." Bobby tried, and tried, but she couldn't hold the tears back anymore. She sat on her carpet, staring at the snake that was her dead girlfriend, and sobbed her eyes out. "I miss you so fucking much."

I know, babe. The snake slithered forward, stopping just shy of Bobby's hand. It lifted itself up, tasting the air and closing its eyes. *I miss you too. But I need you to let go.*

And with a soft *Poof*, it vanished.

Just like that.

Bobby stared at the spot where only a whisp of smoke remained. She didn't move for a very long time.

The snake was back.

Bobby stared at it for a very long time. It was the next morning. Susie's last words still rang in her mind like a bell that never stopped. A never-ending litany of *let go, let go, let go*. She had brought her bag with spray cans. Carefully, she flicked her cigarette to the pavement, stomping out the little glowing end.

Took a deep breath. And began to spray.

No snake this time. At least, not quite. When she was done, a life-size graffiti of a girl with fiery braids, bronze skin and a red snake tattoo on her naked back filled up the brick wall. Susie looked over her shoulder, eyes defiant, boring into Bobby's, a mischievous smile curling around her lips.

Bobby smiled back. Touched the hand of her art-piece one last time.

And walked away.