

## Bleeding Roses, Ticking Hearts

By Olivia Langston

Victoria Grey opens her weary eyes to the sight of a bedroom window left open with flowing white curtains. The walls are a gentle pale pink, like blushing cheeks, or blossoming roses. And just outside the tall, oak door, she can hear the ticking of what she assumes to be a clock.

Into the quiet, still of the dawn, she calls, "Hello?"

The faint fog lying over the glimpses of the horizon mirror the heavy smoke in her head, a thick, wispy glaze chilling and dulling her thoughts. Her name sits on the tip of her tongue, but she can't find it. How did she get here?

The door creaks open and in steps a man wearing a brown suit, elegant, dapper, not a wrinkle in his dress shirt or a tilt in his hat. He walks with perfect posture, not a single bounce in his step, rigid like a soldier, but smiling like a schoolboy.

"Good morning, my rose." Calls the stranger as he marches to her bedside, eyes warm and full of adoration, mouth moving just out of sync with his words.

"Who are you?" Victoria sits up, her knees bending, pulling her legs forward, but the grip of metal chains pull back before her heels can reach the rest of her.

The man's smile begins to falter, eyebrows pinching upwards as he looks at her with a mix of fondness and hurt dancing in the golden hues of his eyes, "My love, how could you forget?" His hand cups her cheek, the chill of metal fingers against her skin makes her shiver.

The memories are drowning, pouring down her lungs and through her nose, choking her, forcing her eyes wide open, forcing her to see, forcing her to remember.

Hours, weeks, months she spent in that damp, half rotted basement, shivering in the cold as her chill-numbed fingers married to tools and gave birth to clockwork, ticking, winding, whirring just beneath carefully handcrafted metal skin. The body was finished by November, the mechanisms animating it refined by March, but the chest sat gaping open for two more years, watching, breathing, waiting hungrily as Victoria created the heart.

A husband. She remembered her father's wrinkled and withered hand clutching her own as he lay tucked so warmly in his deathbed. The way her mother sat at his side, hollow, aching as she watched his light burn out. The way it shattered her, gutted her, leaving her only a shell of herself. Victoria never married, a recluse in her machines and studies, but she too knew love, wanted love, craved love, but seeing her father's soul rot out of his wilted husk that day, she knew she never wanted to suffer the agony that came with it. For every love, without fail, loss followed.

But Victoria was hungry. When she couldn't satisfy herself with the means given to her, she'd create new ones. Out of gears and cogs and bolts and fire, she made her soulmate, a perfect match, with clockwork that ticked in unison with her pulse and eyes that shone of gold and bronze. When she locked his heart into place, his head lifted, and he smiled.

Victoria had created a life with mechanical veins and a clockwork heart. There was no God woven into his soul. Only Victoria. Their first night together, they waltzed through the halls of her empty home, and Victoria smiled.

There were six months lived in perfect harmony, man and machine making a life together. Eggs and toast in the mornings, warm embraces and quiet snores in the night. The ticking of clockwork served as Victoria's lullaby, and when she woke each morning, she smiled.

It was a cold winter's evening on the fourteenth of February that the routine would be disrupted. Laughter over a warm dinner sliced through by a knock at the door. Standing on Victoria's porch with a bouquet of white roses, was a suitor. Sent by her mother, the familiar face of a childhood friend. His name was Henry, his last name she couldn't remember, and before she got the chance to ask, her husband marched like a wind up toy soldier, and his hands got to work. Wrapped around Henry's neck like a necklace of brass, they squeezed, choked, broke the man's bones and tore his flesh until blood bubbled up his throat and oozed out of his pale lips, dripping past metal jointed knuckles and trickling down to stain the roses red. He dropped the man, watched the flowers soak up the vibrant red life, and smiled.

Victoria's own hubris stared back at her with twinkling copper eyes, so full of love and pride, like a loyal little dog after chasing away a mailman, blood seeping under his tarnished fingernails.

The rest, she doesn't remember as clearly. There was running. Hours of running, weeks of hiding, away from him, away from her monster she'd created and loved. If there was any sort of home she'd found after, it was lost in the cracks and holes in her consciousness, overcome by her fear and her regret.

The bedroom she dwelled in she now recognized. It was the bed they'd once shared with tender kisses and loving embraces. The bedroom that had once gently cradled her now holds her hostage in cold, heavy chains.

"Why have you brought me here?"

"I didn't want to," Says her husband as he sits on the corner of the bed with his own face of remorse, his eyes glancing down at her with pity, "I wanted to take you somewhere beautiful, a sunset on a beach, a meadow with butterflies and flowers. Marigolds were your favorite, I remember. But alas, you try to run away."

"Because you're a monster!" Victoria snaps at him, and as she strains against her bonds, she can feel screws. Not wound through the metal, through *her*. Her wrists were pierced by the metal, but numb to the pain, almost healed around their winding rods, blood scabbing under where the bolts blossomed out of her skin.

"Who is the real monster?" Asks her husband as his cold hand sweeps a curl of brown hair past her brow and tucks it behind her ear, "The abomination himself, or his creator?"

"I never meant for you to kill anyone," Victoria speaks in almost a whisper, looking straight ahead, at her faint reflection in the window, yelling now, "I didn't program you to kill anyone!"

"But you did." He argues, back straightening as he carried himself with pride, "Endless love, unwavering devotion. You willed it into my heart and I gave it to you. Still now, it is yours." His voice, harsh as brass, smooth as silk, taunts her with every syllable. The voice of her selfish desires, the voice of her naivety, the voice of the murderer, the monster built by her own hands.

“Just tell me what you want!” She howls, fresh blood seeping from her wrists and trickling down her arms, soaking into the sheets and blooming in their fibers, just like the petals of the white roses.

“I want you to marry me, Victoria,” He takes her left hand with his, his right hand displaying a ring handmade out of sea glass and copper wire.

“Never.” She snarls back.

Steam seeps from the cracks between the sheets of metal forged to make his eyes. The closest the man, the machine, the monster could get to crying, “You made me to love you. I am yours and you are mine. Your husband, my creator. Don’t torture me, my rose.” He pleads, on his knees at her bedside, “Don’t deprive me of the only purpose I have.”

“You don’t have a purpose,” Victoria hisses then, tearing her gaze away from her before it can pull from her any shred of pity, “You were a tool, and you were defective. And now I’m through with you.”

“But you’re still here. You’re still alive, Victoria. You still need love.”

“For every love, loss follows. We loved, I loved you, but now it is over. I’ve come to see the error of my ways.” She says softer, now, the bite in her tone finally beginning to falter, “I’m sorry for creating you.”

“I’m your mistake, but you can fix me! We can fix each other. You teach me to be human, I teach you to love,” He begs, the air thick and humid as steam rises and settles on Victoria’s skin in a second layer of sweat, “Marry me.”

Victoria’s mouth hangs open as she feels the ghost of a dance on her toes, a smile on her lips, a love in her heart that for a precious moment of time they shared.

“No.”

And the steam stops. The husband stands. The anguish is gone, and he doesn’t beg anymore. With a sigh, Victoria’s creation pulls a key from the drawer of her vanity, and he smiles.

“Always so stubborn, my rose,” He laments as he guides the key into a lock in the bed frame, a lock that wasn’t there before. He turns it once, twice, and a heat sprouts from the screws in Victoria’s wrists, “We can try again.”

Electricity burns through her veins, crackling up through her fingertips and splitting her callouses open in rivers of red, skin bubbling like oil in a frying pan. The electricity seeps through her nerves like poison through a tree’s roots, whipping along her flesh and making it shrivel and split and curl like pages thrown into a fireplace, ravaging her with searing agony, until her screams fade into sizzling gasps and then silence.

The husband takes his key from the bed and peels the blistered skin away from her chest, prying her ribs open like a wardrobe’s double doors. He grabs the metal wind-up key protruding from her still heart, cranking it once, twice, then her heart begins to beat again, and her body begins to heal.

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