

Twisted Hearts

Lana knew when angry words turned cruel, but she couldn't stop lashing out, digging up the past with a shovel the size of Texas, no sin left unturned, no ancient grievance allowed to molder away unseen. Like a cold-case cop she revisited the ugly details, a blood-spatter pattern that proved his guilt.

His voice rose above hers, crushing her words, drowning her out in a bellowing baritone, arguing his point with a bite as sharp as a lion devouring prey. Hence the saying, *at each other's throat*.

The door slammed shut behind him, shaking the bookcase against the wall, and sending the ceramic giraffe he'd made in third grade crashing to the parquet floor. She heard the engine in his car rev up and then the screech of rubber on asphalt as he sped away, leaving her to sweep up the pieces of their lack of communication. She knelt and picked up the largest sections, the head attached to a long spotted neck, a hind leg, holding them carefully in the palm of one hand.

She remembered when he was eight, helping him with third-grade problems. Bullies on the bus. Losing the spelling bee to a girl. Building the biggest Lego tower in the world. He loved her unconditionally then, assumed she was always right, and took her word for things he didn't know. He ate his vegetables and brushed his teeth because she told him to, no other reason. Simple days compared to now.

Luke at eighteen, and she at forty-two, were suddenly a quantum leap apart, in thoughts, opinions, everything. A normal conversation was unheard of. Words flew like poison darts, straight for the heart. He thought she was ignorant of the facts, sucked all the fun out of life, and didn't understand his need to be free. She thought he was wasting his life, going out with the wrong kind of girls, and basically screwing up the plans she'd laid so clearly when she conceived and gave him life.

The room suddenly felt cold and dark, hollow and airless without her son. It no longer mattered that he didn't agree with her on colleges or friends, music or movies, politics, or the semantics of religion. Separation from his heart was far worse than this generational gap forming between their minds.

She pressed the edge of the broken keepsake into her palm, feeling the jagged sharpness slice her skin, bringing blood to the surface, and tears to her eyes, as the memory of the childlike expectancy on his face when he gave it filled her with renewed hope. Love like that couldn't evaporate, or melt away like frost on a warm fall morning. Something remained: a tell-tale spark of feeling in the look of concern when she pinched her finger in the drawer, the smile when she told him about the neighbor running outside in his underwear to turn off the sprinkler, his hug before he left for work at the hardware store.

She had to believe things would get better. They couldn't keep this animosity up for long without a breakdown. Something had to give. He lived here like a shadow, moving in and out of rooms, uncommunicative, sullen. She wished flipping all the lights on would dispel the mood, bring him back to the lively, happy boy he used to be.

It wasn't that she didn't remember how it was to be a teenager. The older she got, the clearer the memories. She remembered being eighteen, thinking her parents were unfair in their judgments, wanting to break free from the restraints of living under their rule, hating the emotional chains they had on her heart.

But she also remembered mistakes; harsh lessons learned through pain and heartache, dark days filled with remorse. Couldn't he see that she was trying to save him from that? Stop him before...

She dropped the pieces and stood up, staring at a photograph on the wall in the hall, Luke at six, his arm in a sling. A sad smile curved her lips. He'd thought he could fly and wouldn't listen when she told him only birds had wings. The next thing she knew he was wailing out behind the house, tears streaming down his cheeks, holding his arm against his scrawny chest. With a superman beach towel pinned round his neck, he had jumped from the roof, and dropped like a rock. It wasn't the last time he'd gone his own way, tested the limits, pushed the boundaries. Was it so different now?

Stopping Luke from finding his own path was as impossible as slowing a freight train by hanging on to the caboose and dragging her feet. Like it or not, the boy had become a man with her stubbornness, recklessness, and passion. She couldn't blame him for genetics. Storming out and not coming back was the trait she feared in her son.

She took the broom from the closet and swept up the broken fragments, pieces of the past to be thrown into the trash. Why was it so hard to let go of the little things? Headlights reflected through the window as a car pulled into the drive. Dusk had fallen while she sat there. The knock on the door caused her heart to skip a beat. Had something happened to Luke?

With strength born of fearing the worst, she went and opened the door. He stood leaning against the doorjamb, his hands in the pockets of his jeans. By sheer willpower she refrained from pulling him into her arms, but the obstinate tilt to his chin made her regret her first inclination.

“What are you knocking for?” she asked, crossing her arms and assuming the angry mother pose. “You live here, remember?”

He came in, looking everywhere but at her. “Thought you might not want me to come back after what I said.”

His underlying question penetrated her very core. How could he ever think she would turn him away? “You’re my son, Luke. Even if you’ve gone to the dark side I will love you and try to bring you back.”

Her attempt at humor went unrecognized as he slunk past her and dropped onto the sofa. She followed, taking the straight chair across from him. By the expression on his face, the boy inside was trying to get out through the thick skin of the man he’d grown into. He slouched low on his tailbone, his legs stretched out before him, assuming a careless look of ease and *what the hell*.

“So, why’d you come back then? Because you thought I didn’t want you to?” she asked, wondering silently what made the boy tick. Did he do these things just to get a rise out of her, or because he couldn’t help it? Were his hormones controlling mood swing and attitude as well as sexual overdrive?

“No.” His gaze fell on the dustpan full of broken giraffe. “What did you do?” he asked, his eyes widening in disbelief.

“It fell when you slammed out the door earlier.”

“I broke it?” he asked, getting up to inspect the damage. He worried his lower lip as he lifted a broken chunk. “I really liked this giraffe. It was the best thing I ever made.”

She shook her head. “It was my fault as well as yours. Sometimes my mothering skills get all twisted up with *my* mother’s mothering skills.”

His mouth turned up on one side in a crooked smile. Time to lay the pain at rest. At least for the night. “Yeah. Dealing with the Gestapo was probably easy compared to an interrogation by Grandma.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Sure.” He followed her to the kitchen.

Life always reverted back to the basics eventually, the need for food, shelter, and supplying them for the young. A warm home, good meal, and a television set was all he wanted from her at this point. Mutual understanding and honest communication would come with time. Ten or twenty years of time. Twisted hearts could mend as long as they weren’t rent to pieces and left lying on the ground.

She handed him a plate and filled his glass with milk.