



Shattered heart

BY:
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"Shattered Heart" (extra copy)

"There are no happy endings."

I remember those words escaping my mother's lips as if it were yesterday. Each one articulated with as much anger as she could muster. It was actually seven years ago, almost eight, when my dad drove off into the starry night sky and never looked back to our too-small brick house.

My mom would always come downstairs in the morning and act like everything was ok. I guess she didn't know that every night, I pressed my ear against the wall, trembling as I heard each angry word he flung at her. Silent tears would stream down my face as I forced myself to go to sleep. I just wanted him to love her.

One rainy morning, I groggily trudged downstairs to see my mother sipping her coffee, a small scar across her cheek, from where my dad's wedding ring caught on her face as he drunkenly slapped her.

Later that same day, I found that ring on top of the garbage pile, amidst the bills and remnants of food even our dog wouldn't eat. That's when I knew he was never coming back.

While his new love was about as smart as a brick, my mother was wise beyond her years. I never once saw her shed a tear. She just tidied our small house, made sure we ate our vegetables and acted as if he never existed. His photos were taken down and replaced with ones of me and my sister: cheesy smiles, squinting into the camera, awkward poses and dorky school pictures. It's like he was there one day and gone the next.

Of course it affected each of us in different ways. My older sister started drinking and last time I counted, had seventeen tattoos. I swore to never fall in love. I stopped crying myself to sleep. In fact, it was like all my emotions were just, gone. I threw away anything that even resembled a stupid cheesy romance novel, donated my once-loved Disney movies to the garbage bin and tore down the posters of hot celebrities that had once plastered my bedroom walls. That was that: no chance of falling in love.

Until I started high school.

I spent the first month or so with the usual conundrums: using a pointless map to navigate the hallways and trying not to get shoved around by the giant seniors. I wasted my mornings struggling to open my locker and snatching seats in the back of the class, safe from the beady eyes of teachers, who waited to pounce on clueless students and humiliate them for their mistakes.

It all begins in December, fourth period. I'm safe in the back of the classroom, drawing in my sketchbook when "the snoozer" looks over and sleepily says, "Hey, that's great!" I blush about seven shades of crimson and force myself to look away. I never blush. Why was I blushing? Okay, so maybe the snoozer (nicknamed for his habit of dozing off during morning classes) was above-average attractive, but turning ruby red in the face was something ditzy girls did, not me. I was immune to that crap, wasn't I?

While my thoughts swirl around my head like a tornado, giving me a dreadful headache, I realize he is still waiting for me to respond. "Um...thanks." Satisfied, he returns to his nap.

I study the sharp outline of his jaw, his blond, almost brown hair that slopes up in the front and try not to think of his piercing emerald eyes. Frantically, I push these thoughts out of my mind. I stare at the clock on the wall, willing the seconds to fly by. Instead they creep by slowly sounding like the drops of water that stubbornly fall from our leaky faucet my dad never fixed.

"Oh! He's cute!" my sister gushes as she scrolls through his profile. Honestly, she is such a creep sometimes. It's hard to believe the two of us are related. I mean sure, we have the same splash of freckles across our nose and the same blond hair (although hers falls in gentle waves to her shoulders while mine can best be described as "difficult") but the similarities end there.

"NO!" I protest, "I don't like him!" but I feel that familiar blush creeping across my cheeks and look away.

Lexi sets down the computer and smiles smugly, flipping through a catalogue of tattoos. She folds the corner of a page and circles a skull. "Face it," she taunts, "You are in L-O-V-E."

"Yeah, well at least I don't have stupid ink all over me!" I know it's a lame comeback but I still storm out. As I slam the door behind me, I hear something shatter. Good.

The next day in class, I sit in the very front seat. The teacher glares at me from behind purple spectacles and raspily demands me to answer her questions, spit flying from her mouth. I think it's obvious to say I didn't get a single one right.

The week goes by quickly, with me washing my hair every afternoon to get out the saliva.

I'm on my bed, just staring at an absurdly long math problem, deciding I don't need math in my life, when my phone beeps.

Unknown number: Hi

I toss my phone across the bed and after giving up on math, try English. I'm trying to figure out this Shakespeare crap. I mean come on Juliet, if you didn't fall for Romeo, you'd still be alive. Like I said, this romance stuff is bad news.

Unknown number: How's my favorite girl?

Me: who is this?

As I wait for the response, I nervously clench and unclench my fists, a nervous habit that drives my sister crazy. Maybe it's my dad. Maybe it's that boy, but how would he have my number?

Unknown number: Hey sweetums! It's me!! Your grandma! Texting is fun!

I find myself gasping for air and dizzily force myself outside. As I take in sharp icy breaths of the chilling December air, I decide I'm not going back inside. Not yet anyways. I need some time to think so I head into town.

I'm in Target, trying to find the cheapest thing that I can buy my sister for Christmas when I see him. The blond hair, the emerald eyes. Frantically I look for a place to hide while a mini war goes on inside my head.

Hide!

Oh just talk to him, you idiot!

He'll see me!

That's the point!

NO!

He's just a person!

"So ... um what's your favorite kind of toothpaste?"

He whirls around in surprise and opens his mouth to say something, a faint smile on his lips, but it's too late. I walk as fast as I can, past staring customers and a shocked store manager.

When I finally push through the doors, I break into a sprint, reminded of the first night my dad left.

It was a warm summer night, with loud crickets and humid air from the afternoon rainfall. That night I ran out of the house and just kept running, refusing to let the tears fall. I've always been a runner. It was something my dad taught me, which is ironic since I usually try to

avoid anything that reminds me of him. Yet I keep running, literally, but also from my thoughts because if I stop, I'm scared that something might catch me.

But I know one thing, those eight words I said to him at the store, were eight words too many.

It's about a week until I see him again. The temperature had risen to forty, a record for December where I live, so I decided to enjoy it. I'm jogging around my familiar path, admiring the rising sun's shades of peach, coral, violet and sepia spreading across the frozen ice. I adored that pond. Everyone did. It's where we learned to skate in the winter, went fishing in the summer, and the bravest, or stupidest, went swimming in the summer. Few people see it at this time of day though. When the beautiful pastel colors reflect off the waters in brilliant strobes of light.

I'm making a mental note of how the violet blends with the sepia when I hear the crunch of gravel behind me. I glance over my shoulder and realizing it's him, break into a sprint. It may be December, but I'm sweating like it's the middle of July.

My efforts are futile. I never said I was a fast runner. He catches up to me in about ten seconds. "Hey! I know you," He says brightly. I pretend not to notice. Maybe my heart loves him, but that doesn't mean I have to give in to it. Unfortunately, he continues. "So, what's up? Do you always run here? I love the colors on the lake. Not many people realize how great it is."

Nonverbal communication is not his strong suit. I tune him out, filling my ears instead with the sounds of the geese honking from the lake, and the crunch of the gravel beneath my feet.

"-and my favorite toothpaste is Colgate."

That gets my attention. I look up to see him laughing. But it's in a good-natured way. For the first time, I speak, "Sorry about that."

He tilts his head in confusion "Why?"

"Um...nevermind. My name's Eloise."

More good-natured laughter. I would give anything to have a calm laugh like that. Mine is more like a hysteric giggle, and sometimes there's a snort in there. "What's so funny?" I demand.

"Sorry," he says with amusement, "But I know your name. We're in the same class."

And then, as if I weren't crazy enough about him, he does a spot on imitation of our fourth period teacher: "Mith Eloith! How many timthe do I haph to athk you?! What ith the capital of Swiththerland?" For the first time in seven months, I laugh, and I don't even care that I snort. Maybe I do like him a little bit. But just a little.

Later that morning, I go back inside, humming Christmas carols. (He can sing too! Who knew?) and stop abruptly in the middle of Frosty the Snowman. My mom is sitting at the kitchen table. She's trying to act strong but her eyes are red and puffy and I can tell she's been crying. My mom never cries.

Our dad left. She didn't cry.

Our dog got ran over. She didn't shed a tear.

We went bankrupt once. She let us eat all the ice cream before they turned off the power.

I walk over slowly, dreading the news.

"What is it, Mom?"

She gestures to the chair next to her and I sit down. Her voice is barely above a whisper and I strain to hear what the matter was. "Last night, your sister and I got into an argument, about your father. Lexi stormed out the door and when she didn't come back, I was terrified. She didn't answer her phone, and her shitty boyfriend hung up on me." Her breath comes in short gasps.

"Then what?" I press, trying not to show my shock at her language.

"Then, the cops showed up. They told me she went to went to the bar. Her phone messages showed her trying to get a ride home from her boyfriend and he just dumped her, so she drove herself home"

No surprise, I think. He probably had seven other girlfriends. "So she got arrested?" I ask.

"No, Lexi. She's gone."

My sister was drunk and heartbroken, and she still got into the car. She promised me she would never drive herself home if she had more than one drink. She promised. And now she's dead.

I spend the next few days refusing to go to school. My mom says it's okay to take some "grieving time." Little does she know, I have no plans of going back there. I can't believe I was so stupid to let myself fall in love. I realize the last memory I have of my sister is of me slaying her with a lame insult and storming out on her, all over a stupid boy. I left her and now she's gone forever.

I'm still brewing with anger and hate for the world when the day of the funeral arrives. I aggressively brush my hair and put on seventeen coats of mascara: One for each *stupid* tattoo she got from her *idiotic* boyfriend. I look like I'm ready to murder someone. Good.

As I sulk in the pew I look around. I can't see who showed up, but I know at the ceremony afterwards, I can.

I force chocolate cake into my mouth, slice after slice. It's sickeningly sweet and sticks to my throat. My mom looks embarrassed as she says "Thank you for coming. Eloise and I really appreciate it." Why would she be embarrassed? Oh that's right. Her daughter who's supposed to be grieving is stuffing herself with cake. I can hardly swallow at this point, but I glare at all the weeping old ladies. They didn't even know her. Idiots.

I look around. It's been eight months now since I've heard from my dad, but maybe he's here. I survey the room. Grab a plate to put some chocolate cake on, but I give up and just take the platter. So here I am, an angry teenager carrying around a great big glass platter. I prowl around the room. I check every face. I can't believe it. His own daughter dies and he doesn't show up. But someone else does. He sits silently at a table in the corner of the room, tears in his emerald eyes.

Furiously, I storm over to him. "WHAT THE HECK ARE YOU DOING HERE!" People look up. Some pretend not to stare, but I know they are all listening. "YOU HAVE NO RIGHT! WHO INVITED YOU! TAKE YOUR COAT AND GET THE---" My mom slaps her hand over my mouth and drags me away. I flail my arms and try to scream. He just stands silently, fear in his eyes, but also, understanding.

All eyes are on us as my mom drags me away, through the mahogany doors in the back of the reception hall. The frigid air hits me like a slap to the face. We stumble across the ice to the car since she's trying to go one way, and I'm straining in the other direction. I moodily slide into the passenger seat and she slams the door behind me. I hear the crunch of her heels across the snow and dread the conversation I know is about to happen.

She slides into the car and the air between us is colder than the snowy chill outside.

Just one word escapes her lips, but is filled with more disappointment than I could imagine possible.

"Why?"

I glare out the window, still shivering with silent anger.

"You think life is hard for you? Take a look around. It's not a picnic for the rest of us either..."

I tone her out by counting the cars.

1, 2...

"...You could at least pretend you care about her."

77, 78, 79...*no a smart car is like a half a car...*

“...Could you care about someone other than yourself just this once!?”

That gets my attention.

“What’s the supposed to mean?!” I demand.

“For almost a year, I haven’t seen you smile once. You just pout and sulk and throw yourself little “pity parties” all the time. That boy who showed up? You’re lucky anyone cares about you after how much of a little brat you’ve been. I know you miss your dad, but you can’t keep living like this.”

I put on a blank face but my thoughts are swirling a mile a minute: anger, resentment, but also agreement.

The rest of the ride is silent, and when we finally reach home, I go to my room and lock the door.

I close my eyes and throw my phone at the wall. I feel like I’m frozen, unable to move as I watch the shattered glass of the screen fall in shimmering waves to the floor. The first tear slides down my face. Then another, and then I completely lose it.

All the emotions I have kept bottled up for over seven months have taken their toll. With limited vision, blurred by tears, I start hurling things across the room. Anything within grasp of my shaking hands is a victim. Pencils get snapped in two, pages from my sketch book: torn, crumbled and flung across the room. I don’t stop until I feel the familiar cold metal frame in my hands. The last memory I have of my dad. It’s the picture of us at the beach, me about four years old, in my favorite dress. The purple one with the blue flowers. He has his arms stretched wide and I’m running into them for a hug in those strong arms I could always trust to hold me.

And then I destroy that too. He lives three thousand miles away, but he may as well be dead for all I care. I look down at my hands and see I was not unharmed by my outburst. Shards of glass have sliced into my hands. Crimson blood flows from the scrapes, like the emotions I kept bottled up for so long. I was supposed to be the strong one, the one who was always “in control.”

As I sit rigidly on the edge of my bed, with the occasional quiet sob or hiccup escaping, I decide something. I’m sick and tired of always having to be the “perfect one.” While my sister got to go get drunk and dye her hair whatever color she damn well pleased, I’m stuck doing chores, getting good grades and making people proud. I can’t take it anymore.

My mind is foggy as I look around the room. I pick up a large shard of the broken glass off the floor. I hold it up to the window and bend it back and forth, watching the jagged reflection on the wall.

Just one slit of the wrist and I could escape. No one wants me here anyways. It would be so easy. I count down from ten.

Ten, nine

What would my mom think?

Eight, seven

She wouldn't have anyone left.

Six, five, four

Well. I'm not exactly good company

Three, two

I can't do it.

Shakily I stand up, unlock my door, and head down to the kitchen. I know what I have to say, but the words feel foreign in my mouth. The words I demanded from everyone else but never thought I would have to say. I don't even know where to start. I finally swallow my pride and am about to apologize to my mom, when there is a knock on the door.

It's probably another stupid casserole. I don't even like casserole. Instead, I see a quiet, weary man, shifting anxiously from foot to foot. I almost slam the door. I don't recognize him at first. He's not the youthful, charismatic man he was seven years ago. I find myself ready to run, but I remember what my mom said in the car and force myself to stay.

He looks up. "I'm sorry, Elly." The powerful authority that used to always be in his voice is gone. Instead it's replaced with exhaustion and regret. "I was stupid. One of my little princesses died today. I was too far away to make it in time for the funeral. I never got to see her grow up. I don't want to lose you too."

"Are you staying?" The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them.

His eyes turn glassy and he looks away. "I'm sorry," he whispers. He gives me hug, in those same arms I used to trust to hold me forever. "I love you," he says softly and slowly puts his hands in his pocket and walks back to his car. He drives off, back to his other family.

"That sucks," says a voice behind me. I jump about six feet and see it's that boy again. I feel my heart beat faster, the way it always does when he's around.

"Geez luweez. Are you stalking me or something?" I demand.

"No, I just came to see if you were okay."

"Oh."

Neither of us know what to say, so we kind of just sit there, accepting casseroles from people about every fifteen minutes. Finally I break the silence, “Why do you care about me so much?”

“I know what it feels like to miss someone. My mom lost a battle with cancer last summer. Sometimes I can’t sleep at night, thinking about all the things I wish I had done differently. I went through some pretty rough times, and I don’t want you to feel alone.”

My heart is now beating like a caffeinated hummingbird. “Thank you.”

He smiles.

Now I suppose this is the part of the story where I’m supposed to gaze into his eyes, lean in for a kiss and ride off on sparkling unicorns. Well, that’s not what happened.

We did start running together around the lake every morning, and I finally learned his name. We went to my sister’s grave, and I gave her a more respectful farewell as he held my hand. I returned to the back of the classroom, and last Tuesday, he stayed awake the whole class.

So, some people might say “Aha! There’s your happy ending!” but *au contraire*, there is no ending to my happy just yet. Although, I did get that kiss from the boy with the emerald eyes. Let me paint the picture: The sun was rising, shining off his golden hair as we strolled around the lake. He gave me a quick kiss on the lips and then, after I kissed him back, I shoved him in the lake.

That is all.

Oh, and he can swim.

