

STOLEN HEARTS



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Stolen Hearts

There it is, the trail of the manky scummer who stole my grandma's heart.

I know, right! Who steals an old woman's heart? What kind of a rush could you get from that? When you hear of these crimes you think of headlines like *Renowned model Katya Smink collapses on catwalk due to cardiac theft*, not *73 y.o. grandmother dying of cancer has ticker taken*.

Unlikely as it sounds, it's happened. And I'll tell you what, when I get my hands on that gutter-reeking gimp I'll make him regret he ever took to visiting old ladies in hospital.

I'll bet he never guessed one of that old woman's granddaughters was a Scenter.

It's hard to track in the city – so many odours from so many sources – but I'm lucky, Grandma had the same power and taught me everything she knew.

I barrel down the corridor, the stench of hospital grade disinfectant wrapped so thick around me it's claustrophobic.

The trail thickens, fresher, fuller. I'm close and my pulse pounds.

I come around the corner so fast my feet skid out from under me. I slam to the ground, but scabble up – I can't let him eat her heart or I won't be able to return it to her.

Pressed to the wall in front of me a man in blue scrubs stares, hands on a trolley. I nearly crash into him following the strong spoor. My grandma's fragrance is on him still.

Here he is.

Here's my fist.

Before I throw the punch the perfume of my grandma pulls my eyes to the bottom shelf of the trolley where the bedpans are clustered. One of them is Grandma's.

Seriously?

I pretend I don't notice the look the orderly gives me as I race back to Grandma's room.

Outside her door I falter. My hand shakes turning the doorknob. I can't look at her at first. I stare at the chart on the end of the bed. "Lorenna Remly, 73, malignant tumour left ventricular epicardium". I focus on medical terms that mean nothing to me but my eyes are drawn up, magnetised to Grandma's face.

She stares into space, as unseeing as a blind person only her vision is not impaired. Her arms hang limp, her jaw slack. Drool tracks down from the corner of her mouth and I feel like I'm bleeding inside.

This isn't the woman who taught me how to separate scents. This isn't the woman who tried for over a decade to teach me to braid my hair, never giving up on my hopeless fingers. No. This is just the husk left behind after her heart has been removed.

I tremble, weak, fighting tears.

Focus.

I sniff the air. Bleach, pills, old flowers, new flowers, doctor's sweat. All of the nurses and orderlies must have their uniforms washed in the hospital laundry, it's the same detergent. I sift through the scents ignoring anything with that flavour.

Ah, here we are, something distinct. These clothes aren't washed with hospital grade stain remover. There's a hint of ylang-ylang and citrus mixed with dirt. From the underlying body odour I can tell he's male. I can even smell his confidence. He walked right in and out without a single drop of fear in his sweat. When I find him I'm gonna teach him to be afraid.

The stink builds as I pace the streets. People passing by give me sideways glances. Most have never seen my kind at work – ours isn't a common type of power, and powers aren't common to begin with. One kid, a towel tied over his shoulders, pulls his mum to a halt and points at me, bouncing on his toes. I grin at him despite the ache burning in my chest.

The height of the buildings lowers, more and more green spaces too. The whole aroma of the city changes when you hit the suburbs. There's still petrol fumes and people everywhere, but there's also cut grass, newspapers on lawns, and garbage bins full of nappies – the suburbs are a different world.

I'm led to one of those big parks, the kind with jungle-gyms, slides, swings, looping cement bike paths and sprawling trees perfect for reading under. There's a lake with ducks on one side, and I can't see them, but I catch a whiff of dogs in a fenced off area to the west.

The ylang-ylang and citrus guide me past the water to a high wooden fence between the playground and some houses. There's a gate with a small hole in it that lets you flip the metal latch on the other side. The hole is so smothered in his reek it seems to glow, as if radioactive.

I stop. I could get booked for trespassing if I do this. I remind myself that if I do even a tenth of my dark fantasies to this freaky fapper I'll be up on much nastier charges.

The catch scrapes, but the hinges don't creak as I open the gate.

Kneeling in freshly turned dirt, a trowel in one hand and a sprout in the other, is

the man I've been hunting. He's short and slim and the laughter lines on his face are like trenches in his earthy complexion.

My fists ball up and my jaw hurts from clenching. I want to pounce on him like a rabid dog, but I'm unarmed and he's got a pointy trowel – not technically a weapon but also he could take the essence of my heart right out of my chest and leave me a vegetable.

He looks up and says, 'It's you.' Why is he smiling? 'Your grandmother said she would try and talk to you, but I guess she wasn't strong enough after—'

'You stole her heart!' I rage.

'Hush now, Marerica. Let's not tell the whole world.'

I want to keep screaming just to spite him, but first I have to ask. 'How do you know my name?'

'Your grandmother, Loreenna, told me.'

Shit, what?

'Language, Marerica.'

Did I say that aloud? 'Sorry.' I look down, scuffing a shoe on the ground. My eyes snap up. Hey, why the hell am I apologising? My fists ball back up – I'll clock him before he speaks again.

'Take a moment, calm down and follow me.' His expression is so tranquil, just like Grandma's last time I saw her. My throat tightens.

He walks toward his house. I follow, watching in case he tries to pull something.

Six of the oddest looking plants I've ever seen grow along the edge of his porch. Some are larger, full grown I guess, a few are smaller and there's one, a tiny green wisp curling out of the ground. The largest are twisted, with crazy coloured leaves and none are quite like the others. The smell is the weirdest thing about them though. My nose is telling me they are people.

'The first of us didn't take hearts for power or a narcotic rush like the thieves of today. We took only those in danger of stagnating, of being unable to move on, and we planted them.' He gestures to the strange plants. 'We nourish the plants and when they blossom...' he twitches aside purple, elephant-ear shaped leaves and reveals the most unflower-like flower ever. It looks like a crappy replica of a planet for a kid's science project.

He cups his fingers lovingly around the globe and the flower starts to glow, a tiny light from within forcing ugly petals to flake off like cheap paint. Underneath, the sphere throbs with a heartbeat of light.

He raises his arms and as he does I realise how late it is. The sun has set, only the weakest smudge of fire blurs the west. The orb hovers above the thief's hands. He raises it to the stars as they wink into life overhead.

The orb hesitates. Its flickering falters. A hint of human fear flavours the air.

‘Everything is all right, Mildred,’ he whispers, and the pulsing steadies. The orb lifts away from him, pauses and turns – as if it’s looking back in farewell – then streaks skyward.

He smiles at me. ‘This little one over here,’ he points to the tiny curl of the sprout. ‘This is your grandmother’s.’

About The Author

Kirstie has been telling tales (the good kind and the cheeky) since before memory. As young as four she entertained those who stayed in the guest bedroom with bed time stories featuring cliff hangers so devastating she was pestered for the conclusions before breakfast the following morning.

The story you just read was her first published piece, a winner in the Redlitzer Writing Competition (2013). Other published stories include: ‘Short Circuit’ - in [Oomph: A Little Super Goes A Long Way](#) (finalist in the 2013 Aurealis Awards category ‘Best Fantasy Short Fiction’), ‘Nightfall’ - in [18](#) and ‘Anything To Fit In’ - on [365 Tomorrows](#). There is also more free fiction available on her website: www.storybookperfect.com