

“Haunting Regrets”

by *Linda B.*

The phone sat in its usual place on the round oak table next to her favorite over-stuffed chair. Rachel Starsky stared at it, willing it to ring. But nothing happened. She'd been sitting in that chair for hours, her eyes rarely straying far from the phone. The TV was on, but it served no purpose except to offer background noise. To give the appearance of normalcy. But nothing was normal. Not anymore.

Less than a month ago she'd buried her husband, and this morning she'd sent her eldest son to California to live with his aunt and uncle. Her eldest. Her pride and joy. The son who looked so much like his father that to look at him made her heart ache.

But then, these days everything seemed to make her heart ache. Rachel sighed and leaned back, resting her head against the ecru doily her mother had crocheted as a young girl. *I know you don't understand right now, Davey; maybe you never will, but I had to do it. I had to do it to save you. I've lost your father. I couldn't stand to lose you, too.*

It had been the most difficult decision she'd ever made, especially knowing that friends and family didn't agree with her; but only she fully understood the impact his father's death had had on her son.

She'd been in the kitchen finishing up the evening dishes as she heard her husband's car pulling into the driveway. She'd heard Davey's steps as he ran to the door to greet his father. She'd heard the shots and the squeal of tires hell bent on getting out of there.

Eyes widening in fear and understanding, she'd raced through the dining room and then the living room, tripping on the braided rug linking the two. She'd raced to the screen door—to her husband and her son. They were both on the ground covered with blood. Davey, gently holding his father's head in his lap, rocked as tears streamed down his face. A father's hand reaching up, touching his son's face in a final goodbye. Before she'd reached their side, it was over and their lives were changed forever.

Rachel leaned forward, suddenly grabbing the receiver. *Maybe the phone isn't working.* But the sound of the dial tone told her otherwise. She slowly returned it to its cradle and stood. Her half-empty cup of coffee cold, she returned to the kitchen to refill it.

Glancing out the back door, Rachel watched Nicky playing in the yard. Her youngest son sat on the edge of the old truck tire, humming as he moved his tiny trucks through the sand. Nicky was four years younger than Davey, too young to understand all that had happened. Too young, and too much a momma's boy, to be affected by the death of their father as his brother was. She smiled weakly, remembering when Davey was only three; remembering the excitement of the day his dad had appeared at the door with a huge, old and dirty tire. A tire he had filled with several bags of sand. To this day it remained a favorite place for the boys to play, to escape. The last time she'd seen Davey sitting in it had been the day of the funeral. She'd found him sitting in the tire still dressed in his new navy blue suit, refusing to come in, while the neighbors

and family attended the funeral luncheon inside. Outside, she'd knelt by him. After lovingly running her hand through his curls and talking to him gently, she quietly stood and returned inside. Rachel had repeatedly checked on him from the kitchen window, but she'd let him stay there—alone with his thoughts, his anger, his heartache.

Rachel automatically followed the threadbare path back to her chair. She sat down heavily, a sigh escaping. *I didn't make this decision easily, Davey. You have to understand.* But she knew her son didn't. She'd seen it in his eyes that morning. At the airport. As she watched him walk onto the plane without her. The stewardess had reached for his hand, but he'd refused, his arms remaining tightly wrapped across his chest. Pulling himself to his full height, he'd followed her instead. His body moving forward, while his head turned back, staring at his mother, wide-eyed. Disbelieving. Pleading.

She'd stood there, glued to the floor. Her heart screaming at her to grab her son and run from the airport as fast as she could. Her head telling her it was for the best.

Now, sitting alone, she wondered was it really for the best? Already, she missed his mischievous smile, his unexpected hugs, how he'd follow her around the house excitedly telling her the news of the neighborhood. *Davey, why did I do this? I'll miss you growing up. I'll miss your birthdays, your first car, your first girlfriend, your graduation.* Covering her face with her hands, she thought in dismay, *Oh, Davey, how could I do this to you, to us? I'm going to miss your life.*

What had she done? Her head ached, her hands trembled, her heart—beat numbly. It couldn't feel anymore. She didn't know how she'd make it through the day. Make it through his phone call. She hated herself for doing it. Hated her husband for being a cop. Hated the job he loved—the job that took him from her, from his sons. Even now, Davey was talking about becoming a cop and finding the men who'd taken his father. Already he wanted revenge. But she couldn't let that happen. She couldn't let her son become a cop after the father he idolized. She couldn't let him live that way. She couldn't let him die that way.

So she'd buried her husband and used what was left of the insurance money to buy a one-way ticket for her son. She'd arranged for Davey to go to his aunt and uncle's house in California—as far away from New York as she could manage.

Ri-i-n-n-g!!!

Rachel jumped at the sound and she grabbed for the receiver, suddenly afraid to pick it up. On the third ring, she let herself exhale and brought it slowly to her ear. "Hello?" The quietness of her voice belied the pounding in her chest.

"Hi, Rose. Davey made it fine then?" Her sigh of relief was audible. "Good. I have to thank you again. This can't be easy for you. I hope he's being good, respectful."

"I know. I know. You've always wanted kids and I know you love him." Rachel paused a moment before continuing, her voice now shaking. "Is he there? Can I talk to him?"

Rachel closed her eyes, composing herself. *God help me get through this, please. Don't let me break down when I hear his voice.* She faintly heard Rose's voice in the background, "Davey, your mother wants to talk to you."

Hearing his voice, Rachel straightened up, her hand nervously fiddling with the edge of her apron. "Davey? How was the plane ride?"

Rachel focused on the cracks in the ceiling as she listened to her son's curt reply. "Aunt Rose is amazed at how big you've gotten." But she couldn't bring herself to repeat the second half of Rose's comment, "He looks so much like his dad."

"Aunt Rose said your plane was delayed. Did they give you enough to eat?"

"What? Oh, Nicky's in the backyard."

Rachel, at a loss for words, wondered if the boy on the other end was in fact her son. At home he never stopped moving, talking, laughing. The quiet, nondescript voice responding to her wasn't the boy she knew. But then, nothing was as it used to be anymore.

Closing her eyes tightly, she pressed the tears back, refusing to let them enter into her voice. "I better go, Davey. I don't want to run up your aunt's phone bill...be a good boy...I'll call again...soon." Barely able to swallow, the words somehow managed to get past her lips, "I love you."

As though in a dream, Rachel heard his reply. "Bye. Love ya, Ma." But she waited to hear the click at the other end before she slowly and carefully laid the receiver down. As the evening news came on, she stared at the phone and whispered, "Goodbye."

Burying her face in her hands, she finally allowed the tears to rise to the surface and she sobbed.



Almost three thousand miles away, Davey hung up the phone. Telling his aunt he was tired from the trip, he walked dejectedly upstairs to his bedroom. He didn't see the sunlight streaming in, hear the birds outside the window, smell the fresh paint on the wall, or feel the soft new bedspread. At least not today.

Instead, he lovingly ran his fingers across the black and white photo he'd placed on the dresser. A photo taken a few years earlier. A photo of a happy family smiling in their backyard. His mom holding his baby brother, Nicky; his father, dressed in his uniform, arm wrapped around his shoulder.

Throwing himself face down on the bed, Davey buried his face in his pillow and sobbed.

The End