

Down the Frontage Road
By Ann Karazeris

I've never seen a dead person before.

It's not at all what I expected. Her eyes look weird. Everyone always uses stupid metaphors to describe eyes—they're endless seas of green or resemble deep pools of lapis lazuli, glistening and sparkling. Her eyes don't glisten and they definitely don't sparkle. They just look stiff like any minute they'll break into a thousand little parts right inside their sockets.

I want to touch her just to see if she's cold. I've never touched a cold, dead person before. Not even my grandfather when he was on display at the funeral home—he had a closed casket.

I hesitate. Not because I'm chicken or grossed out or anything but because for a split second her ashen face reminds me of Deirdre after she self-medicates with one of her "special cocktails": a combination of Xanax, Lorazepam, and Polish vodka. For as long as I've known her, which has been my entire life, Deirdre has refused to drink Russian vodka. She's convinced it's been poisoned by Chernobyl so she only drinks vodka bottled in Poland, and quite a lot of it.

I turn to look back at what I'm driving—Deirdre's shitty 1978 rusted out AMC Gremlin with the busted tail light, molting lime green paint. The left turn signal's still blinking and those new guys from Seattle, Nirvana, are blaring mellifluous grunge on

KTAC 101.5, Barstow's *Hit Music Station*. I must have forgot to turn it off when I stopped to avoid hitting the body in the middle of the road. Either that or there's short in the electrical again.

I inhale burnt rubber from the Gremlin's massive skid marks. This cannot be happening. Not now. I turn my attention back to her, kicking up dust as I drop to my knees to get a better look, taking extra care not to get dirt on Deirdre's new ecru canvas espadrilles. Not that it matters, they're mine now.

I look both ways down the frontage road, deserted and completely motionless except for the expanding shadow of a ravenous buzzard circling the two of us overhead. The midday sun is directly above now forcing me to squint until I can feel the deep creases between my brows.

Holy shit. I think I know her.

Her name is, was, Tracey or Tammy Something, and she sits next to me in Calculus. Or is it Spanish? I can't actually be sure without hearing her talk which is highly unlikely given her current condition. The girl I know has the voice of a helium balloon after it's been inhaled. Like someone plucked her right out of Munchkinland, except 5'2 and a dishwater blond. God I wish I could remember her last name.

I chew the first three fingernails of my right hand until there's nothing left but raw, pink stumps. I do this when I'm nervous, or anxious, or both. Deirdre says it's a disgusting habit and I'll never get a boyfriend if my hands look this way. I run my eyes up and down her petite, overly tan body. She looks so uncomfortable with one arm

pinned underneath her torso and the other slung haphazardly over the top of her head, giving her a certain drama queen quality you'd expect from a blond.

I can't help but roll my eyes.

Her blood-soaked, acid washed denim skirt is hiked up to mid-thigh, revealing one leg intertwined with the other, a double helix of bruised and battered flesh, like one of those Chinese contortionists—the kind that can tie themselves in knots. Deirdre took me to see one in Reno once when I was ten. It was the only time I've ever left Barstow.

I stare at her sad face pointing towards the side of the road peppered with yellow creosote bushes and other colorful low desert shrubs, the names of which escape me at the moment. A ring of purplish bruises adorn her delicate throat and the back of her dirty blond head is caked entirely in sticky scarlet which pools beneath her like the filling of a jelly donut trying to escape the confines of a doughy prison.

Jesus, Tracey or Tammy. What did you get yourself into?

The wind swirls dust from the road forcing me to blink reflexively hoping each time I open my eyes she'll be gone. I notice the buzzard's shadow change directions mid-flight. It's insatiable screech echoes loudly, piercing my ears as it's dark silhouette grows to twice the size as it was two minutes ago. I envy the scavenger's freedom.

I wonder what her headstone will say? *Here lies Tracey or Tammy — she had the voice of an angel. Or Beloved Tracey or Tammy — we will miss your sun kissed glow.* I take a deep breath and hold the air in my lungs, my gaze still fixed on her gaping head wound. How long would it take me to become the same color?

One minute? Five minutes?

I let out a long exhale wondering what my own headstone would say when I notice her slender wrist, bloodied and raw. Rope burn? Maybe. Attached to her wrist is a perfectly manicured hand with garish, hot pink polish and holding a small metal object — a delicate silver necklace with one half of a broken heart pendant and an inscription on the front: BE FRI.

It reminds me of a necklace Deirdre gave me one Christmas. She gave me a half and kept the other for herself, then hocked the whole thing the next day because she couldn't pay the phone bill. Together the halves made the words: *BEST FRIENDS*.

The clasp is intact, fastened securely to the chain, and there's a small butterfly charm attached to the top of the broken heart. A relentless pounding overtakes my chest as panic envelopes me. I reach down and carefully pry the necklace from her cold, stiff grasp then stuff it in the front pocket of my second hand Guess jeans. Suddenly, I realize the cruel irony I've accidentally stumbled upon on this barren dusty road. The violent ending and inevitable metamorphosis of Tracey or Tammy, no longer confined to her lonely desert chrysalis. Here, death is the price of freedom.

I slowly walk back to the Gremlin, my swirling head interrogating itself with two nagging questions. Why would she be holding the necklace and not wearing it? And who has the other half? I look back at her lifeless form one last time as the buzzard makes its final descend.

There's an unusual shiftlessness to Barstow when the sun goes down. I can feel it as I step outside and face west from our wobbly, whitewashed back porch infected with dry rot. Even the shadows draped haphazardly across the mountains can't decide where to settle as the light slowly disappears before me. Darkness swallows the desert whole like a python swallows a rodent, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

No one means to stay here long term. It's a gas stop. A crossroads between opportunity and despair. And for me, a goddamned prison, thanks to Deirdre and her failed attempt to head east on Interstate 40 seventeen years ago.

I inhale deeply, filling my lungs with crisp, dry air then run my hand along the dilapidated railing to see how many splinters will end up in my palm — my record is twelve. I can usually get the deep ones out with a tweezers but sometimes I have to soak them first or they'll get red and inflamed, making my hands look even less attractive and more boyfriend repellent.

Sadie pokes her snout through the rusty chain link fence separating our lifeless dustbowl of a yard from the neighbor's, Mrs. Kendrick. She's usually shitfaced by now and screaming at her husband who up and left her three years ago. I can't really blame him.

I feel a faint vibration under my feet as the lights from the Union Pacific become more visible in the distance. I brush off the dead fan palm branches from one of the plastic, chartreuse lounge chairs, then sprawl out like a cat, listening to the blare of the train's whistle letting me know it's 7:45 P.M. — exactly three hours since I found Tracey or Tammy on the road.

Deirdre should be home any minute from working a double at the Bun Boy. It's the first job she's had in six months. I'm sure she'll bring me a bacon avocado burger, minus the avocado because she thinks avocados are fattening. It doesn't matter anyway, I don't have time to eat. J.D. will be here in twenty minutes. I glance down at my sliver-filled palm. I just broke my record.

"Astrid! Astrid, get up!" Half hour later I awake to the cacophony of Deirdre's gold-plated bangles accompanied by Sadie's emphysemic bark. "The police are inside," she squeals, shaking both of my shoulders as Sadie straddles me, licking my chin in between wheezes. "They want to talk to you about the dead girl." I pause, confused and disoriented, trying to process what Deirdre's just said. I heard *police* and *dead girl* but nothing else makes any sense until I realize that I called the police from the Shell station near the frontage road to report the dead girl.

"Come on Astrid. Andele!" Deirdre squawks, leaving the screen door lightly ajar. She stumbles back inside leaving the trailing scent of a deep fryer. I bolt upright and catch a lock of my wiry black locks in between the lounge's plastic slats and suddenly, I remember where I know her from. She was my partner in Spanish. For once Deirdre's awful interpretation of the language was helpful.

Two non-uniformed policemen are waiting patiently on the sunken floral sofa in the center of our tiny living room. Sadie curls up in a fetal position with one eye open in front of the beaten up radiator, her favorite place to pretend to sleep.

The cops didn't look like cops at all. More like game show hosts from the 1970's, complete with cheap polyester suits and ugly sentimental ties. I dislike the

police in general, probably because of all the times they've been called to the house for a "domestic" incident involving one of Deirdre's deadbeat boyfriends. These two seem harmless enough though.

"Hi Astrid. My name is Detective Nichols and this is my partner, Detective Cobb. We'd like to ask you a few questions about what you found this afternoon. Is that ok with you?" he says with a warm smile. He reaches inside his navy suit coat and pulls out a miniature spiral notebook and fountain pen. I nod at his request but avoid making eye contact. My gaze fixed instead on his kelly green tie plastered with golf balls.

"Would you please spell your last name for me," he says.

"C-A-P-O-N. Capon," I tell him, gnawing off what's left of my right thumbnail.

"Capon. Like the chicken?" Detective Cobb asks with an offish-like grin and a grease stain on the front of his white shirt which I think may *be* chicken.

"Rooster actually."

Crap.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Deirdre flutter down the stairs looking like a washed up beauty queen. It took her all of thirty seconds to freshen up her makeup and throw on that slutty strapless hot pink romper — the one she thinks makes her chest look like a twenty-two year old stripper's. She does this every time there's a man in the house. "A capon's a rooster that's been castrated to enhance it's flavor," she adds as she saunters towards us, filling the room with the hideous scent of white gardenia body spray and Marlboro's. "It's a family name."

“Detectives, I see you’ve met my mother?” I say as Deirdre shoots me one of her *I - told - you - never - to - call - me - that - in - public* looks. I can’t help but smirk. They both give her a congenial yet disinterested nod then turn their attention back to me.

“How about a drink Officers?” Deirdre sputters as she steps in front of me, like a child desperate for attention. “I have some white zinfandel chilling in the fridge or maybe a vodka tonic?” She flicks her orange Bic lighter three or four times before lighting her lipstick stained cigarette.

“No Ma’am. We’re on duty,” says Detective Grease Stain.

“Well then how about a Sanka? It’s no trouble, really,” she says exhaling a plume of smoke out of the corner of her mouth.

Sanka? I roll my eyes not so discretely as Deirdre continues her futile attempt to hijack the conversation.

“Nothing. Thank you,” says Detective Nichols turning his back towards her. Deirdre’s mouth contorts at the brush off then she sinks back in the mustard yellow easy chair, sulking. I expect nothing less from this woman because in *Deirdreland*, it’s always about Deirdre. Even during a murder investigation.

“Did you know the deceased, Astrid?” he asks, scribbling something on his note pad.

Deceased? God that sounds so impersonal. At least try to call her by her first name. I nod anyway despite his insensitivity toward Tracey or Tammy.

“When was the last time you saw her alive?” he asks. Sadie gives an unenthusiastic yawn then lays her head back down on the scuffed hardwood floor.

“This morning. At school.” I say as I work on my other thumb nail. Deirdre shoots me another wide-eyed dirty look mouthing, *Stop That* as she uncrosses then crosses her legs again.

“Did she say anything to you?”

I nod again. “Donde esta la biblioteca Seniorita Capon?” I nailed the accent.

Detective Nichols purses his lips as he shifts impatiently on the sofa. I can’t tell if he’s amused or annoyed with my answer. I’m not trying to be an asshole.

“Did Tracey say anything else? Something *pertinent* to this investigation?”

Okay, he’s pissed but at least now I know her first name.

“No. I didn’t really know her outside of Spanish class,” I tell him, all the while thinking I should mention that little thing about the broken heart necklace still tucked securely in my jean pocket, but I opt to keep it to myself. I don’t know why.

A half hour and a million questions later the police finally leave, unsatisfied with most of my answers but not before asking me one final question as I rub my sweaty hands on the front of my jeans shifting my weight nervously from one foot to the other. A question I continue to ponder at school the next day.

One more thing Astrid...what were you doing on the frontage road in the first place?

The smooth voice of Detective Nichols resonates in my head as I plod along like the walking dead from uninteresting class to uninteresting class. I blurted out a half-truth to them last night. I do drive down the frontage road to think, and to get high on occasion, although I left that part out. I think about Deirdre and how incredibly fucked up she is, and despite all her best efforts over the years with lemon juice and peroxide, I'll never be a blond. I think about my father whom I've never met and probably never will, seeing as Deirdre has no idea which poor unsuspecting bastard impregnated her. But mostly I think about being stuck in this desolate shit hole of a town and how I'd give anything just to step outside of it even if it's just for an hour.

One more thing Astrid...what were you doing on the frontage road in the first place?

Leaving Detective Nichols. I was leaving.

My thoughts are interrupted by the excruciatingly long fifth period bell as students swarm the halls like hornets after their nest has been bashed in. They're all nameless faces to me, all except one who's waiting at my locker like a chicken who's just come home to roost.

"You stood me up last night, Asshole," I hiss, smacking J.D.'s arm with the back of my hand. He has on a green and brown camouflage jacket which hides his spindly frame.

"Yeah, well cops make me very nervous. I saw them in your driveway so I bolted. So what happened? Deirdre get pinched for another drunk and disorderly?" he snickers as he stuffs his hands in the back pockets of his baggy rust colored cords.

James David, or J.D., is not my boyfriend although I think I may want him to be. I like his hair. It's thick and lush with streaks of copper that complement his hazel, almond-shaped eyes. Not at all lackluster and over processed like mine. We've been friends since middle school. He was the only one who never called me by my sobriquet, Wednesday Adams, which was awarded to me by our seventh grade class president, Laura MacKenzie, who just happens to have a two-year-old daughter and another one on the way. Funny how things work out.

"No," I say slightly irritated at his cavalier demeanor. "They needed to talk to me about a dead girl I found."

"Holy shit! *You* found that Larkin chick?" says J.D. "Man, I heard she was really messed up, all decapitated and shit. That's f-ed up."

Larkin. Larkin. Tracey Larkin. Got it.

I didn't have it in me to explain to him how nearly impossible it is to identify a dead person when they have no head so I just shook mine instead. God he's stupid.

And I don't tell him about the necklace or the fact that Tracey had ligature marks on her wrists and neck indicating she was bound with something. Or that the back of her head was caved in. Certain details are lost on a guy like J.D.

"So you wanna go to Coyote Lake tonight?" he asks just as the bell rings. "Boyd sold me some real good shit from Tijuana. We can test it out."

"I don't know. Are you going to show up this time?" I reach into my locker to exchange my Chemistry book for Calculus.

J.D. puts his hand on my head and ruffles my hair in a big brotherly fashion which irritates me even further because now I want to be more than just friends.

“As long as there are no cops, Astro. I’ll be there at 8:00.” He flashes me a warm smile then turns and disappears into the sea of West Barstow High. My heart doesn’t stop pounding until I walk into my kitchen an hour later, when suddenly it sinks.

Sitting in my dingy, outdated kitchen is a man I’ve never met before sipping a Bud Light with his feet propped up on the table like he owns the place. He has on a torn black t-shirt and a dirty white baseball hat that says *Mother Trucker*. I can see my reflection in his cheap gold rimmed aviators which no doubt are concealing two very bloodshot eyes. Deirdre’s brought home another winner.

“Who are you?” I say.

“Ray,” says the man, dangling a cigarette from his dry, chapped lips.

“Where’s Deirdre?”

“Upstairs, changing,” says Ray. “You her kid? You don’t look nothin’ like her.”

“Gee Ray, your powers of observation are amazing. They teach you that in truck driving school.”

“Dee said you gotta real smart mouth. My old man woulda kicked the shit out of me for less than that,” he says. “That’s the problem with you little jerks today — no respect.”

“So did he?”

“Did he what?” he asks.

“Kick the shit out of you — your father?” It’s a legitimate question.

“Many times.”

“That explains a lot,” I say. “Can I ask you something?”

“Oh, so you want to be nice now?”

“No. I just need to ask you a question. How far east have you ever gone, you know in your truck?”

“Dunno,” he says. “Why?”

“Ever been to New York?”

“Nah. Been close though,” he says cracking open another beer. “Newark. Then down to Atlantic City. Man, now that was a trip. Didn’t sober up for three days straight.”

There’s a surprise.

“Goddamn that was a good trip,” he says shaking his head. “Why do you wanna know? You thinking about becoming a trucker after you finish high school? Sheeit. Smart ass little punk like you wouldn’t last five minutes on the road.”

Suddenly Deirdre appears in the doorway wearing a light blue halter top and matching daisy duke’s two sizes too small for her middle-aged legs. She flashes me a smile that’s about as real as her newly applied eyelashes.

“Be nice to her, Ray. Astrid’s made the papers,” she says. She tosses today’s edition of the *Barstow Desert Dispatch* on the table. “She’s a local celebrity.”

I snatch the newspaper out of Mother Trucker’s oil stained hands and flip through until I find the article on Tracey Larkin’s murder. The aseptic headline reads

Local Teen Slain. I feel the blood drain from my already pale face. Sure enough my name is mentioned on page 20 as a witness to the investigation.

Panic surges through me as I peruse the article for any mention of the missing necklace or information on exactly how she was killed but I find nothing. Only her senior class photo which isn't terrible, a blurb about her funeral arrangements, and scarce details of her short life including her volunteer work at a local animal shelter and future aspirations to study veterinary technology at San Joaquin Valley College in Fresno.

"How'd they get my name?" I ask Deirdre

"I gave it to them. I called last night. I wanted to make damn sure my baby got credit for finding *her*. You know, in case there's a reward or something." She takes the paper from me. "Isn't it exciting? I'm going to frame it."

Jesus Christ. Was I switched at birth? I stare at Deirdre perched on Ray's lap sucking down a newly opened Bud Light. I've grown accustomed to her stupidity over the years but this is pathological. I grab the beer out of her hand and dump the entire contents on the white and gold linoleum. Sadie hobbles over and laps it up.

"What?" says Deirdre with that blank expression on her face, the kind that's usually accompanied by chirping crickets.

"Did it ever occur to you that giving my name to reporters isn't such a good idea?" I ask. "You do realize they haven't caught whoever did this yet."

"Oh Astrid, don't be so dramatic," she says. "No one will even remember you tomorrow." She takes the rest of the six pack and Ray, and the two of them disappear

out the back door. I stand rooted in place in the middle of the kitchen as they stumble to Deirdre's car, her high pitched laugh suddenly overtaken by the Gremlin's noisy muffler.

Slivers of dusk illuminate my bedroom as peeling salmon colored paint migrates upward on the walls as if it was preparing to spawn. The uneasiness I felt earlier in the day has all but disappeared and in its place is pure anger. I'm mad at Deirdre for being such a selfish, shitty parent. I'm mad at J.D. for being so clueless. I'm mad at Tracey Larkin for dying and dragging me into this mess. But mostly, I'm mad at myself for not having the courage to keep driving when I had the chance. I pull out the necklace from my nightstand drawer and dangle it in the moonlight. I didn't witness anything. All I did was find her.

I glance at the clock blinking 8:15 P.M. J.D. is late as usual. I'm just about to rehearse what I'm going to say to him when I see the bright high beams of his pickup in the driveway. We drive a half hour northeast through the cracked, desolate Mojave desert until we reach Coyote Lake which isn't a lake at all but a dried out lake bed. It's memories of moisture scored into the tempered earth.

J.D. parks the truck then reaches over me pulling out a plastic baggie full of Boyd's imported marijuana from the glove compartment. He rolls the joint in a calm, effortless manner like it's second nature to him, then lights it and hands it to me. I inhale deeply, holding it my lungs like he taught me all those years ago before releasing

it in a smokey climax. I feel the buzz almost immediately then hand it back to him. He looks ethereal like some kind of god as the moonlight highlights his chiseled jawline and coppery locks. I find myself resisting the urge to kiss him, instead I stare out into the emptiness that surrounds us.

“Have you ever thought about getting out of here, leaving Barstow for good?” I ask him as I tear the cuticles from my index finger. I catch a glimpse of the joint’s reddish-orange tip in the reflection of the window.

“Not really,” he says passing it back to me.

“Aren’t you curious what your life would be like somewhere else?”

“Nope. Why Astro?”

I hate it when he calls me that. “No reason,” I say, my eyes welling up. I drop my head to my chest hoping he doesn’t notice how disappointed I am with his answer.

I want to scream at him. To tell him to stop being so fucking small town. I want to tell him to come away with me, that we can make a new start someplace else, anywhere but here. A place where there are no Deirdre’s or dead blond girls or cacti. A place where hope is as plentiful as water. Instead I just sit silently getting buzzed like I always do and watching J.D. smoke away his future.

My eyes flutter open as dawn streams through my bedroom window. My head is still fuzzy and somewhat disoriented from getting high. Sadie is flat on her back sound asleep at the foot of my bed, wheezing and making quick jerky movements with her short legs like she’s chasing a large rodent in her dream. She’s suddenly jolted out of

sleep by the sound of the garbage truck rattling the cans outside on the curb. Then everything is silent.

Unusually silent.

I expect at any moment to hear Deirdre's tone deaf rendition of *Ain't No Mountain High Enough* as she grinds a pound of Eight O'Clock coffee.

Nothing.

I throw on some sweats and work my way downstairs halfway expecting to find Deirdre spiking her morning cup with booze. But the kitchen is empty and dark. It's only when I flip on the light do I notice the envelop taped to the refrigerator door with my name scribbled on the front in my mother's messy handwriting. I tear it open and pull out a note along with \$50 and the keys to the Gremlin. It reads:

Astrid.

Can you believe it! Ray asked me to marry him so we've taken his truck to Las Vegas then on to San Antonio. I wanted to tell you last night but you were out late with that skinny kid. What's his name? Well I hope he used a condom. Anyway, I've left you some money and my car keys. It's on empty so I expect you'll fill it up before I return. Love, Deirdre.

P.S. I borrowed that cute sundress, the white one with the red cherry blossoms on the straps.

P.P.S. You're too pale. For God's sake, get some sun!!!

I read the note five or six times before fully comprehending what's just happened.

My mother has run off to Las Vegas and eloped with a man she hardly knows. Jesus f-ing Christ! What's wrong with her? Who leaves their seventeen-year-old daughter alone with nothing but \$50 bucks and a crappy car? Then in the middle of my kitchen a floodgate of emotion opens and I do something that I haven't done since I was seven. I cry.

I sob uncontrollably for several minutes not even realizing exactly why I'm sad. I'm not crying because Deirdre left. I'm elated she's gone if that makes any sense? She's Ray's problem now. I'm crying because of how cruel and unfair life can be. I'm the one who's supposed to leave, not her. She doesn't get to have her happy ending. She doesn't deserve it.

But I do.

The Gremlin chokes and sputters black smoke as I back out of the driveway, stopping briefly to take a final look at our sad, deteriorating house. A strand of colored lights from three Christmas's ago still drape across the rain gutter over the front porch. I remember that year like it was yesterday and the heartbreak that accompanied it when Deirdre left on one of her two day benders. I'd like to think she did her best with what she was given. But we all know that's not true.

I can hear Sadie's bark from Mrs. Kendrick's living room. She'll be happier living there and Mrs. Kendrick definitely needs the company. My suitcase and an oversize duffle bag is stuffed in the back seat along with a large styrofoam cooler filled with the

remnants of our refrigerator. I have two stops to make on my way out of Barstow. The first is to find Detective Nichols.

I track him down outside of St. Mary's Cathedral on the west side of town. Tracey Larkin's funeral is today. I didn't forget. I didn't want to go. From across the parking lot I see him standing to the side of the processional with his hands respectfully crossed as six men carry a white casket adorned with a bed of pale pink roses towards the black hearse parked in front of the church. I see who think are Tracey's parents and sisters as well as several of her friends emerge through the ornate wooden doors, their painful sobs echoing both ways down the peaceful tree-lined street. The Detective walks to his car deep in conversation with another man I don't recognize before noticing the thin manilla envelop stuffed under his windshield wiper. I'm halfway down the block by the time he opens it. I watch him in my rearview mirror as he frantically searches for any sign of me.

It's late afternoon by the time I turn down the frontage road. I decided not to say goodbye to J.D. It would be too weird, besides I plan to call him when I get the East Coast. I glance over at the wilted bouquet of wildflowers wrapped in a wet paper towel on the passengers seat thinking Tracey deserves much better but I didn't have time to buy her fresh ones so I picked these on the way here. Anyway, Deirdre always says it's the thought that counts.

Sage wisdom.

The sun begins to dip behind the mountains flooding the landscape with hues of vermillion. I spot the makeshift shrine on the side of the road overflowing with dead flowers, deflated balloons tied to stuffed animals, and numerous photos of Tracey in happier times. I pull over and grab the bouquet, carefully placing it next to a large tan teddy bear with a red bandana. A buzzard screeches above me. I wonder if it's the same one who tore Tracey to bits two days ago? A chill runs through me as the last vestige of daylight disappears. As I walk back to the car, I see a set of high beams coming slowly towards me. There's a tightening in my chest but I'm not panicking yet. Maybe they just want to pay their respects like I did. I fumble around my pockets for the keys regretting the decision to take them out of the ignition in the first place, when the car pulls up and parks directly behind the Gremlin.

Shit.

I hear the car door open and shut followed by muffled footsteps on the dusty shoulder, but I can only see the driver's silhouette walking towards me. My heart is practically in my throat when a familiar voice says my name. Detective Nichols is standing in front of me smiling in the headlights. I breath a long sigh of relief.

"I got your note," he says holding up the manilla envelop. "You going somewhere Astrid?"

"Phoenix." The lie just comes out. "My aunt lives there. I thought I might go and stay with her for a few days while Deirdre's on her honeymoon. She eloped in Vegas this morning."

“Looks like you’re packed for more than just a few days.” He shines his flashlight onto my overflowing back seat. Something about his voice is off. It’s flat, like all the emotion has been siphoned out and replaced with a cold affectedness that makes my hair stand up on end. His smile is gone.

“Tampering with evidence is a very serious crime, Astrid,” he says opening the envelope, pulling out the half silver necklace and holding it up to the light. “Your little stunt caused a lot of trouble for me. You ruined my crime scene, Astrid.”

Why does he keep saying my name like that? “I’m sorry,” I say. I look down the road hoping another car passes by. I feel an overwhelming urge to run like hell, not that it would do any good.

“Do you have any idea how long it takes to stage the perfect crime scene?” he says reaching into his suit pocket, the same pocket that held his miniature notebook and pen. “Months and months of meticulous preparation and planning, endless run throughs, rehearsals then rearranging until one day, everything’s just perfect. Oh, don’t misunderstand me, it’s all worth it in the end because you’ve created something beautiful people will remember. Like a work of art. You see, that’s what Tracey was to me, a still life.”

And in that instant everything becomes clear. It’s as if the world just stopped spinning as he pulls the other half of the shiny broken heart necklace out of his jacket and places the two pieces together to form the words *Best Friends*. “You should have kept driving when you had the chance.”

I feel the blood drain from my face. I try to speak but the words are super glued in my throat. The only thing I manage to say is *why?*

“Why? No, you’re asking the wrong question,” he says. “You should be asking *why not?* Sometimes there is no why, Astrid. Sometimes you’re simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Like Tracey Larkin.

It’s not until he towers over me do I realize how tall he really is. Soon after I feel the cold ground rush up to meet me as my breathing becomes shallow with each passing minute. I see my mother’s face in the bright sunlight. She’s smiling with soft, forgiving eyes and running her hand through tall grass in a verdant meadow. I hope she’s happy. I fight to keep my eyes open until blackness overtakes me. I can’t hear the buzzard anymore.

Just the stillness of the desert swallowing me whole.

