

Heart Shaped Charms

by Foster Trecost

He steered to the roadside and answered her question before she could ask it: "Something's wrong with the engine." He paused long enough to let a slight bit of fear slink in, then pulled it back, but not completely. "I'll take a look, but we might have to use someone's phone." Beneath the hood he poked a light beam into dark crevices, tinked a wrench against metal, the sound reminding her of music from ballet class.

They walked past several houses and he picked one, seemingly at random. Soft knocks brought an aged woman to the door. She peered through the opening allowed by a safety chain. "Sorry to bother you, ma'am, but my car broke down. It's just me and my little girl, could we use your phone?"

She lowered her stare and when she saw the little girl, all misgivings faded away. She shut the door long enough to unlatch the chain and then opened it again. "I'm so sorry. It's there in the kitchen." She pointed.

He spun numbers, gave the address, said thank you. "They'll be here soon. Could I use your restroom?"

"Of course," she said. "It's down the hall." Again, she pointed.

He told his daughter to wait in the kitchen. Within a few minutes, he was back. He thanked his host and she saw them to the door.

When they reached the car, he cranked the engine and drove away. "But I thought it was broken."

"It's not broken." His answer meant something she never thought possible: her father had lied. After a few blocks he pulled over again. From his coat pocket he produced a handful of jewels. "She doesn't need these, not anymore."

Her eyes widened. "She gave them to you?"

"Sort of. Choose something."

She took a heart-shaped charm hanging from a gold chain.

"It's yours," he said. "If you like, you can help me next time."

His lie had been forgiven, cased in the taste of something new, an excitement she liked and would one day crave, and one day after that, despise. They visited another house that night, and many more in the nights to come.

Alone on the bed's edge, she massaged a heart-shaped charm that hung from a gold chain. Her father was gone, but not completely. Remnants remained, the best of him and the worst. She gazed through the window. Snow had fallen, more was on the way. Every town looked the same, every season felt the same. She checked her watch, it was almost time. She lit a cigarette and left.

