

Haunted

A single lamp illuminates the backstage where Zoë works. There's no Jorja hunched over her computer, the office is dark and the theatre is empty except for Zoë. She slept in this morning and has decided to stay later to make up for it. Only she's lost track of time. When Carl the caretaker asked if she'd be leaving soon, she had barely nodded. But now without his pattering, without Jorja's clattering, without the phone ringing, with just the sound of her own breathing in the constant twilight of the theatre, she feels suddenly afraid. Everyone knows there are ghosts in theatres.

Her knees crack when she stands. Before her is the stage, bare and black and dusty. The promotional posters she's been cataloguing for the past few hours appear to vibrate when she looks at them. Zoë shakes herself. She finds the panel and throws the key to light the stage. She strides onto it, holding an imaginary microphone, and begins to recite a poem to the empty seats. But her recitation is interrupted by the loud jangling of the office phone.

It could be Jorja, calling from New York City. She dashes down the hallway to the office, flipping up the light switch as she passes. "Zoë here," she gasps, just before voicemail kicks in.

"Hi ya' babe," says Eli. "Why are you still there? And when are you getting your cell connected?"

"I slept in today so I'm staying late."

"Is your boss there too?"

"No. She's in New York City for the weekend."

“I don’t like your being there alone. Anything could happen. Anyone could walk right in.”

“I can take care of myself. Besides, Carl locked up and set the alarm before he left.”

“Don’t you ever watch the news? There are serial killers in Vancouver.”

“There are killers everywhere.”

“There hasn’t been a murder in Clayton in more than fifty years, and even that was more of an accident than a murder.”

“Why did you call if you didn’t think I’d be here?”

“It’s the only number I have for you, so I took the chance. I called to tell you there’s an Air Canada flight leaving Vancouver for Winnipeg at ten-forty tonight, and it’s not full. I checked. You’ve got two hours to get on that plane. I’ll drive to Winnipeg and meet you at the airport.”

“If you don’t stop it, EI,” says Zoë, “I’m hanging up.”

“Wait! Don’t! I also want to tell you that I’ve thought it through, what you are to me, the way you asked. You’re one of my oldest friends. We’ve been friends since grade school.”

Zoë sighs. “Where is Lori at this minute, EI?”

“What difference does that make?”

“I just want to know where she is right now.”

“As far as I know, she’s at our house.”

“And where are you?”

“At yours. I’m cooking a big meal and you’re invited. Please Zoë, get on that plane.”

“Why should I?”

“I want you here. I want to feed you.”

“I’m hanging up now, Eli.”

“No! First tell me what you want.”

“You should either leave my house, or leave your wife. That’s what I want from you.”

“My wife is pregnant.”

“There’s your fucking answer, Eli.” Zoë hangs up the phone and grabs her jacket. It starts to ring again, and she urges herself to keep going, but she can’t. “Hello,” she says again.

“Zoë?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not.”

“I’ve told you what you mean to me. I’ve told you a million times. What more do you need?”

“Didn’t you read my letter?”

“Which letter?”

“The one I put inside your suitcase before you left.”

“Jesus! You put a fucking letter in my suitcase? Are you insane? Lori unpacked it.”

“She unpacks for you?”

“Wives do that for their husbands. You’re the only person who wouldn’t know that. What was in that letter, Zoë?”

“I don’t recall it word for word. But I think you’d better get your hands on it before she does.”

This time it’s Eli who hangs up first. Zoë stands, still clutching the phone. Then she rummages through the top drawer of Jorja’s desk for her very private address book. She flips through it quickly for a familiar name, a club that Jorja has mentioned. It’s Friday night. She’s in a big city all alone with not a soul she has to answer to. She is building a new life for herself, one that does not contain Eli, his snoopy sexist wife, or their stupid fetus either.

The club she’s found is dimly lit, heavy with the scent of pussy, perfume and pot. She creates a space for herself on the floor, and dances there with wild abandon, dimly aware of others touching her with caressing hands. *So this is how it’s done*, she thinks with some surprise. Why is it that she’s never known how easy it is to just be touched?

She shuts her eyes, dizzy with the sensations of skin on skin, of trading favours with these strangers. Someone pulls her into a private room where women fondle one another’s bodies. Zoë removes her clothing and someone takes her, just like that. *Oh*, thinks Zoë, *I could dance like this all night*.