

FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES

The door creaks open. “Shhhh.”

“I’m going as quietly as I can.” She replies, squeezing through the narrowly open door.

“Go quieter.” A torch sweeps through the blackness, the patch of light shining on boxes in red and blue and gold. He hisses, the door inching open as he shuffles through and into the room proper.

“Remind me why we’re doing this again, Steve?”

“Because we’re in that talent show tomorrow and so’s Nerd Boy.”

“And?”

“And...look, he’s good, ok?”

“So you’re saying he’s better than us.”

“No, Chloe, I, I mean, ok, yeah, he’s better than us. I mean, look at this stuff.” The torch stops dead on one cabinet, “This stuff is professional.”

“Ok, and we’re here because...”

“Because we’re going to make sure Nerd Boy doesn’t win.”

“And how are we going to do that?”

“I don’t know. Steal his wand or something. Just something to make sure he doesn’t win.”

“What if he comes in here while we’re here?”

“Heh. He won’t.”

“Why not?”

“Suzy’s distracting him.”

“And you’d know how ‘distracting’ she can be.”

“Oh, not this again, Chloe, nothing happened.”

“Right. She just happened to bump into you in the closet and lose...”

“Is now really the best time to do this? And keep your voice down. We don’t want to...” the lights flicker on.

“Oh, if ever there was a cue, that was it.”

Steve swears profusely, running for the door. Chloe stands stock still, caught like a rabbit in the headlights. The creak of the door breaks the spell, but she’s only in time to watch it close.

“Now, who do we have here?”

She gulps and turns very slowly. “Uhm, hi, Martin.”

The young man smiles, dark brown hair swept across his forehead. A loose white shirt is open at the collar, faded jeans around his rail thin waist. “Hi, Chloe. So that was Steve running?”

She gulps again and nods

“And why would you be here, this late at night, dressed all in black like a kabuki dancer?”

“Uhm, I, well, that is, we, I...”

“Hmmm. You seem to be struggling. Perhaps we should ask someone else...”

“Someone else?” A platinum blonde steps out from the stacks of boxes just behind him, resting a hand lightly on his shoulder, a tiny t-shirt stretched over a more than generous bosom, jeans practically painted on. “Suzy?! How? What? Why?”

“Oh, you know my cousin already. That makes things so much easier.”

“C-c-cousin? She’s your cousin?!”

Martin's grin broadens. "Yup. Kind of puts a little bit of a kink into your plan, huh?"

"It wasn't my plan!"

"And yet, here you are, where you're not supposed to be, and all ready to do something to ruin my act tomorrow. We can't have that, can we?"

"Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Well, I could call the police..." Chloe gasps, a hand over her mouth, "...or the Dean..."

"I'd be expelled."

"Probably. Do you like either of those two options, Chloe?"

"Please, you can't..."

"Or we could go with the mystery option."

"Mystery option?"

"Mmmhmm."

"Wh-what's the mystery option?"

"If I told you that, it wouldn't be a mystery, would it?"

"Martin, stop toying with her. She's already terrified."

"She did come here to sabotage my show, Susan. She could have done something dangerous. If she'd damaged some of these things, they could..."

"She didn't, though. And you're hamming up the gloating villain way too much for someone without a moustache to twirl, Marty. Besides, it was Steve's idea."

"Who isn't here." He turns back to Chloe, "You really need to pick better boyfriends."

"Marty! Just play it straight or I'm out of this."

"You never let me have any fun. And stop calling me Marty!"

"Yeah, yeah, suffer, cuz."

"Ok, ok, jeez." He turns back to Chloe, still trembling, having not moved a step, "Chloe, it's ok. We're not going to call the police or the Dean on you."

"You're not?"

"No. Never was."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Welllllllll..."

"Marty!"

He sighs heavily, "Ok, ok, I was getting there. So, in exchange for not getting you expelled, you're going to help me and Suzy in the show tomorrow."

"I'm what?"

"You're going to help in the show."

"But I don't know how to..."

"Oh, don't worry. Just follow Suzy's lead and things will be fine."

"But Steve..."

"Steve will need to find another partner."

"But..."

"Chloe, really, you don't have a lot of good options here." He reaches into the shirt pocket pulling a foot long black wand from it.

"What? How? What are..." the tip of the wand touches her forehead and she stops.

"Oh, that's just mean."

"You wanted to try to explain things? You know it sounds totally nuts without a demonstration." He turns to the perfectly still figure, "Ok, Chloe, now, see, you are going to help in the show tomorrow. After that, well, it's up to you. But you really don't have a choice about this. Say 'yes, master' if you understand."

Susan rolls her eyes. "You are such a pervert."

"Yes, Master." Chloe replies woodenly, no signs of the confusion or fear knotting her stomach showing on her face.

"Now, Chloe, until the end of the contest tomorrow, including the presentation, you'll obey either Susan or I."

Chloe feels her heart hammering, sure it will break through her ribs at any second.

"After that, you're entirely your own person again. With one little exception. You will not be able to tell anyone what happened to you tonight, or how the show works. You'll know it, but you just won't be able to tell. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Master."

Susan punches Martin in the arm, "Ow! That wasn't me!"

She looks at him very sceptically, one eyebrow raised. "Just get on with it."

"Ok, ok. Chloe, is that all clear? You'll obey us for the show tomorrow."

"Yes, that is clear. I will obey you for the show."

"Man, that's creepy. Is that what I sound like when you put me under?"

"If you're really under, yeah."

"Creepy."

"I heard you the first time."

"Just saying."

"Chloe, do you know what you need to do tomorrow?"

"Obey you and Susan." She relies, hearing her voice saying things but not under her control.

"That might make her a little stiff. Suzy, can I borrow your mind for a sec?"

Susan makes a face, "Ok. Don't meddle."

"No problem."

Chloe feels the wand removed from her forehead, following it as Martin moves it across to touch Susan's forehead. Her face goes slack, eyes empty and vacant, little sparks circling the tip of the wand. Then, Martin pulls it away, the sparks clinging to the wand, Susan blinking. Chloe watches passively as the wand comes closer. She feels it touch her forehead like an ice cube, a kaleidoscope of images flashing past her eyes too fast to register, and then Martin pulls it away again, the little sparks gone.

"Did it work?"

"Oh ye of little faith."

"Yeah, yeah, Marty. Did it work?"

"Of course it worked." He glances at her sceptical look, "Fine, fine. Chloe, show Susan the skill paste worked." Chloe blinks, smiling a perfectly professional smile, one arm raised straight above her head, the other to the side in perfect showgirl pose. "Happy?"

"Can't blame me for being cautious. Not after the time you..."

"I was twelve!!"

"Ok, Marty, ok. So, what are you going to do with her before the show? Oh, great, you're giving me the smile. That smile is never a good sign, Marty."

"It'll be fine."

"You've got something in mind, haven't you?"

"Of course."

"Something weird."

"Of course."

"Going to tell me what it is?"

"A good storyteller doesn't tell, he shows."

"Fine. Get on with it, Marty."

Martin taps Chloe twice on each shoulder. She thinks she wants to tell him to stop, but the thought never leads anywhere as she feels her body stiffen. A slow wave of tingly static crawls through her body. She can feel something different about her as it moves on, but can't tell what it means, everything feeling dull behind the wave.

Susan looks critically as Chloe's skin hardens, the skin darkening as it turns to hard flesh-coloured plastic. Finally the change reaches her face, the colour leeching out of her eyes, her brown hair taking on an unnatural, threaded appearance. "A mannequin? Really?"

"Sure. It'll look great just before we close with a double sawing."

"What will?" Martin smiles at her, "Oh, great, a crazy Martin idea."

"Exactly. Could you get the box marked 'spare assistant'?"

"Why?"

"We'll need to store her somewhere."

Chloe stares rigidly ahead, her thoughts whirling inside the empty plastic skull. *Mannequin? Stored? What is going on? What are they going to do to me?* She's sure her heart should be hammering, but she can't feel it even beating.

Susan drags the box into view. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"Suzy, trust me."

"Ok, ok, what are you doing?"

"Stripping the mannequin."

Chloe watches Susan shake her head, "Pervert."

"Are you going to help or just insult me?"

"What do you need?"

"A spare costume. While it would be fun that way, having her undressed would give people all the wrong ideas."

"Blue?"

"Yeah, you'll be in red, after all."

"Don't do anything bad while I'm gone." She heads back into the boxes while Martin continues to pull off Chloe's clothes. She wants to stop him, but her body refuses to move, leaving her helpless, powerless as he strips her.

Susan returns, pulling a small blue tie bikini onto Chloe's body, the cloth shimmering as it shrinks a little to fit her plastic body.

She watches as Martin reaches over to her, dimly feeling his hands gripping her raised arm. She feels a strain in her shoulder and then feels a sudden flash of heat there. Martin holds a

mannequin's arm in his hands, sliding it into the box. She feels the packing chips drifting around the arm, her arm, and, if she could breathe, or even had lungs, would have gasped as what was happening really dawned on her. That arm, that rigid plastic mannequin arm, was hers. She feels Martin pulling on the other hand, feeling it come away and join the other in the box.

"Well, there's..."

"If you make any Venus de Milo jokes, Marty, I will not forgive you."

"Fine, fine, spoilsport." She feels his hands on either side of her waist. He pulls and twists, her torso finally coming free. He sets her down on her waist, staring as the legs are crammed into the box, feeling the packing chips all around her.

Martin lifts her up. "Can you grab hold of her, Suzy? I can't get a good grip one handed."

"Sure, sure."

Chloe feels Susan's hands on her waist, feeling Martin's hands on her cheeks, feeling them both tighten their grip and...pull. Her head comes away with a pop. She watches as Susan carefully packs her body into the box, making sure no chip goes anywhere awkward.

"You're not going to leave her awake all night, are you?"

"Of course not."

Chloe wonders what they're talking about before she feels the wand touch her forehead. She thinks she hears Martin say 'sleep' before everything tumbles away into darkness.

Awareness comes back in a flash. For a moment, Chloe wonders at the really weird dream she had. Then she realises that she can feel packing chips rubbing against her body. She tries to say something, feeling hands on her cheeks, but her mouth won't move. Then the bright light resolves into the stage, the box she was stored in directly below her. Her body tries to shiver at the thought. She can just make out a plastic hand, her hand, breaking through the chips. She can't make out the audience, the stage lights throwing them into darkness. She feels her head handed over to Susan, in her bright red bikini, as Martin, now dressed as a classical magician, pulls her parts from the box, assembling her on the stage. Finally, after seconds that feel like hours, she feels her head attached with a click. She stands rigid, feeling the unseen audience watching her. She watches as Martin and Susan grab a red canvas drape, holding it up to hide her from the audience. They drop it down to show she's still plastic, raise it and suddenly let go. Chloe feels herself smile, suppressing the shiver as her hard plastic body becomes flesh and blood. The audience applauds as her body stretches, dancing over to Martin.

"Well, now that my second assistant has arrived, shall we put her to work?"

The audience laughs as Susan wheels on two long, thin boxes, both edged in gold trim, one a bright scarlet, the other deep blue. "Now, I might need some help with this one. Could I have a kindly soul from the audience step up to give me a hand? Ah, Dean Friedman, thank you very much, sir." He shakes the grey-haired man by the hand. "Now, just do as I do and things should be fine." Martin puts himself at the head of the blue box. The Dean moves to the head of the red box. Martin opens the box and the Dean follows suit. Susan climbs easily into the box, Chloe feeling her body copy the movements, lying down, her hands placed by her head. She smiles as Martin lowers the stocks over her ankles, feeling the wooden frame brush her ankle. The second stocks lower down over her neck and wrists. She looks trapped, but, really,

she thinks, she's been trapped since last night. The box closes. "Now, Dean, do you agree that it would be very difficult for either of my lovely assistants to escape without you noticing?"

"Yes, I think it would."

"Excellent. Now, if you reach under the table you'll find..." there's a clash as the blades fall to the ground, "yes, that's them." The audience laughs as the Dean picks the dropped metal up. "Now, place one into that slot you can see on Suzy's box." The Dean takes his time lining it up, holding onto it. "You can let it settle. It won't hurt." He lets go of his own blade. The blade shifts up and down a little with each of Chloe's breaths. "Ok, now, take the other blade and slide it into the second groove." This one proceeds quicker. Chloe feels she should be breathing faster, feeling the blades resting on her waist, but her body remains calm, smiling at the audience. "Now, put your hands on the top of both blades. Ok, now, just do this." He shoves the blades down. The audience gasps. Chloe feels the blades sliding through her body, the skin parting around them. She wonders why it doesn't hurt, and how it goes through her body like it was a hot knife and she was just a lump of butter. The box shakes as the blades emerge through the table. The Dean hesitates but seeing Chloe doesn't appear harmed, he pushes down on the blades, making slower progress. Chloe wonders if it feels different for Susan as the blades make their slow progress through her box, and undoubtedly the body within them.

"Ok, Dean Friedman, could you just unclasp the latches in the middle of the table?" Chloe hears the clicks of the latches. "Now, stand like I do, and, on three, push to the sides. Ok?" there's a pause, presumably as the Dean nods, "One...Two...Three!" Chloe feels the table moving under her, feeling it slide over the stage, hearing the crowd applaud. "Now, sir, just step through the middle and take your bow." The audience cheers as the Dean does. "Now, sir, could you help me turn the girls around?" Chloe feels the table move under her and finds herself staring at a pair of feet. Her feet. She wants to say something, probably something bland and embarrassing like 'Those are my feet!' but her mouth just keeps smiling. She feels herself whirl again, feeling the bump as the two halves of the table meet, and then another one a few seconds later. She hears an oooh from the audience but can't see why. She hears the latches clicking, locking her table together again, then "And just pull the blades out. One at a time or both together." She feels both blades yanked out, her body touching itself, skin bonding together. If she could move on her own, or talk, she'd be thrashing in the box, screaming in ecstasy, but instead her body just smiles.

She feels Martin and the Dean removing the stocks, opening the boxes and she and Susan lift themselves out, to cheers from the audience. Chloe feels something wrong, the perspective slightly off. She glances across, and realises why the crowd are cheering so wildly. Under Susan's waist, is a pair of blue bikini briefs and her legs. If she could, she'd almost certainly faint at that point, but she just keeps smiling, breathing easily, no sign of the hyperventilating she's sure should be coming.

Martin thanks the Dean, helping him to the edge of the stage then turns back. "Oh. Uhm, whoops?" The audience laughs. "I think I'd better fix this, before Suzy kills me." Chloe feels her body walking automatically, apparently guided by Martin, to stand back to back with Susan. Martin lifts the drape up to their waists and drops it. Chloe feels her legs shiver,

feeling them fade, then the snap as her own legs appear beneath her. The audience cheer, as the trio bow.

Backstage, Chloe's body walks her into the dressing room with Susan, Martin going the other way. She gets dressed on automatic, wondering how Martin got her clothes as if a change of clothes was the strangest thing about this whole experience. Then, once dressed she sits down and stays there, like a puppet waiting for its strings to be pulled, or a doll, frozen in place, leaving her thoughts chasing each other inside her head.

She rises on cue, following Susan and Martin out into the auditorium. She hears the results announced, feels her body walk up with them to collect the prize, smile for photographs, and then, she feels the control slip away. Her smile falters and she runs.

She stops in the corridor, panting, her body trembling. "Chloe!" she turns, Steve running up to her.

"What were you doing?! I was frantic and then you're performing with..."

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" he stares at her.

"Babe, what's the..."

"You ditched me, you bastard!" she jabs a finger into his chest, "You ran out on me! You. Ran. Away." Each word punctuated by a jab of her finger. "They were going to call the Dean. The police! All because you. Couldn't. Lose."

"But..."

"No buts. You ran out on me, and left me behind, and I..." her throat clenches, unable to get the words out, "I..." and again, "I did what I had to do to get out. No thanks to you, asshole."

"Chloe, babe, it..."

"Oh, fuck off, Steve. I don't want to see you right now. Or ever again."

"But..."

"No, no buts. We're through." She turns, walking slowly away, heart hammering, body trembling, her mind awash with conflicting emotions, leaving Steve stunned.

One week later, one week of trying to forget it, of trying to push the experience out of her dreams, of avoiding Martin, Steve or Susan as much as she could, she finds herself walking towards them. "Oh, hi, Chloe. You ok?"

"I'm...I'm, I don't know." She licks her lips, looking nervously aside, "I, uhm, could..., I, you see, I, that is, can I try that again?" she looks at them both, "Uhm, without the puppet bit? Uhm, if that's ok."

Susan looks darkly across at Martin.

"What?! This wasn't me!"

Susan punches him in the shoulder, just in case, before turning back to Chloe. "Why don't we go and talk about this? I have a feeling this is the start of a beautiful friendship."