

1 'SO WHAT DO you want to do tonight?' Claudette Jackson leaned against her locker and smiled up at her boyfriend, Rashad Gaines. Rashad towered over her like he towered over almost everyone at East High. At seventeen, he stood almost two metres tall, with long, muscular arms and legs. Of Indian heritage, Rashad had warm bronze skin that glowed with good health and energy.

Rashad grinned down at her. 'Oh, I've got a great idea for tonight, baby', he said. 'Want to come with me and help clean up the Palace Theatre?'

'You're going to clean up the old Palace Theatre?' Claudette asked, wide-eyed with surprise.

'Yeah', Rashad said. 'What's the big deal? I'm saving for a new car and Mrs Robinson is paying good money. Why don't you come along? It'll be fun'.

Mrs Robinson was an elderly widow who wanted to sell the theatre she and her late husband had owned for years. She

had asked Rashad to clean it up before the real estate people looked through it.

Claudette shook her head firmly, her dark ponytail dancing around her shoulders. 'No way, Rashad. A million dollars wouldn't tempt me to set foot in that place'. She lowered her voice. 'People say it's haunted'.

Rashad threw back his head and laughed. 'Claudette, you've been reading too many Stephen King books!'

Claudette looked slightly offended. 'Well, it's true', she protested. 'People say that the ghosts of actors who once performed at the Palace still haunt the place. Nobody I know will go near it'. She shook her head again. 'Nope, I'm not going, and I wish you wouldn't either'.

Rashad put an arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze. 'Now, don't worry about me. I'm tougher than any ghost. Tell you what. When Mrs Robinson pays me, I'll take you out to dinner—anywhere you want, okay?'

Claudette smiled. 'Trying to bribe me, huh?' she asked, giving in. 'All right, Rashad. Go on and do your cleaning act.'

But be careful. Even if there aren't any ghosts, that building is pretty run-down. Just don't fall through any holes in the floor, okay?'

'Don't worry, I'll be careful', Rashad promised. 'Call you later tonight, okay?'

Rashad waved to Claudette as he hoisted his backpack onto his shoulder. He turned and headed down the corridor to the front doors.

Once outside, Rashad could feel the warm autumn sun on his face. The front steps and footpath of East High were crowded with students, all relieved to be out of class for yet another day. Rashad headed toward the student carpark.

'Hey, Rashad, wait!'

Rashad turned. His best friend Franklin came running up behind him. 'I tried to catch you before you left, man, but you weren't at your locker. Where were you?'

Rashad grinned. 'Hanging out by Claudette's locker'.

Franklin grinned back. 'I should have guessed. So I suppose shooting hoops is out of the question, huh? You're proba-

bly heading home to get dressed for a hot date tonight’.

‘Fraid not’, Rashad said, shaking his head. ‘I’m working tonight. I’m on my way to clean up the Palace Theatre right now. The owner employed me. She wants to sell the place. Want to come along? There’s probably enough work for both of us’.

Franklin stared at his friend. ‘You’re pulling my leg, right?’ he said. ‘You’re not really going to mess around in that old place, are you?’

‘Oh no, not you too’, Rashad groaned. ‘I’ve already had this lecture from Claudette. Ghosts, goblins and things that go bump in the night, all lurking in the shadows of the Palace Theatre. Give me a break’.

Franklin looked serious. ‘You should listen to your girlfriend, Rash. There’s been some strange rumours about that place for years’.

‘It’s in the middle of town, for crying out loud!’ Rashad scoffed. ‘Most of the people who hang out in that area are winos. They’d see strange things any-