

ZOE

by Colin D. Smith

Zack leaned over and punched the button to turn on the car radio. It was Eighties night on the local classic rock station; ZZ Top blared through the speakers. This particular song made him think about the girl he was going to see: “She’s got legs...” Zoe was pretty and unsoiled—that’s how Zack saw her. And yesterday, after school, he managed to turn on the charm enough to persuade her to meet up with him. No doubt she saw him as a nice looking guy who just wanted to hang out. Zack assured her he just wanted to take her for a ride in his car and spend some quality time with her. If Zoe had asked the last five girls who had been in Zack’s car what he meant by “quality time,” she might have thought twice.

As he cruised down Main Street, Zack looked out for a girl of average height in a long red coat standing on the corner of Tenth Street, near the antique store. It was a cold evening. Most of the people in town wore scarfs, hats, and long coats. Zoe stood out as the only one standing while others were hurrying along the sidewalk. Her hands were planted firmly in her pockets, and she had her hood pulled up so her face was in shadow. But Zack recognized the coat, and the long white scarf tied loosely around her neck. She wore both to school almost daily in the winter.

Zoe didn’t move until Zach pulled the car up alongside the sidewalk. He rolled down the window.

“Hey, Zoe!” he said gesturing over the roof. “Jump in and let’s go.”

Zoe walked around the front of the car, opened the passenger door, sat on the seat, and closed the door. She kept her eyes fixed on the windshield while she buckled her seat belt.

“Where are we going?” she said. Her voice sounded timid, almost frightened.

“Just for a drive,” said Zack. “You hungry?”

“No, thank you,” said Zoe. Zack turned to her, but his eyes met the side of her hood.

“Is it warm enough? I can turn the heat up if you like.” He noticed she had returned her hands to her coat pockets.

“No, it’s okay,” she said, but made no attempt to remove her coat. Probably just nervous, Zack thought, a smile creeping over his lips.

Zack pulled away from the curb and into the light flow of traffic.

“So, what do you usually like to do on a Saturday night, Zoe?” he asked. “You got a favorite hang-out place?”

“The usual,” is all she offered.

“Were you at Danny’s party last week? I don’t remember seeing you. It got really wild at the end, especially when Reggie threw up all over Danny’s dad’s car.” Zack laughed as he remembered the look on Danny’s face. “His old man cleans that car zealously every week. Danny said he was really pissed about that...” His voice tailed off into chuckles. Zoe stared silently out through the windshield.

They drove in silence for a few minutes.

“You sure you’re not hot in that coat?” said Zack.

“I’m fine,” said Zoe. Her voice was still a little shaky, but she seemed insistent. Zack didn’t argue. She won’t be so defensive soon, he thought as he saw the signs for the park. The strained conversation and nervous atmosphere confirmed two things to Zack: Zoe was definitely uncharted territory, and he would have to be more persuasive than usual if he wanted to get anywhere.

Zack didn’t try to talk to Zoe again until they pulled into the park. He chose a parking space

looking out on the path that wound through the trees. Even in the darkening sky, there was a tranquility to the place. Zack cut the engine. Apart from Zack and Zoe, the park was deserted. Leaves shuffled along the ground, blown by the cool breeze; bushes rustled, disturbed by creatures foraging for last-minute winter supplies. These were the only sounds they could hear.

They sat for a minute, looking out over the leaves and the trees. Then Zack stretched his arm out toward Zoe's hood. She turned her head away from him. Zack remembered he needed to go slowly with her; he lowered his arm.

"You're really quite nice to look at, Zoe," said Zack. "Don't be frightened."

"Zack," Zoe said, the strain in her voice beginning to tell even more, "there's something—"

"Hush!" Zack raised his hand. "I thought I heard something."

No-one heard a thing for a minute, but then the sound of shifting gravel cut through the stillness. Zack turned to look out of the back window; all he saw was the rest of the parking lot. Then he heard it again. It sounded like someone walking slowly. The last thing Zack wanted was to be disturbed while he was with Zoe, so he opened his door.

"I'll just be a moment," he said. Zoe continued her silent stare through the windshield.

It was colder outside than Zack expected; he pulled his jacket around his body. He hadn't bothered with anything heavier since he didn't expect to leave the warmth of his car. He stood outside his door and scanned the area. Evening had slipped seamlessly into night, so the edges of the parking lot faded to black. Zack walked a few steps forward.

"Hello?" he said, as if there was someone close by. No response. He took another few steps. Something moved in his peripheral vision and he turned his head to see what it was. All he could see were

the dark silhouettes of the trees.

“Is there someone there?” Zack called out, walking a few more paces away from the light coming out of his open car door. In the distance he heard crunching gravel. The only gravel was in the parking lot, so he looked around, slowly taking in everything he could see. Whatever was making that noise was not willing to make its presence known. Zack backed up toward the car door, climbed inside, and closed it.

“It was probably nothing. I didn’t see anything,” he said. Zoe hadn’t asked; in fact, it looked as if she hadn’t moved.

“Zack, I need to tell you—” she started, when there was a knock on Zack’s window. Zack jumped and turned.

A bright light suddenly flashed into his eyes, then lowered as the face of a police officer appeared. The officer gestured for Zack to lower his window. Zack complied.

“And what are you kids doing out here, or shouldn’t I ask?” the officer said.

“Nothing, sir,” said Zack. “We’ve just come here to talk. That’s all.” The officer smiled, hinting that he had been seventeen once and knew all about what kind of talking boys and girls that age did.

“Do your parents know you’re here?”

“Yes,” said Zack, speaking for Zoe even though he neither knew nor cared if that was true. The officer thought for a moment.

“Alright, but you be careful, and don’t be loitering here too long. I don’t want to be reading about you in the papers tomorrow.”

The officer turned, and Zack watched him walk away while he rolled up the window.

“At least we know what the noise was,” Zack said. He drew a deep breath, then turned back to Zoe. “So, Zoe, let’s talk.” He moved his hand toward her leg. She shifted her leg.

“Zoe? Are you uncomfortable? Do you not like me?”

“Zack,” Zoe said, this time her voice was firm. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

“I understand if this is new to you, Zoe. Don’t be afraid. I’ll go slow.” Zack grinned, and reached out his hand for her leg once again. Zoe’s gloved hand suddenly jumped out of her pocket and gripped Zack’s wrist. He was surprised at how strong her fingers were.

“No, Zack,” she said, slowly moving his hand back to his side. She released his wrist, then grasped the top of her hood. With one movement she pulled her hood down and faced Zack. She glared at him with bloodshot eyes. Her hair was lank, and her skin pale and bloodless. Zoe pulled back her cracked blue lips to reveal yellowing teeth in rotting gums. “Zack,” she said, her voice breaking up as she spoke, “I died last night.”

Zack’s mouth formed a silent scream.