

HAUNTED HEART

An original screenplay by

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(20 Page Excerpt)

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EXT. CARROLL GARDENS, BROOKLYN - DAY

Walking up Court Street, BRENDA FISHBEIN (30) wears a dark dress, dark glasses and a short, spikey haircut. At her side, EMILY BURKE (30s) wears a brighter dress but a troubled look.

EMILY

I know you're still in love with me. But, face it. It's over.

(Brenda doesn't respond)

Sorry. You know I suck at the whole 'good bye' thing. That's the part of dating I hate. That and the 'hello' part. I stink at that too.

Ignoring her, Brenda enters a flower shop. Emily waits outside. Lighting a cigarette, she continues to talk.

EMILY (CONT'D)

I'm hoping maybe, after today, you'll get all this out of your system and we can move on. That'd be good. For both of us. I mean-- I got things I want to do. People I want to see, you know.

Brenda exits the shop with a single long stemmed, red rose.

EMILY (CONT'D)

(touched)

Aw, see. How sweet is that? But so unnecessary. And inappropriate.

EXT. ANOTHER STREET IN BROOKLYN - DAY

Carrying the rose, Brenda moves down a street lined with Brownstones. Emily follows one step behind, still talking.

EMILY

You know, you try to make people think you're a tough, smart ass but you're really a mush-pie. If I knew you were this sentimental I never would've gotten involved with you.

Brenda opens the gate, walks up to a building and rings the bell. Emily stops and watches her.

EMILY (CONT'D)

That's not true. I wouldn't have missed a minute of what we had. It was fun, and surprising, and--

DANIEL LEE (30, not his usual fabulous self) opens the door. Seeing Brenda, he bursts into tears and hugs her. Brenda lamely pats his back. Emily cringes at the scene.

EMILY (CONT'D)
Whoa. Not sure I'm ready for this.

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - DAY

Having pulled himself together, Daniel leads Brenda in. The rest of his GUESTS are dressed in similar somber attire.

DANIEL
I'm so glad you came. I didn't see you at the service.

BRENDA
I was in the back. Behind the nuns. Frankly I wasn't sure I should go.

DANIEL
Don't be dramatic. It's not your style. And it causes wrinkles.

Just then, STEVIE FRANKS (30, ever sneering) slides in.

STEVIE
You brought a flower? What do you think this is? A date?

DANIEL
Get away, Stevie. Now!

Stevie stalks off. Brenda takes off her coat.

BRENDA
He always makes me feel so welcome.

DANIEL
Ignore that bitch. The rest of the lipstick crew are here. Go say hi.

Daniel moves off with her coat. Brenda walks into the living room, doing her best to avoid Stevie's hostile gaze.

She goes to a table covered with lit candles. They surround a picture of Emily. She has dark, Scottish good looks and wears a 'Mona Lisa' smirk. Looking at the picture, Brenda smiles.

Out of nowhere, Emily appears beside her.

EMILY
Ugh. I hate that picture.

BRENDA
 (to herself)
 She hated that picture.

Brenda can't see or hear Emily because, well, she's a ghost. That's why she's been ignoring her. But Brenda wants to connect. She touches the photo on the table.

Just then, Daniel's doorbell RINGS.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT (THREE YEARS AGO) - DAY

Daniel whips open the door. He's much more jovial, as befits the mood of the noisy party raging inside. Brenda, wearing an overcoat and longer hair, enters holding a bottle of bourbon.

DANIEL
 Finally! You're holding up the
 Manhattans. I thought you were
 bringing Brad?

BRENDA
 Nope. We're kaput.

DANIEL
 Good. I never liked him.

BRENDA
 So you told me. Again and again.

She takes off her overcoat and looks around.

DANIEL
 Gimme, gimme, gimme.
 (she hands him her coat)
 Not that. The bourbon. Throw your
 coat in the tub and give me a hand.

Brenda pushes her way to the bathroom and tosses her coat.

She moves to the living room and sees a tall, striking woman; Emily. A GUY is talking her ear off. As he blathers on, Emily meets Brenda's eye and gives her a lingering look.

Brenda goes to the kitchen where Daniel pours the bourbon into a cocktail shaker.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
 Start poking cherries.

Brenda pokes skewers into cherries as she glances at Emily.

BRENDA

Who's that?

DANIEL

Who's who? Oh, the glamazon. That's Emily Burke. She just started proofreading with us.

BRENDA

She keeps looking at me. Is she gay?

DANIEL

Not sure. Maybe. Lots of guys ask her out but she always says 'no.'
(shaking the cocktails)
Anyway, stay away from her. She's Stevie's friend. He'll rip your tits off if you go near her.

Brenda puts the skewers in the glasses. She looks up and sees Emily still peeking at her as the guy chatters on.

BRENDA

Who's that with her? Edgar?

DANIEL

(glancing over)
Oh God. Yes! He's a horror. If he didn't have bad breath he'd have no personality at all.

Daniel pours the mix into the glasses.

BRENDA

You suppose she'd like a Manhattan?

DANIEL

(surprised)
Look at you, getting all flirty.

BRENDA

I'm not flirting. I'm trying to save the poor girl before Edgar's breath melts her face. What's her name again?

DANIEL

Emily.

Brenda picks up two drinks and moves into the living room. Daniel watches her while sipping one of his creations.

EDGAR (27) is pressing a point as Brenda moves in.

EDGAR

I just can't see why an intelligent woman like you would, would ever--

BRENDA

Emmy! Great seeing you.
(to the guy)
Excuse us, Edgar.

Before he can say a word, Brenda spirits her away.

EMILY

Thank you, whoever you are.

BRENDA

(handing her the drink)
Brenda. Fishbein. Of the Coney
Island Fishbeins. Cheers!
(they clink glasses)
Daniel says you're working with the
lipstick crew on the night shift.

EMILY

Yeah. Why do they call it the
'lipstick' crew?

BRENDA

It's because of the shape of the
building. It looks like a giant
lipstick. I proofed there a while.
Don't the late hours kill you?

EMILY

No. I really like them.

BRENDA

Ha! You must be part vampire.

EMILY

Yes. But only a small part.

They share a smile as they both sip their drinks.

BRENDA

What was Edgar going on about?

EMILY

Smoking. He's against it.

BRENDA

And you're for it?

EMILY

No. I think it's horrible. But I can't quit. I've tried everything short of taping my mouth shut.

BRENDA

Don't do that. It's a good mouth. Perfect for sipping a Manhattan.

Stevie spots Brenda and plants himself next to her.

STEVIE

Brenda! I see you've met Emily. Where's your better half?

BRENDA

We broke up. Two weeks ago. Now I'm the better half.

STEVIE

Too bad. You and Brad were a cute couple. It's good you've moved on. But then you're good at that.

BRENDA

Speaking of 'moving on', you should try it sometime. Like right now.

STEVIE

Just don't start any trouble.

Stevie moves off. Brenda sighs and turns to Emily.

BRENDA

We have history. I got drunk one night and slept with Stevie's boyfriend. Then they broke up. And Stevie blames me. He says I have a 'toxic vagina' that destroys anything it touches. Anyway, what were we talking about?

EMILY

Smoking. As in, I need a cigarette. Badly.

EXT. STREET IN BROOKLYN (THREE YEARS AGO) - DAY

Brenda stands with Emily in front of Daniel's building. Holding both drinks, she shivers in the frigid air. Emily smokes a cigarette and doesn't appear at all cold.

BRENDA

Shit! The last time I was this cold paramedics were involved. You're not freezing?

EMILY

I'm Canadian. This is like spring for me. Go in. I'll be fine.

BRENDA

I'll suffer. It's worth it to avoid Stevie. So...what do you do?

EMILY

What do you mean?

BRENDA

All I know is that you're a tall, Canadian vampire. And Daniel says you don't date. Why is that?

EMILY

I just don't like to get serious.

BRENDA

I hear you. And I agree. I hate serious. Fortunately everything I do is frivolous.

EMILY

Even your job?

BRENDA

Especially that. I write speeches for Jack Masters. Ever hear of him?

EMILY

Sure. The motivational guy. He doesn't write his own speeches?

BRENDA

Nobody can be that motivational all the time. So I punch up his stuff. It's ridiculous but it pays well. I also do spoken word. Or I used to. When I had time.

EMILY

I write too. Songs. I came here hoping to be a singer slash songwriter. But so far I'm just a singer slash terrified.

BRENDA

What are you afraid of?

EMILY

The audience. I have horrible stage fright. Doesn't it scare you?

BRENDA

Never. I'll teach you a trick. Just look out and imagine everybody naked. Well, not everybody. Just the cute people.

(Emily laughs)

I can help you with that. I know some spots where you could go onstage and try stuff out.

Emily looks at Brenda between drags and almost weakens.

EMILY

No. I shouldn't.

BRENDA

Why not? You want to sing, don't you? Come on. We'll have fun.

EMILY

I really can't.

BRENDA

You're against fun? You just said you don't like serious.

EMILY

Yeah but-- Thanks anyway.

BRENDA

So that's a 'no?'

EMILY

Yes. That's a 'no.' Sorry.

BRENDA

I don't like 'no.' 'No' is so final. You should try 'maybe.'

EMILY

Is this you being motivational?

BRENDA

No. I'm being insistent. I'm also intrigued and delighted and freezing. So can we try 'maybe?'

EMILY
 (smiling)
 Okay. Maybe.

Brenda smiles back at her.

END FLASHBACK

INT. DANIEL'S APARTMENT - DAY

Still standing by Emily's picture, Brenda feels her silenced phone BUZZING in her pocket. She answers it.

BRENDA
 (into phone)
 Hello. This is Brenda.

WOMAN (V.O.)
 (on the phone)
 Ms Fishbein, it's Acroda Capital.

Upset, Brenda hurriedly hangs up. Ghost Emily sees this.

GHOST EMILY
 You'd better talk to those people.
 They aren't going to go away.

Brenda tucks away the phone and moves with her empty glass to the kitchen. Ghost Emily follows her.

GHOST EMILY (CONT'D)
 Get it together, Bren. You can't
 keep running these memories over
 and over and drinking yourself to
 sleep every night.

Brenda refills her glass with whiskey. During this Daniel calls out to the gathering.

DANIEL
 Everybody. Listen. I want you to
 hear something. Emily wrote this.

Daniel hits 'play' on his remote. The stereo plays the guitar intro to a song. Hearing this, Ghost Emily GROANS and sinks to the floor in despair. She glares at Brenda.

GHOST EMILY
 I'm going to get you for this.

Brenda smiles, sipping her drink as the music continues.

BEGIN FLASHBACK

EXT. EAST VILLAGE CLUB (THREE YEARS AGO) - DAY

Brenda's waiting outside. Emily anxiously rushes toward her with a guitar. The intro to her song continues to play.

EMILY
 (very nervous)
 No audience, right? Just you and
 me. You promised.

BRENDA
 Just you and me.

INT. SMALL DOWNTOWN CLUB (THREE YEARS AGO)- AFTERNOON

Emily is seated on a chair onstage. The twenty or so cafe tables are empty except for Brenda sitting a few rows back. Emily tentatively plays and sings her song, 'Haunting Me.'

EMILY
 (singing)
 My heart is calling home
 Though we said goodbye
 I feel you with me
 Tears fall from my eye

Her voice is horrible. So bad that Brenda has to pinch her leg hard to keep from laughing. Emily sings the chorus.

EMILY (CONT'D)
 (singing)
 I can feel your finger tips
 I still taste your tender lips
 The memory never slips
 It's haunting me

Walking in, a BARTENDER (25) calls out to Brenda.

BARTENDER
 Jesus! Somebody strangling a cat?
 (noticing Emily)
 Oh. Sorry.

Emily stops singing. She's crushed.

EXT. LIPSTICK BUILDING (THREE YEARS AGO) - NIGHT

Later that night, Emily smokes and cries as she walks to her office. Brenda awkwardly pats her back as they go.

EMILY

(crying)

It's true. I stink. Totally.

BRENDA

You don't. Not totally.

EMILY

I have no business being on a stage. I'm horrible.

(reacting to her 'pats')

Please. Stop hovering.

BRENDA

I'm not hovering. I was comforting. Patting a sobbing person's back is my signature comforting move.

EMILY

I can't do this. I'm going home. I should never have come here.

BRENDA

Why do you say that?

EMILY

Because I have no talent!

BRENDA

Not for singing, no. But the song was excellent. Personally I'm relieved. Before I heard you sing I thought you were perfect. I'm thrilled to find out you're human.

EMILY

(stabbing out her smoke)

Ugh. Look at me. I have to go to work. And I'm a wreck.

BRENDA

You're stunning.

Emily can't hear it. She picks up the guitar and moves off.

EMILY

Thanks for walking me. Good bye.

Brenda watches her go in, not wanting the night to end.

EXT. LIPSTICK BUILDING (THREE YEARS AGO) - DAY

Early the next day, people arrive for work as the exhausted night crew stumbles out. Emily walks out with Daniel. She's surprised to find Brenda there with a tray of coffees.

BRENDA

Morning. I didn't know how you like your coffee so I got an assortment. I have your basic black, milk no sugar, milk and sugar--

DANIEL

I'll take one. So long you two.

He grabs a coffee and scoots off as Emily turns to Brenda.

EMILY

What are you doing here?

BRENDA

I'm walking you home. How was work?

EMILY

Tedious, mindless and torturous.

BRENDA

Is that the name of the firm you work for?

She laughs as they walk off. Stevie Franks exits the building and, seeing them together, silently hisses disapproval.

EXT. BROOKLYN STREET (THREE YEARS AGO) - DAY

Emily and Brenda stroll up to Emily's place.

BRENDA

The point is there's no shame in just being a writer. I couldn't sell a calzone to a starving Italian. But I can write a great speech for somebody who can.

EMILY

I guess. I just always saw myself doing both.

Emily opens the gate to a three story Brownstone and moves inside. Brenda screws up the courage to follow her in.

BRENDA

Hey! I hope you don't mind, but I called a friend of mine. She's a really great singer. I asked if she'd do your song at an open mic. And she said 'sure.'

EMILY

What? For real? That's amazing.

Emily hugs her. Overwhelmed, Brenda pats her back.

EMILY (CONT'D)

(laughing)

Uh. You're patting again.

BRENDA

Sorry. It's a reflex.

EMILY

This is so wonderful. Thank you, Brenda. You're an angel.

BRENDA

Hardly. I was raised to help out. You should see me sort socks.

EMILY

Would you like to come up for a bit?

BRENDA

Yeah. I would. But I'm late for work. Some other time.

EMILY

Okay. Good night.

She impulsively kisses Brenda on the lips.

BRENDA

(smiling)

Good morning.

EXT. STREET IN BROOKLYN (INTERCUT WITH FLASHBACK) - DAY

Standing outside Emily's gate, watching this memory unfold, is present-day Brenda. Ghost Emily is standing behind her.

They both watch as 'flashback Emily' walks up her steps to unlock her door.

GHOST EMILY

This isn't good for you, Brenda.
 You can't live in the past. It's--
 (looking at her past-self)
 Oh wow. I miss that coat.

As the FLASHBACK FADES, Brenda walks inside the gate and places the red rose on the steps, where they first kissed.

GHOST EMILY (CONT'D)

That's lovely. But you need to--
 (Brenda moves away)
 Listen to me. Brenda. Brenda!

She exhales her annoyance as she watches Brenda go.

EXT. QUEENSBORO PLAZA STATION - NIGHT

The N train comes up from underground into what's left of the afternoon light. It rattles forward into Queens.

INT. N TRAIN - NIGHT

Brenda sits in a mostly empty car, staring out at the setting sun. Ghost Emily sits opposite her, taking in the scene.

GHOST EMILY

I remember the first time I saw you onstage. You were talking about love. How your grandmother, your 'bubbie', told you when you fell in love, you'd hear bells. How, after every date, she'd ask 'Any bells?' Don't you want to feel like that? About a person who's alive?
 (looking at her)
 I so wish you could hear me. Hey. Maybe I can call you.

Emily concentrates. Hard. Brenda's phone buzzes.

GHOST EMILY (CONT'D)

Nailed it!

Brenda checks her phone. The Caller I.D. says 'Potential Spam' so she clicks it off. Emily's outraged.

GHOST EMILY (CONT'D)

It's not 'Spam!' It's me!

Brenda sees she has a bunch of missed calls. Some from Acroda Capital and some from 'boss man.' She plays a phone message and hears the frantic bellow of JACK MASTERS (55).

JACK (V.O.)

Bren! Where are you? I've been texting you all day. Be at the office tomorrow. Eight o'clock. Sharp. And look sharp. Okay?

Brenda clicks off the phone and tucks it away.

GHOST EMILY

Good idea. Throw yourself into your work. That'll get you back on track.

Pulling out a flask, Brenda drinks from it.

GHOST EMILY (CONT'D)

(throwing up her hands)
Or not. I give up.

EXT. MIDTOWN MANHATTAN - DAY

It's morning at the offices of Bascomb Publishing.

INT. JACK'S OFFICE AT BASCOMB - DAY

Wearing a wrinkled blazer, Brenda sits surrounded by posters of Jack Masters' beaming face, announcing his books; 'Master of Wealth', 'Master of Happiness', 'Master of Sex.'

The 'master' himself paces before her. JACK (55) looks as polished as he does on the posters, only without the smile.

BRENDA

Who the hell's investigating you?

JACK

The Feds. It's all a big mistake. I bought 40,000 shares in a Hong Kong suit company. Then I went on CNBC and said how great they were. Next morning the stock tripled in value. Now they're saying I did something like 'stock manipulation.'

BRENDA

Jack, that is stock manipulation.

JACK

But it's the truth. Their suits are great. Look at this.

(patting his sleeve)

It's made of rice. Amazing, right?

(looking at her)

This is the best you could do?

BRENDA

My prom dress is at the cleaners.

Shaking his head, Jack heads for the door. Brenda follows.

INT. BASCOMB PUBLISHING - DAY

Jack exits his office and runs into ENID (20), an intern.

ENID

Good morning, Jack.

JACK

Good morning, Enid. Are we going to 'Master the World' today?

ENID

You bet we are.

When Brenda catches up to him, Jack drops the cheery tone.

JACK

I'm totally screwed. I told Bascomb about it. He cancelled the roll out of the new book. That means no tour for me and no speeches for you.

BRENDA

Shit! What are we going to do?

JACK

I'm gonna fight this thing. Hire a bunch of lawyers. Some real sharks.

BRENDA

But what about me? I need money.

JACK

You'll keep doing what you've been doing. Just not for me. Bascomb is teaming you with another speaker.

BRENDA

Who?

JACK

Her!

He points to a poster on the wall of SHARON STEEL. It's for her radio show 'Carin' With Sharon.' Brenda is horrified.

BRENDA

No Jack! Not that. I can't--

JACK

Look. It's the best I could do. It was her or Baktu, the pet psychic.

BRENDA

I don't want to work with 'Carin' fucking Sharon.'

JACK

You like eating food and sleeping indoors? Then work with her.

Jack moves down the hall followed by Brenda.

BRENDA

Look, I appreciate what you're trying to do--

JACK

There's no 'trying.' It's done.

BRENDA

Don't I get to say anything?

JACK

Sure. Start with 'hello.'

Jack knocks on a door and pushes her in ahead of him.

INT. SHARON STEEL'S OFFICE - DAY

Brenda stumbles in. Startled, SHARON STEEL (49) stands with her skirt hiked up and her sneakered foot up on her desk.

SHARON

Hey! I didn't say 'Come in.'

She modestly pulls her skirt down.

JACK

Sorry, Sharon. You said eight o'clock. And I know how punctual you are. So I thought we'd just--

SHARON

Barge right in? How thoughtful.

JACK

Everything okay?

SHARON

No. Not even close to 'okay.' My son is thinking of quitting grad school, my radio show was replaced in three markets by Howard Stern reruns. And I have a knot in my God damned laces.

BRENDA

I can help you with that.

SHARON

Which one?

BRENDA

Let's start with the laces.

She extends her foot. Brenda crouches and digs into the knot.

SHARON

Thanks. I'd do it myself but I have a book signing today. And I--

BRENDA

You can't chip a nail 'cause folks will be looking at your hands. I get it. Hold still.

Brenda roughly grabs Sharon's leg as she works on the knot. Sharon shoots Jack an alarmed look.

JACK

This is Brenda. She's the ghost writer I've been using. What she lacks in manners she makes up for in unfiltered genius.

Brenda pulls out the knot with a flourish.

BRENDA

As the Hungarians say, 'Voila!'

SHARON

Well, thank you. You seem...handy.
(she takes off her sneaker)
I guess this might work out.

BRENDA

If you're unhappy about it--

SHARON

No no. I'm thrilled. Anybody who can make this empty suit sound intelligent gets my vote.

(grabbing a book)

Tell me. Do you know about 'The Greatest Love?'

BRENDA

You mean 'getting paid?'

SHARON

No. My book. It's all about self love. How you can't love someone else until you love yourself.

(handing it to her)

I sold twenty million copies of that baby. It's my bible. Take it home. Give it a look. And we'll talk tomorrow.

(scowling)

Now get out.

EXT. FIRST DRAFT BAR - DAY

Brenda walks up to her favorite neighborhood bar in Queens.

INT. FIRST DRAFT BAR - DAY

She enters the literary themed bar. It has books everywhere, a large performance space in back and a sympathetic bartender named ARTIE (35) out front.

ARTIE

Hey Bren. How's it going?

Brenda grunts. She plops on her usual stool and opens 'The Greatest Love.'

Artie reaches behind the bar to a shelf of hammered, copper goblets inscribed with names. Brenda's mug sits next to one marked 'Emily.' Artie pours her a whiskey.

ARTIE (CONT'D)

What's that you're reading?

(Brenda shows the book)

Sweet. What's next? You gonna sit in a circle of candles and start listening to Adele?

BRENDA

Screw you. It's for work. And it's
crap. 100% certified crap.

Brenda takes a drink from her goblet. The light above where
she's seated flickers on and off. Artie looks up at it.

ARTIE

I better change that bulb.

Just then, LARRY (30, ever energetic) enters carrying a box.

LARRY

Artie, I got the new cards.
(seeing Brenda)
Holy crap! Brenda, where ya been?

BRENDA

On the road. Earning some shekels.

ARTIE

(to Larry)
You're mistaken, Larry. That's not
Brenda. Brenda used to come in here
full of crazy ideas, saying she's
gonna quit her job and write a
book. Or a play or something. That
mess right there? That ain't her.

BRENDA

(ignoring him, to Larry)
You still doing the show?

Larry opens the box and takes out a stack of postcards for
'Social Hour', the spoken word show they do at the bar.

LARRY

Tuesdays at eight. Same as always.
(handing her a card)
We gotta get you up there again.
You were always a fan favorite.

Brenda forces a smile and tucks the card into the book.

LARRY (CONT'D)

(seeing the book)
Ugh. You're reading that? Don't.
Lizzy read it and we broke up. Now
I'm the one who has to 'love
myself.' If you know what I mean.
(putting out some cards)
See you around.