

JODI MAY'S



HSA vs IT

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FOREWORD & DISCLAIMER

First and foremost, I do not own the characters of 'IT' nor the original concept. All rights remain with the original author, Stephen King. It's important to note that this is a homage to the original story, which happens to be my favourite book. I was inspired by every single page and read it once a year, every summer, to be whisked away to Derry all over again. It occurred to me, after the two recent films (I prefer the 1990's television series) that a lot of people love the story and adore 'Pennywise the Dancing Clown' but they never get the chance to read the book. Put off by its length, they miss out on the magic of the tale as King wrote it. With this crossover homage fan fiction I wanted to bring a piece of that magic (and horror) to life and it's my hope, above all, that I'll be able to encourage just one person to pick up the original book.

Secondly, the '*Hillside Academy*' characters featured in this fan fiction are all my own. The only character I took from King's story was 'Pennywise'. The rest are mine and all belong to me by law. I will also add that much of the main characters' backstories have been changed to fit this specific 'alternative universe' and several of the minor characters of the story have also been altered. To conclude, there are no spoilers to the main '*Hillside Academy*' series. Rather, it is a way for me to highlight the main eight (Erika, Dominic, Sam, Anna, Emily, Will, Elivia and Tom) in this horror fan fiction that is dedicated to not only Stephen King for inspiring me to keep writing all these years, but also to the people of Lancaster, Lancashire.

Thus bringing me to the penultimate point of this disclaimer. Throughout the book, Lancaster is referred to not always kindly and sometimes in a negative light. This is fiction. I wanted to set this gruesome fan fiction homage in this city because for one, it's truly beautiful and has a rich, fantastic history, and secondly, because I love it. I moved here just over two years ago and fell quickly in love with the history and architecture. My babies were born here and in a way, so was I. By leaving the place I grew up and all its ghosts, I was liberated. This city has quickly become not the place I was raised but the place I was born. And the people? The people of Lancaster are wonderful. They're community-orientated, kind and generous, and during a rather arduous period, the community of Greaves specifically aided us greatly. My partner and I are eternally grateful for their generosity and kindness during this time and this is my strange way of saying thank you; of bringing Lancaster to the forefront again and displaying it in all its glory. So whatever you may read, remember it is fiction and that Lancaster, UK is my favourite place in the world. So to the people of Lancaster, thank you.

And last but not least, a disclaimer to say that the content of this chapter and all the following contain strong language, violence against children, sexual references, scenes of gore and peril and is quite frankly inappropriate for young readers or anyone easily offended. But if this is all to your taste, go ahead and read.

I hope you enjoy reading this 'alternative universe' fan fiction homage as much as I enjoyed writing it. All comments are welcome (though don't be mean), shares are encouraged and remember –

Once you begin this story...*you'll float too.*

CHAPTER EIGHT

A Puppet Without Strings

It was Tuesday and as he had since yesterday morning, Dominic cycled with Tom up to the Lancaster University, just a mile south of the main city in the smaller village of Bailrigg that had merged with the city over the years since the university was built in 1964. It didn't take long and was a pleasant ride. Instead of going along the main road out of the city, they passed down through Hala, along the quieter Collingham Park road and cut across the fields on Bailrigg Lane which brought them out on the north side of the large campus. It was this side, the northern side – the campus split in two by the underpass bus station – where Tom needed to be. The art and performance studios were all this side and so once Dominic had kissed him goodbye and cycled off down the lane, Tom wheeled his bike over to the nearest hut, chained it up and headed in.

Tom adored the Lancaster University campus and hoped, in four years, to become a student here himself. When his art teacher at his secondary school had informed him of the one week summer photography programme at the university he'd signed up straight away. Along with a class full of other fourteen year olds from his school and others in the surrounding area, Tom thrived.

As he walked, he removed his digital camera from its bag and took photos of the beautiful water fountain outside the LICA building on his left. It was like a compulsion. Photography was engrained inside of him and when he didn't have his camera, he positively itched to capture moments all around him. He felt better with his camera; one his grandparents had sold old jewellery and collectable coins to buy him. It was his prized possession.

His film camera, however, had belonged to his mother. It was still in relatively good condition, considering it was over fifteen years old. She had been given it by her parents for a birthday long ago. Back before she ran away with an older man, pregnant with him at the time.

But Tom didn't want to think about his estranged mother today. He had his first workshop of the day to look forward to.

Today, they would be teaming up with the summer art course – all the same age – to create a short stop-motion video. It needed to only be twenty seconds but it would take the entire day to create; to set up the action, take the shot, and move the piece again. It was a challenge and an exciting one. Tom couldn't wait to get to work.

When he arrived in his usual classroom, using the ID all of them had been given at the start of the week which would give them access to all the areas they needed, he found double the amount of peers. But unlike his shy introverted boyfriend, Tom didn't fear the sight of all these new faces – the members of the summer art course – and chucked himself straight into the conversations all around him, bursting with energy and passion.

Unlike Dominic, Tom didn't care what people thought of him. If they didn't like him, he quickly found someone who did. He flourished in social settings and liked to talk and laugh and make new friends. Especially with like-minded people and so when he discovered who he'd been partnered with from the art course, he was less than pleased.

He'd hoped for another passionate soul, brimming with enthusiasm and confidence but what he found was a small girl with elfin features, swan white hair and timid sky blue eyes that searched him anxiously.

"Hi! I'm Tom," he said, camera hanging around his neck on its strap as he held out his hand to the girl.

She looked from it to his face with tight lips.

He knew her type. She probably attended the private girls' school, the same one as Emily. She was from wealth, her clothes designer, her manicure fresh and everything about her oozing with money. Tom had never known money and when he looked at her, all he saw was fifty pound notes and that pout on her lips. People like him didn't get on with people like her, but he wouldn't let that spoil his day. He had a stop-motion to make and he wouldn't let some rich bitch mess this up.

"Elivia," she mumbled.

"So, what did you make for the stop-motion?" he asked, moving to their assigned desk.

Elivia tucked the back of her tartan skirt down as she sat politely on the edge of her seat and tentatively opened her bright pink ring binder. Tom restrained himself from tutting or rolling his eyes; she was so generic and predictable, she was almost painful to look at. As though she'd been cut out from the 'Preppy Rich Bitch' book and made to stand up. She was just a clone, like all the rest. Tom suddenly despised whoever's idea it was to put them together.

Opening her ring binder, she cautiously lifted up a puppet. For a moment, Tom was taken aback. It was beautifully handmade with the ruffles on its dress each cut and stuck with precision and care. The hair from the puppet's head was vivid red and each string had been weaved and threaded perfectly onto the handle she held up high, wriggling her wrist to make the puppet dance. But that wasn't what made Tom inch away.

The face of the puppet was dead. While the rest of it looked almost professionally made, the face looked hurried and grotesque. Tom grimaced with an unsettling feeling in his gut.

He didn't like puppets. Ever since the puppet show he saw as a child on Blackpool promenade – the creepy hanging dolls moving so awkwardly and yet with fluent grace – they had disturbed him. Tom's friends teased him, his grandparents too, and while he tried to laugh it off, he couldn't deny that even at fourteen he still loathed the things. And this one, with its shocked expression and dead eyes, was the epitome of everything he hated about them.

"It's not very good," Elivia said glumly, swinging it from side to side and making it walk across the table.

Tom inched back further in his seat, unable to tear his eyes away from the puppet. "It's fine."

"So, how do you want to do this?" Elivia asked, still dancing the puppet, closer and closer to him.

"Can you stop?" Tom snapped, shocking himself and her.

Elivia's hand lowered, the puppet's legs collapsing beneath it and the strings curling up as she rested it on the table. "Sorry," she whispered, eyes down and her body stiff.

It was as Tom viewed her then, skinny shoulders hunched and a nervous look in her eye that he began to understand. This standoffish stance wasn't because she felt she was better than him; it was anxiety. Social anxiety. She was scared here in amongst all these vibrant, loud people. She probably didn't know any of them, or if she did, she wasn't friends with them. It surprised Tom but also made him feel suddenly guilty. He'd judged her quickly, just as other people judged him. And that wasn't fair.

"No, I'm sorry," Tom sighed, gulping to rid the lump in his throat and relaxing in his seat. "I just, erm, I don't like puppets."

Elivia looked up from the table in surprise. She glanced at the puppet and then gave a small smile. At first, he thought she would laugh; just like all his friends did whenever they found out about his peculiar childish fear. But instead, she nodded.

"They are a bit odd, aren't they?" she giggled. "Especially this one. Look at its eyes."

"Dead," Tom whispered.

Elivia snapped her head to look at him but not with offence. With understanding. "Maybe I should try to sort them out." She went to reach for her pencil case when Tom stopped her.

With his attention on the puppet, staring into its dead eyes and his hand gently resting on Elivia's wrist, he gave a deep shuddering exhale. He was fourteen. He needed to get over this ridiculous fear sooner or later. He couldn't be scared of puppets. How pathetic.

"No, leave them. We can do a horror stop-motion," Tom said.

Elivia's face lit up with joy. "A horror stop-motion! Oh I love it! What a great idea!" She clapped her hands together happily like a toddler but Tom didn't cringe.

It was endearing. She was like a little kitten or baby bunny bouncing around in her seat now the wall between them had been taken down. In a way, she was a lot like Dominic. There was more beneath his hard, introverted exterior; a soft centre beneath his grief. It was a light Tom felt only he knew and as he smiled back at Elivia excitedly noting down ideas for their stop-motion, he wondered if it was his super power.

But even his super power wasn't strong enough to pierce through Dominic's exterior now.

Since last night and upon receiving a MSN message from Sam, stating that he too believed the others and had faced whatever it was, narrowly escaping its clutches, Dominic had seemingly flown from Tom's grasp. He couldn't find him now, so wrapped up in this frightening tale.

So why didn't Tom believe? He trusted his boyfriend and now Sam was in agreement – not that he trusted the arrogant boy – but how could Tom possibly believe? A shapeshifting creature attacking kids? Becoming their worst fears and hunting them? Dominic believed it was the same thing that had murdered Toby; the same thing that had killed all those other children. But how could that be possible? This wasn't a horror movie. This was the real world where things that go bump in the night can be explained. Where murderers were just people. Human.

But this thing, it wasn't human so how could Tom believe?

It was just hysteria. Even after seeing the terror in Emily's eyes and hearing Will's story and Erika's certainty that what had happened wasn't a trip or a dream or just her imagination, Tom couldn't believe. Not even his own boyfriend. He wanted to shake sense into all of them. Tell them to snap out of it but how could he? He didn't want to upset his boyfriend or anger his friends. Other than his photography and his grandparents, they were all he had.

So why couldn't he believe them? These people who had no reason to lie – except for maybe Erika.

It troubled Tom today as he sat planning out his stop-motion with his assignment partner, Elivia, who he quickly learnt was the daughter of Johnathan and Julia Spencer; famous hoteliers. While they moved and travelled often, they originally came from Lancaster and decided to make this their home base for a few years for the sake of Elivia's schooling.

She was new to the girls' school in the centre of the city, having arrived last September. Anna Clearwater was her one and only friend, and neighbour. The two lived in the Haverbreaks gated community off Ashton Road. Over lunch of *Greggs* pastries, she'd told him about the snobs who lived there and how Anna was refreshing; she too came from new money, her father a lawyer and her mother a businesswoman and philanthropist. Tom had had heard of Anna Clearwater before; she was a beautiful golden haired girl that many of the boys at his school fancied, but he'd never met her. Elivia talked warmly of the girl and how she'd taken her under her wing. Tom liked the sound of her already.

As they spoke, chatting and laughing while they ate, the more her quiet demeanour slipped away and the real girl beneath appeared. Tom liked this girl. She was funny and polite, never swearing and always talking in such a clipped manner, it made her sound as though she was from one of those *BBC* period dramas on the television. He liked it though and she was fun to talk to; a skilled conversationalist. And while she was nervous around the other members of their courses, she seemed to relax with Tom. He hated his quick judgement of her that morning and knew that together, they would make a great team.

After lunch, and after Tom had told Elivia a bit about himself – though leaving out the part about his estranged mother – they returned to the classroom to begin photographing their stop-motion. Before lunch, they'd set up a horror background made up of printed photos from the internet. All that was left to do was photograph it.

They'd returned early, wishing to cool down from the heat of the July day outside, to find a cluster of their peers sat around a table, talking hastily and with excitement in their voices. Without hearing their words, Tom suspected they were talking about the murders. It was all anyone could talk about, including his grandparents. However as they got closer, he was surprised to find it wasn't about the missing children at all.

“– and apparently, there are underground tunnels beneath the campus, made when the uni was built, as bomb shelters,” one guy said, gripping everyone's attention.

“They're probably just maintenance tunnels,” a girl scoffed.

“No! I swear, my brother told me. He even said that him and a few of his friends found that their ID passes could get them down there,” the first boy added.

“Bullshit!”

“Yeah, cut the crap, Oscar.”

“No I'm serious!” the boy, Oscar, said again. His eyes were wide and panicked; he was losing his audience. “The way in is beneath Bowland Tower.”

“And our passes would work?” asked one of the girls.

“Maybe, don't know. We should try it, after class, all go and check it out,” Oscar beamed excitedly around at them all.

Tom couldn't deny it. It was an appealing adventure. But he doubted their measly passes that only allowed them into this one building would get them into secret tunnels beneath the campus; that's if there *were* tunnels. That too could be a lie.

"I dunno, that sounds kinda dangerous," said the first girl.

"Don't be a scaredy cat," said her friend, grinning at Oscar. "Go on then, I'm up for it."

Oscar sat up straighter, his stare finding Tom, and then flicking to Elivia hanging back just behind him. "You up for it?"

"Sure, why not." Tom shrugged. "Elivia?"

"Erm, I don't know, we might get caught."

"Priss," Oscar scoffed under his breath causing a ripple of quiet chuckles.

"Go on, Elivia, we won't get caught," Tom said, ignoring the others. He viewed her uncertain, anxious expression. One she wore so often. "I'll be there, it'll be alright."

At this, she met his gaze and gave him a small bashful smile. "Okay."

Tom was sure to bring his camera. If they did somehow manage to gain access to these mysterious tunnels, he didn't want to miss a single moment. So after class ended and they'd cleaned up their stop-motion sets – Elivia tucking the puppet into her handbag – Tom and the others who'd decided to join the boy, Oscar, hung back outside the building and waited until they were all together. Once ready, Tom took Elivia's hand and followed the others along the North Spine footpath which ran down the centre of the campus, into the main hub, down the steps near the *Costa Coffee* and takeout shops and around the back.

It was quiet being summer and all, there weren't many students around. Those that were, were foreign students and didn't notice the cluster of teenagers inching their way along the wall of the great looming block of Bowland Tower, and to a staff only entrance. Oscar led the way, tugging on the handle of the maintenance door only to find it unlocked. Grinning back at them, he stepped inside the dank dim room. Only Tom followed. The rest of them, now they were here, didn't look so sure.

Tom looked to Elivia, her hand still in his. "You coming?"

"I'm not sure."

"Come on, don't be a coward," Oscar jeered from inside the room. He looked to his friends laughing and shaking their heads, wrinkling up their nose at the smell of oil and the loud sound of generators and fans bellowing out of the room. "Fuck this then. No point if it's just me."

“Why? You scared?” Tom smirked.

“Fuck off,” Oscar grunted and left the room, only to be jostled and jeered by his friends.

As they walked away, Tom’s attention fell back to Elivia. The door to the maintenance room was still open, almost calling to him. Now they were here he couldn’t *not* investigate.

“You can wait here?” he said reluctantly. He didn’t want to go alone. Not because he was scared but because if he had an accident who would get help? He was adventurous, not stupid.

Elivia looked from his persuasive eyes to the room and gave a sigh. “No, I’ll come.”

Grinning, Tom gave her a tug and led her into the room.

As they entered, the door shut with a heavy bang behind them, making them both jump. They giggled nervously, still grasping hands. Tom noted then Elivia’s increasingly sweaty palm. She was scared but not too scared to leave. There was curiosity in this girl and it was that which convinced Tom she wanted this as much as him.

They headed across the dank, dimly lit room, a generator thundering in the corner, and over to a door near the back. It didn’t look as though it had been opened in years; the hinges rusted and the handle completely free of any wear. What was peculiar was the lock pad to the side; a modern piece of technology down here in a room probably as old as the 60s. Had it been installed recently? Tom wondered and as he did, he glanced down at the lanyard hanging around his neck, the ID resting against his t-shirt.

“Do you think it will work?” Elivia asked, her voice no louder than a whisper.

“Only one way to find out,” Tom grinned, also keeping his voice hushed. Which didn’t make any sense. No one would be able to hear them down here in a generator room.

Lifting his ID, he held it to the lock pad and held his breath. The red light on the side switched to green.

“It works,” Tom breathed; he could hardly believe it.

Standing back, he gave the handle a tug. It was heavy but with another tug, it opened. They exchanged a look of exhilaration, anxiety and awe.

“You ready?” Tom asked, taking the lens cap off his camera.

Elivia didn’t reply so much as nod her head stiffly. He didn’t look at her again as he pulled the door open the whole way to reveal a grim stairwell. Red emergency lights lit the way down a set of steel stairs. Tom went first, still holding onto Elivia’s hand as they made their way down. His pace was quicker than hers and every so often, he felt her arm go taunt and her grip tighten. He slowed nearer the bottom as they wound down into the earth, the

smell of damp growing greater and greater. It made Tom's eyes water and his tongue twitch from the taste evading the back of his mouth. But his curiosity was too great to turn back, especially once they reached the bottom.

Before them stretched a fathomlessly long hallway. It was as the boy, Oscar, had described. A tunnel with thick electrical cables pinned to the walls running along either side and that red emergency light burning above them. These were almost certainly just maintenance tunnels. Tom didn't care. He felt like a pirate discovering treasure. It was incredible.

Letting go of Elivia's hand, he raised the camera to his face to take the first photo. With the flash on, the snap of his camera illuminated the hallway in full, revealing the T junction at the end.

"Come on," Tom said, taking a step forward. He paused upon noticing Elivia hadn't moved. "What's wrong?"

"Can we go back?" she asked, her voice timid and small, barely leaving an echo.

"You wanna go back? But Elivia, look, we've found it! The rumours are true! We have to at least investigate and take photos for the others. Come on, please?" Tom beseeched, giving her his charming lopsided smile that always worked on whoever he gave it to. His most persuasive smile. It never failed. But Elivia still looked unsure. "Come on, just to the end of this hallway at least? I won't let go of your hand," he assured, taking her hand once again and interlacing their fingers securely.

She had such small, bird like hands; he feared if he gripped too tightly he would break them.

"I don't know, I mean –," she stammered.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Tom smiled.

Elivia's eyes darkened then, a shadow passing her face that was almost identical to the one he'd seen on Emily, Will and Erika's faces. It unnerved Tom. What was she frightened of?

"You won't let go?" she said, gesturing to their hands.

"Nope. I'll just take photos with the one hand. It's fine, they don't have to be perfect. It's not like they need to be Annie Leibovitz good," he chuckled, his laughter filling up the hallway and easing the tension in Elivia's face.

"Okay," she breathed and while he could see she was still unsure, he couldn't let this opportunity slip between his fingers. It was too good to miss.

So with their hands entwined, Tom walked on, pulling a reluctant Elivia with him. When they made it to the T junction at the end, having taken several more photos of the graffiti and cables and the eerie foreboding tunnel itself, they came to a halt.

“Which way?” Tom asked. Either way stretched into oblivion; more long tunnels ending in T junctions.

“Right,” Elivia replied.

“Why right?”

“Because the devil is always left,” she said with such earnest eyes it made Tom gulp.

“Right it is.”

On they went. They didn't talk. Tom muttered a few excited comments while he took photos but Elivia didn't say a word. Her clammy hand stayed glued to his and every so often she glanced behind her. At what, he wasn't sure and nor did he particularly care. So wrapped up in his fascination for this place, these endless subterranean tunnels, he hardly realised when he raised his left hand to steady his camera for another photo, that that very hand was empty, and Elivia was gone.

“Elivia?” He turned around to find the empty tunnel staring back at him.

How could she have disappeared? There were no corners or curves and when he peered down the straight tunnel, she was nowhere in sight. He looked back up the way they came and saw nothing either.

It was then his heart started to race.

“Elivia?” he called out again, louder this time, his voice echoing off the walls. “Elivia!”

But no reply came.

Had she got scared and run away when he wasn't looking? But just as he decided to turn back to join her, he realised he had no recollection of how to get out.

They'd been taking rights. Somehow, they hadn't come back on themselves, which seemed impossible but perhaps these tunnels were so large that that could happen. In his sane mind, he knew that wasn't possible but right then, as he quickened his pace to a jog, his camera bouncing on his chest hanging on the strap around his neck, his sane mind left him. In its place was the terrified mind of a little boy who was lost. Lost in underground tunnels where he wasn't even supposed to be.

“Elivia!” he yelled, praying to see her elfin face appear around a corner. But nothing happened and as he stood at the junction to a new set of tunnels sprouting off either way, Tom didn't know what to do.

They'd been stupid. They should have marked their turns somehow. They hadn't thought. They'd been reckless and he, arrogant. He'd led Elivia down into this place against her wishes and now, he was lost.

They could *both* be lost.

"Elivia!"

He waited, bottom lip quivering as his fear gripped him.

"Tom?"

Relief washed over him at the sound of her timid voice. "Elivia! Where are you?!"

"I'm down here, Tom. I don't know where I am."

"I'm coming! Just keep talking so I can follow your voice."

Tom listened as she gave a small cough. "Okay, well what should I say?"

He chuckled as he took the left tunnel and began to walk, his heart rate slowing again. He'd overreacted. He couldn't do that. That's how people lost their minds. How people, when they fall into cold water, drown. Because they panic. He needed to stay calm and find Elivia, and then they would get out of here together.

"Anything. What's your favourite animal?" Tom asked, walking briskly, one hand around his camera. He wasn't aware it was a comfort thing; not consciously. But when his fingers were on his camera, his most prized possession, he felt safe. Calmer somehow. Like he wasn't so alone.

"Erm...well," she giggled; it warbled off the walls in an odd sort of way. As though her voice was being distorted.

Tom frowned. It had to be the acoustics. They were in tunnels after all. Everything was strange down here.

"I like birds...because they can fly."

"I like birds too," Tom said, following her strange warbled voice down another left hand turn. It sounded like he was getting closer but he couldn't be sure. "What about your favourite colour?"

"Black," her voice was suddenly deep.

Tom slowed down somewhat, his knees weakening. "Black?"

"Yes. I like black. Oozing, shiny black. What about you, Thomas? What's your favourite colour?" This time, her voice wasn't only deep and warbled but it didn't sound like her at all.

Tom came to a halt. Both hands on his camera, he stood at the end of a new tunnel, the end of which was so far away it was almost impossible to make out the figure at the end.

“Elivia?” he called tentatively this time.

“Go on, Thomas. What’s your favourite colour?” she said again in that deep, groaning warbling voice that sent shudders down his spine.

He opened his mouth to reply, unsure what else he was supposed to do then as an uncontrollable shake rippled across him. The red emergency lights began to flicker and in their weakest dim, the tunnel became almost pitch black. Taking a step back, his breath caught in his throat, Tom reached out to the wall to steady himself.

“Elivia?” he squeaked, tears welling in his eyes as the fear wrapped its tendrils around him.

In a flash, the red light disappeared and all was darkness.

“Elivia!” he yelled, stumbling backwards, both hands reaching for the walls, his camera swinging around his neck. “Oh fuck!”

At once, the red lights reappeared and his eyes fell to the figure at the end of that long hallway. No longer small with its back to him. No longer did he believe this could possibly be Elivia. No, this wasn’t the timid rich girl he’d met in the classroom. This was...this was something else.

And as his hair rose to attention and another shudder rolled down his back, Tom gasped at the sight before him.

A clown. Not like the ones at any circus he’d been to and not even like the cheeky *Ronald McDonald* with his head of frizzy red hair and great big smile. No, this clown didn’t smile. And its eyes, even from this far away, Tom knew, were black. Blacker than any hole, any night or any gaping mouth. Fathomless. Endless.

Eternal.

In a white silky all in one with playful ruffles around its neck and great puffs of red down the centre of its chest, the clown hung seemingly in mid-air, its limbs limp and its chin down. Even so, its eyes stayed trained upon Tom. Its face was white; pure sheet white with a red round nose. At the sides of its head, tufts of red hair spurted out the sides. It might have been comical in any other situation, but as it hung there, feet inches above the ground and its arms slowly rising at the backs of its hands as if controlled by another entity, this was far from funny.

It was then, Tom realised what was controlling this thing. It was hanging from strings. Strings that had no visible owner. Just strings that disappeared into the blackness above as the lights flickered again.

Heart like a horse galloping in his chest, Tom panted as he started to back away, his feet unable to carry him quick enough as the light nearest the clown...the thing...went out. With it came a shriek like laughter. But this was no happy sound. It pierced him right down to his core; splitting open his ribcage and gripping his heart so he could no longer breathe. And then, as if this figure at the end of the hallway wasn't enough, it started towards him.

Arms and legs chattering along, up and down, inhumanly so, and fast too, it skittered up the hallway, laughing that piercing maniacal laugh that rippled across Tom and deep into his chest. Staggering backwards, he dared turn and run; speeding down the tunnels, taking each right he came across, again and again. All the while, the clown, that thing, it didn't stop. It kept coming. And soon, it would reach him.

It would grasp him and all the lights would go out.

Stumbling and swerving around each corner, Tom couldn't feel his legs beneath him but willed them to keep going. There was no option to stop. Not when his heart felt like it would explode. Rapidly, the lights behind him went out one by one, announcing this thing's presence as it gained on him, its laughter louder and louder with triumph. For it would get him. It would devour him.

Eat me whole.

As Tom swept around another corner, tears in his eyes, he bumped into something solid. At the sight of her white hair and panicked face, Tom registered her with just a whiff of her familiar perfume before grabbing her hand and pulling her on down the tunnel.

"Run, Lil! *Fucking run!*" he bellowed, pulling strongly at her hand and keeping her on her feet as they pelted along the tunnels, that smell of damp replaced now with something else.

Rotting flesh.

A big gaping mouth.

Death.

I eat children, you know.

I devour them whole.

Just as I'll devour you, too!

Another shriek of laughter echoed around them as they fell into another tunnel, all identical to the rest. But this one was different. At the end of it were the steel stairs.

Their escape.

"Run!" Tom yelped.

"I can't!" Elivia wailed. "I can't go any further!"

“She can’t go any further! She can’t do it!” the warbled deep voice heckled, the clacking of its inhuman limbs and the skittering noise of it chasing them up the tunnels getting closer and closer. *“That’s alright – I like them scared!”*

“You have to!” Tom said. Yanking on her hand one last time, he pulled her into a fast gallop along the tunnel, the staircase seemingly miles away from them.

No matter how fast they ran, it never seemed to get closer. But the thing chasing them did. Tom heard it reach this tunnel. He smelt it. The hair on the back of his neck stood to attention at just its presence.

They couldn’t stop. That was not an option.

Finally, Tom’s foot hit the steel of the stair with a rumbling echo that bellowed up the stairwell. Shoving Elivia ahead of him, one hand on his camera, he grasped the railing with the other as they pushed through their exertion and climbed the stairs two by two. Looking up, they had several levels to climb, the stairs winding around and around. He hadn’t remembered it being this deep. But everything was different now.

Just as he went to spin around to climb the next set, he felt something grab his leg. With a whimpering yelp, Tom twisted around to see the clown, the puppet, whatever it was, on its hands and knees, the strings loose and trailing behind it. One white gloved hand wrapped around Tom’s ankle and no matter how much he pulled, he couldn’t be free.

With one hand still clinging onto the railing, the only thing stopping him from being dragged downwards by the clown, Tom grasped his camera to his thundering chest as he peered down into its gruesome face. Its hideous contorted form as its jaw opened wider and wider to reveal its rows of razor sharp teeth. Like that of a shark. A predator. It would eat him whole. And those eyes. Tom was transfixed. Glowing yellow orbs. They paralysed him. Kept him still as it crawled closer, shuffling over his small weak body, its long barbed tongue reached out to stroke the hot clammy flesh of his neck. It was with this movement that his camera pinged to life.

The flash blinded them all, including Elivia a few paces behind, screaming her wails of terror. The light bounced off the grim black walls and steel stairs and straight it into its eyes. With a shriek of pain, it recoiled away from him, slipping from his body and down a few steps.

Tom still couldn’t move. He didn’t know what to do as he lay limp on the stairs, his camera powering up again and his forefinger moving to the shutter button.

“Do it again!” Elivia shrieked. “Take a photo! Do it, Tom!”

Glancing back, the sight of his new friend brought him down from whatever daze he’d fallen into. And just as the clown reared up to grab him again, Tom pressed down on the shutter button causing it to hiss and recoil, covering its face as smoke emitted from between its fingers.

I can harm it.

We can hurt it.

“Tom, *come on!*” Elivia bellowed, tugging at the back of his sweat sodden t-shirt and pulling him up a couple of steps. He managed to regain his footing and leapt upwards.

Holding his camera high, one arm around Elivia’s tiny waist, they backed away up the stairs. Each time It launched for them, he took another photo, burning It as It hissed a high pitched sound that rang out painfully in their ears.

“Don’t stop, Tom,” Elivia wept, using the railing to pull them both up the stairs, her arm around him strong and powerful, the two together, peering down at this thing as It bore those teeth and hissed again. Its eyes were once again dark, those yellow orbs gone as a crack appeared down Its face.

It was then the clown visage seemed to break too.

Crawling upwards towards them, Its gloved hands became clawed fingers and then a palm of white pure stone. With each photo Tom snapped, Its head snapped from side to side, wailing in agony as the clown’s face faded and was replaced by that of witch, then an awful scaled creature that dripped with water on the steel stairs. It slithered and slimed toward them, Its power somehow fading as finally, Tom and Elivia made it to the top. Photo after photo, flash after flash, It never stopped coming but each time It tried to reach for one of them, It was sent reeling backwards.

With a push on the heavy door, Elivia and Tom fell backwards into the generator room. It was in these milliseconds that the creature, whatever It was, made one last attempt to reach them. Just as It did, Tom slammed the door shut with his foot, the locks clicking and whatever It was thrown away from them. Another agonising shriek bellowed through the door, reverberating off the walls of the generator room. But as much as It slammed itself against the door, the door did not move and soon, it became deathly silent.

Lying on their backs, arms around one another, Tom and Elivia didn’t move. Their eyes stayed trained upon the door. They stayed this way for several minutes until Tom felt breath return to his lungs and his heart rate began to slow. In his clutches, he felt Elivia ease but in no way relax. How could they ever relax again?

Erika and the others were right. They were telling the truth. And now he knew. But as he lay there in his own sweat and tears, Tom wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not. Wasn’t ignorance bliss?

With his sweaty grasp still on his camera, he slowly sat up, bringing Elivia with him.

“It’s true,” he murmured.

“What?”

“My friends, they tried to warn me about It. They tried to make me believe. But it’s true.” He turned to look at Elivia sat beside him. She wore a peculiar expression. One of fear but somehow, not shock. Tom frowned, shuffling around to face her. “Elivia?”

“Yes?”

“You’ve seen It before, haven’t you?”

Elivia’s eyes looked everywhere but at him as she sat on the dirty floor of the generator room just inches from a pile of rat droppings. But this preppy girl didn’t seem to care as she brought her knees to her chest, wrapped her arms around them and nodded.

“When? How?” Tom panted, and then his eyes fell to his camera. “Wait, the photos – we got photos of It!”

Elivia’s face lit up with the realisation. With trembling hands, Tom quickly turned on the camera and waited for it to load. He wasn’t sure when he’d turned it off. Clicking on the button for the gallery, he waited but all he saw when it finally loaded was black.

Photo after photo of just black.

“I don’t understand –.” Tom shook with his words. “I took photos –.”

“Maybe the flash was off?”

“No! No, you saw it! The flash blinded It! It was definitely on!” Panic returned to him as he clicked his way through the photos until he found the very last one he took down in the tunnels. Everything after that was black. Nothingness.

That didn’t make any sense. The flash had been on. He had taken those photos. They should be here!

But they weren’t.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Tom said, licking his dry lips where he tasted the salt of his sweat.

“None of this makes any sense,” Elivia murmured, taking his hand once again.

Withdrawing his eyes from the camera, he met her terrified gaze. All his life, logic and sanity had been his two pillars. If it didn’t make sense, it didn’t exist. Everything had an explanation. Ghosts, aliens, it was all just fiction. It didn’t exist, not in this world which contained so much pain and suffering.

But maybe – just maybe – this was how this *thing* existed. Because of the pain. Because of the suffering.

Because of the fear.

“We should get out of here,” Elivia said, slowly rising to her feet.

Tom joined her.

Stepping out into the brilliant July sunlight, it felt as though they were walking into another dimension. Into a whole other world where things with teeth and changing faces that liked to eat children couldn't possibly exist. What had happened down in the tunnels felt less and less real, but Tom knew he couldn't forget it. He couldn't let it go. He had to hold onto this, as much as it scared him. Because Dominic was right. All his friends were right.

There was something killing children. Something attacking *them*. And it couldn't go on. But what were they supposed to do? They were just kids.

“Elivia?” Tom asked as they walked out into the sunlight; it warmed their skin and revealed the state of them. They were covered in dirt and oil; her pretty clothes ruined. But she didn't seem to notice as she came to a halt and turned to look at him. “You've seen it before. When?”

“Tom, I can't. I mean, it was nothing –.”

“Elivia,” he said firmly. “Why are you still denying it? We were almost killed. If you've faced this thing before I have to know. *We* have to know.”

“*We*?” She frowned, that anxiousness returning to her eyes.

“Me and my friends. We've all seen this now, well, except my boyfriend, but his brother, Toby Johnson?”

“Toby Johnson? Wasn't he the boy who –?”

“Yes. They said he drowned. Said he was crushed by the debris. But his arm was ripped clean from his body and well, Dominic...he's always thought Toby was murdered and now? I believe him. Now I've seen this thing...it makes sense.”

“No, Tom. None of this makes sense!”

“Maybe not!” he said hastily, grasping her dirty hand. “But we have to do something.”

“What?” she said, tears returning to her eyes. Hopeless, terrified tears.

“I don't know,” he said with defeat. “But we have to tell the others.”

“The others?”

“My friends, will you come meet them? This evening before curfew? I can't wait until tomorrow afternoon.” He viewed as she looked down, her thumbnail rising to her mouth where she chewed with thought. He knew it was a lot to ask but he felt this urge – this deep, powerful urge to stick together. She'd seen it before and now she'd faced it again. This time with him. They had to stay together. They were stronger as one. All of them together.

It couldn't hurt them when they were all together, Tom was certain of it.

“Okay,” Elivia breathed, meeting his exultant eyes. “But on one condition.”

“Sure, anything?”

“I bring Anna.”

“Anna?” he said, then quickly remembered Elivia's sole friend. The girl with golden hair. She both terrified Tom and excited him. A girl of power. She didn't look like the type to scare easily. She was exactly what they needed. “More the merrier.”