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Cliff McNish

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Prologue

It was long past midnight when the Horror appeared at the end of Westmoreland Road. No one in the run-down housing estate saw it. No one heard it as it burst through the washing lines of the poky little gardens.

Reaching number thirty-three, Savannah Grey's house, the Horror dropped its star-shaped head on one side, knotted its murderous claws behind its back and tried to work out the most entertaining way to reach her bedroom. There were many ways available, but the Horror was young and like all young things it liked to use its teeth.

Biting a path up the brickwork, it anchored its incisors into Savannah's window ledge. Then, thrilled with excitement, it raised its single cobalt-blue eye to the night winds and howled.

The Horror wasn't meant to do that. It wasn't supposed to draw attention to itself. But it had been let loose for the first time in its life, and was dying to do everything at once.

A city! Such glorious lights! Never having been unchained for this long before, the Horror's restless claws had been on the move all evening, playing freely and greedily with everything it touched. And on the way to Savannah's, it had chanced upon something that truly made it squeal with delight.

An adolescent girl, dancing in her living room.

Blonde-haired, and dressed in a stretched yellow tutu, she was performing ballet exercises. Seeing the way she whisperingly plotted a path across her carpet –'pas, pas', formal steps punctuated by sudden acrobatic leaps – the Horror had stopped to watch, mesmerized. So this was what humans did in private. They danced! How wondrous! And all the way to Savannah's the Horror copied what it had seen, shooting over lampposts and rooftops in a series of risky pirouettes and sweeping vaults.

Reaching number thirty-three, the Horror used its subtle tongue to pick the front door lock. It wasn't afraid of being caught. If anyone did so it would simply kill them. Killing was a game to this creature.

Padding merrily on its dog-like body, it eased into the hallway, humming softly to itself.

Up the staircase. Onto the landing.

Pitter-patter past the toilet.

Toward the bedrooms.

The Horror stayed silent as it approached Savannah, containing its eagerness. A gland in its throat constantly spouted a yellowish liquid, but it was used to that and made sure none dripped onto the hallway carpet.

One more staircase to go.

Remembering the ballet girl, the Horror smiled. Then, raising its body shakily up on two legs, it crooked its front limbs just so – and waltzed like a dancer with an invisible partner up the last flight of stairs.

Savannah's door was open. A breeze from the landing stirred the wavy ends of her hair. *Glissade*, the Horror thought. Thanks to the ballet girl, it knew several human words now. Without understanding what they meant, it had practised them

on the way here, loving the sounds.

Arrieré. Echappé. En dehors. Foutté. Port de bras. Battement!

Murmuring the last of them, the Horror thrust like a fencer inside Savannah's bedroom. For a moment it stood there, its translucent teeth glistening. Then it sprang – an agile, dramatic fling of its hind legs that took it all the way over her duvet. If Savannah had woken she'd have seen the sharp points of the Horror's head jabbing towards her neck. But Savannah did not wake. She slept on. Her lips were open, the bottom one pouting a little in the relaxed way it always did when she was asleep.

Seeing her eye lids dream-fluttering, the Horror cocked its head on one side. So it was true: humans dreamed as well. Did they dream of monsters the way it dreamed of humans?

Gripping the carpet, it vaulted to the ceiling. There it hung, suspended on suckered pads, its yellow mouth gaping. Savannah exhaled, and the Horror caught a waft of spearmint toothpaste. So excited was it by the smell that it forgot to stay quiet – and noisily sniffed her face.

Fifteen-year-old Savannah woke immediately. Blinking in the darkness, she propped herself up on one arm. What had she heard? A snort, followed by two or three quick scurries.

She stared at the door. Either she'd dreamt the noises, or an animal was in the house. Squirrels? A rat? The possibility that it was something as big as a rat kept her awake for a long time, listening. Eventually, hearing only silence, she dismissed the noises as nothing, and turned her head back into the pillow.

*

Once it was certain she was asleep again, the Horror slipped out from under Savannah's bed. Its lone eye peered down at her. Up close, Savannah didn't look as dangerous as it had been led to believe. Physically she appeared the same as other teenage girls it had been shown pictures of. Or was she?

Disobeying its orders, the Horror teased the fabric of the sheet away from Savannah's shoulders to reveal her neck. It discovered nothing unusual. Smooth skin. Soft flesh. The hollow of the throat rising gently up to the vocal cords. It was hard for the Horror to accept that inside that throat of hers was a weapon so uniquely powerful that if Savannah ever learned to control it there was virtually nothing which could stand against her.

But the Horror could hear the beginnings of that weapon. Distant noises. Faint rustlings. Distinctive *click-click-clicks*. They drifted in intervals from her lips. And occasionally even more ominous sounds emerged. Heavy booms. Muffled explosions – as if velveted bombs were igniting in the depths of her throat.

The Horror leaned avidly forward. It had an almost irresistible impulse to wake Savannah by biting that throat of hers, but no, it couldn't do that, it wasn't allowed. Its task was merely to listen to the sounds and report the findings to its master, the Ocrassa.

Frustrated – wanting to kill her now, cold and quick, while she slept – the Horror listened for another hour. Then, mewling in silent frustration into its claws, it sped moodily from the house and off into the leaf-blown night.

1

Late afternoon, dreary autumn sunshine, and I was bored. All Sunday I'd been lounging in bed, nursing my sore throat and generally feeling sorry for myself, when my best friend Nina Savoy called.

'Hi, it's me. What you up to?'

The answer was dreaming about monsters again, but Nina never liked the details so I just said, 'Nothing.'

'Still sick in bed with your throat?'

'Um.'

'Well, see if this makes you feel better. We've been invited out. Tori's throwing one of her parties.'

'Uh-uh,' I protested weakly. 'No way I'm going out tonight.'

Nina laughed. 'Sav, that hurts. It really does. Especially when I've gone to so much trouble to invite along the perfect boy for you.'

I groaned. Nina takes it as a personal insult that I've never seriously gone out with anyone yet. When I'm ready, I keep telling her, but she's unstoppable once she gets an idea into her head. The blind date she sprung on me last week with Henry Duke was typical. Henry's a modest, smart, funny boy from my physics class. In fact I'd always liked him, and though I was flustered by having the date dropped on me, I was really

enjoying myself until we arrived at Peckham cinema.

That's when Henry made his *great move*. I knew he was going to do it. From little shufflings of his bum it was obvious what he was up to – edging closer, calculating distances, daring himself. And when he actually found the guts to spread that thin freckled arm of his around my shoulder, and swing in for a quick half-kiss, I must admit that part of me had felt pleased and almost pathetically grateful.

But then I'd pulled away. I'm not sure why. A cold feeling had just swept over me. Ludicrously, instead of meeting up with his mouth, all I'd wanted to do in that moment was stop Henry. Stop him and carefully inspect what was inside his lips. Not exactly the easiest thing to ask a boy just before he gives you his best move.

All of which meant that meeting someone else tonight, especially a stranger, was the last thing I had in mind.

'Gargle something,' Nina said, unfazed by my protests. 'Staying in bed is what's making you miserable. Anyway, it's half-term so you can lounge in bed the whole of next week if you want. Trust me, you're definitely going to want to meet this boy.'

'Oh yeah?' I grunted.

'Yep. He's just your type. Got all the qualities you like.'

'Which are?'

'For you, not too many muscles. Not hairy. No face fluff. Bookish. Plus extras.'

I burst out laughing.

'And good looking, of course,' she added. 'Smart, too. In fact, he might even be as smart as you.'

'So let me get this straight,' I said. 'What you appear to be describing is basically a geek.'

'Don't forget the extras.'

'Nina, I'm hanging up ...'

'Don't you dare. Listen, I'm not kidding, Sav, he's completely perfect for you. He's – I don't know – he's really unusual. I just think ... you'll like him.'

Her breathiness caught me by surprise. It wasn't like Nina to react that way to anyone, let alone a boy. I was still suspicious, though.

'When did you meet him?'

'A few days ago.'

'So he's someone from school, yeah?'

'No. You don't know him. Just get ready. And make sure you wear a dress.'

'A dress?'

'Yes. A nice floral pattern. Plus a felt hat. That's what he said he liked.'

'You're kidding?'

'Of course I'm kidding, you idiot.'

'Nina –'

'No more questions. I'll be there in an hour.'

I showered, dried myself off in my bedroom and slipped into a plain black skirt.

While I was still choosing what top to wear, Annette Coombs appeared. She's been my new foster mum for the past six months. My parents were killed in a car crash when I was a baby, and I've had six or seven fosterers since then. All have been nice, decent people, but I keep changing them, especially lately. It's not the fosterers fault. I just get edgy if I stay in one place too long. The constant moving around makes life a hassle for my social case workers, but because I never give any of my

fosterers problems they reluctantly put up with the drama.

Annette is already one of my all-time favourite replacement mums, though. She's warm and sensitive, and always respects my privacy. Which was why it was a surprise to see her lingering like a nervous bird outside my bedroom door.

'What is it?' I asked. 'Everything OK?'

'It's ... um, nothing really.' She sounded sheepish. 'It's only ... well, I've been meaning to mention –' she shook her head – 'Did you know that you're making unusual noises?'

I raised an eyebrow.

'In the middle of the night, I mean. In your sleep.'

'What kind of noises?'

'Squeaks and, er ...' She shrugged awkwardly. 'Clicks.'

'Clicks?' I couldn't help laughing. 'You're kidding. *Clicks*?'

She shrugged. 'I know, but I've been hearing them coming from your room for the past couple of weeks. At first I thought you just had a radio on low or something, but this morning one noise was so weird that I came in to check you were OK.' She hesitated. 'The sounds were coming *from your mouth*, Savannah. You had your lips wide open. One sound was especially odd. A sort of' – she fumbled to find the right word – 'watery, liquid noise.'

Crazy as all this sounded, I could tell she was being serious, so I attempted a serious answer. 'My throat's been a bit sore because of my cold. Maybe my breathing's rough because of that.'

'Mm.' But Annette didn't look convinced, and maybe she was right not to be. The truth was that my throat had been sore for ages. About a month ago, Nina got so concerned that

she dragged me to my doctor, who sent me off for blood tests. I'm due to receive the results at King's Hospital tomorrow, but I can't say I'm not looking forward to it. Without understanding why, I've been feeling bizarrely protective of my throat recently. Whenever anyone questions me about the pain, I keep pretending I feel OK. Alone in bed, I've even caught myself reaching out to touch my neck. Nothing dramatic – just quiet, tender little dabs. But it's alarming because I keep finding my hand there unexpectedly. I'll raise my arm for an unrelated reason, and there my fingers will be – hovering like a shield.

And *liquid* sounds? What did that mean?

In the end, I promised Annette I'd tell King's about the noises when I went for my appointment tomorrow, and finished dressing. I surprised myself by being ready twenty minutes before Nina was due. I'll admit I was curious. Her enthusiasm combined with the fact that I knew nothing about this boy definitely had my interest.

Nina turned up looking as good as always, dressed in a sparkling strapless turquoise top. I smiled. It was just the sort of semi-revealing outfit bound to annoy her latest boyfriend, the pretty but none-too-bright Brent. Especially if he saw her dancing with any other boys wearing it. Nina liked annoying Brent. That and kissing him.

'You ready?' she asked, checking her watch. Nina always acts as if the whole world's keeping her waiting.

'Yep. Tell me more about this boy, then.'

'In a minute. Let's get going.'

We jumped on the crowded 171 bus and walked up Lyndhurst Way. Nina made slow progress in her pointy killer heels. They're the highest she can wear without tipping over.

Even so, they barely bring her up to five-four. Nina's always been self-conscious about her height, but recently she's filled out a little, and found a way to inject a seductive swing into her hips when she puts her mind to it. My own speciality is looming over people. I'm nearly six foot, tallest girl in my year, so I'm good at that.

Walking side by side, Nina and I look odd, I suppose, mismatched, tall and short, but looks aren't everything, are they? We've known each other since we were tots. Even when I moved away a few years ago we kept in constant touch. I'd do anything for Nina, and she would for me as well. Her hair looked great tonight: long swathes of vibrant auburn. My own hair is a duller brown, if you care to look up that high.

'Let's get a move on, we'll be late,' she said, still offering me nothing about the mysterious boy. Typical of Nina, now she had my attention, to keep me in suspense.

'He's expecting us, is he?' I asked.

'Of course he's expecting us. I told him to get there for seven.'

'Why so early?'

'I want to be sure he arrives before most of the other girls turn up. We don't want them getting in ahead of us. Damaging your chances.'

I blinked at her. 'What makes you think they'll be so interested in him?'

She grinned. 'Intuition.'

Nina had me completely hooked now, of course. Despite my misgivings about getting close to boys, I couldn't help being intrigued.

'Your throat still sounds sore,' she tutted.

'Nah, it's OK.' I shrugged defensively. 'This cold's just

dragging on, making me croaky. It's fine.'

'Fine for an axe-murderer, maybe.'

I managed a half laugh.

'It sounds husky at least,' Nina noted. 'For tonight that's good. Alluring. Temptress voice. Everything helps.' She smiled enigmatically. 'Anyway, he's not perfect, this boy. He won't mind your croak. He's got a little defect of his own.'

'Oh?'

'You'll see.'

'Nina,' I growled, grabbing the straps of her bag to yank her back, 'you'd better tell me more about him, or I swear I'm going home right now.'

'Oh ... OK,' she relented. 'But I don't know much. I just found him wandering around our estate last week, that's all. Lost, he was. Said he was new to the area. Just moved in and all that.'

'He stopped to talk to you?'

'No. I stopped to talk to *him*, dummy. He looked lost but he also looked cute. Cute enough to really need my help.'

Until now her description had all been typically brash and full-on Nina, but suddenly she looked a little ... was that shyness I was seeing?

'So what happened?' I asked.

She shrugged as if it was nothing, but I could tell it wasn't.

'We were getting on fine,' she said, when I pressed her. 'You know, chatting away, blah, blah, when ... well, I could tell he wasn't interested. Not in me, anyway.'

I checked Nina's expression. It was oddly vulnerable.

'Hey, hold on a minute,' I said. 'How many times have you met this boy? Be honest.'

'Just that day. I was with him ... no more ten minutes.'

'Ten minutes?'

'Probably less.'

'He made that much of an impression on you in less than ten minutes?'

She blushed, glanced away. Circling her arm, I drew her close to me. I wasn't sure I wanted to meet this boy of hers any more. Not if he could do this much damage so fast to someone as confident as Nina.

We walked together in silence for a few minutes, our bodies close. Eventually, Nina smiled cautiously up at me. As a little girl I'd seen her smile that way.

'You're my best friend,' she said quietly. 'You know that?'

'I know.' I felt emotional myself now and held her.

We finally arrived and stood outside Tori Siegler's front door a moment, neither of us knocking. Nina licked her lips and looked up at me.

'Ready?' she asked.

I blew out a long breath and rang the bell.