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Endurance is his first novel.

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ENDURANCE

T. J. Blake

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ISBN: 1491074566

ISBN-13: 978-1491074565

Part 1

1

A man sat slumped with his back against the wall, injured and staring at the last flickering light, at a vandalised station on the London Underground; the bricks and tiles scattered across the floor. The bloodstained walls have made it unrecognisable. No one else was around. He sat in the corner of the stop, deeply hidden within the shadows. The entrance was barricaded with collapsed concrete and bricks. Specks of dust floated down from the ceiling onto the ground and covered the man in a sheen of white.

Complete silence was occasionally interrupted by loud screams from above, mostly from women and children. As the screaming stopped, murmuring and deep roars began. The sounds were not completely clear, but resembled a heavy smoker clearing his throat.

The man emptied his pockets; a wallet was all he had; it contained only a bank card and driving licence. Tom was thirty-years old, with roughed-up black hair and stubble on his face. He wore a suit that had seen better days. His shirt was covered in blood and there was a deep gash on his shoulder, with blood trickling slowly down and further staining it. As he stared at his driving licence, he inhaled and exhaled wearily, and mentally

went over the events leading to his current circumstances...

Today's been hard. How could a day go from being so good to so fucked up so fast? I don't even know what's going on anymore. How am I going to get help?

Tom slowly rose. Dust fell from him, creating a smoky atmosphere. He choked. In pain, he clutched his injured leg, fell into the wall and slid onto the ground.

Blood dribbled from a wound on his leg; it had been oozing blood for some time now. Trying to shake off the pain, he slowly and carefully pushed himself upright.

Breathing heavily, he used all the strength in his legs and balanced first on his left foot and then his right, testing the strength to ensure the limbs would bear his weight. He began to limp toward the blocked exit. Tom moved some of the debris. After a few moments, he kicked the barricade in frustration as he realized it was completely blocked with monstrous pieces of concrete that would require heavy equipment to move. He knew there was no choice but to walk through the tunnel to the next stop in search of a clear exit. The thought of this journey into the dark with no light at all to assist him sent a shiver down his spine, his palms began to sweat and the hairs on his neck stood on end.

He stepped off the platform, onto the tracks, and stared weakly into the gaping black maw of the tunnel. Tom took a cautious step toward the darkness. He was shaken when he heard a scream echo through the blackness. It sounded like a grown man. He took one step; followed by another. Then yet another step, until he stumbled into something on his left side. He knelt cautiously, trying to protect his injured leg as much as possible. He leaned forward, squinting to make the best of the feeble light. Tom saw that he'd tripped over the corpse of young man, who seemed to be in his early twenties. He wore a green polo shirt and blue jeans, soaked in blood. The clothes clung tightly to his physique. His arm was covered in blood, with deep scratches all over it; the entire arm had a strange, lumpy, chewed look.

The bile climbed into Tom's throat; he vomited violently and fell onto his hands and knees.

Screams faded into the distance, but Tom attempted to block them from his mind. He stared at the filthy train tracks; the musky scent of the tracks and the smell of the rotting corpse overwhelmed his senses, making him nauseous. Tom continued to focus on the dust-filled tracks. He watched the clumps of dust rolling from his knees, past his hands toward the tunnel, blown by a breeze that entered the stop behind him.

He placed his palms on the grimy wall and pulled himself to his feet. He stepped away from the wall and stood upright, facing the tunnel. Clenching his shaking fists, he began to walk toward the tunnel. As he stumbled past the corpse, the shadows wrapped around him; dragging him in. He disappeared into the darkness...

2

It was sunny in London at Jubilee Gardens; the sun glistened off the river Thames and the surrounding buildings. The London Eye gleamed from the rays. The grass was green with no dead, yellow, dried grass in sight. The Thames was dark blue with boats cruising along the river and seagulls fluttering around the water.

Tom Williams and his long-term girlfriend, Anna Reid, sat on the green grass having a picnic. Her straight, smooth, shoulder length hair shone in the sun as she tossed her head to look at Tom. Her dark brown eyes sparkled with hidden mirth as she gazed at him. He reached down to stroke her soft, pale skin and touched her peachy lips lightly with his; she blessed him with an elegant smile. She wore a knee length red dress, brown boots and brown-tinted sunglasses.

'Can we see that new romantic film tomorrow in the cinema to mark our five-year anniversary?'

'Yes, I suppose we can, now I'm unemployed I'm free non-stop,' Tom sighed.

'Oh, Tom, don't worry, we'll find you something soon, I guarantee it.'

'I don't know. There are no jobs around here,' Tom chuckled, "I'm a bit nervous about ever finding anything.'

'I know, Tom, but it will get better and you'll find something and when you do, everything will be great.' Anna held Tom's hand. 'Come on, let's eat, I'm starving,' Anna said.

After eating their fill of the lunch of fried chicken, pasta salad, and tiny pastries for dessert, Tom and Anna lay down, gazing into the clear blue sky. The sun dominated the sky and shone brightly on them and everything around them. A light breeze floated through the gardens. The trees danced and the grass swayed from side to side.

Tom turned onto his stomach and ran his hand through Anna's soft glossy hair, 'What do you want to do now?'

Anna rolled onto her stomach and looked at Tom, 'I don't know.' She stroked Tom's wiry black hair and moved down his bristly face, over his cheeks, to his chin and back the way she came.

'I've got to go back to work soon, I only have five minutes of the lunch hour left, so we should probably make our way back.' Anna stood, brushed the grass off her dress and grabbed her bag. She pulled out her mobile, checked the time, and then threw it back into her bag. 'Come on you.'

Tom stood and brushed the grass off his jeans and his navy blue and white checked shirt.

They left Jubilee Park and walked along the side of the River Thames, holding hands,

talking, and joking around, until they arrived at the front of the fruit and vegetable shop where Anna worked.

Outside serving the customers, was a middle-aged, slightly overweight man. He saw Tom and nodded; Tom returned the nod and looked at Anna.

'See you later, baby. I'll meet you here; then walk you home, if you like?'

'That'd be nice, Tom. Thanks.' Anna smiled and wrapped her arms around Tom's neck. As she did, Tom got a waft of her sweet perfume. 'See ya, Tom, I love you.'

'Bye, I love you, too.'

Anna stared at Tom and smiled. When she smiled, her slightly freckled nose crinkled. She kissed his lips, loosened her grip, and released him.

She skipped to the shop, turned at the entrance, waved, blew Tom a kiss then walked inside.

3

Tom arrived at the home he shared with three roommates. He walked through the front door and corridor. The corridor and sitting room floor were covered with a soft, bouncy, green carpet. The walls downstairs and upstairs on the landing were a soft cream colour.

With every step, the floor boards under the carpet gave a loud screech.

'Anyone home? Tom shouted. He heard a muffled voice from the sitting room. Tom entered to find one of his house mates, Stewart, lying on the sofa with his legs crossed together on its arm, watching the Jeremy Kyle Show.

'You alright Tom, any luck with a job yet?'

'Nothing yet, still on the lookout. Something should come up soon. Got anything planned today?' Tom began to smile; 'Apart from watching The Jeremy Kyle show of course.'

Tom sat on an armchair to the right side of the sofa.

'Nah, mate nothing today, just chilling and that, you?'

'Well, seeing Anna again later. Tomorrow is our five-year anniversary of being together so I'm taking her to a posh place to eat and then to the cinema. I think I might propose to her.'

Tom grinned.

'Whoa, wait a second.' Stewart paused.
'You're proposing? For that you need a ring, pal, and some money while you're at it.'
'I've got a ring. I do have some money, you know, I had a good ICT job being a designer. It paid well; but obviously I need a job to keep my money topped up before I lose it all.'
'That's a big step, mate, but I wish you the best.' Stewart rose from his cocoon, pulled Tom out of his chair and shook his hand firmly. 'Your dad would be proud.'
Tom felt himself welling up and quickly moved toward the door. 'Cheers, going to go in the attic right quick just to look at the bit of Dad's stuff that I kept. Where are Dan and Lucy?'
'They're both at work, and won't be back till later.'
'Alright. See you in a bit.'

Tom walked out of the sitting room and up the creaky stairs. He got to the top and looked up at the entrance to the attic. He carried a stepladder from a walk-in cupboard and set the ladder underneath the entrance. He climbed the ladder and pushed the attic hatch open and pulled himself into the darkness. Once inside, Tom switched on the light, attached to part of the wooden scaffolding. Specks of dust and a musty smell welcomed him.

He stepped across the wooden structures to the other side of the room to an open box, where all of his father's possessions were placed. Using his palm to wipe the dust off the photos, Tom looked longingly at the pictures of his dead family. Of the three people in the photo – him, his mum, and his dad, he was the only one still living. He set the photos aside and looked at the cassette recorder his father loved and once used to play his music. The player impressed Tom as a child because it also had the capability to communicate with others through a radio frequency.

Next, Tom picked up an article about his father's death. The headline read "Murder Mystery." No one knew why Tom's father, Ken Williams, was killed or who murdered him.

Ken Williams was a physicist working with a very specialized and top secret experiment for his company; this made him unique in his job. He was shot to death in his own lab. There were no CCTV cameras working at the time. There was no known reason for him to be killed. There had been no new developments in his murder case. Tom put the paper back in the box. Thinking about his father's death made him depressed and reflective.

Tom's mother died of cancer when he was very young. Tom never really knew his mother, Sarah.

Ken and Sarah had gone away on holiday to Rome, knowing that she didn't have long to live. Ken returned home a week after they'd left and broke the news to family and friends that she had passed away while in Italy.

The people closest to Tom were his girlfriend Anna, and his housemates Stewart, Dan and Lucy. These folks were as close to family as he had. Some days the loneliness hit him like a brick in the head. It was painful in its all-encompassing blackness. Tom left the attic in a much darker mood than when he'd entered it.

Anna finished work at 6:30 p.m.; Tom was waiting outside to meet her. She ran to him, jumped into his arms, wrapped herself around him, and caused him to stumble in her happiness to see him. She laughed happily as he leaned down to kiss her deeply. 'Hello Tommy, did you miss me?' Anna laughed aloud as she waited for the answer. 'Of course I did,' Tom kissed her again, and set her down.

They reached Anna's flat, located in a green area. The building itself looked grubby, but the street was clean with few neighbours. To the building's left was a small grassy area that

was fenced off to protect the flowers and trees.

They walked to the front entrance and stood under the porch. They hugged each other and Tom kissed her.

'What are you up to tonight, then, missy?'

'Well, Mel and Lucy are coming round to gossip and eat chocolate.'

'Cool, well you better get inside and get ready. See you tomorrow.' Tom smiled and kissed Anna. 'Bye, I love you.'

Anna smiled, 'I love you, too.'

Tom watched Anna walk inside and then watched her through the window as she walked upstairs.

Anna walked into her flat and threw her keys on the kitchen table. She dragged her feet as she stumbled to her sofa, tired after a long day at work.

Tom returned home to see Stewart, who lay sprawled out on the sofa, asleep, with the TV still on. Tom laughed as he walked upstairs to prepare for his date with Anna.

Tom lay on his bed and wondered what Anna's answer would be.

4

The next day was Tom and Anna's five-year anniversary. Tom arrived for his date with Anna early and was sent to wait for her in the sitting room. He had dressed carefully for this night in a black blazer, white shirt, black tie and shoes. He even took the time to gel his hair; it was all spiked up unevenly.

Wandering toward Anna's window, Tom reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out a small maroon box. He opened the box to look at the engagement ring as it glinted from the street lamp outside. Tom moved the ring from side to side, using his thumb and index finger. The diamond shone brightly and changed colour. He imagined himself kneeling down in front of Anna and placing it on her finger.

His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a door creak. Tom quickly snapped the box closed and slipped it back into his pocket; he turned to see Anna emerging from her room. She sauntered across her living room wearing a long purple silk dress with matching purple high-heeled shoes. Her hair was in a sexy French twist with a couple of strands left artfully dangling in front. Tom's chest constricted painfully at her beauty.

'What do you think?'

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