

The padlock on the gate had long since broken and it opened with a shrill creak that echoed on the still night air, sending a chill up my spine as I froze in place, listening for the sound of footsteps. I didn't think anyone would be here this late, but I wasn't taking any chances.

"Come on," I told myself, "don't be so pathetic, just get in and get out."

I couldn't believe I was actually here, doing this, and all because I wanted to fit in. Of all the stupid things that I could do, sneaking out of the house to follow the orders of Courtney and her gang of simpering idiots was at the top of the list.

I sighed deeply, reminding myself why I was here. After years of being picked on and ignored by almost everyone in that damned school, I had a chance to change their opinion of me. I wasn't going to be the scared, chubby, shy little mouse in the corner, watching them from afar, following them around like a little lost puppy.

I knew it was stupid, I knew it was pathetic, I even believed my mum when she said that I was special in my own way and that I was worth more than all of them combined, but that didn't help. I just wanted them to be my friends, to like and accept me for who I was. I wanted to belong.

I pushed at the gate a little harder when it stopped mid swing. I set my shoulder against it, giving it a heave but it was stuck fast. I took a step back, judging the distance between the gate and the post and reckoned that I might just make it.

Sucking in a breath and thinking skinny thoughts, I shimmed my body through the narrow gap. My jumper caught on something and I jerked to a stop, my head whipping round. I let out a small eek of panic, convinced someone had grabbed me, my heart pounding in my chest. A nervous laugh bubbled up in my throat when I saw I was snagged on a rusty nail. Ignoring it I took another step to the side, inching my way through. I felt a small tug before the wool gave and I popped through. I was free!

Once inside though, I was at a slight loss as to what to do and just stood there, panting for a second, trying to bring my heart rate down to something that resembled a normal pace, shivering in the misty night.

I hugged myself, arms wrapped tight in an effort to ward off the chill in the air. I looked around, my eyes slowly adjusting to the low light, shapes beginning to emerge from the darkness. Towering winged angels cast eerie shadows across the too long grass. Great slabs of granite, most with cracks down their centres, tottered at odd angles, oddly reminding me of misshapen teeth in a giant's mouth.

I shook my head to dispel my childish thoughts. Giants, witches, goblins and especially ghosts, were nothing but fairy stories to frighten little children, I was too old for such nonsense now.

But no matter what I told myself, I couldn't stop the little thrill of fear that skittered up my spine, the stories the kids at school told of this place, running through my head. The story of the old ghost caretaker, who was as mean in death as he was in life, chasing off anyone who dared to set foot into his precious cemetery.

I took a deep, calming breath, forcing myself to stop thinking about things like that -things guaranteed to scare the pants off me- and just get on with my given task. Get in, get out had been my plan of action and I was failing already by lingering.

I mentally ran through the instructions I had been given and turned in what I hoped was the right direction, picking my way carefully through the mine field of fallen rocks and chunks of marble that glinted dully in the weak moonlight.

My teeth had begun to chatter with the chill, which felt like it was beginning to seep into very my bones. Banks of fog that seemed to swirl around me, blocking out any real distinguishable features of the path I was walking. I hugged myself again, my jumper feeling almost wet to the touch in the damp night air.

I wished feverently that I had thought to take my coat up to bed with me, rather than leaving it in its usual place in the hallway, but Mum and Dad were bound to have noticed and questioned me. I just couldn't lie to my parents, so I had left it behind when I had received the text

telling me when and where my initiation dare was to take place along with what I was expected to do.

Suddenly, up ahead, looming out of the darkness, I saw it. I fumbled in my pocket for my phone and yanked it out, clicking on the camera.

“Just a little further, a little longer,” I promised myself, sweat beginning to bead on my forehead despite the cold. The more I thought about it the less I wanted to be in their stupid club, and wished I had the strength to tell them where to get off. But no one told Courtney and her friends anything, they rule the school and what they say goes. If you were lucky enough to receive a text, you did what you were told, to do anything else was social suicide, they would make my days even worse than they were now.

Clutching my phone tightly in my hand I braced myself for the final part. I forced my feet forward, one step at a time, its pale walls getting closer and closer. Once more I urged myself on and finally decided I was close enough. I turned around, putting my back to the tomb and raised my camera with shaky hands, ready to take the picture that would prove I had fulfilled my dare. My finger hovered over the button just as a scream pierced the air.

Spinning round, my eyes darting in every direction, my heart hammering in my chest, I searched for the source of the noise. Maybe it was just a fox, my Nan always joked that they sounded like they were being murdered.

Another scream sounded, seeming closer this time. Nope, I was done, it was too much. Without waiting to find out its source I bolted, my feet carrying me as fast as my slightly bulky frame would allow. I twisted and ducked around the stones that had remained standing, leaping over the fallen ones as nimbly as I could. I smacked my hip against one particularly large stone, making me gasp, the sudden shock of pain bringing me to a halt.

My ears picked up the sound of footsteps, seeming to thump against the frozen ground, getting louder and louder the closer they came, the sound pounding in my ears. The ghostly caretaker, he was real. I stuffed my fist in my mouth to muffle the whimpering sounds of terror that threatened to spill out and began running again.

My head constantly swivelling back to look behind me, terrified that something was about to grab me from behind. I glanced forward again and almost groaned, realizing that I had managed to run in completely the wrong direction, away from the big iron gates and freedom, and headed deeper into the maze of crypts and tombs that were springing up on all sides.

I dared a look back behind again, paying little attention to where to where I was stepping, not even registering that I had lost my footing until my legs gave way and I crashed to the ground, the impact forcing the breath from my lungs. I lay there for a second of two, too stunned to move. I heard a low moan coming from my right and hauled myself to my feet as quickly as I could, the pain in my hip now fighting with the ache in my chest from my fall.

Without even thinking about what I was doing, I darted into the nearest crypt, ignoring my brain screaming at me, yelling that there were dead bodies in there. I told my brain to shut up, it was the moving dead bodies outside that I had the real problem with. I stopped when my back hit the wall behind me and sank down it, crouching in the darkness, the noises outside becoming louder and louder.

I covered my ears, tears streaming down my face as I whimpered, begging and praying for them to go away. I nearly jumped out of my skin, screaming in terror when the crypt door slammed shut, encasing me in darkness so complete, I couldn't even see the shaky hand I raised in front of my face.

The ghosts outside began to bang on the door, on the walls around me, the sounds echoing around the tomb, pounding into my head as I prayed for them to stop.

I stayed, rocking on the spot, terrified out of my mind, for what felt like hours, the tears cooling on my cheeks until I registered that the noises outside had turned into whoops of laughter.

I looked up as I heard the door burst open and a bright light shone directly into my face. I squinted past the light, my eyes finally revealing Courtney standing in the doorway, a torch in one hand and her camera phone in the other, both pointed straight at me.

I didn't know what to do as more people poured in, all pointing and laughing at me. I shrank back further into my corner, covering my head with my arms, my shoulders heaving as I cried bitter tears, humiliated to my core. They had tricked me, it was all just a big joke and now they had video proof of my stupidity, I would never live this down.

"What the hell do you lot think you are doing?" a familiar voice boomed out behind them. They all jumped in shock, spinning around to face the figure in the doorway. Making use of the distraction, I stumbled to my feet, not even bothering to brush the dirt off my behind. I looked towards the doorway where my older brother was now standing, yelling at my gang of tormentors, giving them what for. I couldn't help but grin to myself as I watched them shrink, going from cocky, mouthy teenagers to contrite little kids in a few sentences and a glare from Rick.

I listened as he threatened to round them all up and take them home to their parents and tell them exactly what they had been up to. I watched him take Courtney's phone and delete the video of me snivelling on the floor like a baby. The gang slunk off with their tails between their legs and I finally dared to make my way over to the door.

Rick immediately wrapped his arm around my shoulders, giving me a comforting squeeze as he pulled me into his side.

"Do I take it Mum and Dad don't know you're out here?" he asked, a teasing smile on his face.

I shook my head, feeling equal parts embarrassed that I'd let myself get into the situation he found me in, and ashamed that I'd snuck out in the first place. "No, they don't. I'm sorry, I won't ever do anything so stupid again. I just want to go home."

He gave me another squeeze before taking my hand, just like he had when I was younger, starting to walk me towards the gates. I looked around and noticed that with Rick by my side the cemetery didn't seem so scary any more, sure it was still creepy looking but with my big brother, my hero, I felt safe.

I began to smile, a little laugh escaping. "I've been so silly, trusting them, I knew they weren't nice people. And you always told me there was no such thing as ghosts, and I should never have believed their stories."

As we reached the gates I looked up at him, something bothering me. "How did you know I was here?"

He smiled at me, dropping a kiss on my forehead as he always had since I was a child. Rick being 12 years older than me, he had always seen me as someone to take care of.

"It's a brother's job to know when his baby sister needs help, and I always be there when you do." He ruffled my hair, something he knew I hated, yet this time it didn't bother me. "Go on home, sprat, I'll see you later. I'm supposed to be somewhere."

He gave me a little push and I automatically turned, walking a few steps before turning back to thank him, but he had already left. I looked around for him, but couldn't see him anywhere. I yawned, the night's adventure catching up with me, and began the short walk home, figuring that Rick had had some friends to catch up with and I'd see him soon.

I noticed the police car outside my house as I turned into the driveway, my stomach sinking to my shoes. Mum must have noticed that I had sneaked out and called the police. I would have some explaining to do and probably be grounded for the next five years. I pushed open the door, wincing in preparation for the tongue lashing I was bound to receive.

My mum appeared in the living room door, her face wet with tears as she enveloped me in her arms, hugging me so tight I couldn't breathe.

"Oh Susie, I thought we'd lost you too, when you weren't in your bed..." she burst into fresh tears.

"Lost me too?" I asked, puzzled. Who else had we lost?

My Dad came out of the kitchen, wiping his own eyes and placed an arm round us both, steering us into the living room where a police officer sat on the sofa, an undrunk cup of tea on the coffee table in front of him.

Mum began to cry again as Dad turned to me, his red rimmed eyes showing the seriousness of the situation. "Susie, we have some bad news. It's Rick, he was in an accident earlier, on the way home from work, his car was hit by a drunk driver. He died in hospital, the doctors did all they could."

I shook my head in disbelief, fresh tears welling in my eyes. It couldn't be true, he'd just saved me from those monsters. He said he would always be there for me, and I believed him. He couldn't be gone. I had to make them understand that they were wrong. "No, you're wrong, he can't be dead, I just left him. He saved me."

They all looked at me with pity in their eyes, obviously thinking that the shock had addled my brain.

"You couldn't have baby, it happened at half five this afternoon."

I couldn't argue with them, even though I tried. They just wouldn't listen. I knew I was right and that my wonderful, clever, brave brother had helped me, protected me as he always had. And when he said that he would always be there, I believed him.