

a blur. Perhaps because I was unconscious, or losing blood, for so much of it. I had dreams about it at first, but they've faded for the most part now. The therapy has helped, of course. All our parents paid to get us help. And thank God they did. But I remember the passageways.

Halfway.

And that's when I see it.

I sense it before I fully comprehend what I'm looking at. I skid to a halt. A presence, shadowed but drenched with familiarity. Lights flicker in the alley. Decorative lights for the festival, I presume. They seem to change colour every few seconds. The silhouette takes me back to that night in my home, when I was attacked. Jonesy had left. I got that call. And then the security lights fluttered on and off, bathing everything in red.

It's hard to forget your first killer.

The obscured lights turn red, and I'm transported back.

At the end of the alley stands the Carrington Ghoul.

Charred clothing, torn fabric hanging down like rags. Everything in me screams to turn and run. But there's a nagging voice, most likely Amber's influence, reminding me that would be a death wish. *Never turn your back*, I can hear her saying. In a horror movie, this would be the moment when another killer materializes from either side, trapping their victim in the alley. Or sometimes the killer magically teleports (because, let's face it, the writers got lazy).

The ghoul is unmoving, eerily so. Not even a tilt of the head, like Michael Myers. My eyes are drawn to the knife in their hand – Carrington’s signature. It’s hard to make out clearly, but I’m almost certain there’s a dark liquid dripping from the blade, pooling slowly on the ground beneath it. My stomach tightens.

I can’t believe I’m back here again. A year on and here I am. I’ve imagined this, of course. Even though Mr Graham was dead, I was afraid the ghoul might come back somehow. But then the anniversary passed and I thought we were safe. Or did I? I’ve seen enough movies to know never to let my guard down fully.

Weirdly, I’m angered more than anything. Terror fills my veins but it’s clouded by rage. I’m sick of being scared to walk in my own town, fearing dark alleys.

“Now what?” I yell. The volume of my voice takes me by surprise but I’m not going down with a whimper, not this time.

The ghoul remains motionless.

I’ve had enough.

I step forward with determination. “I dare you—”

And then it moves.

“Oh shit.” Instinctively, I jump back. But it doesn’t come closer; it takes a step away, putting distance between us. I take another cautious step and it moves again, still deeper into shadow.

I swallow. “Screw this.” With a new-found courage

flooding through me, and without truly thinking it through, I sprint down the alley. The moment I do, the ghoul steps backwards into a mass of fog.

I barrel out of the alley, stumbling and landing hard on the sidewalk. I clamber to my feet in an instant, pushing through the pain. My fists go up in defence and—

The ghoul is gone.

My heart is racing, beating at a mile a minute, as I cautiously tow myself back to the alley, my eyes unwavering. I barely blink until I reach the opening again. *Where is it?* It's like the ghoul vanished into thin air. I can't see where it would have gone. I have to remind myself that this is real life. People don't just *vanish*. That would be ridiculous. We've been here before and there is absolutely no room for supernatural nonsense.

It's only now that I realize that the fog isn't fog at all, but steam billowing from a nearby pipe, forming a perfect veil of smoke, ideal for a swift escape.

I hear a *squelch*. Damn it. I lift one foot and I realize I've stepped right in the blood that was dripping from the blade.

A frown creeps on to my face. "Great," I mutter to myself, knowing I'll have to explain to Sanera's new sheriff how I've managed to tread in evidence.

The pooled liquid refracts the light. I bend down and inspect it more closely.

I'm sure of one thing.

This is not blood.