

CHAPTER ONE



GRAVE OMEN

Again he felt a chill across his scalp and down his neck, the icy touch of disembodied fingers seeking out his warm flesh. The first of the evening mist pooled around him in ghostly pockets as the light retreated and colour drained from the landscape. He moved swiftly among the autumn shadows, now only dully aware of the taunting jeers behind him, the sound muted and filtered by the stale air of this other world into which he had plunged.

Dully aware too of the figure in the distance, the man in black watching him from the foot of the tower.

Martin searched frantically for a route through the damp mess of decay. He lurched forwards over ancient mounds and fallen stones. Suddenly he saw it. The red and black bag poked incongruously from a dew-sodden tangle of grass ahead, lying where Gary and his mates had tossed it from the other side of the wall. The wall that separated the real world from the forbidden world of Dead Man's Corner.

Something snagged his foot, sending him crashing

headlong into the wet grass. Rubbing at his knee, Martin glanced up at the man standing by the tower. The figure remained impassive, unmoved, waiting. Martin breathed deeply and pulled his bag towards him.

He could see a route out now: a thin winding path among the briars and graves that was only apparent from this low angle. With a glance over his shoulder at the now-deserted wall, Martin flexed his knee and prepared for the final leg of his escape. His dare was done; maybe now he would be left alone for a while.

Then something caught his eye.

Partly obscured by moss and lichen and softened by the gloom, he saw the most familiar words in his life: 'MARTIN JAMES LEWIS'. Instinctively he reached out, the tips of his fingers making contact with the worn carving of a bell above the name. The stone felt warm for an instant, before the icy chill of death spread into his hand.

Dew soaked through his trousers, numbing the ache in his knee as Martin scrambled closer. Scratching the moss away he struggled to read the rest of the inscription.

'MARTIN JAMES LEWIS, BORN 24 OCT 1895,' it said. His stomach lurched. Same date. One hundred years earlier to the exact same day. His head spun, his mind searching for a logical explanation. He had cracked his head ... was lying unconscious ... trick of the mind. That was it: just a dream. Any minute the man in the cloak would shake him, waking him from his stupor. Take him home, away from Dead Man's Corner, away from...

He forced himself to focus on the stone. If he were

unconscious, he would not be able to feel the wet moss under his finger-nails, the cold grass, the chill of approaching evening. The cold stare of the figure in the black cloak.

Frantic now, he scratched at the stone, tearing at history, desperate to see what came next. *Please, a long life, please.*

‘DIED,’ it said, ‘24 OCT 1908, AGED 13 YEARS.’

It couldn’t be. He peered closer, his one good eye struggling to decipher the crumbling words. No one died that young.

Died ... *aged 13.*

October the twenty-fourth – this Friday. The day he had been looking forward to for weeks. The day he too would turn thirteen.

A powerful, shapeless fear gripped him, turning his bones to jelly. His breath came cold and shallow, his heart pounding somewhere in his throat. No hands reached up from the cold grave, but in his mind Martin reached down, down through the wet earth to the dead child that mirrored his own existence.

No one died that young, at least no one he knew. No one so close to being just like him.

A murder of crows alighted from the skeletal elm beside the churchyard and wheeled overhead in the darkening sky. Their cawing wrenched him upwards, out of the dream, out of the wet earth and back to reality.

At the far end of the church the cloaked figure still stood watching him. Their eyes met, locking together for several uncomfortable seconds. The man dropped his head and

turned away, leaving Martin to confront his fear alone.

As he scrambled to his feet and ran, stumbling out of the graveyard and up the road to the comforting light of home, he knew that in that moment everything had changed.

Archibald Snode watched the boy run from the graveyard. He watched as he shoved past the other three boys who'd thrown his school bag into Dead Man's Corner. Watched as Martin James Lewis tried to outrun the past, escape a history he could never leave behind.

Snode pulled his cloak closer and retraced his steps past the vestry. He'd waited a long time for this moment. All along he'd known that Martin would come, would find the grave, would catch his first glimpse of what lay in store.

He smiled to himself as the churchyard sighed in the gathering mist. The only thing he could not control was what Martin would do now, but he'd been watching a long time. This boy was special. This boy would find a way.

Snode began the long walk back up the hill to the bleak, forbidding Chadian House.

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