The Woman in the Graveyard

An icy breeze snaked around my ankles as I pushed open the splintered, wooden gate. It wasn't long ago that I had been curled up in front of the fire, watching TV, and I longed to be back there.

I looked across the damp, grey graveyard towards the church. The only time I had ever had to come here before was for our Sam's christening, and I must have been about five. The church looked tired somehow. There hadn't been a vicar here for ages now, about four years I thought, and the lifelessness of the congregation seemed to have taken its toll.

Rain trickled down the cracked tiles on the roof, seeping into the guttering and smearing across the old stained glass that looked as if it hadn't been cleaned in a long time. The colours had all faded to a browny-grey, with only a hint of red bursting through every now and again. Weeds stretched and clambered up the side of the porch and I could see evidence of nocturnal visitors everywhere I looked; rabbit droppings, molehills, the footprints of foxes and cobwebs. The local wildlife must know that nobody ever comes up here, and make it their human-free hangout! I smiled to myself, happy at the thought of the rabbits partying with the spiders, but then felt a sudden shiver through my bones, which made me shake and pull my old coat tighter around my body; the snug fabric felt comforting around my skin. I looked to the church door, heavy, wooden and dark. The planks were studded with black, iron rivets, which looked medieval and strong.

As I stepped down into the cool stone porch, the smell of damp and rotting foliage hit the back of my nostrils, making me gasp, and again I felt that chill. I turned, suddenly aware of something changing in the air behind me, something cooling, making me nervous.

'Just get on with it,' I muttered to myself, and it was a shock to hear my voice after the near silence of the graveyard. I stepped towards the door and lifted the black, iron door handle, the weight of which reminded me of the stories I had heard of shackles and chains in Mrs Brown's history classes – like a torture chamber.

A mist had gathered, curling around the graveyard like a fleet of ghosts. I looked back over my shoulder and saw a shadow by one of the gravestones. Suddenly nervous, my heart beating a little faster, I turned to look.

The shadow became a shape, which became a figure, crouching behind a gravestone, hunched over like someone praying. My nervousness turned to fear; my heart stopped, I couldn't breathe, my eyes fixated on the figure dressed in black behind the stones. Suddenly I saw a movement, a flicker of a skirt, a silent swish on the grass; the figure began to stand, and turn. I stood frozen to the spot, standing under the arch of the church porch, not sure whether to look away or stay watching – half enthralled, half terrified, hairs standing up on my arms and the back of my neck. As the woman stood up I saw that she was dressed entirely in black, her skirt was to the floor and she had on a jacket, tightly buttoned around her skeletal frame. Her head was still bowed as she turned to me, holding up the single white flower she had in her hand; she lifted her head, slowly, determinedly, and as her white face and dark eyes raised towards me, I felt my blood run cold.