

**MY SO-CALLED
AFTERLIFE**

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Chapter One

I knew it was time to move on when a tramp peed on my Uggs.

OK, he didn't do it on purpose – it may even have been my fault for not looking where I was going – but it was still the single most disgusting thing to happen to me that week.

'Eeeuw! Gross!' I let out a howl of dismay and stepped backwards through the urinal. 'Do you have any idea how much these cost?'

Utterly unconcerned, the tramp finished his business and headed for the stairs. Sourly, I watched him leave. 'Next time, wee on your own feet,' I called after him. Although, judging from the trail of soggy footprints, he already had. And, like pretty much all my visitors, he didn't stop to wash his hands. I suppose he had an excuse. If you

smell like the inside of a rubbish bin, hygiene probably isn't your top priority.

It wasn't the first time I'd found myself ankle-deep in wee. When you haunt a public toilet, an over-familiarity with the more basic human functions goes with the territory. In the early days, I often found myself sinking into the floor or through whatever I happened to be sitting on, but it didn't take me long to adjust to having less substance than candy-floss. Once the novelty of walking through walls and defying gravity had worn off, I spent most of my time hiding in the cleaner's stock cupboard, with its shelves of loo roll and fascinating bottles of cleaning fluid, bored out of my mind. The difference that day was Jeremy – he'd given me hope that I wasn't destined to hang around the men's toilets on the corner of Carnaby Street for the rest of my days.

You've probably guessed by now that I'm not your average fifteen-year-old girl. Before my death I was pretty normal. My favourite part of myself was my hair – dark and silky, it looked awesome when I bothered to straighten it. Freya, my best mate and partner in crime, used to go on about my eyes, which she described as 'exotically emerald'. I lost count of the times we found ourselves in detention for slathering on forbidden eyeliner and mascara. The target of our efforts was the gorgeous Jamie Bickerstaffe. Accept no substitutes, Jamie was the official babe-magnet of St Augustine's Secondary. I had been determined that one day he'd know who I was, and I guess eventually he did. Just not in the way that I'd hoped.

Apart from the pointless rules and casual bullying,

school was mostly bearable. I wasn't the coolest kid, but I wasn't a geek either. To this day, I thank my lucky stars I didn't die in school uniform, or I'd have been stuck in a poo-coloured blazer for all eternity. Who knows, there may be a God after all.

Jeremy was no different to anyone else the evening he first walked in. I was going through a phase of grading my visitors according to their toilet habits. You wouldn't believe what some people do when they're alone in the loo. Then again, maybe you would.

He was a hummer. In fact, it was his tuneless rendition of the Jackson Five's 'Blame it on the Boogie' that tempted me out of my cupboard to give him the once over.

Critically, I studied his battered biker jacket and grey jeans. From behind, he looked like a geography teacher trying to be down with the kids. That lost him points. He made up for it with his musical taste, though. As my dad always said, anyone who was a fan of early Michael Jackson couldn't be all bad.

His image in the mirror showed me he wasn't as ancient as I'd imagined at first. In spite of his thinning blond hair, I guessed he was in his mid-twenties. Overall, he wasn't scoring badly on the disdain-ometer. In fact, if he didn't fart and washed his hands, he was in with a shot at the top ten most pleasant guests that week.

And then everything changed. He looked up.

'Aaaargh!'

Stumbling backwards, he tugged at his zip, face flooding

with horrified embarrassment. ‘How long have you been there?’

I resisted the temptation to glance behind me. ‘Are you talking to me?’

‘Who else is here?’ Turning, he glared at me. ‘This is the *men’s* toilets. You should be in the ladies’ next door.’

My mind fizzed furiously. He could see me. He could actually *see* me! I could have hugged him. Well, I couldn’t, but you know what I mean.

‘Let me get this straight. You can see and hear me?’

His expression changed. He was starting to look like he regretted engaging me in conversation.

‘Are you here on your own?’ he said with an exaggerated slowness, like I was four years old. That put my back up,.

I rolled my eyes. ‘Nah, I’m here with my mates for an illegal rave. Of course I’m on my own.’

He smiled, in what I suppose he thought was a reassuring way. It made him look like a deranged kids’ TV presenter. ‘Right, I’m going to find some help. You stay here.’

Without taking his eyes off me, he crossed to the bottom of the stairs. Almost as an afterthought, he stopped to rinse his hands under the tap. I watched him go with a mixture of curiosity and irritation. Six months I’d been dead and, despite some heavy duty arm-waving and shouting, no one had ever seen me before. It was just my luck that the one person who had was drippier than the log flume at Alton Towers.

Five minutes later he was back, with a member of

London's finest in tow. I groaned. Before I died, I'd held the police in reasonably high esteem. I'd seen them on TV. They spent their days chasing criminals and didn't rest until they had their man. The complete dog's dinner they'd made of the investigation into my death had changed my views. These days, I couldn't shake the impression that most of them would struggle to find their arse with both hands.

'There she is, officer.'

The policeman peered around the apparently empty room. A smile tugged at my lips; this was going to be more entertaining than I'd thought.

'Where?'

Jeremy threw him a hard look and pointed directly at me. 'There.'

Following the line of his finger, the policeman frowned. 'I don't see anyone.'

'She's right in front of you!' Jeremy said, annoyance beginning to creep into his voice. 'Standing by the sinks and making a very rude gesture, I might add.'

With a suspicious sideways look, the policeman said, 'Have you been drinking, sir?'

'No, I flipping well haven't,' Jeremy exploded. 'I came down here to use the facilities and found this . . . this . . . Peeping Tomasina watching me. Between you and me, I don't think she's all there.'

'Hello?' I waved a sarcastic hand. 'I can hear you, you moron. I'm dead, not deaf.'

Jeremy frowned, as though he didn't quite believe what

he'd heard. 'Are you going to do anything about her or not?'

PC Plod pulled himself up to his full height. 'Don't take that tone with me, sir. There's no one in this room besides us, and if anyone's a few spanners short of a socket set, it's you.' His bushy eyebrows beetled together forbiddingly. 'You do realise that wasting police time is a criminal offence?'

'I'm sorry I started this.' Jeremy crossed his arms and sighed. 'Let's cut to the chase. You cannot see or hear a teenage girl doing a terrible monkey impression in front of you right this minute?'

The policeman didn't even look. 'No, sir.'

Jeremy stared first at him, then at me. 'Fine. I haven't been drinking, but maybe I should. In fact, I'm going to start now.'

He turned and stomped his way across the tiled floor.

'Bye!' I called sweetly, wiggling my fingers at his retreating back. 'Do drop in again!'

His shoulders stiffened as he went up the stairs and then he was gone. Shaking his head, the police officer followed, leaving me alone. My grin slowly evaporated. The bloke might have been a prize plonker, but at least he'd known I was there. Now I was on my own again. A lump began to form in my throat. Maybe the chimp impression had been a mistake.