

The Cemetery

We were walking through the cemetery on Halloween night when the ground gave a quiet sigh—like the earth itself was breathing. The fog rolled in thick and silver, curling around the tombstones like fingers. My friend, Thalia, had dared me to come, and I couldn't back down. She laughed easily, but I could hear the slight tremor in it, her uneasiness masked by a smile. When the iron gate creaked shut behind us on its own, she whispered "It's just wind, Alice" but she seemed a tiny bit nervous

We moved down the narrow path, our flashlight beams slicing through the mist. Every now and then, the light flickered, as if something unseen was passing in front of it. I tried to focus on Thalia's footsteps ahead of me, but they started sounding... wrong. Too heavy. Too slow. "Thalia?" I whispered. She turned to me, her face ghostly pale in the beam. "What?" Then, behind her, I saw shadows moving. I thought it was mine at first. But when I took a step closer, the shadow stayed perfectly still. The air grew cold enough to burn. The flashlight flickered again, then went out completely. Darkness swallowed us whole.

Something dragged across the gravel behind us. Slow, deliberate. Screeching like nails on a chalkboard. We spun around, staring at each other. She looked confused and I'm sure I looked 10 times more disoriented. That's when we saw it. An old gravestone with fresh soil just beneath it. Carved into it was the two worst words I had ever seen on any tombstone. THALIA RANGER

My stomach dropped. I turned to her, but she was staring at the grave, frozen. "That's not funny," I angrily whispered. "You set this up, didn't you?" She didn't answer. Her eyes were wide and glassy. Her quick breaths were visible in the cold air. I tried to make out her facial expression for a hint of a smile, wishing this was one of her signature pranks, but her face looked like it was deteriorating rapidly right in front of me. This isn't something I want to admit, but I left her. I ran until the cemetery gates appeared again. When I looked back one last time, Thalia was gone, with the only trace of her existence being the squiggly shoeprint walking with mine, leading up to the grave. The footsteps that never returned with me.