

## Stiffy's Midnight Stroll

The entrance of the Highland Lawn Cemetery looms over us in the flickering moonlight, wind howling through the mock castle gate. My best friend Colt and I slip through the arched stone, the bell tower standing silent. When I glance down at our shadows, my bobbed, wavy hair looks wild next to Colt's beanpole frame and the other dark forms drawing near to us.

The shadows move like the legends say.

"Do you hear that howling?" Colt asks, his voice cracking. "It's Stiffy Green. Isn't it?" If I have to drag Colt Allison out of the most haunted cemetery in Terre Haute, I will never let him live it down among the rest of the 7th grade class.

The dark is heavy tonight, lingering on my arms and giving me goosebumps, as the full moon keeps peeking out of the cloud cover, casting shadows that feel alive. I reach for my phone in my pocket, double checking the camera is set for nighttime mode.

Colt hands me an extra, real flashlight, a living version of the "always be prepared" Boy Scout motto. "That's got to be Stiffy Green howling, Lidey. Listen!" I hastily cover his mouth with my other hand so I can listen, but I don't hear anything. Just the wind rustling through the sycamore trees, low and deep. It *almost* sounds like a dog howling, but I focus on the rustle coming from our left, behind the smaller stone tower.

Our parents have no idea we're at the cemetery. But then again, it's summer, so I told my parents I'm staying at Colt's house and he told his he's staying with me. We've been friends since kindergarten when we tried to swap our first-name-last-names, Alexander and Allison, which lasted for half a day before our teacher caught on.

But in middle school, last names don't matter. Only nicknames.

Loony Lidey. Woodrow Wilson's resident dork.

I flick on my flashlight, shoving down the shadows. “It’s probably Stiffy.” I pause, excited at the thought of finally seeing his ghost. “Hopefully.”

Colt’s jacket rustles as he shivers before looking over at me, his own flashlight under his chin, illuminating a bit of worry in his eyes. “That’s the reason *you’re* the ghost expert. Not me.”

The closer I listen, the more it sounds like a dog howling. I scan my light over the grounds checking for the path towards John Heinel’s infamous mausoleum. I can get there no problem during the day. But at night, the grounds look too different to me.

*Gaaaarooooooo.*

“Tell me you heard that!” Colt grabs my free hand, squishing it with enough force to break my pinky. “It’s not just a regular dog!”

“Ow!” I squelch, pulling my hand out a little too hard, stumbling back into an in-ground tombstone and dropping my flashlight as I flail. Colt catches the front of my jacket, righting me, just before I fall. “Thanks,” I mumble, bending down for my flashlight. I click the switch, but nothing happens.

“No...no...no,” I hiss between clenched teeth. It’s not that I’m afraid out here, it’s just—  
The dark.

The dark is always how the legend starts.

*Darkness falls.  
Crying hound.  
The ghosts are coming.  
You’ll be found.*

Legend has it that if you’re in Highland Lawn Cemetery when the bell tolls, you’ll catch the ghost of John Heinel taking his emerald-eyed bulldog, Stiffy Green, for a walk. Master and companion saunter through the boneyard waking up specters, a midnight stroll of ghosts.

And they might just take you with them into the afterlife.

Every kid in Terre Haute knows about Stiffy Green, the bulldog who loved his master so much that he went to the grave for him.

But apparently, I'm the only seventh grader who *really* believes it.

John Heint, a Hautian philanthropist, died in 1920 and when he did, his beloved bulldog wouldn't leave his side. Not at the funeral. And definitely not when he was entombed. When Heint was buried, Stiffy Green refused to leave, standing guard over his master's mausoleum until one day Heint's widow found him lying on the steps.

Dead.

"Tell me exactly why we're here again and not at home, asleep?" Colt whispers, our footsteps echoing on the pavement. But there's another noise, too.

*Click. Click. Click.*

I turn around, only to find murkiness lingering between tombstones.

Something shifts to my left, and I catch a glint of green low to the ground, but it disappears immediately. A cold current whips across my arms, wrapping its icy fingers around my wrist as I turn back to Colt. Then something treads through the leaves behind me, drawing closer until it brushes across my ankles. "Ah!" I scream, nearly jumping into Colt's arms.

"What was that?" he asks, gripping his flashlight tighter.

Something growls softly off to our right, low and raspy.

The moonlight disappears as we scramble into the wooded, and oldest, part of the cemetery. "N-n-nothing," I chatter, Colt's beam erratic as he scans the ground. "Just a leaf that blew up on my ankle. C-c-c-aught me off guard." Except it wasn't. It was definitely an animal.

A small, bulldog-sized animal.

I whack my flashlight on my leg which kicks the light back on, illuminating the stone building in front of us, the sealed door a sickly, green patina. Everything outside my beam is pitch black, darkness wrapping around the stone doorway like spectral fingers.

I squeeze Colt's hand, responding to his earlier question. "We're here because I have to get proof that the legend is true." *And show that I'm not loony.*

Since Stiffy wanted to be with his companion so badly, after he died, Heinel's widow sent his body to a taxidermist then entombed it in the mausoleum next to his companion where he could stand by him even in the afterlife, his green eyes forever on guard.

Colt squeezes back. "But Stiffy's body was moved to the Vigo County Historical Museum. Wouldn't his ghost haunt *that* building?"

"No," I say confidently, thinking back to my local folklore project last fall. "His ghost is tied here. Where his master lies."

Colt pulls me forward towards the grave, our feet crunching over the soft ground.

I shine my flashlight at my feet and find a half-buried bone. Like something a dog dug up. "Uh—"

He interrupts me, missing the bone entirely. "What if we don't see anything tonight, Lidey? I mean you know I believe you, but what if Stiffy doesn't show up? What if you don't get your picture?" He trails off, sounding skeptical like he doesn't believe me either.

But Colt doesn't know what I do.

I'd already seen Stiffy Green tonight.

And I was pretty sure he was following us.

"We'll see him," I say as we walk up the mausoleum steps, hot breath steaming up the back of my calves.

We stop at the verdigris door, shining our flashlights through the iron curls, but no Stiffy Green in sight. Colt breathes a sigh of relief, while more goosebumps wave across my arms at the presence behind us. Out of nowhere, the bell tower tolls.

*Boooooong.*

When I turn around, I don't need my flashlight because Stiffy's emerald-green eyes are glowing in the dark. The beam falters, turning off completely.

"Colt," I whisper, locking eyes with the ghostly bulldog. "Whatever you do, I need you to keep your flashlight on."

*Darkness is how it starts.*

"Why?" he asks, turning towards me.

"Because they found us," I say as John Heinl's ghost beckons from the other end of Stiffy Green's leash, the restless shadows closing in.

Colt's flashlight flickers, once, twice.

Then everything, except those emerald eyes, goes dark.