

# Winter Cemetery

Picture, if you dare, a landscape so brutally twisted by the hands of time that all beauty has drained away. Whilst nature dwindled and died, rumours were born, like seeds sewn in the mind that were impossible to dislodge. The desolate wilderness fed curiosity and embraced new strength: the power to provoke involuntary reactions... spontaneous emotions... recklessly impulsive decisions. Was there truth behind the stories? Nobody knew. Occupying the imagination as a nightmarish backdrop to a theatre of terror, the soulless cemetery lay waiting...

Refusing to relinquish its grip, the cold clung to every surface: here, winter was endless. The biting chill stole breath and pinched skin. Its penetrating force sharpened the mind and awakened suspicion; the stillness became alive with disturbing possibilities. A vicious crusting of snow enveloped this unwelcoming world, suffocating all life beneath. Frozen as jagged, glass-like shards, the smothering mask failed to soften the scene. Like tattered lace, the snow draped over vegetation forcing it to yield and wilt. From every bough, icicles hung like spears, waiting to break free and impale intruders below. Branches, heavy with snow, punctuated the quiet with eery groans of complaint. Inevitably, some surrendered and fell with a roar; the accompanying echoes resonated as a haunting farewell.

Choking the air, an ash-white cloud of gloom slunk, billowed and coiled. It drank the light and distorted reality. Innocent objects assumed sinister intent and shadowy forms materialised then melted away, swallowed by the mist. Under the ghostly cloak, instincts couldn't be trusted. Fantasy danced menacingly close... relentlessly teasing truth.

With little to bar its path, the wind coursed through the bare boughs whistling a melancholy melody. Occasionally, the ghostly bellow of church bells complemented the wind's unearthly song. Their hollow toll thundered, lingered then faded, provoking a solitary owl to hoot forlornly in response. Sweeping up flurries of sharp crystals, the squalls became a malicious beast; the air was alive with stinging bullets. It callously toyed with the last shrunken leaves, plucked them free, then heartlessly discarded them to spiral towards the ground.

Jutting chaotically from the frozen carpet, countless headstones scattered the ground. Some lay collapsed, others stood askew and unbalanced, dislodged from their beds by roots that aggressively

snaked and pushed. Cracked and crumbling – their engraved sentiments ruthlessly eaten by neglect – they lay as faceless monuments to those long since forgotten. Nobody tended these graves. The only mourners were the ancient trees that loomed ominously like guardians of the dead. Tormented by memories, but forbidden to reveal their secrets, they raised their arms to heaven and howled a spine-chilling prayer for mercy. Threading between the tombs, a cobbled path navigated the terrain. Its frosting of powder was unblemished by footprints. With nowhere to go and nobody to guide, the elements had ravaged the walkway and ripped it apart to be engulfed by the land.

Within a sunken channel, water pooled like a bottomless pit of despair. Its icy seal was splintered with a spiderweb of cracks that savagely deformed reflections... distorted nature... deceived the eye into believing untruths. Overhead, the moon yawned into the night. It cast flashes of light upon the glassy surface, then retreated behind the angry clouds once more. The darkness returned and consumed all joy, leaving fear to fill the void. At the edges, the saturated soil oozed around the rocks, so they appeared to float upon the claggy ocean of mud. Within, tree litter slowly rotted, emitting a dank aroma of decay.

According to hearsay, this graveyard was haunted. Numerous sightings had occurred, but the facts lay steeped in mystery. Was it the plummeting temperature or the oppressive atmosphere that first alluded to an unwelcome presence? Nobody could fully explain. Inhospitable and hostile, this environment had become the domain of the spectres...

