

THE DOGS OF HOLLOW CREEK CEMETERY



By Nathaniel Theos
and AI

A NOTE ON AI

The story concept, creative direction, characters, and original writing are by Nathaniel Theos.

AI was used as an editorial and creative-support tool, including story development suggestions, the full editing process, and the creation of the cover artwork.

The human story remains the heart of the work. AI served as a tool in the creative and editorial process.

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It was 1950, and Hollow Creek was the kind of town where people still left their doors unlocked.

Children rode bicycles until the streetlights came on. Neighbours borrowed sugar without asking. Everyone knew which family lived in which house, who drove what automobile, and whose dog had been barking half the night.

Crime was something people read about in newspapers from larger cities.

It was not something that happened in Hollow Creek.

Which was why sixteen-year-old Emily Hart thought nothing of walking home alone after babysitting on Halloween night.

It was only fourteen blocks.

She had made the walk dozens of times.

Her mother had even offered to come for her, but Emily had laughed.

“Mother, honestly. It’s Hollow Creek.”

That had been just before midnight.

Now Halloween was over.

The children had gone home. Porch lights had been switched off. Jack-o’-lantern candles burned low behind collapsing orange faces.

Paper ghosts hung motionless from verandas. A cardboard witch leaned crookedly against a picket fence, abandoned until morning.

The celebration was finished.

Hollow Creek had gone to sleep.

Emily pulled her wool coat tighter around herself and started down Elm Street.

Behind her, the Murray house disappeared into darkness.

Ahead, the road sloped gently toward the oldest part of town.

And Hollow Creek Cemetery.

Emily slowed.

During the day, there was nothing frightening about the place.

Families walked through it on Sunday afternoons. Schoolchildren copied names from old gravestones for history assignments. Some townspeople even used the path through the cemetery as a shortcut to Main Street.

But after midnight on Halloween, the wrought-iron fence looked different.

So did the trees.

So did everything.

A gust of wind swept along the road and sent dry leaves scratching across the pavement behind her.

Emily turned.

Nothing.

She smiled at herself.

“Don’t be foolish,” she whispered.

Her voice carried farther than she expected.

The sound of it in the empty street bothered her.

She walked on.

Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked.

Once.

Emily stopped.

There were dogs all over Hollow Creek.

A barking dog should have meant nothing.

But the sound pulled an old memory from somewhere she had thought long forgotten.

Margaret Bell.

Emily's cousin Mason had told her the story years earlier at their grandparents' cabin.

He had been fourteen.

Emily had been eleven.

Mason had held a flashlight beneath his chin and lowered his voice until one of the adults finally told him to quit frightening her.

According to the story, Margaret Bell had been walking home beside Hollow Creek Cemetery late one autumn night when she heard a dog barking somewhere beyond the graves.

Then another.

Then a third.

Emily could still see Mason leaning toward her.

"You don't worry about the first dog," he had whispered.

Emily had rolled her eyes.

“It’s the second one you listen for.”

She shook the memory away.

“Ridiculous,” she muttered.

The cemetery fence began beside her.

Black iron bars rose from the earth.

Beyond them, rows of pale gravestones faded into darkness.

The moon disappeared behind fast-moving clouds.

Another dog barked.

This one sounded farther away.

Emily told herself it was probably someone’s farm dog.

Nothing more.

Then she heard another sound.

An automobile.

She glanced behind her.

Two headlights appeared at the crest of Elm Street.

Far away.

Perhaps a block and a half behind her.

Emily relaxed.

Another person.

Someone from town.

Probably returning home after a Halloween gathering.

She kept walking.

The automobile came slowly down the hill.

At that distance, Emily could see only the headlights. Darkness swallowed the body of the car.

She expected it to catch up and pass her.

It did not.

The automobile remained well behind.

A hundred and fifty yards.

Perhaps two hundred.

Emily frowned.

She walked another half block.

The headlights stayed almost exactly the same distance away.

She slowed.

The car slowed.

Emily stopped.

The headlights stopped.

For several seconds neither she nor the automobile moved.

Emily stared back.

A small knot formed in her stomach.

“That’s strange,” she whispered.

She started walking again.

A few moments later, the automobile moved too.

Emily glanced over her shoulder.

She still could not make out its shape.

Only two bright circles of light and the vague black outline of a vehicle behind them.

Someone was deliberately keeping their distance.

That bothered her more than if the automobile had simply driven past.

A dog barked somewhere beyond the cemetery.

Another answered from across town.

Emily remembered more of Mason's story.

When the dogs begin answering one another, Margaret is walking again.

"Stop it," Emily muttered.

She meant the words for herself.

For Mason.

For the story.

For the part of her imagination that had suddenly decided to believe every foolish thing she had ever heard.

The wind rose.

Bare branches scraped together above the cemetery.

The distant headlights remained behind her.

Never close enough to identify.

Never far enough to disappear.

For the first time that night, Emily wished she had accepted her mother's offer to come for her.

The thought annoyed her.

This was Hollow Creek.

People walked home at night all the time.

Nothing happened here.

Another gust moved through the cemetery.

Something rattled against the iron fence.

Emily jumped.

A loose strand of wire tapped against one of the bars.

She exhaled.

"You're doing this to yourself," she whispered.

Ahead stood the main cemetery gate.

Two stone pillars rose on either side.

The words **HOLLOW CREEK CEMETERY** had been carved into one of them.

Emily kept her eyes forward.

Then another piece of Mason's ridiculous folklore surfaced.

Never look through the gate after midnight.

She almost laughed.

Naturally, the warning made her want to look.

"Don't," she whispered.

She took three more steps.

Stopped.

And looked.

Rows of gravestones.

Trees.

Shadows.

Nothing more.

Emily smiled.

“See?”

Something pale moved between two monuments.

Her smile vanished.

Emily froze.

Far inside the cemetery, a white shape shifted behind one of the stones.

Then moved again.

Her heart began to pound.

The shape seemed to rise.

Then drift sideways.

Emily backed toward the road.

The moon emerged from behind a cloud.

Light spilled across the cemetery.

The apparition became a white sheet caught in a bush.

Probably part of someone's Halloween decorations that had blown loose.

Emily closed her eyes.

"Wonderful," she murmured.

She shook her head.

"You nearly ran from a bedsheet."

A nervous laugh escaped her.

For a moment, it helped.

Then she heard an automobile door close behind her.

Emily turned.

The headlights had stopped nearly a block away.

A dark figure stood beside the car.

At that distance, she could not see his face.

Only the shape of a man beneath a streetlamp.

He called toward her.

"Emily?"

Her breath caught.

He knew her name.

She took a step backward.

The man called again.

"Emily, wait."

Her imagination made the decision before reason had a chance.

Emily ran.

Her shoes struck the pavement hard as she hurried along Elm Street.

Behind her, the man called again.

She did not stop.

Dogs began barking.

One.

Then another.

Then another.

Emily's heart hammered.

Mason's voice returned from childhood.

Three dogs.

Three warnings.

And after the third—

Margaret walks beside you.

“Shut up, Mason,” Emily whispered breathlessly.

She hurried faster.

The cemetery fence seemed endless.

Wind chased dead leaves around her shoes.

Then she heard something else.

Footsteps.

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Someone was walking behind her.

Emily stopped.

The sound stopped.

She stood perfectly still.

Her breathing seemed impossibly loud.

Slowly, she turned.

The sidewalk was empty.

The automobile remained far down the street.

The man had not followed her.

He was still standing beside the car.

Emily stared.

Then he called again.

“Emily Hart! Your mother asked me to make sure you got home safely.”

She froze.

That voice.

She knew it.

Constable Peter Walsh.

The local police officer.

Relief washed through her so quickly that her knees nearly weakened.

Walsh began walking toward her.

Only when he passed beneath the next streetlamp could Emily see the familiar uniform beneath his dark overcoat.

She put one hand against her chest.

“You frightened me half to death!”

Walsh stopped.

“I was trying not to frighten you.”

“You were following me.”

“I was keeping an eye on you.”

“From halfway across town?”

A smile appeared beneath the brim of his hat.

“I figured if I drove up beside you after midnight, you might wonder why some strange man was creeping along next to you.”

Emily stared at him.

“That plan did not work.”

Walsh laughed.

“No. I suppose it didn’t.”

He motioned toward the car.

“Want a ride home?”

“Yes.”

The answer came so quickly that Walsh laughed again.

They walked back to the automobile.

Once Emily was close enough to see it properly, she recognized the police car immediately.

She climbed inside.

The warmth felt wonderful.

Walsh pulled away from the curb.

“Your mother telephoned the station,” he explained. “She knew I was doing rounds tonight.”

Emily groaned.

“She actually called the police?”

“She asked whether I happened to be nearby.”

“And you happened to be nearby.”

“Exactly.”

Emily looked through the window toward the cemetery.

The dogs had stopped barking.

The gravestones passed quietly beyond the iron fence.

Everything looked ordinary again.

Almost disappointingly ordinary.

Emily glanced at Walsh.

“Do people still tell the Margaret Bell story?”

Walsh smiled.

“Every Halloween.”

“Was she real?”

“Oh yes.”

Emily sat straighter.

“She disappeared?”

“No.”

Emily blinked.

“Oh.”

“She moved to Winnipeg.”

Emily turned toward him.

“What?”

“According to town records, Margaret Bell married a railway clerk and moved west sometime around 1904.”

Emily stared.

“That is a terrible ending.”

“It’s a terrible ghost story.”

“What about the dogs?”

“There used to be a farm behind the cemetery. Fellow raised hunting dogs.”

Emily shook her head slowly.

“So the terrifying legend of Hollow Creek is about a woman who moved to Winnipeg and some farm dogs?”

“That appears to be the truth.”

Emily laughed.

The last of the tension left her shoulders.

Every strange thing that had happened now had an explanation.

The dogs.

The automobile.

The white figure.

The wind.

Her imagination.

Nothing supernatural had happened.

Nothing dangerous had happened.

Because this was Hollow Creek.

Safe, quiet Hollow Creek.

Walsh stopped outside Emily's house.

Her mother had left the porch light burning.

Emily opened the passenger door.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She stepped onto the road.

Walsh leaned across the seat.

"Emily?"

She turned.

"Next Halloween, let your mother come get you."

Emily smiled.

"I think I might."

The police car drove away.

Emily watched the taillights disappear around the corner.

Then she climbed the front steps.

Something lay beside the door.

She stopped.

A small round object rested near the edge of the porch.

Emily bent down.

It was an old brass dog tag.

Heavy.

Cold.

Green with age.

She frowned.

Perhaps it had been there earlier.

Maybe one of the trick-or-treaters had dropped it.

Emily picked it up.

One side was blank.

She turned it over.

Two characters had been engraved into the metal.

M. BELL

Emily stopped breathing.

She stared at the name.

A dog barked somewhere toward the cemetery.

One bark.

Then silence.

Emily slowly looked toward the empty street.

Nothing moved.

Another dog answered.

Farther away.

Her fingers tightened around the tag.

“No,” she whispered.

She reached for the front door.

Then, from somewhere very close behind her—

a third dog barked.

Emily froze.

Every instinct told her to turn around.

She did not.

She opened the door.

Stepped inside.

Closed it.

Locked it.

And only then began breathing again.

Outside, Hollow Creek remained exactly what everyone believed it to be.

Quiet.

Friendly.

Safe.

At least during the day.