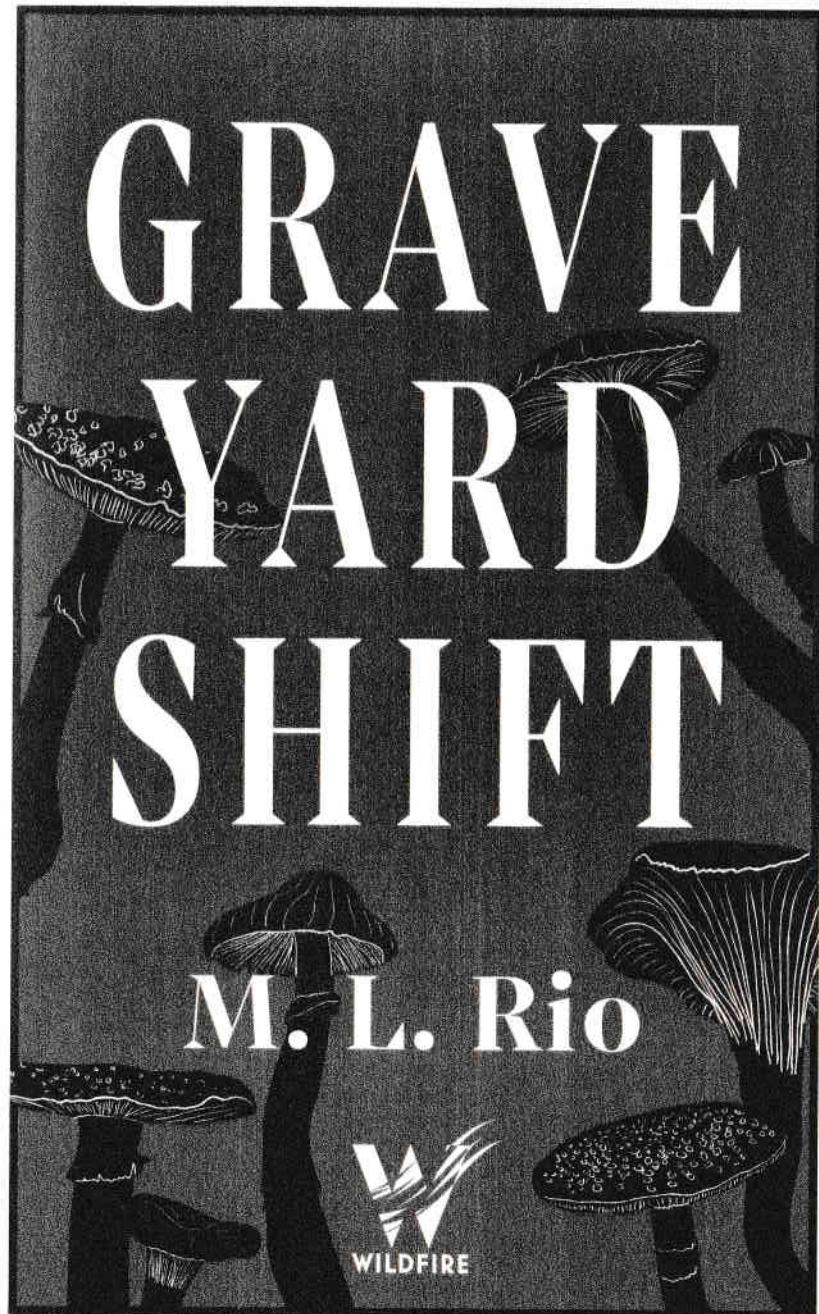


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**BY M. L. RIO**

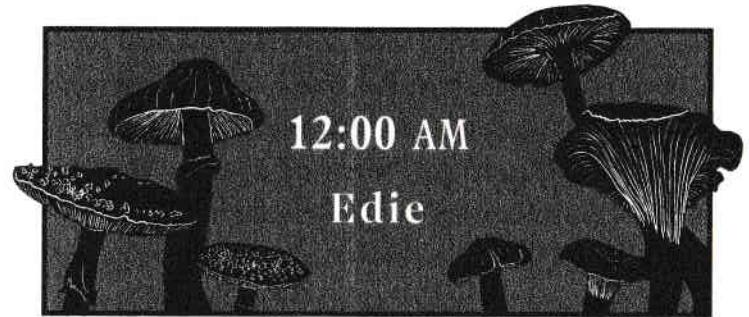
*If We Were Villains*  
*Graveyard Shift*  
*Hot Wax*



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# GRAVEYARD SHIFT



They met in the cemetery every night at midnight. Not on purpose, exactly, but not quite by accident either. University policy prohibited smoking within a hundred feet of any campus building, and on the west side of campus, where the borders between the medical school and the broader community were especially porous, the only place a person gasping for a cigarette could safely stand was in the unkempt graveyard behind the Church of Saint Anthony the Anchorite.

Most of the names on most of the gravestones had been scrubbed out by time or teenage vandals; the church itself had been boarded up and was so overgrown with vines and moss and mold that the DANGER, KEEP OUT sign nailed across the doors was decidedly redundant. Since its

designation as a local historic landmark, it was protected from the bulldozers and wrecking balls that had razed everything else south of Azalea Street to make way for more patients, more parking, more gift shops and dining halls. While the medical school constructed, Saint Anthony the Anchorite *deconstructed*—one brick, one beam at a time. Nobody in their right mind would loiter in its long shadow in the middle of the night, but nobody in their right mind still smoked these days anyway.

So Edie Wu told herself as she trudged across campus from the offices of the *Belltower Times*. She was always the last to clock out—her grim duty as editor-in-chief to lash herself to the masthead, go down with the ship—but lately she didn't clock out so much as take five. Take a break. Take a walk. Tell herself one cigarette a night was not a habit, just a way to take the edge off when she was, well, *on edge*. And when was she not? Yes, it was a student paper, but a six-time Pacemaker Award-winning student paper circulating to ten thousand readers. Her predecessor had graduated and gone on to the *Nation* but still cast a long shadow across Edie's desk. Some nights she wished for catastrophe to strike just so she'd have a big story to break, which only made her feel worse in the morning, because she still had no story, but she did have a fresh black bruise on her conscience.

The bigger problem was The Lump. Since its first appearance two weeks ago, everything had felt hugely, horribly urgent. She pulled her coat a little closer and hurried

toward the ramshackle shadow of the Anchorite, a rock-bound black mass rudely eclipsing the sickly sickle moon.

She was huffing and puffing by the time she crested the hill and slipped through the gate, which refused to stay latched anymore. Like the **KEEP OUT** sign, the gate was redundant. Nobody *wanted* to huddle in a moldering churchyard after midnight because there was nowhere else to smoke. But huddle they did. Misery loved company and made strange bedfellows.

Two of the others had beaten her there. She knew them by their shadows: Tuck, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched, was always first. Beside him stood Hannah, who put her hood up at the first rustle of autumn and didn't take it down again until May. Oddly, though, they weren't talking. They stared down at the ground in stony imitation of the graveyard angels, without the blank unblinking eyes or patchy beards of lichen. When they heard Edie's footsteps round the Drewalt obelisk, they looked up and she looked down and realized that what they were actually staring at was a hole in the ground.

Edie stared, too. "The fuck is that?"

Hannah took a long drag. "The fuck do you think?" The hood cast her narrow face in shadow, blacked out both her eyes. Of the other Anchorites, Edie liked her least. She turned to Tuck instead, already fumbling to light his second smoke.

"Don't look at me," he said. "I don't know anything."

"It wasn't here last night," Edie said.

"Duh." Hannah let her mouth hang open, smoke spilling out. She lifted one foot and knocked the peak off the little mountain of dirt at the edge of the hole. Edie peered down into the darkness. Hairy, gnarled roots poked out of damp earth cobwebbed with white threads of mycelia.

"Who was the last to leave?"

"Ask the rector." Hannah steepled her hands in a mockery of prayer and bowed toward Tuck. He pinched the cigarette against his lips.

"Me," he said. Not actually a rector in any official capacity, but he might as well have been. Always the first to arrive, always the last to leave. Edie sometimes wondered what he was avoiding. She had trouble checking the impulse to pry into everything. The Lump throbbed reproachfully. It did that now, when her journalistic ambitions got the better of her. She knew she was probably imagining it, but that—like the many statistics arguing in favor of its being entirely benign—did not comfort her much.

"Did you see anything weird?"

"Is this your first time here?" Hannah said. "Everything about this place is weird."

The Anchorite did seem oddly lost in time and space. It had stood on the same spot for two hundred years while the town and the college exploded around it. On one side, a parking garage cast a murky orange light, as if the night outside had oxidized. Glaring red letters spelled out EMERGENCY in the black sky southward. The west wall opened into an

alley behind the Calhoun Center for Behavioral Psychiatry, and the north wall followed a narrow road that eventually crossed paths with the modest nightlife flitting up and down Azalea Street. The light of the streetlamps encroached only so far, held at bay by a wall of ivy that had filled in the gaps between the bars of the fence. Within its crooked boundaries, angels wept elegantly over headstones while swinish gargoyles grinned and leered from their perches on either side of the church doors. Weeds grew without restraint. An oak tree even older than the church squatted in one corner, dropping acorns and orange leaves every October until the branches were bare and jack-o'-lantern mushrooms took up residence among the roots. Some had sprouted already, glowing eerily in the dark.

"I mean did you see anything man-made weird," Edie said. The hole clearly wasn't the work of an animal—the lines and angles too regular for paws and claws. "Tuck?"

He shook his head. "Nothing weirder than usual," he said. "No . . . hole."

Nobody wanted to call it what it obviously was, including Edie. She tugged her own pack of smokes from her pocket and struggled to get one lit. A cold breeze nipped at the tip of her nose and blew the flame out every time she spun the spark wheel.

"Here." Tuck opened his coat to offer temporary shelter from the elements.

"Thanks." She inhaled, exhaled, watched the smoke unfurl. "So, what do we do?"

"Do?" Tuck looked from her to Hannah. "Who says we have to do anything?"

"Do anything about what?"

They turned together toward the Drewalt obelisk, less startled than they might have been because they knew the voice.

"Tamar," Edie said, and breathed a little easier. Tamar was the oldest of the Anchorites, a sobering presence to counterbalance Tuck's twitchy agitation, Hannah's extravagant indifference.

"Hey," she said, emerging slowly from under the oak, cheeks dewy from her walk across campus from the Health Sciences Library. "How's ev— What's with the hole?"

"The very conundrum we were just contemplating," Hannah said, with a wry little smile.

Tamar looked her way, but Hannah only inhaled, exhaled, in Holmesian condescension. "Maybe there's a funeral this weekend," Tamar said, with a sigh, resigned to playing Watson for the moment. "Don't they dig beforehand if the ground is hard?"

Tuck shook his head. "Nobody's been buried here in a hundred years."

"And wouldn't you need a backhoe for that?" Edie asked. "I don't think they dig the old-fashioned way anymore."

"Maybe they do if they're trying to keep it real quiet," Hannah said, with ghoulish gravitas.

"Or," said Tamar, cooler head prevailing, "maybe somebody's just been disinterred."

"What for?" Tuck asked.

She shrugged. "Historical interest, maybe. It's an old church."

"Or dissection," Hannah suggested. "Don't they work on cadavers at the med school?"

"Yeah," Edie said. It was one of the few schools in the county to let premed students work on human bodies—a point of some controversy in her first year muckraking for the *Times*. Certain parents seemed to think it grotesque. "But I think they prefer them to be, uh, *fresh*."

Hannah flicked her first butt into the hole. They all leaned toward the center of the circle, watched it disappear. "Maybe," she said, "it's for somebody who's not dead yet."

"THE DARK LORD DEMANDS BLOOD SACRIFICE!"

Only Hannah was unsurprised. Tuck swore a blue streak; Tamar gasped and clutched her chest; Edie almost bit her tongue in half and dropped her cigarette in the dirt. She turned in fury toward the whispering oak. Theo Pavlopoulos came swashbuckling out of the shadows, but his laugh, like his name, preceded him—that deep, roguish chuckle that topped off every drink he poured at the Rocker Box Bar. *They hear his name and just start drooling*, or so the saying went. Wavy brown hair and black-coffee eyes, muscled like