

A cemetery scene in autumn. The ground is covered in fallen orange and yellow leaves. In the foreground, a large, dark, rectangular tombstone sits on a bed of leaves. To the left, a small pond reflects the sky and the surrounding trees. The background is filled with trees with vibrant autumn foliage. The sky is a mix of orange and blue, with a bright sunburst effect in the center. Numerous black silhouettes of birds are scattered across the sky, some in flight. The overall atmosphere is serene and slightly melancholic.

THE GRAVEYARD OF MAPLE HEIGHTS

CHAPTER 1



I stepped over the doorstep and entered my new home in Maple Heights. The house was dusty and somewhat old. I thought about my old home, my *much* better home, and spun around to argue with my mom for the thirty-ish time.

“For the last time, Becca, I’m not arguing with you about this. This move is good for your dad’s new job, and I’m sure you’ll find this town lovely. Besides... We all want a fresh start, a wipe of the slate. Especially after the *accident*,” my mom reminded me. She sighed. “Look, I know it’s not perfect, but it’s home.”

My mom rarely ever mentioned the accident, so I knew it was time to drop the matter.

“Now help me unpack,” my mom said. She tossed a cardboard box at me labeled *Kitchen Utilities*. It clunked to my feet, and I grabbed it and went deeper into the dusty and rotten-wood-smelling house. It was

slightly bigger, with two floors, and a large kitchen. I found it quickly and dropped the box on the counter. My dad was in there, running the tap water over his hands. I went over to him. Even the tap water looked musty dusty crusty.

“Got a long day ahead of us, Bec,” my dad said. “You should go out. Meet the neighbors. I know you like to explore. Did you know there’s a graveyard here, in this town? It’s been here since the 1940s!”

“Ugh, a graveyard. This house smells like rotten wood, too!” I complained.

“Yeah, because it’s old. Did you know this house was constructed in 1987?” My dad’s gray eyes gleamed with excitement behind his silver-rimmed glasses. He liked history. He was a history *teacher* at Maple Heights High School.

“Bor-ing,” I sighed, heading out of the kitchen.

“Say hi to the neighbors for me!” My dad called after me. “Check out the people in the graveyard!”

“Urgh... I’m okay,” I replied.

Outside, the day was sunny but icy cold, like a winter day, except it was October. My sneakers crunched on the dead grass of our lawn as I walked out. There was a skeleton tree on our lawn, and there were several large vans in front of the house with people unloading boxes.

My mom smiled at me as I walked past, her forehead peppered with sweat. “Going... to check out the graveyard, Bec?” she panted.

I nodded and began to walk on the sidewalk. I noticed that it was littered with trash and maple leaves. A chill crept up my spine, probably from the cold of the day. I soon got out of the neighborhood and began walking alongside the shops and road.

As I kept going, I saw the Maple Heights field on one side of the street and the graveyard on the other. I quickened my pace, but I didn't notice the gap in the street until it was too late - my foot hit the gap and I tripped, falling and landing on my butt.

I groaned, my gut sinking

Once I got to the graveyard, I saw a pair of keys lying on a rock next to it. Curious, I picked them up and compared each to the gate lock, finding the right one and unlocking it. The grass in the graveyard was certainly fresher than the grass on my lawn. It was freshly mowed and all the graves seemed surprisingly clean, with fresh flowers by some. I walked along the graves, getting to the back part, where I saw a beautiful willow tree, its yellow-orange leaves dipping into the water of the pond next to it. I went to the grave next to the pond and crouched by it. The grave seemed older, and rusted over, with grass reaching toward the top of the grave. The name on the grave was Magus Hemlock. 1942-2000. Loved father. Decaying flowers lay on the grave. The grave seemed impossibly ancient. I knelt and felt the dry soil of the grave.

“Fascinating, isn't it?”

I looked up, startled, to see a girl with pale features, white hair, and light green eyes. She smiled. She was dressed in a white dress and a sweater.

“I meant the grave. I'm Jade,” the girl introduced. “I go here a lot to see my mom.” Her eyes lowered and a deep look of sadness came over her face.

“I'm sorry,” I replied quietly. “I'm Becca, by the way. How did your mom die?”

“Car crash,” Jade said.

“My sister died in a car crash too,” I said, swallowing back the nerves and tension that threatened to come back, spilling over like they had *that* night. Images unleashed through my mind - a hospital room, the wailing of an alarm, the bright flashes of red and blue, and a car by the side of the road.

It was Jade’s turn to say, “I’m sorry. What was her name?”

I stood up to face her. “Her name was Beatrice.” Eager to change the subject, I said quickly, “Do you believe this graveyard’s haunted?” I immediately kicked myself for saying it. Of course, she wouldn’t think that.

“Wouldn’t put it past the graveyard.” Jade looked at me curiously. “You’re new here, right?”

“I just moved in,” I said, then, with a smile, “Is it that obvious?”

“Cool, cool,” Jade nodded. Her piercing eyes landed on the grave again, and a slightly distant, worried expression crossed her face.

“A *haunted* graveyard?” scoffed my mom, her face wet with perspiration as she dropped the last box on my newly installed bed. “Sounds like quite the adventure you had, dear.”

“Everyone acts weird in this town,” I said.

“Now, let’s not get judgemental, Becca. Remember what Dad always says -”

“Don’t judge a book by its cover, blah blah blah,” I said flatly.

“Listen, Bec, this ‘Jade’ kid sounds kinda sketchy,” my mom panted as she practically ripped the box open.

“Plus, I mean, haunted graveyards and strange kids ‘popping out of nowhere,’ as you put it? Quite the town we have here.”

“The old one was better,” I said in a quiet voice as I helped her unload things.

My mom looked at me with searching gray eyes. “I know you have a hard time adjusting, but I’m sure you’ll make many friends, and you’ll love your new school.”

“That’s what they all say,” I said sarcastically.

She went on to gush about Maple Heights Middle - my cue to tune out all her reminders, like ‘study hard!’ and ‘don’t want to waste my money on your Cs and Ds’ and ‘this life is expensive, Becca!’

We had a quick, small dinner in the new kitchen, with my parents discussing work and me poking gloomily at my food and imagining what I would do the next day.

CHAPTER 2



I got up at seven.

SEVEN!

(Don't worry, it was only so that I could get some of Mom's delicious chocolate pancakes. Otherwise, I'd wake up at 10.)

"You're early," my mom said with a smile as I padded into the kitchen in huge, fluffy socks, baggy sweatpants, and a shirt, looking disheveled and tired.

"You should get up early every day."

"You wish," I said as I helped myself to a more than healthy generous serving of pancakes. I practically

slurped the stuff down, my taste buds singing. Outside the window, the birds were chirping and fog had misted the windows, although the sun shone still. “Me and your dad have to leave early today for work. Your dad’s already left,” my mom said as she bustled around. “You have school in a week, remember. You have to get your supplies.”

“I don’t like going to school late,” I grouched as my mom tossed me a hundred-dollar bill. My eyes lit up as soon as I got the money. “Never mind!”

The town was sleepy and quiet as I walked to the nearest shopping mart. I found a stationery store and went in, the door swinging open as I pushed it. To my surprise, Jade was leaning against the counter, talking to a lady with a strict but kind face, with sharp features and gray eyes.

She turned around as I entered the store.

“Hi, Becca!” Jade greeted. Her eyes narrowed. “Did... ahem... anything happen, last night? After you left?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “Um... nothing happened last night. I had dinner?”

“Nevermind.” Jade said. “Sorry. Oh! This is Alice. Alice, meet Becca.”

“Hi,” I said, smiling.

“Hi, Becca! I’m the owner of this shop. I’m also Jade’s

close friend. I've looked after her ever since her mom died. "Anyway... are you looking for anything?" Alice asked. She seemed like a kind person, with a good heart.

"Yeah, actually. I need school supplies," I said, looking around at the little but cute shop, with stuffed pumpkins everywhere and a whole candy shelf.

"A little late for that, isn't it?" Alice asked as she walked over and gestured for me to follow. "But, you're in luck. We still have some."

"Got my supplies from here as well," Jade chirped as she watched us.

"Yes, well, not a lot of places to go," Alice said. She pointed at an aisle full of what seemed to be papers, notebooks, pens, pencils, and binders. I went in, taking out the paper list I had taken.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Don't you know? We're the only stationery shop around. Nowhere else to get supplies, really. The only other place, Holman's, has closed. Apparently, the owner went missing."

A chill went up my spine. I looked around at Alice as I fiddled with a white binder. She was gazing into the distance, eyes clouded over.

"Hey, Alice?"

Jade was looking curiously at a simple, small black book with a leather cover. It sat on the checkout desk, abandoned. From where I could see it, it seemed old and rumpled.

“What’s this?”

Jade turned it over curiously, looking at it. Alice bustled over quickly, reaching out to take it from her. “Magnolia Hemlock? Magus's sister? She’s the author of this book, Alice?” Jade's voice was growing louder, and she looked at Alice with a penetrating, searching stare.

I stopped picking out a notebook and instead went over to Jade, looking down at the small, innocent book.

“Yes, she’s the author. Magnolia always loved herbs and plants... you’ll find this little journal of hers is all about plants. Magnolia’s Little Journal Of Poison Plants, you might say,” Alice said with a smile. “She was quite the kind soul, too, Magnolia. Shame, she ingested nightshade. Apparently, it was a gift, disguised as a harmless berry.”

“That’s terrible,” I said quietly. Jade nodded in agreement.

“Yes, she was buried here, right in our little town,” Alice went on. “I can show you her grave, if you’d like?” Both Jade and I nodded eagerly. Alice smiled, walking over to the entrance. Her eyes landed on the shelf of supplies, and she said quickly, “I can get the rest of your supplies mailed to your house maybe around tomorrow,”

“Thanks a bunch,” I said, grinning.

“Now, come along,” Alice beckoned, and we followed her out to the door to the graveyard.

CHAPTER 3



When we got to the gates, Alice rummaged around in her pocket for a set of keys, frowning as she came up empty.

“I’m sorry, kids, I think I lost my keys.” Jade groaned at these words, already about to turn back.

“There’s no need,” I said, remembering the keys I had found at the gates yesterday with an odd feeling. “I have a pair.”

I produced the keys from my pocket with a proud smile, and Alice frowned at them. “Where’d you get those?” she asked suspiciously.

My smile faded. “Found them here yesterday,” I said cautiously. “They were just lying on the rock there.” I blinked as I realized there was no longer any rock sitting at the gates.

Alice shrugged, taking the keys from me and unlocking the gates. We all entered.

“Jade’s told me you saw Magus’s grave yesterday,” Alice said. “You’ll find Magnolia’s is a little more... decorated.”

Suddenly, Alice's phone rang in her pocket. She took it out. “Sorry, kids. I have to take this call.” She moved away, talking to the person on the other end.

When Alice came back, she looked upset. “We’ll have to continue this tonight. I have an important work call. Sorry, Becca.”

“It’s alright,” I said.

We left the graveyard quietly. As the gate swung shut behind us, a chilling laugh rang out, and the graveyard seemed alive for a moment, the wind rustling hard through the trees.

Then all was still again, and the only sound that could be heard was the cawing of the birds.

That night, I scarfed down dinner, eager to visit the graveyard with Alice and Jade. Jade had told me to go to the graveyard at 11 PM exactly, slipping me a note in the mail. My parents hadn't exactly agreed... but they didn't need to know.

"Night," I said, already rushing up the stairs.

In my bedroom, I closed the door and put a pillow under the blankets to make it look like I was fast asleep in the blankets. I went to the window and unlatched it, opening it wide. I could already see the silhouette of a person waiting down below.

Excitement pumping through me, I quickly climbed out of the window, scaling the side of the house like a freaking ninja, the constant reminder of *don't die* running through my head and keeping me stable. I

inhaled and exhaled as my foot found a footing, avoiding all the windows so my parents couldn't see me. Finally, I jumped and rolled onto the lawn, exhaling deeply. The hard part was over.

Jade was hiding behind the skeleton tree on the lawn, her white hair glimmering in the moonlight. A relieved smile spread over her face as she saw me. "Come on!" she said excitedly, grabbing my hand. I followed her with a growing sense of unease.

Once Jade and I had run to the graveyard, the cold, fresh night air seeping into my lungs and chilling my skin, Alice had already unlocked the gates and was waiting by Magus's grave. She smiled as she saw us. "Good to see that you made it," she said, and her voice seemed strange, deeper even, her eyes glittering..

"Yeah," I said, bouncing on my toes. "OK, what was so important about Magnolia Hemlock's grave that you absolutely had to sneak me out at 11 PM?"

Alice smiled, a devious look that suddenly made me feel uncomfortable. "Well... who ever taught you to sneak out at nighttime for a stranger you just met?" A wicked glint in her eyes shone, and a cruel look filled her features. "The graveyard comes alive at night... and you're it's next victim."

"What do you mean?" I said, horror chilling me. This can't be happening, I thought.

"You'll see," Alice said. We both looked at Jade at the same time. Jade's eyes were glowing red, and a blank look filled her eyes. Alice grabbed her wrist, and the two of them disappeared into thin air, almost as if they had never been there at all. I blinked.

I quickly ran to the gates, rattling them furiously, but they were locked. Desperately, I ran a plan over in my mind. I looked around at the suddenly still and unnerving graveyard. It seemed so large, so quiet. Then a crow cawed loudly.

The moon shone its light onto the graveyard as the ground started to rumble. Suddenly, the branches of the trees seemed much more sinister, and while the dark graves appeared harmless, I knew something, or rather, *someone* could be waiting to grab me by the ankles.

“Hello?” I called out, my voice shaky. The only response was children’s laughter, a normally innocent sound that chilled me to the bones. I stepped toward the closest grave tentatively. From the soil, I saw the bony fingers of a hand reach out and clench around the dirt, trying to find a solid grasp. I shrieked and jumped away.

A voice murmured in my ear, “The key is where it always will be.”

I spun around, but there was no one there. Seeing more hands emerging from the soil of each silent grave, I knew it was time for action. I ran to the gates, remembering the first time I had gone to the graveyard and seen the key to the gate on the rock outside.

Sure enough, the key was still there. I reached a hand out through a crevice in the gate, my fingers scrabbling at the metal of the gate. Looking behind me, I saw a dark figure lunge at me. Someone started screaming. I realized faintly that was me.

My fingers clenched around air.

Well, I guess this is the end, I thought numbly as darkness overtook my vision.

“Bec.... Becca! BECCA!”

My eyes flew open and I sat up, blinking furiously. I was lying on the bed in our new house. My mom was looking at me, obviously concerned.

“Are you okay?” my mom asked. “It looked like you were having a nightmare.”

The fresh, cold feeling of the graveyard (nightmare?) still echoed in my bones. Immense relief rushed into my system. If that was the easy answer, I didn’t care, I was believing it.

“What... what happened?”

“You fell asleep on the long drive here,” my mom said. “You seemed really out of it.” She smiled. “When you’re ready, help me and your dad unpack, okay?” As I got out of bed, out the window, across the street, one block over, the graveyard gates violently shook and a skeleton hand curled around the gate.

THE END

