

GRAVEYARD GLADIATORS





For Alfie

First published in the UK in 2026 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House,
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England. usborne.com

Usborne Verlag, Usborne Publishing Ltd., Prüfeninger Str. 20, 93049 Regensburg,
Deutschland VK Nr. 17560

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 9781836045052 10287/1 JFMAMJJA OND/26

Printed and bound using 100% renewable energy at CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.



GRAVEYARD GLADIATORS

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GRAVEYARD GLADIATORS

MEET YOUR FIGHTERS!



JUDE JONES

**POSIE,
THE RAGING
RAPTOR**



**MICKEY,
ZOMBIE TRAINER**

**ROSE
BUSHWHACKER**



MR FLUFFY-BOTTOM

SKULK



COUNT TANKENSTEIN

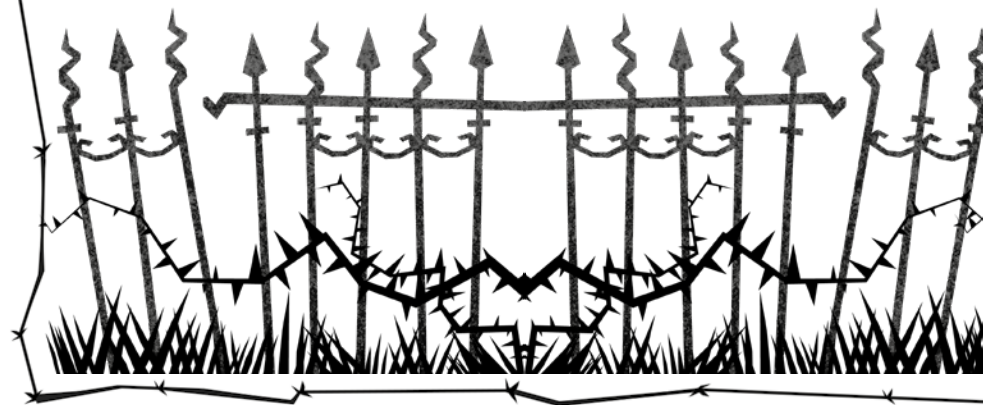
**WAYNE,
THE ZOMBIE STUDENT**



ZOMBIE CHICKEN



A HEAP OF SHEEP



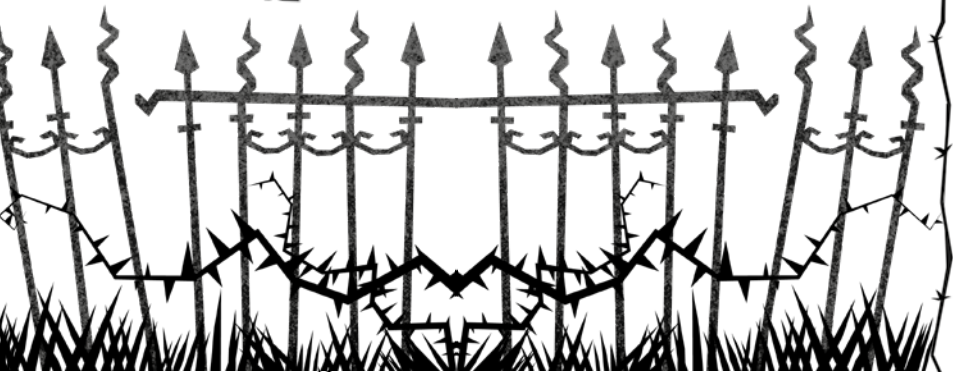
LOVE BUG



KNUCKLEDRAGGER



**THE KNIGHTS OF THE
NEIGHBOURHOOD
WATCH**





CHAPTER ONE

ALL MY NEIGHBOURS ARE DEAD

The back garden was full of dead people.

Jude Jones had a lot of doubts about his new house. The shabby bungalow was clapped together from creaky wooden boards, rusty nails and a healthy dose of hope. Daylight peeped through gaps in the damp and peeling walls. The poky rooms felt punishingly cold despite the summer heat outside.

But the worst thing, the *very worst* thing about the new house, was that it sat inside a graveyard.

Jude leaned on the wonky windowsill of his new bedroom. Only a bristling band of overgrown grass separated the house from a rolling sea of headstones and crumbling crosses. A roughly carved angel stared at his



window with blank eyes crying tears of dirt.

“They did say the house has character.”

Jude’s dad appeared in the doorway. He wore his familiar moving-day clothes of ripped jeans and a faded *Necromancer’s Sandwich* band T-shirt. Dad also wore his signature brave face: a fragile smile designed to hide the worry behind his eyes.

“Did they mention that our neighbours are quiet and peaceful?” Jude smiled. “You might even say *dead* quiet.”

Dad grinned back gratefully.

Jude returned his gaze to the graveyard. Yes, living right beside a few thousand dead people was hardly ideal. But it also meant they were close to nature. The air smelled clean and fresh. The nearby village was surrounded by countryside to explore. Plus the house came free with a high-paying job for his dad.

Jude knew how to make the best of a bad situation and this was really only a *slightly iffy* situation. Over the last few years they had lived in six or seven different places. Nowhere else had lasted more than a few months. A job would fall through or a house would fall apart – literally. Bad luck seemed to follow them everywhere.

This was a fresh opportunity to turn all that around. Jude was determined to take it.

“Should we go and see the village before it gets dark?” he



suggested. “We can unpack later.”

“Good idea,” Dad said. “I can find where I’ll be reporting for work tomorrow. They told me just to turn up on the day, but I’d rather be prepared.”

Their house was a mile or so outside the village, along a narrow dirt track. The graveyard ran alongside for a while, penned behind a tall iron fence topped with fierce spikes. Insects buzzed in the undergrowth and birds sang in the gnarled branches of trees lining the path.

“That sounds like a Eurasian blue tit!” Jude said excitedly, straining his neck to catch a glimpse of the bird.

Dad cocked an eyebrow. “How do you know what a Eurasian blue tit sounds like?”

“Research. I thought I should know about the countryside before we moved here.” Another bird trilled overhead. “Oh, that sounds like a chaffinch!”

An enormous **THUD** rumbled across the graveyard, followed by what sounded distinctly like a roar. The birds took off from the trees and flittered away, plunging the path into silence.

“What kind of bird was that?” Dad asked.

“Maybe one we don’t know about yet.”

They started walking a little faster.

A dense tree tunnel covered the rest of the path, shutting out the light as they finally left the graveyard behind. The



sun dazzled them when they emerged from the other side.

When his vision cleared, Jude saw the village ahead of them. A dirty road sign read:

WELCOME TO BLACKHINGE

The centre of the village was little more than a short row of squat, grey-stone shops with thatched roofs and walls covered in ivy. On one side stood a wood-timbered pub called The Hidden Hand, its leaded windows blacked-out, stone gargoyles sneering down from the roof. Opposite was a post office and a tiny village shop. The slope beyond trailed up to a small, square church.

A trio of men in wax jackets and flat caps stood outside the pub in a pungent cloud of pipe smoke. A couple of ladies chatted animatedly outside the shop. Beside them, a younger girl in denim dungarees tapped one boot on the ground in frustrated boredom. She brushed a frizz of hacked-short blond hair off her forehead as she briefly met Jude's eye. A strange expression crossed her face – half pained and half angry – before she pointedly looked away.

“Good morning!” Dad called to nobody in particular.

Silence fell as everybody turned to stare at them with looks that could have curdled curry.

“We're new here,” Dad persisted, smile now bordering on a grimace. “Up at the house by the graveyard.”

Everybody took a step backwards. A shadow seemed to



pass briefly over the sun. Only the girl stood her ground.

Jude scanned the hostile crowd. Maybe they should have made more effort to be presentable. He still wore his grimy moving-day T-shirt and torn jeans, his dark mop of hair sitting messy on his shoulders.

Still, now that he looked more closely, Jude realized there was no way they could have dressed like the locals. Wooden crucifixes and stakes poked out from wax jackets and wellington boots. Small vials of water hung around necks. Strings of pungent garlic were slung over shoulders like sashes. One elderly woman wore a vest of chain mail over her bright floral dress.

"They don't seem very pleased to see us," Jude whispered. He looked to the girl, hoping he might find support there, but disappointment fluttered in his belly when she still refused to meet his eye.

"It's a small place. They probably just need to get used to our faces." Dad fired up his smile again. "Can anybody point us towards the office of Paul Bearer and Sons?"

After a long, icy moment, a man with thick sideburns and a stubbly jaw lifted a finger to point along the road.

Jude felt the eyes of the locals on his back as they walked to the end of the street. Only when they turned off into a side alley did he gasp a sigh of relief.

"Tough crowd," he said.



Dad took a scrap of paper from his pocket and read the address of his new job. They followed the alley, stepping over bulging bin bags and grimy puddles. Crumbling brickwork squeezed close on both sides, the long windowless walls of buildings designed to hold cattle.

Finally, right at the end, they arrived at a battered wooden door sealed by chain and padlock.

Dad checked the address again. "This is supposed to be it."

Jude pressed an eye to a hole in the door. On the other side was nothing but an empty concrete room.

Doubt gripped the bars of his ribcage and shook. Where was the amazing job that had brought them to Blackhinge?

"There must be a mistake," Jude said, trying to reassure himself. "What's your new job again?"

"Senior Diversionary Fodder and Shielding Specialist," Dad recited.

"And what exactly does that mean?"

"Well, it's..." Dad's brave-face smile appeared more fragile than ever. "It was too good to turn down."

They both studied the dilapidated building for a long moment. A profound sense of *wrongness* hollowed out Jude's stomach. He stamped his feet to shake it away.

"It's probably some sort of joke," he said brightly.

"Maybe." Dad screwed the paper into a ball. "Let's go back and ask someone."



Not much time had passed, but it seemed the locals had been busy. Thick metal bars had been fitted over the village shop window. Heavy shutters had been lowered over the post office, and strange swirling patterns and pointed symbols were being smeared on the metal in bright red paint. Wooden picnic benches had been flipped onto their sides in front of The Hidden Hand pub, stakes fitted to them to form a barricade.

People had formed a line. The woman in chain mail and the man with sideburns were handing out pitchforks, torches ready to be set aflame and the occasional axe.

Jude could no longer ignore it. Something was very wrong here indeed.





CHAPTER TWO

HOME BEFORE DARK

It felt like they had stumbled upon a ritual they were not supposed to see. Yet the sharing of weapons continued like it was the most normal thing in the world.

The sky was turning pink behind the nearby church. Shadows lengthened.

“Maaaybe we should just go home,” Jude suggested.

Dad shook his head. He could be stubborn about admitting defeat. “Wait here while I ask.”

Standing alone on the street of Blackhinge made Jude feel strangely exposed. Locals kept snatching looks at him and whispering to their companions. Weapons were gripped a little more tightly.

Voices by the village shop caught Jude’s attention: a



woman furiously negotiating last-minute supplies. She wore pristine wellington boots and a slim-cut tweed coat that seemed to hamper her arms as she waved them vigorously in the air. Her daughter, in denim dungarees, was still stuck waiting impatiently nearby.

There were two reasons to approach the girl. Firstly, it might give him a chance to find out what was going on around here. Secondly, Jude had never had much chance to make friends in the other places they had lived, and he rather liked the idea of having one.

He walked over before he could change his mind.

“Hello,” he said, considering a handshake before deciding against it. “My name is Jude Jones.”

The girl shifted uncomfortably. She was a head shorter than him but her stocky build, combined with how she held her fists to her hips and jutted out her elbows, made her seem much larger. “I’m Posie Hogan.”

“Me and my dad are new here.” Jude barrelled ahead, pleased somebody was actually speaking to him. “Have we come at a bad time?”

Across the street, Dad circled the locals, peppering them with questions that they huddled close to ignore.

“Mummy said I shouldn’t speak to you.” Posie’s voice was clipped. Proper. Jude imagined she might own a horse. She glanced at her mother, whose blond perm escaped her



headscarf as she snatched for a box of supplies from the dark interior of the shop.

“Oh, okay.” Jude felt his heart sink but refused to give up quite so easily. “It’s just that I don’t have any friends here and I wondered if...”

As he trailed off, Posie’s expression softened. She checked to see if her mother was watching and then leaned close to whisper into his ear.

“Get home before dark. Keep your door locked and stay inside,” she said quickly. “And whatever you do, don’t—”

Posie was snatched away before she could deliver her final warning.

“What have I told you about fraternizing with the sacrifi—” Posie’s mother realized Jude was listening and gave him a sickly smile before half-heartedly finishing. “...the completely safe and welcome stranger.”

Her mother hurried them off along the street, wellington boots clomping, whispering admonishments. Posie managed to glance back and threw him an imploring look.

“Safe and welcome is not exactly how I’m feeling,” Jude said, a shiver running up his spine.

The church bell began to ring; a deep, solemn tolling that rolled through the village.

The locals scattered. Conversations ended mid-sentence and everybody hurried away, pitchforks clacking against



the road and garlic garlands rustling. Within moments, only Jude and Dad remained.

“We should go back,” Jude said. Numb fear jellified his legs. Only his blood seemingly turning to ice froze him upright.

Dad swallowed hard and nodded. “I’m sure everything will make sense by the morning.”

The sun was low over the graveyard by the time they reached the house, pushing long and twisted shadows from the headstones and trees. As soon as they were back inside, Jude slammed the door and locked it, Posie’s warning echoing in his mind.

Night fell quickly. The ramshackle house conducted a discordant melody of creaking floorboards, rattling windows and whistling wind. Every noise set Jude’s heart racing. Every shadow grew teeth, claws and tail before he slapped on a light to banish it.

“Are you okay?” Dad asked as they cleared their dinner plates. “You seem on edge.”

“I’m worried about...”

Something wasn’t right in Blackhinge. Posie might not have immediately agreed to be his best friend, but she had tried to help. If only she could have told him exactly *what* to worry about. But Jude refused to concern his dad over the small matter of an uncanny feeling of doom, dread and impending disaster.



“...unpacking,” he finished.

Dad smiled with relief. “No rush. There’ll be plenty of time to settle in. I know this place seems a little weird, but I think we can make it work if we try. We go together, right?”

Jude returned the smile. “We go together.”

It had become their motto, wherever they went. If they stuck together, then everything would be alright.

“Do you need anything before I go to bed?” Dad asked. “I’ll get up good and early to find where I’m working. They must have given me the wrong address.”

“Can you, um...keep your window closed tonight?” Jude asked. “And maybe locked?”

Dad frowned. “Why?”

Jude considered sharing Posie’s warning. But he could be worrying Dad over nothing. “Just a first-night superstition.”

“Alright, closed it is.”

After Dad had said goodnight and his loud snoring started rumbling through the wall, Jude made sure all the other windows and doors were locked. He was too nervous to sleep. Maybe if he looked around he would find some clue to help make sense of Posie’s warning.

The house was full of mismatched furniture, as if every previous resident had left in too much of a hurry to pack. He opened up a towering wardrobe in his room. Old clothes



were piled inside, the musty smell prickling his nostrils. Nothing matched here either. There were jackets that looked fifty years old and dresses that might have been older, shirts and trousers in all different sizes and styles. Far more than could ever have belonged to a single person or even a family.

“What is the deal with this place?” Jude whispered.

Underneath the clothes were stacks of cardboard boxes, many turning mouldy, old packing tape peeling away.

Jude glanced uneasily at his own moving boxes. Maybe the previous residents hadn’t left without packing their things. Maybe they had never had the chance to *unpack* in the first place.

Inside the wardrobe, a box tumbled sideways and an avalanche of clothes fell out. A plume of pale moths puffed into the air, sending Jude staggering backwards onto the carpet.

A crusty stain grated against his fingers, flaking onto his skin. Jude lifted his hand to the light.

Dark red flakes rusted almost brown.

Blood.

Jude scrambled upright so quickly that he tripped and caught himself on the door frame. A splinter bit into his skin. He looked to find four deep gouges in the wood, with exactly the same spacing as fingernails. As if somebody had



tried to hold on while being dragged away against their will.

A strangled yelp came from outside. Somewhere in the graveyard.

Goosebumps puckered across Jude's skin as he stared at the window. The glaring overhead light meant he could only see his startled face reflected back in the dark glass.

"It was only a fox," Jude told himself, heart pounding.

The sound of his own voice lent him the courage to approach the window. He paused after every step, ready to spin away and run. But no more noises came before he reached the glass. Only darkness lay beyond.

Jude took a shaky breath. "You're scaring yourself."

A figure flashed across the window. Too quick to make out. Jude cried out and leaped away.

BANG-BANG-BANG!

Jude practically jumped out of his skin. Somebody was knocking at the front door hard enough to wake the dead. Slowly, he stepped through to the hallway, heart thundering in his chest.

Dad's snoring still rumbled through the wall. Jude should wake him. No way should he deal with this alone.

"Who is it?" Jude asked, his voice shaking.

"It's Posie. From the village." She banged the door once more for luck. "You need to open up right now."

Everything he had seen in Blackhinge flashed across his



mind. The weapons being handed out. The hostile looks. Posie's warning.

"You told me to keep the door locked."

"Not to me! I'm trying to help you."

"That's exactly what someone would say if—"

"Just open up before I kick it in!"

Jude unbolted the door. He intended to crack it open carefully and peek out, but Posie shoved the door and almost hit him in the face. He stumbled away as she pushed into the hallway and bolted the door firmly behind her.

"I am *not* supposed to be here. I'm not even supposed to be *outside*." Sweat beaded on her forehead as if she had run all the way from the village. "It's getting close to midnight. We have to barricade the house. Bar the door, block every window. As fast as we can."

"There was someone outside my bedroom window just now," Jude said.

"Not someone," Posie replied. "*Something*."

A **CRASH** of breaking glass burst from the back of the house. Jude heard his dad yell out in surprise before his voice was abruptly cut off.

"Dad!" Jude shouted.

He ran to Dad's bedroom with Posie hot on his heels. Throwing open the door, he found that Dad had kept his promise: the window was closed. The glass had been broken



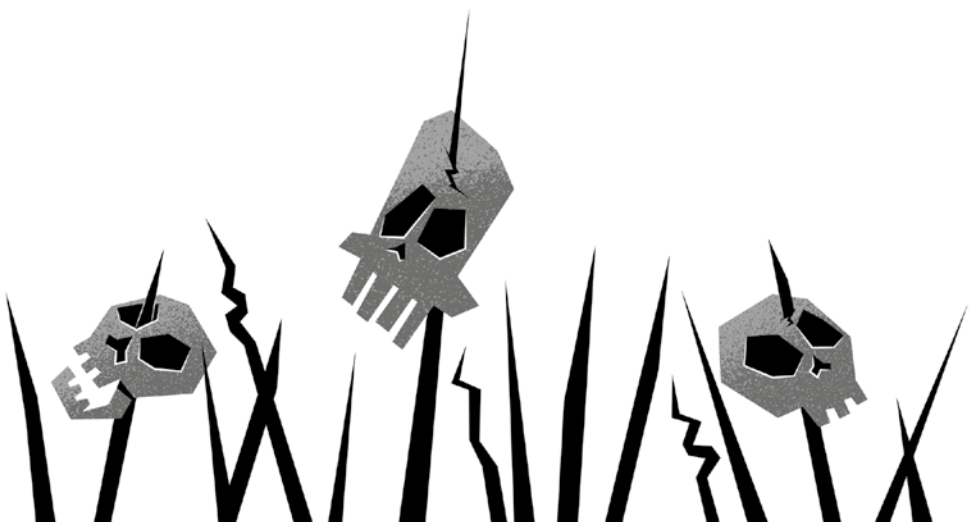
instead, razor shards littering the carpet. The bedclothes had been dragged towards the window.

Dad was gone.

Jude rushed to the window, glass crunching under his shoes. A pale moon offered just enough light to make out a group of figures bundling Dad away between the gravestones.

“Who is that?” Jude cried. “We have to stop them!”

“It’s too late.” Posie arrived beside him at the window. “The graveyard has already taken him.”





CHAPTER THREE

ENTER THE NECROPOLIS

Broken glass clinked as Jude pulled himself up onto the empty window frame.

Posie seized his arm and held him back. She was surprisingly strong.

“You can’t go after him!” she told him.

Jude looked at her blankly.

“What else am I going to do?”

He had never thought of himself as brave. That was confirmed now by his legs shaking so hard he feared he might fall. But it wasn’t bravery that made him want to give chase; there was simply no other choice. Jude and his dad always faced everything together. There was no reason to change that now.



Posie held doggedly to his arm even as he tried to shake her loose.

“You don’t understand,” she explained. “Out there in the dark is more dangerous than you can possibly imagine. Neither of you will make it back here in one piece. Literally.”

As he tried to pull away, Jude found himself facing the graveyard. There was no sign now of the figures bundling Dad away. Pale moonlight silhouetted the gravestones so they looked like solid barriers built to keep him out. Beyond those, flashes flickered sporadically like lightning, followed by distant thumps and groans.

“If you know what’s out there,” Jude said, swallowing a lump in his throat, “then you also knew this was going to happen.”

Posie froze, eyes fixed on him guiltily. “Everybody knew.”

“Everybody apart from my dad and me.”

Jude tugged his arm away and Posie released him without any more fight. He dropped from the window into the long grass outside. Damp and cold washed over him as if he had crossed an invisible boundary. Cloud drifted over the moon, plunging the graveyard into darkness.

Jude didn’t know what awaited him in the depths of the graveyard. Still, he refused to look back at the house in case he lost his nerve to leave it.

So he only realized Posie was following him when he

heard her feet drop into the grass behind him.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“You stand a better chance of keeping all your limbs if I go with you,” she replied matter-of-factly. “I tried to warn you and I was too late. So now I have to help you make it right.”

Without another word, she shouldered past him and moved off between the first crooked row of gravestones.

“Thank you,” Jude breathed gratefully, before hurrying to keep up.

In places, the grass reached Jude’s stomach and was almost as high as Posie’s shoulders. A seemingly total lack of paths didn’t prevent her from barrelling forwards confidently, using her body as a battering ram to flatten the undergrowth. When they reached a tree gnarled into the shape of a question mark, she adjusted her course, leading them over a series of graves that bulged up from the earth like stepping stones.

“Have you been here before?” Jude asked.

Posie waved irritably for him to keep his voice down. “My family has lived in Blackhinge for generations.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

The graveyard’s neglected condition made it clear that few people visited even at less terrifying times of day. Larger structures peeked from the darkness as they delved deeper:



tombs thick with weeds and smothering ivy, crypts with spears of moonlight slicing between them.

"We're entering the Necropolis," Posie whispered. "Keep quiet, stay low and follow me. This is where they'll be."

"Where *who* will be?"

Posie plunged onwards without answering.

Round a corner, the shape of a gigantic woman twice Jude's height loomed in their path. He cried out and fell backwards into the grass, braced for the giant to lunge at him.

It remained completely frozen.

"It's a statue, isn't it?" Jude said, cheeks burning. The woman was carved from stone, perched atop a tomb with her head cradled in her hands.

Posie pulled him upright as if he weighed nothing. "Technically it's a monument. Do you know what a necropolis is?"

"I'm guessing 'big graveyard'?"

She sighed. "Yes. But also no. It means 'city of the dead'."

Jude shivered. He realized he was surrounded by stone angels with wings spread over ornate sarcophagi, mausoleums the size of small houses guarded by knights in stone armour. Obelisks jutted between them like tusks.

"This isn't a normal graveyard, is it?" Jude asked.

Footsteps rustled in the grass nearby. A low murmur of



voices reverberated between the monuments.

“This way, quickly!”

Posie yanked Jude sideways into shelter underneath a circle of thick stone pillars supporting a low roof. As they crouched to hide, Jude realized they weren’t alone: a pair of foxes and a badger hunkered in the grass beside them as if also hiding from whatever lurked out there.

The footsteps dragged closer through the grass.

“They could have my dad,” Jude whispered.

“I assure you –” Posie locked eyes with him – “they don’t.”

Jude decided to trust her. If only because there didn’t seem to be much other choice.

Gruff, gurgling voices accompanied the footsteps moving past their hiding place. Jude itched to go after them. Fear was easier to handle if he just faced it. He glanced round a pillar and glimpsed two figures shuffling away between the graves. Their shadows tangled together and briefly appeared to have too many arms and legs.

“Tell me what’s going on here,” Jude said.

Posie kept her back pressed against a pillar. “You know all the monsters you learn about as a kid? Zombies, vampires, werewolves, that kind of thing?”

Jude nodded slowly, feeling like he was walking into a trick.



“All real.” Posie shook her head as if trying to rid herself of troubling thoughts. “And plenty more I guarantee you’ve never imagined.”

Anger bubbled in Jude’s belly. “You’re messing with me.”

“I’m the only one *not* messing with you!” Posie caught herself, closed her eyes and took three deliberately deep breaths. When she opened her eyes and continued, her voice was calm again. “For three nights a year, monsters, undead and other assorted nocturnal nightmares rise up from the Underworld and gather in this graveyard. The first night is tonight.”

She paused a moment to listen, apparently decided the coast was clear, and peeled away from their hiding place without another word.

“Stop doing that!” Jude hissed after her.

There was no way Posie’s story could be true. Monsters were not real.

Still, Jude found himself staying lower than before and his footsteps suddenly seemed deafeningly loud.

Warm orange lights appeared ahead like ghostly candles, fluttering between gravestones and monuments. More voices mumbled, groaned and growled nearby. A knot of fear tightened in Jude’s stomach.

“The monsters hold a competition here,” Posie whispered. “And every competition needs a prize. So every

year they take a single human from Blackhinge.”

That was why everybody in the village had been carrying weapons, wearing wards, barricading the buildings so nothing could get inside. Nobody, except for Posie, had told Jude and his dad to do the same. Nobody else had even wanted to speak to them. Realization washed over him.

“There is no dream job, is there?” Jude asked, cold all over. “We were invited to Blackhinge so one of us could be sacrificed instead of a local.”

Posie clenched her jaw. “I really did try and warn you.”

And she had. Posie had put herself in danger by coming to his house. She was still with him now. That meant Jude had to trust her.

Even if her story was completely bonkers.

“You don’t believe me?” Posie asked.

“I’m really trying to,” he replied.

Posie huffed. “Fine. I’ll show you.”

She grabbed Jude’s arm and dragged him towards the glowing lights. Jude was breathing raggedly now, like a hunted animal.

Two headstones leaning away from each other offered a path between. Together, Jude and Posie stumbled through. Jude found himself at the edge of a wide clearing enclosed by smaller tombs and gnarled, leafless trees. Flaming lanterns in their branches briefly dazzled him, a din of



voices overwhelming his senses.

Slowly, his vision cleared to show him monsters: hundreds of horrors perched on headstones around the clearing like arena seats, bellowing in dreadful voices as they pumped fists, tentacles and other unidentifiable appendages in the air.

Jude rubbed his eyes and followed their gaze. What he saw next was the most unbelievable thing of all.

In the middle of the clearing was a wrestling ring.

