

BEYOND THE CEMETERY GATE

The Secret Keeper's Daughter
(Chloe & Maggie Mystery #1)

Valerie Biel

FIRST CHAPTER - EXCERPT

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CHAPTER ONE

CHLOE

In the space between sleep and wakefulness, a sound seeped into my consciousness. The sense that something wasn't quite right pulled me fully awake. I listened beyond my own breathing for it to come again.

A wail pierced the silence. An animal in pain? Only it wasn't. I knew it was human. I slipped from bed to stare out into the cemetery. The tombstones always made for fascinating or eerie shadows, depending on how you felt about graveyards. I never minded, which was a good thing, considering my house was smack dab in the middle of one.

The sound came again, more of a moan this time, followed by a murmur of voices. I couldn't tell what they were saying, but people were definitely in the cemetery. One of them was scared or maybe hurt. Dad wasn't going to like this. He locked the gate tight every night. The only way in was to scale the tall, spiked iron fence or pick the lock. Either one was going to piss him off.

In the distance, a pinpoint of light moved away from where I perched. It was too small to be a flashlight . . . maybe a cell phone?

I padded down the hall to Dad's bedroom, calling for him. His door was ajar, and the hall light was enough to show his empty bed, the covers ruffled and thrown back as though he'd gotten up quickly. He must have heard the same thing.

His boots weren't in their usual spot by the back door, so I knew for sure he'd gone to investigate. I had to help because Dad and I were a team, *small and mighty*, he said. We always made it through everything together.

In my hurry I forgot to stop the screen door from slamming behind me when I stepped out onto the porch, cringing when the sound echoed through the night.

I waited a moment and then whispered, "Dad," as loudly as I dared.

No answer.

I angled toward the part of the cemetery where the small light had been, thinking I'd find him corralling some kids from high school pulling a prank. It happened once in a while but usually in a few weeks—closer to Halloween. I knew more than a handful of idiots my age who would think this was funny.

I hadn't heard the wailing or voices since I left the house. Maybe whoever it was had left? That hopeful thought disappeared as a weird combination of worry and fear crawled up the base of my spine. Just in case it was something more menacing than kids, I hid my approach

behind the cemetery's largest and oldest tombstones. Maxwell, Bell, Ludington . . . I touched their cold granite and the mossy green lichen growing up their sides as I slid between them. I expected to find Dad by now. *Where was he?*

A terrible thought pushed me into full fear mode. What if the person making that horrible scream *was* Dad? It hadn't sounded like him, but . . . what if he was out here somewhere and hurt? I had to find him!

My breath quickened and a damp sheen of sweat prickled my skin.

I sped up, more concerned with finding him than being seen. The cemetery was big, but I had to be close to where I'd spotted the light. I calmed myself long enough to pivot in a slow circle, my bare feet sliding on the dewy grass. The main gate was open, obviously where the trespassers came in—and hopefully where they'd gone out.

It was quiet and dark.

The cemetery had no lights of its own, and the glow of streetlights reached only to the second row of graves. Here and there, solar decorations shimmered for dead loved ones as cheerfully as possible but didn't shine far enough to be helpful. The darkness didn't hinder me. The cemetery had been my playground since preschool, so even in the dark I was able to avoid every tree root, odd stone, or divot that might trip me up.

I decided to be systematic and jogged a grid pattern, snaking through the rows. I stopped short and gasped at the next turn. A body was slumped against the base of my favorite statue, a white marble angel holding a sword and shield.

“Dad!”

He didn't move. In two quick strides, I was at his side. “Dad!”

I gave his shoulder a gentle shake, and his head tipped sideways.

“Oh my god! Wake up!”

I needed a better look and found the light on my phone. What I saw scared me even more. Dad's face was pale, his eyes unfocused. I needed help—fast!

Dialing 911 seemed impossibly slow for three simple numbers.

“911. What's your emergency?”

“It's – it's my dad. He won't wake up.”

“What's your location?”

“I'm in the city cemetery. My dad is the caretaker here.”

“What’s your name?”

“C-Chloe Cowyn.”

“Okay, Chloe, can you check whether your dad’s breathing?”

I bent low and placed my face close to Dad’s mouth. “I don’t think so. Please hurry!”

This didn’t make sense. Had someone hit him? I didn’t see any blood. I swept my eyes over his legs and arms—stopping abruptly at what I saw.

“Nooooo.”

At first, I thought the wailing had returned, until I realized that *I* was the one making the sound eerily like what woke me.

“Chloe, are you okay? I have help on the way. Stay on the line with me until they arrive.”

“No. No. No.” My cell phone dropped from my hand as I backed away.

Tears blurred my view until I could no longer see the needle stuck in my dad’s arm.