Welcome to Dead Town, Raven McKay

Most ships don't moor at Grave's Pass. They continue their journey on the waves, avoiding the reflection of the town. But some days the sea laps the shore of the town, as if trying to calm some restless, unknown beast. On those days seafaring people find it inviting, but the closer they come, they see something that sends them quickly on their way.

The dark houses with the squinty windows, are fastened like limpets and periwinkles to the hill. Above the town there is a yew forest and a graveyard that slopes down to jagged cliffs with caverns and caves. This is why the dead come here. This is why they call it home.

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On her first day in Grave's Pass, Raven McKay spotted pooka horses chasing goblins in a vacant lot, three banshees on a bus, a zombie in ripped jeans staring in the window of a phone shop, a bogeyman walking a labradoodle, a ghost on a ladder cleaning windows, a ghoul sipping coffee at an outdoor café.

Raven McKay with black hair as silky as a raven's wing and eyes as piercing blue as the sea in the sandy coves around Grave's Pass, sat in the social worker's car outside No. 28 Flower Hill. She clutched her battered beige suitcase with its faded sticker of a black butterfly and missed her parents terribly. This was her third foster home in six months. She had been in and out of Kim's green Fiat so much, the very cherry jellybean air freshener hanging from the rear view mirror had lost its tang.

"Look Kim," screeched Raven. "Those are pooka horses."

The ghostly stallions galloped in the lot by an old factory, fiery smoke billowing from their nostrils. "They're harmless, Raven. Once you leave them be. We've already spoken about this."

The shimmering coats of the horses stung her like vinegar in the eyes. What a welcome, Raven thought. One of the horses stopped and scratched the earth with a black hoof, kicking up dust, sparks, clouds of sulphur. Raven rolled down the window and pinched her nose, overcome with the stench of rotten eggs. Where was the very cherry jellybean air freshener when you need it?

"You must be warm in those clothes," Kim said.

"A little. But you know I love these clothes."

"Do as you wish dear. But you should take off the hat and jacket. It's scorching."

Raven sighed and stuck her hand out of the window. It felt heavy in the thick, sticky air. Kim was right – it was scorching but there was no way Raven was going to take off her favourite hat and jacket. She brought in her hand and sniffed her wrist. Rotten eggs. She wrinkled her nose and touched the breast pocket of her coat.

Raven took out a neatly folded paper from the pocket of her brown velvet jacket. The note her mum left. The note that was now her anchor. It kept her grounded and safe. Often just before bed, when the night seemed darkest, she would trace her mother's handwriting with her finger. She read the words, although she knew them by heart.

Dearest Raven,

Don't open the suitcase until the time is right. You'll know when that is.

Love Mum xx

But of course she couldn't help herself on the first night in her first foster home. She opened it a little. Her stomach knotted like a pretzel. She looked around at her new room in her new foster home. She was a stranger who would have to face school and a new town. She ripped it open. She ran her hands over the white, silky lining. There was nothing there.

"Oh mum.. oh dad," Raven whispered. "Where are you? What happened to you?" She knew Kim heard her but Kim said nothing. Raven didn't mind. Kim was a nice lady but Raven often thought Kim was tired of shunting her around from foster home to foster home. Anyway, there was nothing to say. What could she say? She didn't know where Raven's parents were either.

Raven never told anyone about the note. All the world knew was that Raven came home one day and her parents were gone. Vanished into thin air. The house like the Mary Celeste. The police were stunned, a mystery in a world of mysteries.

And now Raven was about to step through the doorway of another foster home. In another town. But at least this time was different, Raven thought. Kim discovered that Raven's father's third cousin once removed lived in Grave's Pass. Raven was shocked to find out she had a relative, even a distant one.

Grave's Pass was a town on a hill with narrow streets, some cobbled with ornate archways with carvings of wolves and snakes. Some streets were brightly-painted like smarties. Others were the shades of cola bottles and liquorice and some as black as the pooka-horses. Some streets were so dark and wicked that you would want to fold them like a deck of cards and put them in your pocket and forget about them forever.

Kim had already told her that Grave's Pass wasn't an ordinary town. Those pooka horses were probably just the tip of the iceberg, Raven thought. Raven couldn't believe it when Kim told her about Grave's Pass over breakfast earlier. How come her father never said where he was from? Did mum know? Was she from there? They were having breakfast in Kim's office, eating cold, soggy takeaway pancakes from the café across the street. It was a windy, wet day, full of grey. Raven felt as miserable as the weather. Kim's office was chock-a-block with cabinets and files of other children like Raven.

The more Kim told her, the more the pancakes felt like rocks in her mouth. How could such a town exist? A town where the living and the dead live side by side? If she didn't see the pooka horses and the other creatures on the drive in, she wouldn't have believed it. She wasn't sure she believed it anyway. Now, some people might think that it wasn't a suitable place for a foster child, but Kim kept telling Raven anywhere with family was the best place, even if that family was a distant cousin she had never met.

"Let's go. Kitty's waiting," said Kim, turning off the ignition. The Fiat coughed.

Raven stepped out into the withered autumn sunlight with her suitcase and looked up at her new home, a two storey white house with a blue door. Flower Hill was so steep, there were

steps on the footpath. She didn't like the idea of trudging up such a hill but when she saw a pink-haired girl pushing a pink bicycle up the hill without breaking a sweat, Raven felt better.

The girl nodded and walked by Raven. She had only gone a few steps when she stopped and turned around. She looked cool in her polka dot top and bell bottom trousers.

"Welcome," the girl said. "I'm Hannah."

"I'm Raven McKay."

"Of course you are. You look different though."

"What? What do you mean? I've never met you."

The girl smiled and Raven flashed an uneasy smile. Raven put out her hand but Hannah stared at her with ghostly grey eyes and a never-ending ear to ear grin. She flashed a peace sign with two bony fingers and continued on her way. Raven watched until Hannah and the bicycle disappeared over the top of the hill. The girl was well out of sight, those grey eyes were still crawling all over Raven.

"All set?" Kim said, nudging her. "Remember what I said?"

"I'm sorry, Kim. I didn't want to be rude to the girl. The girl. Oh my! Is she one of them?"

Kim shrugged. "Who knows? Just leave her be."

Kim thundered up to the doorway and knocked. Raven stood behind her and brushed off the last of Hannah's grey eyes. A tall, thin lady with sandy hair and large freckles, in jeans and a black cardigan opened the door. There was something in her smile that put Raven at ease.

The other foster homes were like solitary confinement. She spent her time in her box-sized rooms except for meal times when her legs shook so much the cutlery rattled and she thought the table would break and everything would end up on the floor in a big mess. Her stomach was so nervous she didn't taste the food. But she had to eat. She had to have energy to sit in a class with strangers all day. There was a foster girl silence, which meant that as

soon as the other kids had gobbled their food, which was different to hers (all the things she liked -- pizza, pasta, couscous and curry) they rushed from the table to the sofa to watch TV, usually having tea and chocolate biscuits there. Why were mincemeat and gravy-soggy, mashed potatoes, the staple food for foster kids? Why did the custard and strawberry jelly never taste like the custard and jelly she had at home?

"Hello Raven. I'm Kitty Stromsoe. Welcome to Grave's Pass. Welcome to Flower Hill. Welcome to your new home."

"Hi Kitty. Thanks for having me." Raven knew the routine by now. Smile and be polite. Thank them for everything, but don't tell them everything. She didn't tell her that she cried most of the way. Never let them see you cry. This would be her third foster home in six months and she would be going to another new school. Raven had been mocked about her one crooked front tooth in her last school. One tooth, one little thing, one little imperfection that made her school life a misery.

Kim whispered something to Kitty. Kitty laughed. Raven was sure it was about her. All she wanted was to be back home in Glentown with her mum and dad. Where had Ross and Aria McKay gone? She hoped they weren't in danger. They wouldn't just abandon their 12-year-old daughter. She thought of all the nights they tucked her into bed and kissed her goodnight. She thought of the heavy snowfall last winter and the giant snowman they made together.

"She's very excited," said Kim, handing Raven's purple rucksack to Kitty. Raven carried her beige suitcase to the door.

"I have margarita pizza and garlic bread for you, Raven. I know it's your favourite dinner."

Kim turned to Raven and shook her hand. Raven wasn't expecting a hug or anything but a handshake seemed cold. "Good luck Raven," said Kim. "I know you'll be happy in your new home."

Raven suppressed a sigh. Kim was just doing her job rehearsing lines she probably practiced in front of an office mirror. Before Raven knew it, the Fiat spluttered into life and Kim was off with a sickly beep beep of the horn. Raven stood alone on a new doorstep. She squeezed her eyes. She didn't want Kitty to see her cry on the first day.