

Chapter 15

Theyre going to kill us! Josh cried. I watched them move forward in silence. Josh and I had backed up to the window. I looked around the dark room for an escape route. But there was nowhere to run. Karen you seemed so nice, I said. The words just tumbled out. I didnt thought before I said them. Her eyes glowed a little brighter. I was nice, she said in a glum monotone, until I moved here. We were all nice, George Carpenter said in the same low monotone. But now were dead. Let us go! Josh cried, raising his hands in front of him as if to shield himself. Please let us go. They laughed again, the dry, hoarse laughter. Dead laughter. Dont be scared, Amanda, Karen said. Soon youll be with us. Thats why they invited you to this house. Huh? I dont understand, I cried, my voice shaking. This is the Dead House. This is where everyone lives when they first arrive in Dark Falls. When theyre still alive. This seemed to strike the others as funny. They all snickered and laughed. But our great-uncle Josh started. Karen shook her head, her eyes glowing with amusement. No. Sorry, Josh. No great-uncle. It was just a trick to bring you here. Once every year, someone new has to move here. Other years, it was us. We lived in this house until we died. This year, its your turn. We need new blood, Jerry Franklin said, his eyes glowing red in the dim light. Once a year, you see, we need new blood. Moving forward in silence, they hovered over Josh and me. I took a deep breath. A last breath, perhaps. And shut my eyes. And then I heard the knock on the door. A loud knock, repeated several times. I opened my eyes. The ghostly kids all vanished. The air smelled sour. Josh and I stared at each other, dazed, as the loud knocking started again. Its Mom and Dad! Josh cried. We both ran to the door. Josh stumbled over the coffee table in the dark, so I got to the door first. Mom! Dad! I cried, pulling open the door. Where have you been? I reached out my arms to hug them both and stopped with my arms in the air. My mouth dropped open and I uttered a silent cry. Mr. Dawes! Josh exclaimed, coming up beside me. We thought Oh, Mr. Dawes, Im so glad to see you! I cried happily, pushing open the screen door for him. Kids youre okay? he asked, eyeing us both, his handsome face tight with worry. Oh, thank God! he cried. I got here in time! Mr. Dawes I started, feeling so relieved, I had tears in my eyes. I He grabbed my arm. Theres no time to talk, he said, looking behind him to the street. I could see his car in the driveway. The engine was running. Only the parking lights were on. Ive got to get you kids out of here while theres still time. Josh and I started to follow him, then hesitated. What if Mr. Dawes was one of them? Hurry, Mr. Dawes urged, holding open the screen door, gazing nervously out into the darkness. I think were in terrible danger. But I started, staring into his frightened eyes, trying to decide if we could trust him. I was at the party with your parents, Mr. Dawes said. All of a sudden, they formed a circle. Everyone. Around your parents and me. They they started to close in on us. Just like when the kids started to close in on Josh and me, I thought. We broke through them and ran, Mr. Dawes said, glancing to the driveway behind him. Somehow the three of us got away. Hurry. Weve all got to get away from here now! Josh, lets go, I urged. Then I turned to Mr. Dawes. Where are Mom and Dad? Come on. Ill show you. Theyre safe for now. But I dont know for how long. We followed him out of the house and down the driveway to his car. The clouds had parted. A sliver of moon shone low in a pale, early morning sky. Theres something wrong with this whole town, Mr. Dawes said, holding the front passenger door open for me as Josh climbed into the back. I slumped gratefully into the seat, and he slammed the door shut. I know, I said, as he slid behind the wheel. Josh and I. We both Weve got to get as far away as we can before they catch up with us, Mr. Dawes said, backing down the drive quickly, the tires sliding and squealing as he pulled onto the street. Yes, I agreed. Thank goodness you came. My house its filled with kids. Dead kids and So youve seen them, Mr. Dawes said softly, his eyes wide with fear. He pushed down harder on the gas pedal. As I looked out into the purple darkness, a low, orange sun began to show over the green treetops. Where are our parents? I asked anxiously. Theres a kind of outdoor theater next to the cemetery, Mr. Dawes said, staring straight ahead through the windshield, his eyes narrow, his expression tense. Its built right into the ground, and its hidden by a big tree. I left them there. I told them not to move. I think theyll be safe. I dont think anyone will think to look there. Weve seen it, Josh said. A bright light suddenly flashed on in the backseat. Whats that? Mr. Dawes asked, looking into the rearview mirror. My flashlight, Josh answered, clicking it off. I brought it just in case. But the sun will be up soon. I probably wont need it. Mr. Dawes hit the brake and pulled the car to the side of the road. We were at the edge of the cemetery. I climbed quickly out of the car, eager to see my parents. The sky was still dark, streaked with violet now. The sun was a dark orange balloon just barely poking over the trees. Across the street, beyond the jagged rows of gravestones, I could see the dark outline of the leaning tree that hid the mysterious amphitheater. Hurry, Mr. Dawes urged, closing his car door quietly. Im sure your parents are desperate to see you. We headed across the street, half-walking, half-jogging, Josh swinging the flashlight in one hand. Suddenly, at the edge of the cemetery grass, Josh stopped. Petey! he cried. I followed his gaze, and saw our white terrier walking slowly along a slope of gravestones. Petey! Josh yelled again, and began running to the dog. My heart sank. I didnt had a chance to tell Josh what Ray had revealed to me about Petey. No Josh! I called. Mr. Dawes looked very alarmed. We dont have time. We have to hurry, he said to me. Then he began shouting for Josh to come back. Ill go get him, I said, and took off, running as fast as I could along the rows of graves, calling to my brother. Josh! Josh, wait up! Dont! Dont go after him! Josh Petey is dead! Josh had been gaining on the dog, which was ambling along, sniffing the ground, not looking up, not paying any attention to Josh. Then suddenly, Josh tripped over a low grave marker. He cried out as he fell, and the flashlight flew out of his hand and clattered against a gravestone. I quickly caught up with him. Josh are you okay? He was lying on his stomach, staring straight ahead. Josh answer me. Are you okay? I grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to pull him up, but he kept staring straight ahead, his mouth open, his eyes wide. Josh? Look, he said finally. I breathed a sigh of relief, knowing that Josh wasnt knocked out or something. Look, he repeated, and pointed to the gravestone he had tripped over. I turned and squinted at the grave. I read the inscription, silently mouthing the words as I read: COMPTON DAWES. R.I.P.

1950-1980. My head began to spin. I felt dizzy. I steadied myself, holding

onto Josh. COMPTON DAWES. It wasn't his father or his grandfather. He had told us he was the only Compton in his family. So Mr. Dawes was dead, too. Dead. Dead. Dead. Dead as everyone else. He was one of them. One of the dead ones. Josh and I stared at each other in the purple darkness. Surrounded. Surrounded by the dead. Now what? I asked myself. Now what?

Chapter 16

Get up, Josh, I said, my voice a choked whisper. We've got to get away from here. But we were too late. A hand grabbed me firmly by the shoulder. I spun around to see Mr. Dawes, his eyes narrowing as he read the inscription on his own gravestone. Mr. Dawes, you, too! I cried, so disappointed, so confused, so scared. Me, too, he said, almost sadly. All of us. His eyes burned into mine. This was a normal town once. And we were normal people. Most of us worked in the plastics factory on the outskirts of town. Then there was an accident. Something escaped from the factory. A yellow gas. It floated over the town. So fast we didn't see it, didn't realize. And then, it was too late, and Dark Falls wasn't a normal town anymore. We were all dead, Amanda. Dead and buried. But we couldn't rest. We couldn't sleep. Dark Falls was a town of living dead. What? What are you going to do to us? I managed to ask. My knees were trembling so hard, I could barely stand. A dead man was squeezing my shoulder. A dead man was staring hard into my eyes. Standing this close, I could smell his sour breath. I turned my head, but the smell already choked my nostrils. Where are Mom and Dad? Josh asked, climbing to his feet and standing rigidly across from us, glaring accusingly at Mr. Dawes. Safe and sound, Mr. Dawes said with a faint smile. Come with me. It's time for you to join them. I tried to pull away from him, but his hand was locked on my shoulder. Let go! I shouted. His smile grew wider. Amanda, it doesn't hurt to die, he said softly, almost soothingly. Come with me. No! Josh shouted. And with sudden quickness, he dived to the ground and picked up his flashlight. Yes! I cried. Shine it on him, Josh! The light could save us. The light could defeat Mr. Dawes, as it had Ray. The light could destroy him. Quick! Shine it on him! I pleaded. Josh fumbled with the flashlight, then pointed it toward Mr. Dawes' startled face, and clicked it on. Nothing. No light. It's broken, Josh said. I guess when it hit the gravestone. My heart pounding, I looked back at Mr. Dawes. The smile on his face was a smile of victory.

Chapter 17

Nice try, Mr. Dawes said to Josh. The smile faded quickly from his face. Close up, he didnt look so young and handsome. His skin, I could see, was dry and peeling and hung loosely beneath his eyes. Lets go, kids, he said, giving me a shove. He glanced up at the brightening sky. The sun was raising itself over the treetops. Josh hesitated. I said lets go, Mr. Dawes snapped impatiently. He loosened his grip on my shoulder and took a menacing step toward Josh. Josh glanced down at the worthless flashlight. Then he pulled his arm back and heaved the flashlight at Mr. Dawes head. The flashlight hit its target with a sickening crack. It hit Mr. Dawes in the center of his forehead, splitting a large hole in the skin. Mr. Dawes uttered a low cry. His eyes widened in surprise. Dazed, he reached a hand up to the hole where a few inches of gray skull poked through. Run, Josh! I cried. But there was no need to tell him that. He was already zigzagging through the rows of graves, his head ducked low. I followed him, running as fast as I could. Glancing back, I saw Mr. Dawes stagger after us, still holding his ripped forehead. He took several steps, then abruptly stopped, staring up at the sky. Its too bright for him, I realized. He has to stay in the shade. Josh had ducked down behind a tall marble monument, old and slightly tilted, cracked down the middle. I slid down beside him, gasping for breath. Leaning on the cool marble, we both peered around the sides of the monument. Mr. Dawes, a scowl on his face, was heading back toward the amphitheater, keeping in the shadows of the trees. Hehes not chasing us, Josh whispered, his chest heaving as he struggled to catch his breath and stifle his fear. Hes going back. The sun is too bright for him, I said, holding onto the side of the monument. He must be going to get Mom and Dad. That stupid flashlight, Josh cried. Never mind that, I said, watching Mr. Dawes until he disappeared behind the big leaning tree. What are we going to do now? I dont know Shhh. Look! Josh poked me hard on the shoulder, and pointed. Whos that? I followed his stare and saw several dark figures hurrying through the rows of tombstones. They seemed to have appeared from out of nowhere. Did they rise out of the graves? Walking quickly, seeming to float over the green, sloping ground, they headed into the shadows. All were walking in silence, their eyes straight ahead. They didnt stop to greet one another. They strode purposefully toward the hidden amphitheater, as if they were being drawn there, as if they were puppets being pulled by hidden strings. Whoa. Look at them all! Josh whispered, ducking his head back behind the marble monument. The dark, moving forms made all the shadows ripple. It looked as if the trees, the gravestones, the entire cemetery had come to life, had started toward the hidden seats of the amphitheater. There goes Karen, I whispered, pointing. And George. And all the rest of them. The kids from our house were moving quickly in twos and threes, following the other shadows, as silent and businesslike as everyone else. Everyone was here except Ray, I thought. Because we killed Ray. We killed someone who was already dead. Do you think Mom and Dad are really down in that weird theater? Josh asked, interrupting my morbid thoughts, his eyes on the moving shadows. Come on, I said, taking Joshs hand and pulling him away from the monument. Weve got to find out. We watched the last of the dark figures float past the enormous leaning tree. The shadows stopped moving. The cemetery was still and silent. A solitary crow floated, high above in the clear blue, cloudless sky. Slowly, Josh and I edged our way toward the amphitheater, ducking behind gravestones, keeping low to the ground. It was a struggle to move. I felt as if I weighed five hundred pounds. The weight of my fear, I guess. I was desperate to see if Mom and Dad were there. But at the same time, I didnt want to see. I didnt want to see them being held prisoner by Mr. Dawes and the others. I didnt want to see them killed. The thought made me stop. I reached out an arm and halted Josh. We were standing behind the leaning tree, hidden by its enormous clump of upraised roots. Beyond the tree, down in the theater below, I could hear the low murmur of voices. Are Mom and Dad there? Josh whispered. He started to poke his head around the side of the bent tree trunk, but I cautiously pulled him back. Be careful, I whispered. Dont let them see you. Theyre practically right beneath us. But Ive got to know if Mom and Dad are really here, he whispered, his eyes frightened, pleading. Me, too, I agreed. We both leaned over the massive trunk. The bark felt smooth under my hands as I gazed into the deep shadows cast by the tree. And then I saw them. Mom and Dad. They were tied up, back-to-back, standing in the center of the floor at the bottom of the amphitheater in front of everyone. They looked so uncomfortable, so terrified. Their arms were tied tightly down at their sides. Dads face was bright red. Moms hair was all messed up, hanging wildly down over her forehead, her head bowed. Squinting into the darkness cast by the tree, I saw Mr. Dawes standing beside them along with another, older man. And I saw that the rows of long benches built into the ground were filled with people. Not a single empty space. Everyone in town must be here, I realized. Everyone except Josh and me. Theyre going to kill Mom and Dad, Josh whispered, grabbing my arm, squeezing it in fear. Theyre going to make Mom and Dad just like them. Then theyll come after us, I said, thinking out loud, staring through the shadows at my poor parents. Both of them had their heads bowed now as they stood before the silent crowd. Both of them were awaiting their fates. What are we going to do? Josh whispered. Huh? I was staring so hard at Mom and Dad, I guess I momentarily blanked out. What are we going to do? Josh repeated urgently, still holding desperately to my arm. We cant just stand here and I suddenly knew what we were going to do. It just came to me. I didnt even have to think hard. Maybe we can save them, I whispered, backing away from the tree. Maybe we can do something. Josh let go of my arm. He stared at me eagerly. Were going to push this tree over, I whispered with so much confidence that I surprised myself. Were going to push the tree over so the sunlight will fill the amphitheater. Yes! Josh cried immediately. Look at this tree. Its practically down already. We can do it! I knew we could do it. I dont know where my confidence came from. But I knew we could do it. And I knew we had to do it fast. Peering over the top of the trunk again, struggling to see through the shadows, I could see that everyone in the theater had stood up. They were all starting to move forward, down toward Mom and Dad. Come on, Josh, I whispered. Well take a running jump, and push the tree over. Come on! Without another word, we both took several steps back. We just had to give the trunk a good, hard push, and the tree would topple right over. The roots were already almost entirely up out of the ground, after all. One hard push. Thats all it would take. And the sunlight would pour into the theater. Beautiful, golden sunlight. Bright, bright sunlight. The dead people would all crumble. And Mom and Dad would be saved. All four of us would be saved. Come on, Josh, I whispered. Ready? He nodded, his face solemn, his eyes frightened. Okay. Lets go! I cried. We both ran forward, digging our sneakers into the ground, moving as fast as we could, our arms outstretched and ready. In a second, we hit the tree trunk and pushed with all of our strength, shoving it with our hands and then moving our shoulders into it, pushing pushing pushing It didnt budge.

Chapter 18

Push! I cried. Push it again! Josh let out an exasperated, defeated sigh. I cant, Amanda. I cant move it. Josh I glared at him. He backed up to try again. Below, I could hear startled voices, angry voices. Quick! I yelled. Push! We hurtled into the tree trunk with our shoulders, both of us grunting from the effort, our muscles straining, our faces bright red. Push! Keep pushing! The veins at my temples felt about to pop. Was the tree moving? No. It gave a little, but bounced right back. The voices from below were getting louder. We cant do it! I cried, so disappointed, so frustrated, so terrified. We cant move it! Defeated, I slumped over onto the tree trunk, and started to bury my face in my hands. I pulled back with a gasp when I heard the soft cracking sound. The cracking sound grew louder until it was a rumble, then a roar. It sounded as if the ground were ripping apart. The old tree fell quickly. It didnt have far to fall. But it hit with a thundering crash that seemed to shake the ground. I grabbed Josh and we both stood in amazement and disbelief as bright sunlight poured into the amphitheater. The cries went up instantly. Horrified cries. Angry cries. Frantic cries. The cries became howls. Howls of pain, of agony. The people in the amphitheater, the living dead caught in the golden light, began scrambling over one another, screeching, pulling, climbing, pushing, trying to claw their way to shade. But it was too late. Their skin began to drop off their bones and, as I stared open-mouthed, they crumbled to powder and dissolved to the ground, their clothes disintegrating along with them. The painful cries continued to ring out as the bodies fell apart, the skin melted away, the dry bones collapsed. I saw Karen Somerset staggering across the floor. I saw her hair fall to the ground in a heap, revealing the dark skull underneath. She cast a glance up at me, a longing look, a look of regret. And then her eyeballs rolled out of their sockets, and she opened her toothless mouth, and she cried, Thank you, Amanda! Thank you! and collapsed. Josh and I covered our ears to shut out the ghastly cries. We both looked away, unable to keep watching the entire town fall in agony and crumble to powder, destroyed by the sun, the clear, warm sun. When we looked back, they had all disappeared. Mom and Dad were standing right where they had been, tied back-to-back, their expressions a mixture of horror and disbelief. Mom! Dad! I cried. Ill never forget their smiles as Josh and I ran forward to free them. It didnt take our parents long to get us packed up and to arrange for the movers to take us back to our old neighborhood and our old house. I guess its lucky after all that we couldnt sell the old place, Dad said, as we eagerly piled into the car to leave. Dad backed down the driveway and started to roar away. Stop! I cried suddenly. Im not sure why, but I had a sudden, powerful urge to take one last look at the old house. As both of my parents called out to me in confusion, I pushed open the door and jogged back to the driveway. Standing in the middle of the yard, I stared up at the house, silent, empty, still covered in thick layers of blue- gray shadows. I found myself gazing up at the old house as if I were hypnotized. I dont know how long I stood there. The crunch of tires on the gravel driveway snapped me out of my spell. Startled, I turned to see a red station wagon parked in the driveway. Two boys about Joshs age jumped out of the back. Their parents followed. Staring up at the house, they didnt seem to notice me. Here we are, kids, the mother said, smiling at them. Our new house. It doesnt look new. It looks old, one of the boys said. And then his brothers eyes widened as he noticed me. Who are you? he demanded. The other members of his family turned to stare at me. Oh. I uh His question caught me by surprise. I could hear my dad honking his horn impatiently down on the street. I uh used to live in your house, I found myself answering. And then I turned and ran full speed down to the street. Wasnt that Mr. Dawes standing at the porch, clipboard in hand? I wondered, catching a glimpse of a dark figure as I ran to the car. No, it couldnt be Mr. Dawes up there waiting for them, I decided. It just couldnt be. I didnt look back. I slammed the car door behind me, and we sped away. Scanning, formatting and basic proofing by Undead.