

1977-1988. Huh? I could hear Josh calling me, but I couldn't make out

what he was saying. The rest of the world seemed to fall away. I read the deeply etched inscription again: RAY THURSTON. 1977-1988. I stood there, staring at the letters and numbers. I stared at them till they didn't make sense anymore, until they were just a gray blur. Suddenly, I realized that Ray had crept up beside the gravestone and was staring at me. Ray I managed to say, moving the light over the name on the stone. Ray, this one is you! His eyes flared, glowing like dying embers. Yes, it's me, he said softly, moving toward me. I'm so sorry, Amanda.

Chapter 13

I took a step back, my sneakers sinking into the soft ground. The air was heavy and still. No one made a sound. Nothing moved. Dead. Im surrounded by death, I thought. Then, frozen to the spot, unable to breathe, the darkness swirling around me, the gravestones spinning in their own black shadows, I thought: What is he going to do to me? Ray I managed to call out. My voice sounded faint and far away. Ray, are you really dead? Im sorry. You werent supposed to find out yet, he said, his voice floating low and heavy on the stifling night air. Buthow? I mean I dont understand. I looked past him to the darting white light of the flashlight. Josh was several rows away, almost to the street, still searching for Petey. Petey! I whispered, dread choking my throat, my stomach tightening in horror. Dogs always know, Ray said in a low, flat tone. Dogs always recognize the living dead. Thats why they have to go first. They always know. You mean Petey is dead? I choked out the words. Ray nodded. They kill the dogs first. No! I screamed and took another step back, nearly losing my balance as I bumped into a low marble gravestone. I jumped away from it. You werent supposed to see this, Ray said, his narrow face expressionless except for his dark eyes, which revealed real sadness. You werent supposed to know. Not for another few weeks, anyway. Im the watcher. I was supposed to watch, to make sure you didnt see until it was time. He took a step toward me, his eyes lighting up red, burning into mine. Were you watching me from the window? I cried. Was that you in my room? Again he nodded yes. I used to live in your house, he said, taking another step closer, forcing me back against the cold marble stone. Im the watcher. I forced myself to look away, to stop staring into his glowing eyes. I wanted to scream to Josh to run and get help. But he was too far away. And I was frozen there, frozen with fear. We need fresh blood, Ray said. What? I cried. What are you saying? The townit cant survive without fresh blood. None of us can. Youll understand soon, Amanda. Youll understand why we had to invite you to the house, to the Dead House. In the darting, zigzagging beam of light, I could see Josh moving closer, heading our way. Run, Josh, I thought. Run away. Fast. Get someone. Get anyone. I could think the words. Why couldnt I scream them? Rays eyes glowed brighter. He was standing right in front of me now, his features set, hard and cold. Ray? Even through my jeans, the marble gravestone felt cold against the back of my legs. I messed up, he whispered. I was the watcher. But I messed up. Ray what are you going to do? His red eyes flickered. Im really sorry. He started to raise himself off the ground, to float over me. I could feel myself start to choke. I couldnt breathe. I couldnt move. I opened my mouth to call out to Josh, but no sound came out. Josh? Where was he? I looked down the rows of gravestones but couldnt see his light. Ray floated up a little higher. He hovered over me, choking me somehow, blinding me, suffocating me. Im dead, I thought. Dead. Now Im dead, too.

Chapter 14

And then, suddenly, light broke through the darkness. The light shone in Rays face, the bright white halogen light. Whats going on? Josh asked, in a high-pitched, nervous voice. Amandawhats happening? Ray cried out and dropped back to the ground. Turn that off! Turn it off! he screamed, his voice a shrill whisper, like wind through a broken windowpane. But Josh held the bright beam of light on Ray. Whats going on? What are you doing? I could breathe again. As I stared into the light, I struggled to stop my heart from pounding so hard. Ray moved his arms to shield himself from the light. But I could see what was happening to him. The light had already done its damage. Rays skin seemed to be melting. His whole face sagged, then fell, dropping off his skull. I stared into the circle of white light, unable to look away, as Rays skin folded and drooped and melted away. As the bone underneath was revealed, his eyeballs rolled out of their sockets and fell silently to the ground. Josh, frozen in horror, somehow held the bright light steady, and we both stared at the grinning skull, its dark craters staring back at us. Oh! I shrieked as Ray took a step toward me. But then I realized that Ray wasnt walking. He was falling. I jumped aside as he crumpled to the ground. And gasped as his skull hit the top of the marble gravestone, and cracked open with a sickening splat. Come on! Josh shouted. Amandacome on! He grabbed my hand and tried to pull me away. But I couldnt stop staring down at Ray, now a pile of bones inside a puddle of crumpled clothes. Amanda, come on! Then, before I even realized it, I was running, running beside Josh as fast as I could down the long row of graves toward the street. The light flashed against the blur of gravestones as we ran, slipping on the soft, dew-covered grass, gasping in the still, hot air. Weve got to tell Mom and Dad. Got to get away from here! I cried. Theythey wont believe it! Josh said, as we reached the street. We kept running, our sneakers thudding hard against the pavement. Im not sure I believe it myself! Theyve got to believe us! I told him. If they dont, well drag them out of that house. The white beam of light pointed the way as we ran through the dark, silent streets. There were no streetlights, no lights on in the windows of the houses we passed, no car headlights. Such a dark world we had entered. And now it was time to get out. We ran the rest of the way home. I kept looking back to see if we were being followed. But I didnt see anyone. The neighborhood was still and empty. I had a sharp pain in my side as we reached home. But I forced myself to keep running, up the gravel driveway with its thick blanket of dead leaves, and onto the front porch. I pushed open the door and both Josh and I started to scream. Mom! Dad! Where are you? Silence. We ran into the living room. The lights were all off. Mom? Dad? Are you here? Please be here, I thought, my heart racing, the pain in my side still sharp. Please be here. We searched the house. They werent home. The potluck party, Josh suddenly remembered. Can they still be at that party? We were standing in the living room, both of us breathing hard. The pain in my side had let up just a bit. I had turned on all the lights, but the room still felt gloomy and menacing. I glanced at the clock on the mantel. Nearly two in the morning. They should be home by now, I said, my voice shaky and weak. Where did they go? Did they leave a number? Josh was already on his way to the kitchen. I followed him, turning on lights as we went. We went right to the memo pad on the counter where Mom and Dad always leave us notes. Nothing. The pad was blank. Weve got to find them! Josh cried. He sounded very frightened. His wide eyes reflected his fear. We have to get away from here. What if something has happened to them? Thats what I started to say. But I caught myself just in time. I didnt want to scare Josh any more than he was already. Besides, hed probably thought of that, too. Should we call the police? he asked, as we walked back to the living room and peered out the front window into the darkness. I dont know, I said, pressing my hot forehead against the cool glass. I just dont know what to do. I want them to be home. I want them here so we can all leave. Whats your hurry? a girls voice said from behind me. Josh and I both cried out and spun around. Karen Somerset was standing in the center of the room, her arms crossed over her chest. But youre dead! I blurted out. She smiled, a sad smile, a bitter smile. And then two more kids stepped in from the hallway. One of them clicked off the lights. Too bright in here, he said. They moved next to Karen. And another kid, Jerry Franklinanother dead kidappeared by the fireplace. And I saw the girl with short black hair, the one I had seen on the stairs, move beside me by the curtains. They were all smiling, their eyes glowing dully in the dim light, all moving in on Josh and me. What do you want! I screamed in a voice I didnt even recognize. What are you going to do? We used to live in your house, Karen said softly. Huh? I cried. We used to live in your house, George said. And now, guess what? Jerry added. Now were dead in your house! The others started to laugh, crackling, dry laughs, as they all closed in on Josh and me.