

1977-1988. Huh? I could hear Josh calling me, but I couldnt 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 didnt 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, its me, he said softly, moving toward me. Im 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.

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 hadnt 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 hadnt 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.