

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.