

Chapter 11

Several days went by. Josh and I were getting used to our new house and our new friends. The kids we met every day at the playground weren't exactly friends yet. They talked with Josh and me, and let us on their teams. But it was really hard to get to know them. In my room, I kept hearing whispers late at night, and soft giggling, but I forced myself to ignore it. One night, I thought I saw a girl dressed all in white at the end of the upstairs hall. But when I walked over to investigate, there was just a pile of dirty sheets and other bedclothes against the wall. Josh and I were adjusting, but Petey was still acting really strange. We took him with us to the playground every day, but we had to leash him to the fence. Otherwise, he'd bark and snap at all the kids. He's still nervous being in a new place, I told Josh. Hell calm down. But Petey didn't calm down. And about two weeks later, we were finishing up a softball game with Ray, and Karen Somerset, and Jerry Franklin, and George Carpenter, and a bunch of other kids, when I looked over to the fence and saw that Petey was gone. Somehow he had broken out of his leash and run away. We looked for hours, calling Petey! wandering from block to block, searching front yards and backyards, empty lots and woods. Then, after circling the neighborhood twice, Josh and I suddenly realized we had no idea where we were. The streets of Dark Falls looked the same. They were all lined with sprawling old brick or shingle houses, all filled with shady old trees. I don't believe it. We're lost, Josh said, leaning against a tree trunk, trying to catch his breath. That stupid dog, I muttered, my eyes searching up the street. Why did he do this? He's never run away before. I don't know how he got loose, Josh said, shaking his head, then wiping his sweaty forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt. I tied him up really well. Hey maybe he ran home, I said. The idea immediately cheered me up. Yeah! Josh stepped away from the tree and headed back over to me. Ill bet you're right, Amanda. He's probably been home for hours. Wow. We've been stupid. We should've checked home first. Let's go! Well, I said, looking around at the empty yards, we just have to figure out which way is home. I looked up and down the street, trying to figure out which way we'd turned when we left the school playground. I couldn't remember, so we just started walking. Luckily, as we reached the next corner, the school came into sight. We had made a full circle. It was easy to find our way from there. Passing the playground, I stared at the spot on the fence where Petey had been tied. That troublemaking dog. He'd been acting so badly ever since we came to Dark Falls. Would he be home when we got there? I hoped so. A few minutes later, Josh and I were running up the gravel driveway, calling the dog's name at the top of our lungs. The front door burst open and Mom, her hair tied in a red bandanna, the knees of her jeans covered with dust, leaned out. She and Dad had been painting the back porch. Where have you two been? Lunchtime was two hours ago! Josh and I both answered at the same time. Is Petey here? We've been looking for Petey! Is he here? Mom's face filled with confusion. Petey? I thought he was with you. My heart sank. Josh slumped to the driveway with a loud sigh, sprawling flat on his back in the gravel and leaves. You haven't seen him? I asked, my trembling voice showing my disappointment. He was with us. But he ran away. Oh. Im sorry, Mom said, motioning for Josh to get up from the driveway. He ran away? I thought you've been keeping him on a leash. You've got to help us find him, Josh pleaded, not budging from the ground. Get the car. We've got to find him right now! Im sure he hasn't gotten far, Mom said. You must be starving. Come in and have some lunch and then well No. Right now! Josh screamed. Whats going on? Dad, his face and hair covered with tiny flecks of white paint, joined Mom on the front porch. Josh whats all the yelling? We explained to Dad what had happened. He said he was too busy to drive around looking for Petey. Mom said shed do it, but only after we had some lunch. I pulled Josh up by both arms and dragged him into the house. We washed up and gulped down some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Then Mom took the car out of the garage, and we drove around and around the neighborhood searching for our lost pet. With no luck. No sign of him. Josh and I were miserable. Heartbroken. Mom and Dad called the local police. Dad kept saying that Petey had a good sense of direction, that he'd show up any minute. But we didn't really believe it. Where was he? The four of us ate dinner in silence. It was the longest, most horrible evening of my life. I tied him up really good, Josh repeated, close to tears, his dinner plate still full. Dogs are great escape artists, Dad said, Don't worry. Hell show up. Some night for a party, Mom said glumly. Id completely forgotten that they were going out. Some neighbors on the next block had invited them to a big potluck dinner party. I sure don't feel like partying, either, Dad said with a sigh. Im beat from painting all day. But I guess we have to be neighborly. Sure you kids will be okay here? Yeah, I guess, I said, thinking about Petey. I kept listening for his bark, listening for scratching at the door. But no. The hours dragged by. Petey still hadn't shown up by bedtime. Josh and I both slinked upstairs. I felt really tired, weary from all the worrying, and the running around and searching for Petey, I guess. But I knew Id never be able to get to sleep. In the hall outside my bedroom door, I heard whispering from inside my room and quiet footsteps. The usual sounds my room made. I wasn't at all

scared of them or surprised by them anymore. Without hesitating, I stepped into my room and clicked on the light. The room was empty, as I knew it would be. The mysterious sounds disappeared. I glanced at the curtains, which lay straight and still. Then I saw the clothes strewn all over my bed. Several pairs of jeans. Several T-shirts. A couple of sweatshirts. My only dress-up skirt. Thats strange, I thought. Mom was such a neat freak. If she had washed these things, she surely would have hung them up or put them into dresser drawers. Sighing wearily, I started to gather up the clothes and put them away. I figured that Mom simply had too much to do to be bothered. She had probably washed the stuff and then left it here for me to put away. Or she had put it all down, planning to come back later and put it away, and then got busy with other chores. Half an hour later, I was tucked into my bed wide awake, staring at the shadows on the ceiling. Some time after that I lost track of the time; I was still wide awake, still thinking about Petey, thinking about the new kids Id met, thinking about the new neighborhood, when I heard my bedroom door creak and swing open. Footsteps on the creaking floorboards. I sat up in the darkness as someone crept into my room. Amandassshits me. Alarmed, it took me a few seconds to recognize the hushed whisper. Josh! What do you want? What are you doing in here? I gasped as a blinding light forced me to cover my eyes. Oops. Sorry, Josh said. My flashlight. I didn't mean to. Ow, thats bright, I said, blinking. He aimed the powerful beam of white light up at the ceiling. Yeah. Its a halogen flashlight, he said. Well, what do you want? I asked irritably. I still couldn't see well. I rubbed my eyes, but it didn't help. I know where Petey is, Josh whispered, and Im going to go get him. Come with me? Huh? I looked at the little clock on my bed table. Its after midnight, Josh. So? It wont take long. Really. My eyes were nearly normal by now. Staring at Josh in the light from the halogen flashlight, I noticed for the first time that he was fully dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. I don't get it, Josh, I said, swinging around and putting my feet on the floor. We looked everywhere. Where do you think Petey is? In the cemetery, Josh answered. His eyes looked big and dark and serious in the white light. Huh? Thats where he ran the first time, remember? When we first came to Dark Falls? He ran to that cemetery just past the school. Now, wait a minute I started. We drove past it this afternoon, but we didn't look inside. Hes there, Amanda. I know he is. And Im going to go get him whether you come or not. Josh, calm down, I said, putting my hands on his narrow shoulders. I was surprised to discover that he was trembling. Theres no reason for Petey to be in that cemetery. Thats where he went the first time, Josh insisted. He was looking for something there that day. I could tell. I know hes there again, Amanda. He pulled away from me. Are you coming or not? My brother has to be the stubbornest, most headstrong person in the world. Josh, youre really going to walk into a strange cemetery so late at night? I asked. Im not afraid, he said, shining the bright light around my room. For a brief second, I thought the light caught someone, lurking behind the curtains. I opened my mouth to cry out. But there was no one there. You coming or not? he repeated impatiently. I was going to say no. But then, glancing at the curtains, I thought, its probably no more spooky out there in that cemetery than it is here in my own bedroom! Yeah. Okay, I said grudgingly. Get out of here and let me get dressed. Okay, he whispered, turning off the flashlight, plunging us into blackness. Meet me down at the end of the driveway. Joshone quick look at the cemetery, then we hurry home. Got it? I told him. Yeah. Right. Well be home before Mom and Dad get back from that party. He crept out. I could hear him making his way quickly down the stairs. This is the craziest idea ever, I told myself as I searched in the darkness for some clothes to pull on. And it was also kind of exciting. Josh was wrong. No doubt about it. Petey wouldn't be hanging around in that cemetery now. Why on earth should he? But at least it wasn't a long walk. And it was an adventure. Something to write about to Kathy back home. And if Josh happened to be right, and we did manage to find poor, lost Petey, well, that would be great, too. A few minutes later, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, I crept out of the house and joined Josh at the bottom of the driveway. The night was still warm. A heavy blanket of clouds covered the moon. I realized for the first time that there were no streetlights on our block. Josh had the halogen flashlight on, aimed down at our feet. You ready? he asked. Dumb question. Would I be standing there if I weren't ready? We crunched over dead leaves as we headed up the block, toward the school. From there, it was just two blocks to the cemetery. Its so dark, I whispered. The houses were black and silent. There was no breeze at all. It was as if we were all alone in the world. Its too quiet, I said, hurrying to keep up with Josh. No crickets or anything. Are you sure you really want to go to the cemetery? Im sure, he said, his eyes following the circle of light from the flashlight as it bumped over the ground. I really think Petey is there. We walked in the street, keeping close to the curb. We had gone nearly two blocks. The school was just coming into sight on the next block when we heard the scraping steps behind us on the pavement. Josh and I both stopped. He lowered the light. We both heard the sounds. I wasn't imagining them. Someone was following us.

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Josh was so startled, the flashlight tumbled from his hand and clattered onto the street. The light flickered but didnt go out. By the time Josh had managed to pick it up, our pursuer had caught up to us. I spun around to face him, my heart pounding in my chest. Ray! What are you doing here? Josh aimed the light at Rays face, but Ray shot his arms up to shield his face and ducked back into the darkness. What are you two doing here? he cried, sounding almost as startled as I did. Youyou scared us, Josh said angrily, aiming the flashlight back down at our feet. Sorry, Ray said, I wouldve called out, but I wasnt sure it was you. Josh has this crazy idea about where Petey might be, I told him, still struggling to catch my breath. Thats why were out here. What about you? Josh asked Ray. Well, sometimes I have trouble sleeping, Ray said softly. Dont your parents mind you being out so late? I asked. In the glow from the flashlight, I could see a wicked smile cross his face. They dont know. Are we going to the cemetery or not? Josh asked impatiently. Without waiting for an answer, he started jogging up the road, the light bobbing on the pavement in front of him. I turned and followed, wanting to stay close to the light. Where are you going? Ray called, hurrying to catch up. The cemetery, I called back. No, Ray said. Youre not. His voice was so low, so threatening, that I stopped. What? Youre not going there, Ray repeated. I couldnt see his face. It was hidden in darkness. But his words sounded menacing. Hurry! Josh called back to us. He hadnt slowed down. He didnt seem to notice the threat in Rays words. Stop, Josh! Ray called. It sounded more like an order than a request. You cant go there! Why not? I demanded, suddenly afraid. Was Ray threatening Josh and me? Did he know something we didnt? Or was I making a big deal out of nothing once again? I stared into the darkness, trying to see his face. Youd be nuts to go there at night! he declared. I began to think I had misjudged him. He was afraid to go there. Thats why he was trying to stop us. Are you coming or not? Josh demanded, getting farther and farther ahead of us. I dont think we should, Ray warned. Yes, hes afraid, I decided. I only imagined that he was threatening us. You dont have to. But we do, Josh insisted, picking up his speed. No. Really, Ray said. This is a bad idea. But now he and I were running side by side to catch up with Josh. Petey was there, Josh said, I know he is. We passed the dark, silent school. It seemed much bigger at night. Joshs light flashed through the low tree branches as we turned the corner onto Cemetery Drive. Waitplease, Ray pleaded. But Josh didnt slow down. Neither did I. I was eager to get there and get it over with. I wiped my forehead with my sleeve. The air was hot and still. I wished I hadnt worn long sleeves. I felt my hair. It was dripping wet. The clouds still covered the moon as we reached the cemetery. We stepped through a gate in the low wall. In the darkness, I could see the crooked rows of gravestones. Joshs light traveled from stone to stone, jumping up and down as he walked. Petey! he called suddenly, interrupting the silence. Hes disturbing the sleep of the dead, I thought, feeling a sudden chill of fear. Dont be silly, Amanda. Petey! I called, too, forcing away my morbid thoughts. This is a very bad idea, Ray said, standing very close to me. Petey! Petey! Josh called. I know its a bad idea, I admitted to Ray. But I didnt want Josh to come here by himself. But we shouldnt be here, Ray insisted. I was beginning to wish hed go away. No one had forced him to come. Why was he giving us such a hard time? Heylook at this! Josh called from several yards up ahead. My sneakers crunching over the soft ground, I hurried between the rows of graves. I hadnt realized that we had already walked the entire length of the graveyard. Look, Josh said again, his flashlight playing over a strange structure built at the edge of the cemetery. It took me a little while to figure out what it was in the small circle of light. It was so unexpected. It was some kind of theater. An amphitheater, I guess youd call it, circular rows of bench seats dug into the ground, descending like stairs to a low stagelike platform at the bottom. What on earth! I exclaimed. I started forward to get a closer look. Amandawait. Lets go home, Ray called. He grabbed at my arm, but I hurried away, and he grabbed only air. Weird! Who would build an outdoor theater at the edge of a cemetery? I asked. I looked back to see if Josh and Ray were following me, and my sneaker caught against something. I stumbled to the ground, hitting my knee hard. Ow. What was that? Josh shone the light on it as I climbed slowly, painfully, to my feet. I had tripped over an enormous, upraised tree root. In the flickering light, I followed the gnarled root over to a wide, old tree several yards away. The huge tree was bent over the strange below-ground theater, leaning at such a low angle that it looked likely to topple over at any second. Big clumps of roots were raised up from the ground. Overhead, the trees branches, heavy with leaves, seemed to lean to the ground. Timberrr! Josh yelled. How weird! I exclaimed. Hey, Raywhat is this place? Its a meeting place, Ray said quietly, standing close beside me, staring straight ahead at the leaning tree. They use it sort of like a town hall. They have town

meetings here. In the cemetery? I cried, finding it hard to believe. Lets go, Ray urged, looking very nervous. All three of us heard the footsteps. They were behind us, somewhere in the rows of graves. We turned around. Joshs light swept over the ground. Petey! There he was, standing between the nearest row of low, stone grave markers. I turned happily to Josh. I dont believe it! I cried. You were right! Petey! Petey! Josh and I both started running toward our dog. But Petey arched back on his hind legs as if he were getting ready to run away. He stared at us, his eyes red as jewels in the light of the flashlight. Petey! We found you! I cried. The dog lowered his head and started to trot away. Petey! Heycome back! Dont you recognize us? With a burst of speed, Josh caught up with him and grabbed him up off the ground. Hey, Petey, whats the matter, fella? As I hurried over, Josh dropped Petey back to the ground and stepped back. Oohhe stinks! What? I cried. Peteyhe stinks. He smells like a dead rat! Josh held his nose. Petey started to walk slowly away. Josh, he isnt glad to see us, I wailed. He doesnt even seem to recognize us. Look at him! It was true. Petey walked to the next row of gravestones, then turned and glared at us. I suddenly felt sick. What had happened to Petey? Why was he acting so differently? Why wasnt he glad to see us? I dont get it, Josh said, still making a face from the odor the dog gave off. Usually, if we leave the room for thirty seconds, he goes nuts when we come back. Wed better go! Ray called. He was still at the edge of the cemetery near the leaning tree. Peteywhats wrong with you? I called to the dog. He didnt respond. Dont you remember your name? Petey? Petey? Yuck! What a stink! Josh exclaimed. Weve got to get him home and give him a bath, I said. My voice was shaking. I felt really sad. And frightened. Maybe this isnt Petey, Josh said thoughtfully. The dogs eyes again glared red in the beam of light. Its him all right, I said quietly. Look. Hes dragging the leash. Go get him, Joshand lets go home. You get him! Josh cried. He smells too bad! Just grab his leash. You dont have to pick him up, I said. No. You. Josh was being stubborn again. I could see that I had no choice. Okay, I said. Ill get him. But Ill need the light. I grabbed the flashlight from Joshs hand and started to run toward Petey. Sit, Petey. Sit! I ordered. It was the only command Petey ever obeyed. But he didnt obey it this time. Instead, he turned and trotted away, holding his head down low. Peteystop! Petey, come on! I yelled, exasperated. Dont make me chase you. Dont let him get away! Josh yelled, running up behind me. I moved the flashlight from side to side along the ground. Where is he? Petey! Petey! Josh called, sounding shrill and desperate. I couldnt see him. Oh, no. Dont tell me weve lost him again! I said. We both started to call him. Whats wrong with that mutt? I cried. I moved the beam of light down one long row of gravestones, then, moving quickly, down the next. No sign of him. We both kept calling his name. And then the circle of light came to rest on the front of a granite tombstone. Reading the name on the stone, I stopped short. And gasped. Joshlook! I grabbed Joshs sleeve. I held on tight. Huh? Whats wrong? His face filled with confusion. Look! The name on the gravestone. It was Karen Somerset. Josh read the name. He stared at me, still confused. Thats my new friend Karen. The one I talk to on the playground every day, I said. Huh? It must be her grandmother or something, Josh said, and then added impatiently, Come on. Look for Petey. No. Look at the dates, I said to him. We both read the dates under Karen Somersets name. 1960-1972. It cant be her mother or grandmother, I said, keeping the beam of light on the stone despite my trembling hand. This girl died when she was twelve. My age. And Karen is twelve, too. She told me. Amanda Josh scowled and looked away. But I took a few steps and beamed the light onto the next gravestone. There was a name on it Id never heard before. I moved on to the next stone. Another name Id never heard. Amanda, come on! Josh whined. The next gravestone had the name George Carpenter on it. 1975-1988. Joshlook! Its George from the playground, I called. Amanda, we have to get Petey, he insisted. But I couldnt pull myself away from the gravestones. I went from one to the next, moving the flashlight over the engraved letters. To my growing horror, I found Jerry Franklin. And then Bill Gregory. All the kids we had played softball with. They all had gravestones here. My heart thudding, I moved down the crooked row, my sneakers sinking into the soft grass. I felt numb, numb with fear. I struggled to hold the light steady as I beamed it onto the last stone in the row. RAY THURSTON. 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. I'm 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? I'm sorry. You weren't supposed to find out yet, he said, his voice floating low and heavy on the stifling night air. But how? I mean I don't 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. That's why they have to go first. They always know. You mean Petey's 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 weren't supposed to see this, Ray said, his narrow face expressionless except for his dark eyes, which revealed real sadness. You weren't supposed to know. Not for another few weeks, anyway. I'm the watcher. I was supposed to watch, to make sure you didn't 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. I'm 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 town it can't survive without fresh blood. None of us can. You'll understand soon, Amanda. You'll 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 couldn't I scream them? Ray's 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. I'm really sorry. He started to raise himself off the ground, to float over me. I could feel myself start to choke. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't 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 couldn't see his light. Ray floated up a little higher. He hovered over me, choking me somehow, blinding me, suffocating me. I'm dead, I thought. Dead. Now I'm 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 screeched, 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. Karenyou 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. Pleaselet 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 houseuntil 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 bothand 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. Kidsyoure 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 herenow! 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 houseits 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 anyoneell 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. NoJosh! 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! JoshPetey 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. Joshare you okay? He was lying on his stomach, staring straight ahead. Joshanswer 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 wasnt 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.