

"Grueling, demented, and so crammed with noxious awesomeness that I had to read it twice."

—Scott Westerfeld, author of the Uglies series

A shovel is shown digging through a graveyard of tombstones. The scene is monochromatic, with a blue and grey color palette. The shovel's handle is on the left, and its head is buried in the ground. In the foreground, a shovel is digging through a mound of earth. In the background, several tombstones are visible, some partially buried. One tombstone in the foreground has a carved face. A small insect is perched on the top right corner of the title banner.

ROTTERS

DANIEL KRAUS

Chapter Sampler

GRAVE ROBBING.

**What kind of monster
would do such a thing?**

Joey Crouch is a sixteen-year-old straight-A student living in Chicago with his single mom, but everything changes when his mother dies in a tragic accident and he is sent to live with his father, a strange, solitary man with unimaginable secrets. Together they embark on an exhilarating adventure where they discover what rots beneath the earth's surface—and inside its graves.

Learn more at randomhouse.com/teens
www.danielkraus.com



Keep reading for a sneak peek at *Rotters* . . .

A piece of crumpled, aged, light-colored paper with a small, dark insect (possibly a fly or beetle) on its surface. The paper has a rough, torn edge and a textured, wrinkled appearance. The insect is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the paper.

**So Many
Worthy Deaths**

This is the day my mother dies. I can taste it right off: salt on my lips, dried air, the AC having never been switched on because she died from heart failure while reclining in front of the television, sweating in her underwear, her last thought that she needed to turn on the air because poor Joey must be roasting in his bedroom. Pulmonary embolism: it is what killed everyone on her side of the family and now it has killed her, while I slept, and this salt is the bitter taste of her goodbye.

Turns out, her heart is not what got her. There are her usual morning noises. The apartment door unbolts and unlocks. I kneel on my bed to look out the window. The dawn is piss yellow but beautiful because it is another day and she is alive, and I am alive, and the city around us is screaming with life. Birds push one another along branches, their alien feet peeling bark. There is an empty birdhouse; I hear my mother's utilitarian humming and realize that she is somewhere beneath it, and that as the birds battle they will bother the string that straps birdhouse to branch, causing it to fall. Given the right trajectory it can kill her and will. I built that birdhouse. It is my fault. This is the day she dies.

I'm standing on the bed now. The birdhouse rights itself. My mother is still alive; I catch sight of her confident shadow

darting around the corner of the apartment complex, her direction indicating the building's laundry room and the homeless murderer crouching behind the row of washers. Since childhood I've watched her claws flash at the barest hints of danger; she has nearly attacked strangers whose only crimes were giving me disapproving looks. Now she is the one in danger and yet I display none of her courage: I let her die. My failure is too much to bear. I bolt up the stairs and into the shower to hide the tears. I love her too much, I know this. I'm a teenage boy and it's embarrassing. Her constant, hovering, demanding presence should irritate and infuriate me, but it doesn't. She's stronger than I could ever hope to be. She's all I have, and even if that's her fault I love her anyway, especially today, the day that will turn out to be her last.

Then I hear her noises again; she's back inside and there is something unwelcome playing on the stereo—she has turned it on now that I am awake and suddenly I remember the vase. Oh, god. Her birthday was two days ago and I bought her stupid flowers at Jewel and, on impulse, a silver helium balloon with some crap about turning forty. The balloon's ribbon was tied around a vase. Our apartment, cluttered with enough nonperishables to outlast a nuclear winter, photos of the two of us in various Chicago locales, other evidence of a life spent isolated from the wider world, has forced my mother to put the vase on top of the stereo. In moments she will reach to skip the CD's second track—we hate the second track—and her knuckles will bump the vase and the balloon will pitch and rise. The vase will overturn and spill and there will be water in the stereo, through the wiring, down the wall, and into the power strip. She will reach in there to wipe it up and will die the way she warned me against incessantly when I was little. Electricity takes her.

Or not. She barges into the bathroom, burdened with freshly dried towels, singing along grimly to the loathed second track. Her voice is loud, and then there is the rattle of water to contend with, and I wait for a gap of silence during which I can implore her to turn back from certain doom, but she is already ranting that I get up too early, wasn't I up all night playing video games with Boris, and how do I survive on so few hours of sleep—all this despite the fact that she is the lifelong insomniac, the lifelong paranoid, not I. What do you want for breakfast, she asks. I don't care, I say through a mouthful of water—how about eggs. There is a leak in the tub and she will slip in the puddle and strike her head on the edge of the toilet—at least this death is quick—and the final thing I will tell her is not how much I owe her, not how much I need her. It is *eggs*.

She's tough, so tough: I find her alive and well in the kitchen, curls arranged sloppily, cheeks freckled, shoulders pink, wearing a tank top and cutoffs and red flip-flops, hunched bored in front of a frying pan. It's all for me, this tedious routine. She could've been a nuclear physicist, a powerhouse attorney, a mountaineer. Her intelligence and ingenuity are proven on a daily basis—she knows all the *Jeopardy!* answers, can disassemble and reconstruct a toaster oven in under five minutes, is steely in the face of injuries, crafty in the face of collection agencies—yet for me she accepts the indignities of raising an ungrateful sixteen-year-old, the stultifying grind of an insulting desk job. Despite these sacrifices, I won't eat. How can I? The room twitches with menace. Grease pops in the pan; it will burn holes in her ever-watchful eyes and she will flail, and I do not have to list the number of sharp objects waiting for her on the counter.

I choke down the eggs. I watch her as she cleans up. She

raises the edge of her cutoffs to brood over cellulite. Contorted in this way I can see the unnatural groove that passes through the curvatures of her left ear. It is a wound she suffered from my father. I don't know my father and she has offered neither information nor emotion. The injury is part of a puzzle I've been too self-absorbed to wonder about, the true origin of her sleepless nights. The pitiful little I know is this: to draw attention away from the disfigurement, she stretches her lobes with extravagant earrings; those she wears now are turquoise with mini-dangles that swirl and catch themselves in knots. So *this* is how she dies. Today's chores include mowing the grass along the building's front lawn (for a few bucks off our rent), changing the oil in the car, and cleaning dust from fans that over the summer have caked. It seems inconceivable that such trifling devices could take down my invincible guardian, but they will. Mower, car, fan: each has spinning components that will snatch dangling earrings, gears that will pinch the skin, then shudder against live meat before self-lubricating with blood. I have time to disable only one device, and the choice immobilizes me.

She's unrelenting. As usual. Already she's down the stairs seeking my dirty laundry. There is a rip in the carpet on the third stair, wide enough to snare a flip-flopped toe. When she somehow survives, she is out the door, laundry basket on her hip, shouting to me that I need to get off my butt and practice my trumpet. The door bangs shut. Outside there is nothing but trouble. Strung-out punks with knives and a need. Gang members not caring who gets caught in the cross fire. There are a million ways to bite it in the big city, even if you're as fearless as my mother. I lift my trumpet. The song I play will be her requiem.

I play poorly. My fingers stiffen in sympathy with the rigor

mortis already setting her joints. I am one month away from beginning my junior year in high school, and this room of mine provides further proof that I am helpless without her as my vigilant protector. Tacked to my bulletin board are the past six years of straight As, a testament to her skillful badgering. Scattered around the room is evidence of too many weekends spent together playing board games. She should not have sheltered me so much. I try to get mad about it. It might make losing her a little bit easier.

The flops have been replaced with flats, the tank top with a blouse. I must leave the house. She says so. Summer is half over and my face, she says, looks like Wonder Bread. She is leaving, too—groceries don't buy themselves. She moves fast, mirrored sunglasses planted, purse shouldered. I stand there in bare feet. This unstoppable force is my mother and I will never see her again. I need to thank her and tell her the truth: I love her. Her perfunctory smile tells me she has other things on her mind. She is saying something about how I should shut the windows before it rains, and do I want Thai later, no, no—let's do Vietnamese. It is food I will never taste. The space between us plummets and we stand on edges of opposite cliffs. It feels like I have played the trumpet all night: my lips are numb, my fingers tremulous, my lungs bruised. She stomps out the door, and ten minutes later, at 10:15 a.m., the time of her actual death, when she jaywalks and is broken to pieces by a city bus, I turn where I stand in our living room and glare at the apartment that used to be our haven. So many more-worthy deaths available here, all things considered, than the one that chose her.

BOOK I

Fun and Games



1.

MY FATHER'S NAME WAS Ken Harnett. I was told by my caseworker from the Department of Children and Family Services that she had tracked him down in a small town in Iowa not far from the Mississippi River, not even five hours away from Chicago. My caseworker, a young woman named Claire, was proud of the discovery. When she had told me after my mother's funeral that she was giving top priority to the search, it had sounded like one of those things she was required to say. I think I nodded and maybe even smiled. It never occurred to me that Claire would succeed. I don't think it occurred to her, either.

I tried to imagine what he looked like; I subtracted my mother's features from my own. The exercise was not only futile, it was boring. I didn't care. He was not real, at least not to me. Even the name felt fabricated. My last name was Crouch. I knew no Harnetts and had never met anyone named Ken. Such thoughts compelled me to fish out my passport and consider the moronic face staring back at me. I'd had the passport all my life, a childhood gift that made little

sense; perhaps there had been a time when my mother had fantasized that we might leave the confines not only of the city but of the country as well. Over the years, I had taken it upon myself to renew the passport as a personal promise that I would not turn out like her, that one day I would see the world, any world. If I used it now, right now, maybe I could escape this faceless father.

Claire was assigned to my case the same day that my mother went under all eight wheels of the bus. Death was instantaneous, though the paperwork wasn't signed until about noon. Around dinnertime, the intercom buzzed and I asked who was there and it was a woman's voice that was not my mother's. Our speaker was crap, so I went downstairs to see who it was and it was a pretty Asian girl with a pixie cut and purple fingernails, possibly still in her twenties, and suddenly it didn't matter if she was homeless or a Jehovah's Witness or planned on pressing a knife to my throat. All I could think of was how stupid I looked with my Kool-Aid-stained tee and pleated shorts. Not that my attire mattered much: I was short and scrawny and not anyone people spent time looking at, and I knew I was kidding myself that this female, any female, saw me as anything but a blur of pimpled flesh and uncooperative brown hair. "Your mother has died," she said. She said it before introducing herself, and I couldn't help considering my reaction almost abstractly. There was an attractive young woman at my door; masculine protocol required that I not cry. It was tough, and got tougher as the night progressed, and I found myself wishing that Claire were less cute, much older, and had, for instance, a mustache.

Claire attended the wake and the funeral. I guess it was part of her job. My best friend, Boris Watson, met her for the first time there, and was as disheartened as I by her inappropriate

good looks. The two of them shook hands, her grip business-like and warm, his limp and humiliated, and I realized that, with my mother gone, this mismatched pair was all I had left. It did not bode well that their handshake was short, their conversation strained and doomed.

The service took place at our usual church with our usual pastor—my mother had taken me there almost every Sunday of my life. I don't know who arranged the funeral details and chose the casket or where exactly the money came from to pay for the service and flowers. Claire surely knew; maybe Boris knew, too. I was steered around, sometimes literally by the shoulders, from a hospital morgue to Boris's living room to a dreary Italian restaurant and back to Boris's, and on and on until it was two days later and there was my mother in her casket. I first caught sight of her face from the corner of my eye and it was like noticing someone you didn't expect to see. Behind me, Boris and the rest of the Watsons kept their distance. The funeral home doors would remain closed for another twenty minutes; this time belonged solely to the family, and that meant me. Red carpet led me to her. She was fantastically still and her cheeks lay unnaturally flat. On those cheeks was far too much makeup—the only freckles I could see were in a patch below her throat.

A few seconds of this was enough. I craned my neck. That spider bobbing in that ceiling cobweb—there was more life there than in this expensive silver box, and I devoured its every detail, the delicate probe of the spider's leg, the responding sink and shine of its net. It was a talent of mine, or a problem, depending on whom you asked, to obsess about trivial details during stressful situations. In fourth grade a school therapist called it an avoidance technique. My mom, who didn't mind it so much, had dubbed it "specifying." Once,

in a doctor's office, as the old man ran through the grim details of my impending tonsillectomy, my mom caught me specifying toward the floor. As we left, she didn't ask me about the procedure. Instead she asked me about the doctor's shoes, their color, the number of lace holes, and their general condition. I could not help smiling and responding—

—*greenish black*—

—*twelve*—

—*ratty as hell*—

The skill hadn't come from nowhere. My friendship with Boris aside, my mother and I had lived in solitude as hermetic as it was mysterious. Fiercely dependent upon her from an early age, I was seized by anxiety when she was even a few minutes late coming home from work. To distract myself I would concentrate—on the insectile innards of lightbulbs, the landscapes of dust on the blinds, the caricatures hiding within the ceiling spackle—and when she arrived, I could recite to her every last detail. She applauded and encouraged this practice, but for me it came far too easily. There were plenty of things in life I wanted to forget. By the time I was nine or ten, I considered specifying a curse.

At the request of the Watsons, and with Claire's recommendation to her department, I was placed with Boris's family until other arrangements could be made. Boris stood beside me during the endless handshaking of the wake and sat next to me at the funeral. When the graveside service was over and people were filing away, Boris was the one who told me that I needed to touch the casket. "Just put your hand on it," he said. I didn't see why it was important. "Now, dumb-ass," he hissed. "I did it when my grandma died. Trust me."

People were squeezing past us; it was my only chance. I leaned over and touched the casket with two fingers. The solidity of the hard surface was unexpectedly reassuring, and I pressed my entire palm flat against the beveled corner. I could feel through my hand the thunder of the exiting crowd. These vibrations were life, and for a moment my mother was part of it. I let it last for several seconds. It was the first time I had touched a casket and I presumed it would be the last. I was wrong, of course—I would touch hundreds, and soon.

Ken Harnett was out there, but it was still two weeks before Claire would find him. Two duffel bags and my beloved green backpack in tow, I moved into the Watsons' dusty ambiance of paperback books and vinyl records, all of which quivered with thatches of dog hair. My mother and I might have never crossed state lines, but going to the Watson condo was like traversing the world. Boris's parents, Janelle and Thaddeus, were an interracial couple—he was from Vermont, she from Kenya—and their place was decked out with bizarre and frightening artifacts they brought home from their travels only to have them dutifully demolished by one of Boris's hysterical little sisters. I moved through the familiar museum of masks and swords and sculpture, crashed onto an army mattress on Boris's floor, and found myself staring at a scattering of glow-in-the-dark stars that we had stuck on his ceiling in third grade. As the sky darkened, I marveled at the number of years that had passed since we had placed the constellation, how little we must have been, and how those stars—little scraps of sticky paper—had outlasted my mother. "The stars are still there," I finally said, unable to close my eyes and unwilling to start specifying—here, nested within the Watson home, it just seemed cowardly. "Huh?" Boris answered right away. He was awake, too. "What stars?"

“The stars,” I insisted, and he responded, “Yeah, but where?” I thought I was going crazy. Then he said, “Oh, *those* stars. Wow, I guess I forgot about them. Huh. You sure are an observant bastard. I don’t know, I guess that’s just how my ceiling looks. You better get used to it.” I wiped the sweat from my face and peeled away the dog hairs. He was right. I had better.

Boris wasn’t just my best friend, he was my only friend, really. By the time you hit middle school, one good friend was all you needed. We were not popular, Boris and I, but we were hardly Mac Hill or Alfie Sutherland. It was a big school, seething with nearly two thousand jocks and dorks and burnouts of every conceivable ethnicity and IQ. Within such pandemonium, it was blissfully easy to be overlooked.

If the adults were to be believed, each one of us possessed some sort of special talent, though they were kidding themselves if they thought all talents were equal. My straight As, for instance, were hardly something I went around advertising. Fortunately, there was one other place Boris and I shined: we both played trumpet. Boris had been playing since he was little—trumpet lessons were but one of the dozens of cultural pursuits foisted upon him by Janelle and Thaddeus. My mom was uncomfortable with anything that kept me away from home, but I guilted her into buying me an instrument in sixth grade and naturally chose the same one as Boris. We were both pretty good. We could sight-read and even improvise over changes a bit. We played at school pep rallies, football and basketball games, and seasonal concerts, and between the two of us we had scored four or five solos. We spent a lot of quality time bitching about what an idiot’s contraption the trumpet was, how it barely rated above a first grader’s recorder, and how

we both planned to melt the brass for money as soon as we hit college. In reality we loved it. The trumpet is, in fact, a pretty unimpressive thing, but it's different when you're playing as part of an eighty-piece concert orchestra or twenty-member jazz band. There is power there, and we both felt it after every performance, even as we rolled our eyes at the applause and made lewd gestures involving the bell ends of the trumpets.

Since the beginning of summer, I had practiced maybe two or three times total, and each of those had been a reaction to my mother's badgering. Now, bunking alongside Boris in weird imitation of the sleepovers of our youth, I couldn't get practice out of my head—practice had been my mother's final request. I sat up beneath the glowing green stars, the sheets clinging to my skin. I checked the digital clock. It was nearly two in the morning. I counted on my fingers. My mother had been dead for almost sixty hours. It was dark in Boris's bedroom, much darker than my room at home, and I patted the carpet until I found my backpack, then dug past clothes, the flimsy folds of my wallet, the crinkled pages of my passport, until my hands felt the hard plastic of my trumpet case. Keeping my eyes focused on the phony universe six feet above my head, I removed the trumpet and ran my hands over the warm metal, slid my palm over the valves, gave a little tug to the water key. I settled my fingers onto the buttons and nested my thumb into its crook.

"Shit, man," came a voice from Boris's bed. "If you wanted to play, all you had to do was ask."

"Oh, sorry."

"I'm sure you are." He paused. "It's a nice night."

"It's dark in here," I said. "I tried to be quiet, sorry."

Boris drew a long breath through his nose. "Sound always

carries best at night anyway. Think about how we sound at football games.”

“Boris,” I said. “It’s late. Real late.”

“Hell, if this was Birdland, we’d just be getting cooking right about now.”

“Your parents would kill us.”

“Janelle and Thaddeus? Tonight? Tonight we can get away with anything, and I say we take advantage of it.” I heard rustling covers. He was out of bed. Next came the bang of his trumpet case hitting the desk, the crack of undone latches.

“What about your sisters? They will go bat-shit,” I said. “Come on, forget it, let’s go to sleep.”

I heard the soft squeal of his mouthpiece being inserted and saw his outline in the dark, blotting out star systems in silent laughter. “You want to play or what?”

And so we played. The notes were tentative at first; “Blues by Five” never sounded so twiggy and fragile. Boris took the lead on “Salt Peanuts.” At what passed for the conclusion, I started “Oleo” without even thinking about it, and there it was, what we had been searching for: a true sound. He met me a few lines in, dodging around, finding the gaps before I could guess where they might be, and now we were playing, really playing, and Boris shoved open his window with an elbow. The night came inside, the music went out. Only after twenty minutes did I realize we were loud; we both played louder. I kept waiting for the pounding from his sisters or angry neighbors, the phone calls alerting us to the police who were on their way. Nothing—it was as if the performance itself imparted its magnitude. Boris kicked open his bedroom door and we snaked through the kitchen and living room, and I thought of the second-line funeral marches in New Orleans, the sepulchral celebrations in the streets of Mexican villages.

Another window tossed open and we were on the fire escape, the sound taking on crisper properties in the night air, the notes electric at each apex. At some point I became aware of Janelle and Thaddeus standing behind us looking on silently, their hands gripping each other's pajamas. Behind them, yawning dogs and the progressively shorter lineup of Boris's bedclothed sisters, their perennially cross faces loosened with something like awe. Below us, faces on the street tilted our way. All this listening made me listen, too: our notes no longer made any sense. It didn't matter and no one seemed to care. In the end, everything is noise.

MEET DANIEL KRAUS



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