

# Chapter 4

Wipe your feet! Dont track mud on the nice clean floors! Mom called. Her voice echoed against the bare walls of the empty living room. I stepped into the hallway. The house smelled of paint. The painters had just finished on Thursday. It was hot in the house, much hotter than outside. This kitchen light wont go on, Dad called from the back. Did the painters turn off the electricity or something? How should I know? Mom shouted back. Their voices sounded so loud in the big, empty house. Momtheres someone upstairs! I cried, wiping my feet on the new welcome mat and hurrying into the living room. She was at the window, staring out at the rain, looking for the movers probably. She spun around as I came in. What? Theres a boy upstairs. I saw him in the window, I said, struggling to catch my breath. Josh entered the room from the back hallway. Hed probably been with Dad. He laughed. Is someone already living here? Theres no one upstairs, Mom said, rolling her eyes. Are you two going to give me a break today, or what? What did I do? Josh whined. Listen, Amanda, were all a little on edge today Mom started. But I interrupted her. I saw his face, Mom. In the window. Im not crazy, you know. Says who? Josh cracked. Amanda! Mom bit her lower lip, the way she always did when she was really exasperated. You saw a reflection of something. Of a tree probably. She turned back to the window. The rain was coming down in sheets now, the wind driving it noisily against the large picture window. I ran to the stairway, cupped my hands over my mouth, and shouted up to the second floor, Whos up there? No answer. Whos up there? I called, a little louder. Mom had her hands over her ears. Amandaplease! Josh had disappeared through the dining room. He was finally exploring the house. Theres someone up there, I insisted and, impulsively, I started up the wooden stairway, my sneakers thudding loudly on the bare steps. Amanda I heard Mom call after me. But I was too angry to stop. Why didnt she believe me? Why did she have to say it was a reflection of a tree I saw up there? I was curious. I had to know who was upstairs. I had to prove Mom wrong. I had to show her I hadnt seen a stupid reflection. I guess I can be pretty stubborn, too. Maybe its a family trait. The stairs squeaked and creaked under me as I climbed. I didnt feel at all scared until I reached the second-floor landing. Then I suddenly had this heavy feeling in the

pit of my stomach. I stopped, breathing hard, leaning on the banister. Who could it be? A burglar? A bored neighborhood kid who had broken into an empty house for a thrill? Maybe I shouldnt be up here alone, I realized. Maybe the boy in the window was dangerous. Anybody up here? I called, my voice suddenly trembly and weak. Still leaning against the banister, I listened. And I could hear footsteps scampering across the hallway. No. Not footsteps. The rain. Thats what it was. The patter of rain against the slate- shingled roof. For some reason, the sound made me feel a little calmer. I let go of the banister and stepped into the long, narrow hallway. It was dark up here, except for a rectangle of gray light from a small window at the other end. I took a few steps, the old wooden floorboards creaking noisily beneath me. Anybody up here? Again no answer. I stepped up to the first doorway on my left. The door was closed. The smell of fresh paint was suffocating. There was a light switch on the wall near the door. Maybe its for the hall light, I thought. I clicked it on. But nothing happened. Anybody here? My hand was trembling as I grabbed the doorknob. It felt warm in my hand. And damp. I turned it and, taking a deep breath, pushed open the door. I peered into the room. Gray light filtered in through the bay window. A flash of lightning made me jump back. The thunder that followed was a dull, distant roar. Slowly, carefully, I took a step into the room. Then another. No sign of anyone. This was a guest bedroom. Or it could be Joshs room if he decided he liked it. Another flash of lightning. The sky seemed to be darkening. It was pitch-black out there even though it was just after lunchtime. I backed into the hall. The next room down was going to be mine. It also had a bay window that looked down on the front yard. Was the boy I saw staring down at me in my room? I crept down the hall, letting my hand run along the wall for some reason, and stopped outside my door, which was also closed. Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door. Whos in there? I called. I listened. Silence. Then a clap of thunder, closer than the last. I froze as if I were paralyzed, holding my breath. It was so hot up here, hot and damp. And the smell of paint was making me dizzy. I grabbed the doorknob. Anybody in there? I started to turn the knobwhen the boy crept up from behind and grabbed my shoulder.