

# Chapter 1

Josh and I hated our new house. Sure, it was big. It looked like a mansion compared to our old house. It was a tall redbrick house with a sloping black roof and rows of windows framed by black shutters. Its so dark, I thought, studying it from the street. The whole house was covered in darkness, as if it were hiding in the shadows of the gnarled, old trees that bent over it. It was the middle of July, but dead brown leaves blanketed the front yard. Our sneakers crunched over them as we trudged up the gravel driveway. Tall weeds poked up everywhere through the dead leaves. Thick clumps of weeds had completely overgrown an old flower bed beside the front porch. This house is creepy, I thought unhappily. Josh must have been thinking the same thing. Looking up at the old house, we both groaned loudly. Mr. Dawes, the friendly young man from the local real estate office, stopped near the front walk and turned around. Everything okay? he asked, staring first at Josh, then at me, with his crinkly blue eyes. Josh and Amanda arent happy about moving, Dad explained, tucking his shirttail in. Dad is a little overweight, and his shirts always seem to be coming untucked. Its hard for kids, my mother added, smiling at Mr. Dawes, her hands shoved into her jeans pockets as she continued up to the front door. You know. Leaving all of their friends behind. Moving to a strange new place. Strange is right, Josh said, shaking his head. This house is gross. Mr. Dawes chuckled. Its an old house, thats for sure, he said, patting Josh on the shoulder. It just needs some work, Josh, Dad said, smiling at Mr. Dawes. No one has lived in it for a while, so ill take some fixing up. Look how big it is, Mom added, smoothing back her straight black hair and smiling at Josh. Well have room for a den and maybe a rec room, too. Youd like thatwouldnt you, Amanda? I shrugged. A cold breeze made me shiver. It was actually a beautiful, hot summer day. But the closer we got to the house, the colder I felt. I guessed it was because of all the tall, old trees. I was wearing white tennis shorts and a sleeveless blue T-shirt. It had been hot in the car. But now I was freezing. Maybe ill be warmer in the house, I thought. How old are they? Mr. Dawes asked Mom, stepping onto the front porch. Amanda is twelve, Mom answered. And Josh turned eleven last month. They look so much alike, Mr. Dawes told Mom. I couldnt decide if that was a compliment or not. I guess its true. Josh and I are both tall and thin and have curly brown hair like Dads, and dark brown eyes. Everyone says we have serious faces. I really want to go home, Josh said, his voice cracking. I hate this place. My brother is the most impatient kid in the world. And when he makes up his mind about something, thats it. Hes a little spoiled. At least, I think so. Whenever he makes a big fuss about something, he usually gets his way. We may look alike, but were really not that similar. Im a lot more patient than Josh is. A lot more sensible. Probably because Im older and because Im a girl. Josh had hold of Dads hand and was trying to pull him back to the car. Lets go. Come on, Dad. Lets go. I knew this was one time Josh wouldnt get his way. We were moving to this house. No doubt about it. After all, the house was absolutely free. A great-uncle of Dads, a man we didnt even know, had died and left the house to Dad in his will. Ill never forget the look on Dads face when he got the letter from the lawyer. He let out a loud whoop and began dancing around the living room. Josh and I thought hed flipped or something. My Great-Uncle Charles has left us a house in his will, Dad explained, reading and rereading the letter. Its in a town called Dark Falls. Huh? Josh and I cried. Wheres Dark Falls? Dad shrugged. I dont remember your Uncle Charles, Mom said, moving behind Dad to read the letter over his shoulder. Neither do I, admitted Dad. But he mustve been a great guy! Wow! This sounds like an incredible house! He grabbed Moms hands and began dancing happily with her across the living room. Dad sure was excited. Hed been looking for an excuse to quit his boring office job and devote all of his time to his writing career. This house absolutely freewould be just the excuse he needed. And now, a week later, here we were in Dark Falls, a four-hour drive from our home, seeing our new house for the first time. We hadnt even gone inside, and Josh was trying to drag Dad back to the car. Joshstop pulling me, Dad snapped impatiently, trying to tug his hand out of Joshs grasp. Dad glanced helplessly at Mr. Dawes. I could see that he was embarrassed by how Josh was carrying on. I decided maybe I could help. Let go, Josh, I said quietly, grabbing Josh by the shoulder. We promised wed give Dark Falls a chancere member? I already gave it a chance, Josh whined, not letting go of Dads hand. This house is old and ugly and I hate it. You havent even gone inside, Dad said angrily. Yes. Lets go in, Mr. Dawes urged, staring at Josh. Im staying outside, Josh insisted. He can be really stubborn sometimes. I felt just as unhappy as Josh looking at this dark, old house. But Id never carry on the way Josh was. Josh, dont you want to pick out your own room? Mom asked. No, Josh muttered. He and I both glanced up to the second floor. There were two large bay windows side by side up there. They looked like two dark eyes staring back at us. How long have you lived in your present house? Mr. Dawes asked Dad. Dad had to think for a second. About fourteen years, he answered. The kids have lived there for their whole lives. Moving is always hard, Mr. Dawes said sympathetically, turning his gaze on me. You know, Amanda, I moved here to Dark Falls just a few months ago. I didnt like it much either, at first. But now I wouldnt live anywhere else. He winked at me. He had a cute dimple in his chin when he smiled. Lets go inside. Its really quite nice. Youll be surprised. All of us followed Mr. Dawes, except Josh. Are there other kids on this block? Josh demanded. He made it sound more like a challenge than a question. Mr. Dawes nodded. The schools just two blocks away, he said, pointing up the street. See? Mom quickly cut in. A short walk to school. No more long bus rides every morning. I liked the bus, Josh insisted. His mind was made up. He wasnt going to give my parents a break, even

though wed both promised to be open-minded about this move. I dont know what Josh thought he had to gain by being such a pain. I mean, Dad already had plenty to worry about. For one thing, he hadnt been able to sell our old house yet. I didnt like the idea of moving. But I knew that inheriting this big house was a great opportunity for us. We were so cramped in our little house. And once Dad managed to sell the old place, we wouldnt have to worry at all about money anymore. Josh should at least give it a chance. Thats what I thought. Suddenly, from our car at the foot of the driveway, we heard Petey barking and howling and making a fuss. Petey is our dog, a white, curly-haired terrier, cute as a button, and usually well-behaved. He never minded being left in the car. But now he was yowling and yapping at full volume and scratching at the car window, desperate to get out. Peteyquiet! Quiet! I shouted. Petey usually listened to me. But not this time. Im going to let him out! Josh declared, and took off down the driveway toward the car. No. Wait Dad called. But I dont think Josh could hear him over Petseys wails. Might as well let the dog explore, Mr. Dawes said. Its going to be his house, too. A few seconds later, Petey came charging across the lawn, kicking up brown leaves, yipping excitedly as he ran up to us. He jumped on all of us as if he hadnt seen us in weeks and then, to our surprise, he started growling menacingly and barking at Mr. Dawes. Peteystop! Mom yelled. Hes never done this, Dad said apologetically. Really. Hes usually very friendly. He probably smells something on me. Another dog, maybe, Mr. Dawes said, loosening his striped tie, looking warily at our growling dog. Finally, Josh grabbed Petey around the middle and lifted him away from Mr. Dawes. Stop it, Petey, Josh scolded, holding the dog up close to his face so that they were nose-to-nose. Mr. Dawes is our friend. Petey whimpered and licked Joshs face. After a short while, Josh set him back down on the ground. Petey looked up at Mr. Dawes, then at me, then decided to go sniffing around the yard, letting his nose lead the way. Lets go inside, Mr. Dawes urged, moving a hand through his short blond hair. He unlocked the front door and pushed it open. Mr. Dawes held the screen door open for us. I started to follow my parents into the house. Ill stay out here with Petey, Josh insisted from the walk. Dad started to protest, but changed his mind. Okay. Fine, he said, sighing and shaking his head. Im not going to argue with you. Dont come in. You can live outside if you want. He sounded really exasperated. I want to stay with Petey, Josh said again, watching Petey nose his way through the dead flower bed. Mr. Dawes followed us into the hallway, gently closing the screen door behind him, giving Josh a final glance. Hell be fine, he said softly, smiling at Mom. He can be so stubborn sometimes, Mom said apologetically. She peeked into the living room. Im really sorry about Petey. I dont know what got into that dog. No problem. Lets start in the living room, Mr. Dawes said, leading the way. I think youll be pleasantly surprised by how spacious it is. Of course, it needs work. He took us on a tour of every room in the house. I was beginning to get excited. The house was really kind of neat. There were so many rooms and so many closets. And my room was huge and had its own bathroom and an old-fashioned window seat where I could sit at the window and look down at the street. I wished Josh had come inside with us. If he could see how great the house was inside, I knew hed start to cheer up. I couldnt believe how many rooms there were. Even a finished attic filled with old furniture and stacks of old, mysterious cartons we could explore. We must have been inside for at least half an hour. I didnt really keep track of the time. I think all three of us were feeling cheered up. Well, I think Ive shown you everything, Mr. Dawes said, glancing at his watch. He led the way to the front door. Wait! I want to take one more look at my room, I told them excitedly. I started up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Ill be down in a second. Hurry, dear. Im sure Mr. Dawes has other appointments, Mom called after me. I reached the second-floor landing and hurried down the narrow hallway and into my new room. Wow! I said aloud, and the word echoed faintly against the empty walls. It was so big. And I loved the bay window with the window seat. I walked over to it and peered out. Through the trees, I could see our car in the driveway and, beyond it, a house that looked a lot like ours across the street. Im going to put my bed against that wall across from the window, I thought happily. And my desk can go over there. Ill have room for a computer now! I took one more look at my closet, a long, walk-in closet with a light in the ceiling, and wide shelves against the back wall. I was heading to the door, thinking about which of my posters I wanted to bring with me, when I saw the boy. He stood in the doorway for just a second. And then he turned and disappeared down the hall. Josh? I cried. Heycome look! With a shock, I realized it wasnt Josh. For one thing, the boy had blond hair. Hey! I called and ran to the hallway, stopping just outside my bedroom door, looking both ways. Whos here? But the long hall was empty. All of the doors were closed. Whoa, Amanda, I said aloud. Was I seeing things? Mom and Dad were calling from downstairs. I took one last look down the dark corridor, then hurried to rejoin them. Hey, Mr. Dawes, I called as I ran down the stairs, is this house haunted? He chuckled. The question seemed to strike him funny. No. Sorry, he said, looking at me with those crinkly blue eyes. No ghost included. A lot of old houses around here are said to be haunted. But Im afraid this isnt one of them. Ill thought I saw something, I said, feeling a little foolish. Probably just shadows, Mom said. With all the trees, this house is so dark. Why dont you run outside and tell Josh about the house, Dad suggested, tucking in the front of his shirt. Your Mom and I have some things to talk over with Mr. Dawes. Yes, master, I said with a little bow, and obediently ran out to tell Josh all about what he had missed. Hey, Josh, I called, eagerly searching the yard. Josh? My heart sank. Josh and Petey were gone.

## Chapter 2

Josh! Josh! First I called Josh. Then I called Petey. But there was no sign of either of them. I ran down to the bottom of the driveway and peered into the car, but they weren't there. Mom and Dad were still inside talking with Mr. Dawes. I looked along the street in both directions, but there was no sign of them. Josh! Hey, Josh! Finally, Mom and Dad came hurrying out the front door, looking alarmed. I guess they heard my shouts. I can't find Josh or Petey! I yelled up to them from the street. Maybe they're around back, Dad shouted down to me. I headed up the driveway, kicking away dead leaves as I ran. It was sunny down on the street, but as soon as I entered our yard, I was back in the shade, and it was immediately cool again. Hey, Josh! Josh, where are you? Why did I feel so scared? It was perfectly natural for Josh to wander off. He did it all the time. I ran full speed along the side of the house. Tall trees leaned over the house on this side, blocking out nearly all of the sunlight. The backyard was bigger than I'd expected, a long rectangle that sloped gradually down to a wooden fence at the back. Just like the front, this yard was a mass of tall weeds, poking up through a thick covering of brown leaves. A stone birdbath had toppled onto its side. Beyond it, I could see the side of the garage, a dark, brick building that matched the house. Hey, Josh! He wasn't back here. I stopped and searched the ground for footprints or a sign that he had run through the thick leaves. Well? Out of breath, Dad came jogging up to me. No sign of him, I said, surprised at how worried I felt. Did you check the car? He sounded more angry than worried. Yes. It's the first place I looked. I gave the backyard a last quick search. I don't believe Josh would just take off. I do, Dad said, rolling his eyes. You know your brother when he doesn't get his way. Maybe he wants us to think he's run away from home. He frowned. Where is he? Mom asked as we returned to the front of the house. Dad and I both shrugged. Maybe he made a friend and wandered off, Dad said. He raised a hand and scratched his curly brown hair. I could tell that he was starting to worry, too. We've got to find him, Mom said, gazing down to the street. He doesn't know this neighborhood at all. He probably wandered off and got lost. Mr. Dawes locked the front door and stepped down off the porch, pocketing the keys. He couldn't have gotten far, he said, giving Mom a reassuring smile. Let's drive around the block. I'm sure we'll find him. Mom shook her head and glanced nervously at Dad. I'll kill him, she muttered. Dad patted her on the shoulder. Mr. Dawes opened the trunk of the small Honda, pulled off his dark blazer, and tossed it inside. Then he took out a wide-brimmed, black cowboy hat and put it on his head. Hey, that's quite a hat, Dad said, climbing into the front passenger seat. Keeps the sun away, Mr. Dawes said, sliding behind the wheel

and slamming the car door. Mom and I got in back. Glancing over at her, I saw that Mom was as worried as I was. We headed down the block in silence, all four of us staring out the car windows. The houses we passed all seemed old. Most of them were even bigger than our house. All of them seemed to be in better condition, nicely painted with neat, well-trimmed lawns. I didn't see any people in the houses or yards, and there was no one on the street. It certainly is a quiet neighborhood, I thought. And shady. The houses all seemed to be surrounded by tall, leafy trees. The front yards we drove slowly past all seemed to be bathed in shade. The street was the only sunny place, a narrow gold ribbon that ran through the shadows on both sides. Maybe that's why it's called Dark Falls, I thought. Where is that son of mine? Dad asked, staring hard out the windshield. I'll kill him. I really will, Mom muttered. It wasn't the first time she had said that about Josh. We had gone around the block twice. No sign of him. Mr. Dawes suggested we drive around the next few blocks, and Dad quickly agreed. Hope I don't get lost. I'm new here, too, Mr. Dawes said, turning a corner. Hey, there's the school, he announced, pointing out the window at a tall redbrick building. It looked very old-fashioned, with white columns on both sides of the double front doors. Of course, it's closed now, Mr. Dawes added. My eyes searched the fenced-in playground behind the school. It was empty. No one there. Could Josh have walked this far? Mom asked, her voice tight and higher than usual. Josh doesn't walk, Dad said, rolling his eyes. He runs. We'll find him, Mr. Dawes said confidently, tapping his fingers on the wheel as he steered. We turned a corner onto another shady block. A street sign read Cemetery Drive, and sure enough, a large cemetery rose up in front of us. Granite gravestones rolled along a low hill, which sloped down and then up again onto a large flat stretch, also marked with rows of low grave markers and monuments. A few shrubs dotted the cemetery, but there weren't many trees. As we drove slowly past, the gravestones passing by in a blur on the left, I realized that this was the sunniest spot I had seen in the whole town. There's your son. Mr. Dawes, pointing out the window, stopped the car suddenly. Oh, thank goodness! Mom exclaimed, leaning down to see out the window on my side of the car. Sure enough, there was Josh, running wildly along a crooked row of low, white gravestones. What's he doing here? I asked, pushing open my car door. I stepped down from the car, took a few steps onto the grass, and called to him. At first, he didn't react to my shouts. He seemed to be ducking and dodging through the tombstones. He would run in one direction, then cut to the side, then head in another direction. Why was he doing that? I took another few steps and then stopped, gripped with fear. I suddenly realized why Josh was darting and ducking like that, running so wildly through the tombstones. He was being chased. Someone or something was after him.

# Chapter 3

Then, as I took a few reluctant steps toward Josh, watching him bend low, then change directions, his arms outstretched as he ran, I realized I had it completely backward. Josh wasnt being chased. Josh was chasing. He was chasing after Petey. Okay, okay. So sometimes my imagination runs away with me. Running through an old graveyard like this even in bright daylight its only natural that a person might start to have weird thoughts. I called to Josh again, and this time he heard me and turned around. He looked worried. Amandacomme help me! he cried. Josh, whats the matter? I ran as fast as I could to catch up with him, but he kept darting through the gravestones, moving from row to row. Help! Joshwhats wrong? I turned and saw that Mom and Dad were right behind me. Its Petey, Josh explained, out of breath. I cant get him to stop. I caught him once, but he pulled away from me. Petey! Petey! Dad started calling the dog. But Petey was moving from stone to stone, sniffing each one, then running to the next. How did you get all the way over here? Dad asked as he caught up with my brother. I had to follow Petey, Josh explained, still looking very worried. He just took off. One second he was sniffing around that dead flower bed in our front yard. The next second, he just started to run. He wouldnt stop when I called. Wouldnt even look back. He kept running till he got here. I had to follow. I was afraid hed get lost. Josh stopped and gratefully let Dad take over the chase. I dont know what that dumb dogs problem is, he said to me. Hes just weird. It took Dad a few tries, but he finally managed to grab Petey and pick him up off the ground. Our little terrier gave a halfhearted yelp of protest, then allowed himself to be carried away. We all trooped back to the car on the side of the road. Mr. Dawes was waiting by the car. Maybe youd better get a leash for that dog, he said, looking very concerned. Petey never been on a leash, Josh protested, wearily climbing into the backseat. Well, we might have to try one for a while, Dad said quietly. Especially if he keeps running away. Dad tossed Petey into the backseat. The dog eagerly curled up in Joshs arms. The rest of us piled into the car, and Mr. Dawes drove us back to his office, a tiny, white, flat-roofed building at the end of a row of small offices. As we rode, I reached over and stroked the back of Petey head. Why did the dog run away like that? I wondered. Petey had never done that before. I guessed that Petey was also upset about our moving. After all, Petey had spent his whole life in our old house. He probably felt a lot like Josh and I did about having to pack up and move and never see the old neighborhood again. The new house, the new streets, and all the new smells must have freaked the poor dog out. Josh wanted to run away from the whole idea. And so did Petey. Anyway, that was my theory. Mr. Dawes parked the car in front of his tiny office, shook Dads hand, and gave him a business card. You can come by next week, he told Mom and Dad. Ill have all the legal work done by then. After you sign the papers, you can move in anytime. He pushed open the car door and, giving us all a final smile, prepared to climb out. Compton Dawes, Mom said, reading the white business card over Dads shoulder. Thats an unusual name. Is Compton an old family name? Mr. Dawes shook his head. No, he said, Im the only Compton in my family. I have no idea where the name comes from. No idea at all. Maybe my parents didnt know how to spell Charlie! Chuckling at his terrible joke, he climbed out of the car, lowered the wide black Stetson hat on his head, pulled his blazer from the trunk, and disappeared into the small white building. Dad climbed behind the wheel, moving the seat back to make room for his big stomach. Mom got up front, and we started the long drive home. I guess you and Petey had quite an adventure today, Mom said to Josh, rolling up her window because Dad had turned on the air conditioner. I guess, Josh said without enthusiasm. Petey was sound asleep in his lap, snoring quietly. Youre going to love your room, I told Josh. The whole house is great. Really. Josh stared at me thoughtfully, but didnt answer. I poked him in the ribs with my elbow. Say something. Did you hear what I said? But the weird, thoughtful look didnt fade from Joshs face. The next couple of weeks seemed to crawl by. I walked around the house thinking about how Id never see my room again, how Id never eat breakfast in this kitchen again, how Id never watch TV in the living room again. Morbid stuff like that. I had this sick feeling when the movers came one afternoon and delivered a tall stack of cartons. Time to pack up. It was really happening. Even though it was the middle of the afternoon, I went up to my room and flopped down on my bed. I didnt nap or anything. I just stared at the ceiling for more than an hour, and all these wild, unconnected thoughts ran through my head, like a dream, only I was awake. I wasnt the only one who was nervous about the move. Mom and Dad were snapping at each other over nothing at all. One morning they had a big fight over whether the bacon was too crispy or not. In a way, it was funny to see them being so childish. Josh was acting really sullen all the time. He hardly spoke a word to anyone. And Petey sulked, too. That dumb dog wouldnt even pick himself up and come over to me when I had some table scraps for him. I guess the hardest part about moving was saying good-bye to my friends. Carol and Amy were away at camp, so I had to write to them. But Kathy was home, and she was my oldest

and best friend, and the hardest to say good-bye to. I think some people were surprised that Kathy and I had stayed such good friends. For one thing, we look so different. Im tall and thin and dark, and shes fair-skinned, with long blonde hair, and a little chubby. But weve been friends since preschool, and best friends since fourth grade. When she came over the night before the move, we were both terribly awkward. Kathy, you shouldnt be nervous, I told her. Youre not the one whos moving away forever. Its not like youre moving to China or something, she answered, chewing hard on her bubble gum. Dark Falls is only four hours away, Amanda. Well see each other a lot. Yeah, I guess, I said. But I didnt believe it. Four hours away was as bad as being in China, as far as I was concerned. I guess we can still talk on the phone, I said glumly. She blew a small green bubble, then sucked it back into her mouth. Yeah. Sure, she said, pretending to be enthusiastic. Youre lucky, you know. Moving out of this crummy neighborhood to a big house. Its not a crummy neighborhood, I insisted. I dont know why I was defending the neighborhood. I never had before. One of our favorite pastimes was thinking of places wed rather be growing up. School wont be the same without you, she sighed, curling her legs under her on the chair. Whos going to slip me the answers in math? I laughed. I always slipped you the wrong answers. But it was the thought that counted, Kathy said. And then she groaned. Ugh. Junior high. Is your new junior high part of the high school or part of the elementary school? I made a disgusted face. Everything in one building. Its a small town, remember? Theres no separate high school. At least, I didnt see one. Bummer, she said. Bummer was right. We chatted for hours. Until Kathys mom called and said it was time for her to come home. Then we hugged. I had made up my mind that I wouldnt cry, but I could feel the big, hot tears forming in the corners of my eyes. And then they were running down my cheeks. Im so miserable! I wailed. I had planned to be really controlled and mature. But Kathy was my best friend, after all, and what could I do? We made a promise that wed always be together on our birthdaysno matter what. Wed force our parents to make sure we didnt miss each others birthdays. And then we hugged again. And Kathy said, Dont worry. Well see each other a lot. Really. And she had tears in her eyes, too. She turned and ran out the door. The screen door slammed hard behind her. I stood there staring out into the darkness until Petey came scampering in, his toenails clicking across the linoleum, and started to lick my hand. The next morning, moving day, was a rainy Saturday. Not a downpour. No thunder or lightning. But just enough rain and wind to make the long drive slow and unpleasant. The sky seemed to get darker as we neared the new neighborhood. The heavy trees bent low over the street. Slow down, Jack, Mom warned shrilly. The street is really slick. But Dad was in a hurry to get to the house before the moving van did. Theyll just put the stuff anywhere if were not there to supervise, he explained. Josh, beside me in the backseat, was being a real pain, as usual. He kept complaining that he was thirsty. When that didnt get results, he started whining that he was starving. But we had all had a big breakfast, so that didnt get any reaction, either. He just wanted attention, of course. I kept trying to cheer him up by telling him how great the house was inside and how big his room was. He still hadnt seen it. But he didnt want to be cheered up. He started wrestling with Petey, getting the poor dog all worked up, until Dad had to shout at him to stop. Lets all try really hard not to get on each others nerves, Mom suggested. Dad laughed. Good idea, dear. Dont make fun of me, she snapped. They started to argue about who was more exhausted from all the packing. Petey stood up on his hind legs and started to howl at the back window. Cant you shut him up? Mom screamed. I pulled Petey down, but he struggled back up and started howling again. Hes never done this before, I said. Just get him quiet! Mom insisted. I pulled Petey down by his hind legs, and Josh started to howl. Mom turned around and gave him a dirty look. Josh didnt stop howling, though. He thought he was a riot. Finally, Dad pulled the car up the driveway of the new house. The tires crunched over the wet gravel. Rain pounded on the roof. Home sweet home, Mom said. I couldnt tell if she was being sarcastic or not. I think she was really glad the long car ride was over. At least we beat the movers, Dad said, glancing at his watch. Then his expression changed. Hope theyre not lost. Its as dark as night out there, Josh complained. Petey was jumping up and down in my lap, desperate to get out of the car. He was usually a good traveler. But once the car stopped, he wanted out immediately. I opened my car door and he leaped onto the driveway with a splash and started to run in a wild zigzag across the front yard. At least someones glad to be here, Josh said quietly. Dad ran up to the porch and, fumbling with the unfamiliar keys, managed to get the front door open. Then he motioned for us to come into the house. Mom and Josh ran across the walk, eager to get in out of the rain. I closed the car door behind me and started to jog after them. But something caught my eye. I stopped and looked up to the twin bay windows above the porch. I held a hand over my eyebrows to shield my eyes and squinted through the rain. Yes. I saw it. A face. In the window on the left. The boy. The same boy was up there, staring down at me.

## 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.

# Chapter 5

I couldnt breathe. I couldnt cry out. My heart seemed to stop. My chest felt as if it were about to explode. With a desperate, terrified effort, I spun around. Josh! I shrieked. You scared me to death! I thought He let go of me and took a step back. Gotcha! he declared, and then started to laugh, a high-pitched laugh that echoed down the long, bare hallway. My heart was pounding hard now. My forehead throbbed. Youre not funny, I said angrily. I shoved him against the wall. You really scared me. He laughed and rolled around on the floor. Hes really a sicko. I tried to shove him again but missed. Angrily, I turned away from him just in time to see my bedroom door slowly swinging open. I gasped in disbelief. And froze, gaping at the moving door. Josh stopped laughing and stood up, immediately serious, his dark eyes wide with fright. I could hear someone moving inside the room. I could hear whispering. Excited giggles. Whowhos there? I managed to stammer in a high little voice I didnt recognize. The door, creaking loudly, opened a bit more, then started to close. Whos there? I demanded, a bit more forcefully. Again, I could hear whispering, someone moving about. Josh had backed up against the wall and was edging away, toward the stairs. He had an expression on his face Id never seen before sheer terror. The door, creaking like a door in a movie haunted house, closed a little more. Josh was nearly to the stairway. He was staring at me, violently motioning with his hand for me to follow. But instead, I stepped forward, grabbed the doorknob, and pushed the door open hard. It didnt resist. I let go of the doorknob and stood blocking the doorway. Whos there? The room was empty. Thunder crashed. It took me a few seconds to realize what was making the door move. The window on the opposite wall had been left open several inches. The gusting wind through the open window must have been opening and closing the door. I guessed that also explained the other sounds I heard inside the room, the sounds I thought were whispers. Who had left the window open? The painters, probably. I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, waiting

for my pounding heart to settle down to normal. Feeling a little foolish, I walked quickly to the window and pushed it shut. Amanda are you all right? Josh whispered from the hallway. I started to answer him. But then I had a better idea. He had practically scared me to death a few minutes before. Why not give him a little scare? He deserved it. So I didnt answer him. I could hear him take a few timid steps closer to my room. Amanda? Amanda? You okay? I tiptoed over to my closet, pulled the door open a third of the way. Then I laid down flat on the floor, on my back, with my head and shoulders hidden inside the closet and the rest of me out in the room. Amanda? Josh sounded very scared. Ohhhhhh, I moaned loudly. I knew when he saw me sprawled on the floor like this, hed totally freak out! Amandawhats happening? He was in the doorway now. Hed see me any second now, lying in the dark room, my head hidden from view, the lightning flashing impressively and the thunder cracking outside the old window. I took a deep breath and held it to keep from giggling. Amanda? he whispered. And then he must have seen me, because he uttered a loud Huh?! And I heard him gasp. And then he screamed at the top of his lungs. I heard him running down the hall to the stairway, shrieking, Mom! Dad! And I heard his sneakers thudding down the wooden stairs, with him screaming and calling all the way down. I snickered to myself. Then, before I could pull myself up, I felt a rough, warm tongue licking my face. Petey! He was licking my cheeks, licking my eyelids, licking me frantically, as if he were trying to revive me, or as if to let me know that everything was okay. Oh, Petey! Petey! I cried, laughing and throwing my arms around the sweet dog. Stop! Youre getting me all sticky! But he wouldnt stop. He kept on licking fiercely. The poor dog is nervous, too, I thought. Come on, Petey, shape up, I told him, holding his panting face away with both my hands. Theres nothing to be nervous about. This new place is going to be fun. Youll see.

## Chapter 6

That night, I was smiling to myself as I fluffed up my pillow and slid into bed. I was thinking about how terrified Josh had been that afternoon, how frightened he looked even after I came prancing down the stairs, perfectly okay. How angry he was that I'd fooled him. Of course, Mom and Dad didn't think it was funny. They were both nervous and upset because the moving van had just arrived, an hour late. They forced Josh and me to call a truce. No more scaring each other. It's hard not to get scared in this creepy old place, Josh muttered. But we reluctantly agreed not to play any more jokes on each other, if we could possibly help it. The men, complaining about the rain, started carrying in all of our furniture. Josh and I helped show them where we wanted stuff in our rooms. They dropped my dresser on the stairs, but it only got a small scratch. The furniture looked strange and small in this big house. Josh and I tried to stay out of the way while Mom and Dad worked all day, arranging things, emptying cartons, putting clothes away. Mom even managed to get the curtains hung in my room. What a day! Now, a little after ten o'clock, trying to get to sleep for the first time in my new room, I turned onto my side, then onto my back. Even though this was my old bed, I couldn't get comfortable. Everything seemed so different, so wrong. The bed didn't face the same direction as in my old bedroom. The walls were bare. I hadn't had time to hang any of my posters. The room seemed so large and empty. The shadows seemed so much darker. My back started to itch, and then I suddenly felt itchy all over. The bed is filled with bugs! I thought, sitting up. But of course that was ridiculous. It was my same old bed with clean sheets. I forced myself to settle back down and closed my eyes. Sometimes when I can't get to sleep, I count silently by twos, picturing each number in my mind as I think it. It usually helps to clear my mind so that I can drift off to sleep. I tried it now, burying my face in the pillow, picturing the numbers rolling past 4 6 8 I yawned loudly, still wide awake at two-twenty. I'm going to be awake forever, I thought. I'm never going to be able to sleep in this new room. But then I must have drifted off without realizing it. I don't know how long I slept. An hour or two at the most. It was a light, uncomfortable sleep. Then something woke me. I sat straight up, startled. Despite the heat of the room, I felt cold all over. Looking down to the end of the bed, I saw that I had kicked off the sheet and light blanket. With a groan, I reached down for them, but then froze. I heard whispers. Someone was whispering across the room. Whowhos there? My voice was a whisper, too, tiny and frightened. I grabbed my covers and pulled them up to my chin. I heard more whispers. The room came into focus as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. The curtains. The long, sheer curtains from my old room

that my mother had hung that afternoon were fluttering at the window. So. That explained the whispers. The billowing curtains must have woken me up. A soft, gray light floated in from outside. The curtains cast moving shadows onto the foot of my bed. Yawning, I stretched and climbed out of bed. I felt chilled all over as I crept across the wooden floor to close the window. As I came near, the curtains stopped billowing and floated back into place. I pushed them aside and reached out to close the window. Oh! I uttered a soft cry when I realized that the window was closed. But how could the curtains flutter like that with the window closed? I stood there for a while, staring out at the grays of the night. There wasn't much of a draft. The window seemed pretty airtight. Had I imagined the curtains billowing? Were my eyes playing tricks on me? Yawning, I hurried back through the strange shadows to my bed and pulled the covers up as high as they would go. Amanda, stop scaring yourself, I scolded. When I fell back to sleep a few minutes later, I had the ugliest, most terrifying dream. I dreamed that we were all dead. Mom, Dad, Josh, and me. At first, I saw us sitting around the dinner table in the new dining room. The room was very bright, so bright I couldn't see our faces very well. They were just a bright, white blur. But, then, slowly, slowly, everything came into focus, and I could see that beneath our hair, we had no faces. Our skin was gone, and only our gray-green skulls were left. Bits of flesh clung to my bony cheeks. There were only deep, black sockets where my eyes had been. The four of us, all dead, sat eating in silence. Our dinner plates, I saw, were filled with small bones. A big platter in the center of the table was piled high with gray-green bones, human-looking bones. And then, in this dream, our disgusting meal was interrupted by a loud knocking on the door, an insistent pounding that grew louder and louder. It was Kathy, my friend from back home. I could see her at our front door, pounding on it with both fists. I wanted to go answer the door. I wanted to run from the dining room and pull open the door and greet Kathy. I wanted to talk to Kathy. I wanted to tell her what had happened to me, to explain that I was dead and that my face had fallen away. I wanted to see Kathy so badly. But I couldn't get up from the table. I tried and tried, but I couldn't get up. The pounding on the door grew louder and louder, until it was deafening. But I just sat there with my gruesome family, picking up bones from my dinner plate and eating them. I woke up with a start, the horror of the dream still with me. I could still hear the pounding in my ears. I shook my head, trying to chase the dream away. It was morning. I could tell from the blue of the sky outside the window. Oh, no. The curtains. They were billowing again, flapping noisily as they blew into the room. I sat up and stared. The window was still closed.

# Chapter 7

Ill take a look at the window. There must be a draft or a leak or something, Dad said at breakfast. He shoveled in another mouthful of scrambled eggs and ham. But, Dad its so weird! I insisted, still feeling scared. The curtains were blowing like crazy, and the window was closed! There might be a pane missing, Dad suggested. Amanda is a pain! Josh cracked. His idea of a really witty joke. Dont start with your sister, Mom said, putting her plate down on the table and dropping into her chair. She looked tired. Her black hair, usually carefully pulled back, was disheveled. She tugged at the belt on her bathrobe. Whew. I dont think I slept two hours last night. Neither did I, I said, sighing. I kept thinking that boy would show up in my room again. Amandayouve really got to stop this, Mom said sharply. Boys in your room. Curtains blowing. You have to realize that youre nervous, and your imagination is working overtime. But, Mom I started. Maybe a ghost was behind the curtains, Josh said, teasing. He raised up his hands and made a ghostly oooooooh wail. Whoa. Mom put a hand on Joshs shoulder. Remember what you promised about scaring each other? Its going to be hard for all of us to adjust to this place, Dad said. You may have dreamed about the curtains blowing, Amanda. You said you had bad dreams, right? The terrifying nightmare flashed back into my mind. Once again I saw the big platter of bones on the table. I shivered. Its so damp in here, Mom said. A little sunshine will help dry the place out, Dad said. I peered out the window. The sky had turned solid gray. Trees seemed to spread darkness over our backyard. Wheres Petey? I asked. Out back, Mom replied, swallowing a mouthful of eggs. He got up early, too. Couldnt sleep, I guess. So I let him out. What are we doing today? Josh asked. He always needed to know the plan for the day. Every detail. Mainly so he could argue about it. Your father and I still have a lot of unpacking to do, Mom said, glancing to the back hallway, which was cluttered with unopened cartons. You two can explore the neighborhood. See what you can find out. See if there are any other kids your age around. In other words, you want us to get lost! I said. Mom and

Dad both laughed. Youre very smart, Amanda. But I want to help unpack my stuff, Josh whined. I knew hed argue with the plan, just like always. Go get dressed and take a long walk, Dad said. Take Petey with you, okay? And take a leash for him. I left one by the front stairs. What about our bikes? Why cant we ride our bikes? Josh asked. Theyre buried in the back of the garage, Dad told him. Youll never be able to get to them. Besides, you have a flat tire. If I cant ride my bike, Im not going out, Josh insisted, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Mom and Dad had to argue with him. Then threaten him. Finally, he agreed to go for a short walk. I finished my breakfast, thinking about Kathy and my other friends back home. I wondered what the kids were like in Dark Falls. I wondered if Id be able to find new friends, real friends. I volunteered to do the breakfast dishes since Mom and Dad had so much work to do. The warm water felt soothing on my hands as I sponged the dishes clean. I guess maybe Im weird. I like washing dishes. Behind me, from somewhere in the front of the house, I could hear Josh arguing with Dad. I could just barely make out the words over the trickle of the tap water. Your basketball is packed in one of these cartons, Dad was saying. Then Josh said something. Then Dad said, How should I know which one? Then Josh said something. Then Dad said, No, I dont have time to look now. Believe it or not, your basketball isnt at the top of my list. I stacked the last dish onto the counter to drain, and looked for a dish towel to dry my hands. There was none in sight. I guess they hadnt been unpacked yet. Wiping off my hands on the front of my robe, I headed for the stairs. Ill be dressed in five minutes, I called to Josh, who was still arguing with Dad in the living room. Then we can go out. I started up the front stairs, and then stopped. Above me on the landing stood a strange girl, about my age, with short black hair. She was smiling down at me, not a warm smile, not a friendly smile, but the coldest, most frightening smile I had ever seen.

## Chapter 8

A hand touched my shoulder. I spun around. It was Josh. Im not going for a walk unless I can take my basketball, he said. Joshplease! I looked back up to the landing, and the girl was gone. I felt cold all over. My legs were all trembly. I grabbed the banister. Dad! Come hereplease! I called. Joshs face filled with alarm. Hey, I didnt do anything! he shouted. Noitsits not you, I said, and called Dad again. Amanda, Im kind of busy, Dad said, appearing below at the foot of the stairs, already perspiring from uncrating living room stuff. Dad, I saw somebody, I told him. Up there. A girl. I pointed. Amanda, please, he replied, making a face. Stop seeing things okay? Theres no one in this house except the four of us. and maybe a few mice. Mice? Josh asked with sudden interest. Really? Where? Dad, I didnt imagine it, I said, my voice cracking. I was really hurt that he didnt believe me. Amanda, look up there, Dad said, gazing up to the landing. What do you see? I followed his gaze. There was a pile of my clothes on the landing. Mom must have just unpacked them. Its just clothes, Dad said impatiently. Its not a girl. Its clothes. He rolled his eyes. Sorry, I said quietly. I repeated it as I started up the stairs. Sorry. But I didnt really feel sorry. I felt confused. And still scared. Was it possible that I thought a pile of clothes was a smiling girl? No. I didnt think so. Im not crazy. And I have really good eyesight. So then, what was going on? I opened the door to my room, turned on the ceiling light, and saw the curtains billowing in front of the bay window. Oh, no. Not again, I thought. I hurried over to them. This time, the window was open. Who opened it? Mom, I guessed. Warm, wet air blew into the room. The sky was heavy and gray. It smelled like rain. Turning to my bed, I had another shock. Someone had laid out an outfit for me. A pair of faded jeans and a pale blue, sleeveless T-shirt. They were spread out side by side at the foot of the bed. Who had put them there? Mom? I stood at the doorway and called to her. Mom? Mom? Did you pick out clothes for me? I could hear her shout something from downstairs, but I couldnt make out the words. Calm down, Amanda, I told myself. Calm down. Of course Mom pulled the clothes out. Of course Mom put them there. From the doorway, I heard whispering in my closet. Whispering and hushed giggling behind the closet door. This was the last straw.

Whats going on here? I yelled at the top of my lungs. I stormed over to the closet and pulled open the door. Frantically, I pushed clothes out of the way. No one in there. Mice? I thought. Had I heard the mice that Dad was talking about? Ive got to get out of here, I said aloud. The room, I realized, was driving me crazy. No. I was driving myself crazy. Imagining all of these weird things. There was a logical explanation for everything. Everything. As I pulled up my jeans and fastened them, I said the word logical over and over in my mind. I said it so many times that it didnt sound like a real word anymore. Calm down, Amanda. Calm down. I took a deep breath and held it to ten. Boo! Joshcut it out. You didnt scare me, I told him, sounding more cross than I had meant to. Lets get out of here, he said, staring at me from the doorway. This place gives me the creeps. Huh? You, too? I exclaimed. Whats your problem? He started to say something, then stopped. He suddenly looked embarrassed. Forget it, he muttered. No, tell me, I insisted. What were you going to say? He kicked at the floor molding. I had a really creepy dream last night, he finally admitted, looking past me to the fluttering curtains at the window. A dream? I remembered my horrible dream. Yeah. There were these two boys in my room. And they were mean. What did they do? I asked. I dont remember, Josh said, avoiding my eyes. I just remember they were scary. And what happened? I asked, turning to the mirror to brush my hair. I woke up, he said. And then added impatiently, Come on. Lets go. Did the boys say anything to you? I asked. No. I dont think so, he answered thoughtfully. They just laughed. Laughed? Well, giggled, sort of, Josh said. I dont want to talk about it anymore, he snapped. Are we going for this dumb walk, or not? Okay. Im ready, I said, putting down my brush, taking one last look in the mirror. Lets go on this dumb walk. I followed him down the hall. As we passed the stack of clothes on the landing, I thought about the girl I had seen standing there. And I thought about the boy in the window when we first arrived. And the two boys Josh had seen in his dream. I decided it proved that Josh and I were both really nervous about moving to this new place. Maybe Mom and Dad were right. We were letting our imaginations run away with us. It had to be our imaginations. I mean, what else could it be?



# Chapter 9

A few seconds later, we stepped into the backyard to get Petey. He was as glad to see us as ever, leaping on us with his muddy paws, yapping excitedly, running in frantic circles through the leaves. It cheered me up just to see him. It was hot and muggy even though the sky was gray. There was no wind at all. The heavy, old trees stood as still as statues. We headed down the gravel driveway toward the street, our sneakers kicking at the dead, brown leaves, Petey running in zigzags at our sides, first in front of us, then behind. At least Dad hasn't asked us to rake all these old leaves, Josh said. He will, I warned. I don't think he's unpacked the rake yet. Josh made a face. We stood at the curb, looking up at our house, the two second-floor bay windows staring back at us like eyes. The house next door, I noticed for the first time, was about the same size as ours, except it was shingle instead of brick. The curtains in the living room were drawn shut. Some of the upstairs windows were shuttered. Tall trees cast the neighbors' house in darkness, too. Which way? Josh asked, tossing a stick for Petey to chase. I pointed up the street. The school is up that way, I said. Let's check it out. The road sloped uphill. Josh picked up a small tree branch from the side of the road and used it as a walking stick. Petey kept trying to chew on it while Josh walked. We didn't see anyone on the street or in any of the front yards we passed. No cars went by. I was beginning to think the whole town was deserted, until the boy stepped out from behind the low ledge. He popped out so suddenly, both Josh and I stopped in our tracks. Hi, he said shyly, giving us a little wave. Hi, Josh and I answered at the same time. Then, before we could pull him back, Petey ran up to the boy, sniffed his sneakers, and began snarling and barking. The boy stepped back and raised his hands as if he were protecting himself. He looked really frightened. Petey stop! I cried. Josh grabbed the dog and picked him up, but he kept growling. He doesn't bite, I told the boy. He usually doesn't bark, either. Im sorry. That's okay, the boy said, staring at Petey, who was squirming to get out of Josh's arms. He probably smells something on me. Petey, stop! I shouted. The dog wouldn't stop squirming. You don't want the leash, do you? The boy had short, wavy blond hair and very pale blue eyes. He had a funny turned-up nose that seemed out of place on his serious-looking face. He was wearing a maroon long-sleeved sweatshirt despite the mugginess of the day, and black straight-legged jeans. He had a blue baseball cap stuffed into the back pocket of his jeans. Im Amanda Benson, I said. And this is my brother Josh. Josh hesitantly put Petey back on the ground. The dog yipped once, stared up at the boy, whimpered softly, then sat down on the street and began to scratch himself. Im Ray Thurston, the boy said, stuffing his hands into his jeans pockets, still staring warily at Petey. He seemed to relax a little, though, seeing that the dog had lost interest in barking and growling at him. I suddenly realized that Ray looked familiar. Where had I seen him before? Where? I stared hard at him until I remembered. And then I gasped in sudden fright. Ray was the boy, the boy in my room. The boy in the window. You! I stammered accusingly. You were in our house! He looked confused. Huh? You were in my room, right? I insisted. He laughed. I don't get it, he said. In your room? Petey raised his head and gave a low growl in Ray's direction. Then he went back to his serious scratching. I thought I saw you, I said, beginning to feel a little doubtful. Maybe it wasn't him. Maybe. I haven't been in your house in a long time, Ray said, looking down warily at Petey. A long time? Yeah. I used to live in your house, he replied. Huh? Josh and I stared at him in surprise. Our house? Ray nodded. When we first moved here, he said. He picked up a flat pebble and heaved it down the street. Petey growled, started to chase it, changed his mind, and plopped back down on the street, his stub of a tail wagging excitedly. Heavy clouds lowered across the sky. It seemed to grow darker. Where do you live now? I asked. Ray tossed another stone, then pointed up the road. Did you like our house? Josh asked Ray. Yeah, it was okay, Ray told him. Nice and shady. You liked it? Josh cried. I think it's gross. It's so dark and Petey interrupted. He decided to start barking at Ray again, running up till he was a few inches in front of Ray, then backing away. Ray took a few cautious steps back to the edge of the curb. Josh pulled the

leash from the pocket of his shorts. Sorry, Petey, he said. I held the growling dog while Josh attached the leash to his collar. He's never done this before. Really, I said, apologizing to Ray. The leash seemed to confuse Petey. He tugged against it, pulling Josh across the street. But at least he stopped barking. Let's do something, Josh said impatiently. Like what? Ray asked, relaxing again now that Petey was on the leash. We all thought for a while. Maybe we could go to your house, Josh suggested to Ray. Ray shook his head. No. I don't think so, he said. Not now anyway. Where is everyone? I asked, looking up and down the empty street. It's really dead around here, huh? He chuckled. Yeah. I guess you could say that, he said. Want to go to the playground behind the school? Yeah. Okay, I agreed. The three of us headed up the street, Ray leading the way, me walking a few feet behind him, Josh holding his tree branch in one hand, the leash in the other, Petey running this way, then that, giving Josh a really hard time. We didn't see the gang of kids till we turned the corner. There were ten or twelve of them, mostly boys but a few girls, too. They were laughing and shouting, shoving each other playfully as they came toward us down the center of the street. Some of them, I saw, were about my age. The rest were teenagers. They were wearing jeans and dark T-shirts. One of the girls stood out because she had long, straight blonde hair and was wearing green spandex tights. Hey, look! a tall boy with slicked-back black hair cried, pointing at us. Seeing Ray, Josh, and me, they grew quiet but didn't stop moving toward us. A few of them giggled, as if they were enjoying some kind of private joke. The three of us stopped and watched them approach. I smiled and waited to say hi. Petey was pulling at his leash and barking his head off. Hi, guys, the tall boy with the black hair said, grinning. The others thought this was very funny for some reason. They laughed. The girl in the green tights gave a short, red-haired boy a shove that almost sent him sprawling into me. How's it going, Ray? a girl with short black hair asked, smiling at Ray. Not bad. Hi, guys, Ray answered. He turned to Josh and me. These are some of my friends. They're all from the neighborhood. Hi, I said, feeling awkward. I wished Petey would stop barking and pulling at his leash like that. Poor Josh was having a terrible time holding onto him. This is George Carpenter, Ray said, pointing to the short, red-haired boy, who nodded. And Jerry Franklin, Karen Somerset, Bill Gregory. He went around the circle, naming each kid. I tried to remember all the names but, of course it was impossible. How do you like Dark Falls? one of the girls asked me. I don't really know, I told her. It's my first day here, really. It seems nice. Some of the kids laughed at my answer, for some reason. What kind of dog is that? George Carpenter asked Josh. Josh, holding tight to the leash handle, told him. George stared hard at Petey, studying him, as if he had never seen a dog like Petey before. Karen Somerset, a tall, pretty girl with short blonde hair, came up to me while some of the other kids were admiring Petey. You know, I used to live in your house, she said softly. What? I wasn't sure I'd heard her correctly. Let's go to the playground, Ray said, interrupting. No one responded to Ray's suggestion. They grew quiet. Even Petey stopped barking. Had Karen really said that she used to live in our house? I wanted to ask her, but she had stepped back into the circle of kids. The circle. My mouth dropped open as I realized they had formed a circle around Josh and me. I felt a stab of fear. Was I imagining it? Was something going on? They all suddenly looked different to me. They were smiling, but their faces were tense, watchful, as if they expected trouble. Two of them, I noticed, were carrying baseball bats. The girl with the green tights stared at me, looking me up and down, checking me out. No one said a word. The street was silent except for Petey, who was now whimpering softly. I suddenly felt very afraid. Why were they staring at us like that? Or was my imagination running away with me again? I turned to Ray, who was still beside me. He didn't seem at all troubled. But he didn't return my gaze. Hey, guys, I said. What's going on? I tried to keep it light, but my voice was a little shaky. I looked over at Josh. He was busy soothing Petey and hadn't noticed that things had changed. The two boys with baseball bats held them up waist high and moved forward. I glanced around the circle, feeling the fear tighten my chest. The circle tightened. The kids were closing in on us.