

## 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. Lets 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. Peteystop! 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. Thats 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 leashdo 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 roomnight? I insisted. He laughed. I don't get it, he said. In your room? Petey raised his head and gave a low growl in Rays 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 its gross. Its 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. Hes 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. Lets 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. Its 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. Hows 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. Theyre 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. Its 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 Id heard her correctly. Lets go to the playground, Ray said, interrupting. No one responded to Rays 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. Whats 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.