

## 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?