

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.