

Chapter 10

The black clouds overhead seemed to lower. The air felt heavy and damp. Josh was fussing with Petey's collar and still didn't see what was happening. I wondered if Ray was going to say anything, if he was going to do anything to stop them. But he stayed frozen and expressionless beside me. The circle grew smaller as the kids closed in. I realized I'd been holding my breath. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to cry out. Hey, kids, what's going on? It was a man's voice, calling from outside the circle. Everyone turned to see Mr. Dawes coming quickly toward us, taking long strides as he crossed the street, his open blazer flapping behind him. He had a friendly smile on his face. What's going on? he asked again. He didn't seem to realize that the gang of kids had been closing in on Josh and me. Were heading to the playground, George Carpenter told him, twirling the bat in his hand. You know. To play softball. Good deal, Mr. Dawes said, pulling down his striped tie, which had blown over his shoulder. He looked up at the darkening sky. Hope you don't get rained out. Several of the kids had backed up. They were standing in small groups of two and three now. The circle had completely broken up. Is that bat for softball or hardball? Mr. Dawes asked George. George doesn't know, another kid replied quickly. He's never hit anything with it! The kids all laughed. George playfully menaced the kid, pretending to come at him with the bat. Mr. Dawes gave a little wave and started to leave. But then he stopped, and his eyes opened wide with surprise. Hey, he said, flashing me a friendly smile. Josh. Amanda. I didn't see you there. Good morning, I muttered. I was feeling very confused. A moment ago, I'd felt terribly scared. Now everyone was laughing and kidding around. Had I imagined that the kids were moving in on us? Ray and Josh hadn't seemed to notice anything peculiar. Was it just me and my overactive imagination? What would have happened if Mr. Dawes hadn't come along? How are you two getting along in the new house? Mr. Dawes asked, smoothing back his wavy blond hair. Okay, Josh and I answered together. Looking up at Mr. Dawes, Petey began to bark and pull at the leash. Mr. Dawes put an exaggerated hurt expression on his face. I'm crushed, he said. Your dog still doesn't like me. He bent over Petey. Hey, dog, lighten up. Petey barked back angrily. He doesn't seem to like anybody today, I told Mr. Dawes apologetically. Mr. Dawes stood back up and shrugged. Can't win 'em all. He started back to his car, parked a few yards down the street. I'm heading over to your house, he told Josh and me. Just want to see if there's anything I can do to help your parents. Have fun, kids. I watched him climb into his car and drive away. He's a nice guy, Ray said. Yeah, I agreed. I was still feeling uncomfortable, wondering what the kids would do now that Mr. Dawes was gone. Would they form that frightening circle again? No. Everyone started walking,

heading down the block to the playground behind the school. They were kidding each other and talking normally, and pretty much ignored Josh and me. I was starting to feel a little silly. It was obvious that they hadn't been trying to scare Josh and me. I must have made the whole thing up in my mind. I must have. At least, I told myself, I hadn't screamed or made a scene. At least I hadn't made a total fool of myself. The playground was completely empty. I guessed that most kids had stayed inside because of the threatening sky. The playground was a large, flat grassy field, surrounded on all four sides by a tall metal fence. There were swings and slides at the end nearest the school building. There were two baseball diamonds on the other end. Beyond the fence, I could see a row of tennis courts, also deserted. Josh tied Petey to the fence, then came running over to join the rest of us. The boy named Jerry Franklin made up the teams. Ray and I were on the same team. Josh was on the other. As our team took the field, I felt excited and a little nervous. I'm not the best softball player in the world. I can hit the ball pretty well. But in the field, I'm a complete klutz. Luckily, Jerry sent me out to right field where not many balls are hit. The clouds began to part a little and the sky got lighter. We played two full innings. The other team was winning, eight to two. I was having fun. I had only messed up on one play. And I hit a double my first time at bat. It was fun being with a whole new group of kids. They seemed really nice, especially the girl named Karen Somerset, who talked with me while we waited for our turn at bat. Karen had a great smile, even though she wore braces on all her teeth, up and down. She seemed very eager to be friends. The sun was coming out as my team started to take the field for the beginning of the third inning. Suddenly, I heard a loud, shrill whistle. I looked around until I saw that it was Jerry Franklin, blowing a silver whistle. Everyone came running up to him. We'd better quit, he said, looking up at the brightening sky. We promised our folks, remember, that we'd be home for lunch. I glanced at my watch. It was only eleven-thirty. Still early. But to my surprise, no one protested. They all waved to each other and called out farewells, and then began to run. I couldn't believe how fast everyone left. It was as if they were racing or something. Karen ran past me like the others, her head down, a serious expression on her pretty face. Then she stopped suddenly and turned around. Nice meeting you, Amanda, she called back. We should get together sometime. Great! I called to her. Do you know where I live? I couldn't hear her answer very well. She nodded, and I thought she said, Yes. I know it. I used to live in your house. But that couldn't have been what she said.