

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 chanceremember? 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! 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. If I 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.