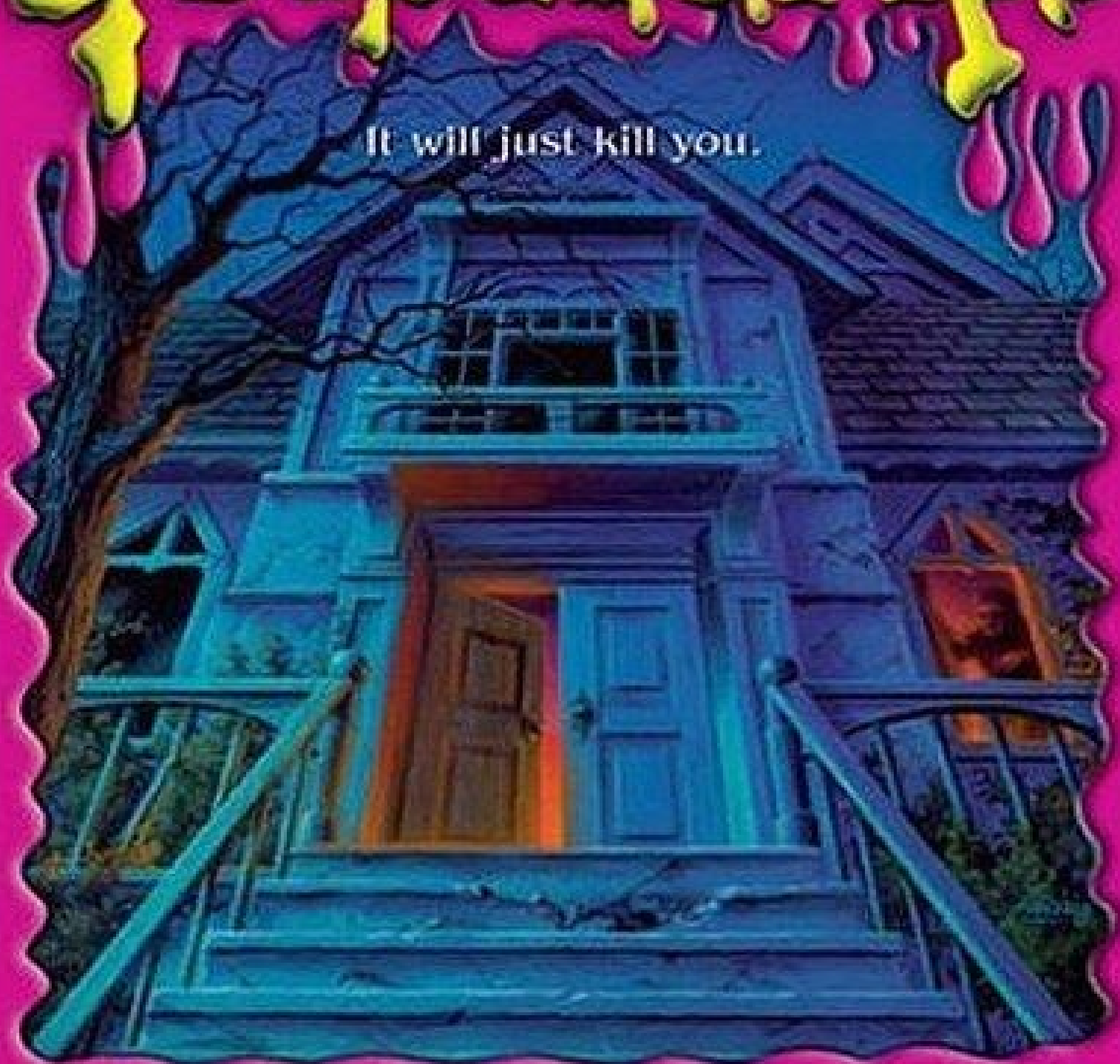


R.L. STINE

Goosebumps®

It will just kill you.



WELCOME TO DEAD HOUSE

■ SCHOLASTIC

WELCOME TO DEAD HOUSE

Goosebumps - 01

R.L. Stine

(An Undead Scan v1.5)

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.

It's 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 aren't happy about moving," Dad explained, tucking his shirttail in. Dad is a little overweight, and his shirts always seem to be coming untucked.

"It's 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. "It's an old house, that's 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 it'll take some fixing up."

"Look how big it is," Mom added, smoothing back her straight black

hair and smiling at Josh. “We’ll have room for a den and maybe a rec room, too. You’d like that—wouldn’t 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 it’ll 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 couldn’t decide if that was a compliment or not. I guess it’s true. Josh and I are both tall and thin and have curly brown hair like Dad’s, 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, that’s it. He’s 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 we’re really not that similar. I’m a lot more patient than Josh is. A lot more sensible. Probably because I’m older and because I’m a girl.

Josh had hold of Dad’s hand and was trying to pull him back to the car. “Let’s go. Come on, Dad. Let’s go.”

I knew this was one time Josh wouldn’t get his way. We were moving to this house. No doubt about it. After all, the house was absolutely free. A great-uncle of Dad’s, a man we didn’t even know, had died and left the house to Dad in his will.

I’ll never forget the look on Dad’s 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 he’d flipped or something.

“My Great-Uncle Charles has left us a house in his will,” Dad explained, reading and rereading the letter. “It’s in a town called Dark Falls.”

“Huh?” Josh and I cried. “Where’s Dark Falls?”

Dad shrugged.

“I don’t remember your Uncle Charles,” Mom said, moving behind Dad to read the letter over his shoulder.

“Neither do I,” admitted Dad. “But he must’ve been a great guy! Wow! This sounds like an incredible house!” He grabbed Mom’s hands and began dancing happily with her across the living room.

Dad sure was excited. He’d been looking for an excuse to quit his boring office job and devote all of his time to his writing career. This house—absolutely free—would 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 hadn’t even gone inside, and Josh was trying to drag Dad back to the car.

“Josh—stop pulling me,” Dad snapped impatiently, trying to tug his hand out of Josh’s 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 we’d give Dark Falls a chance—remember?”

“I already gave it a chance,” Josh whined, not letting go of Dad’s hand. “This house is old and ugly and I hate it.”

“You haven’t even gone inside,” Dad said angrily.

“Yes. Let’s go in,” Mr. Dawes urged, staring at Josh.

“I’m staying outside,” Josh insisted.

He can be really stubborn sometimes. I felt just as unhappy as Josh looking at this dark, old house. But I’d never carry on the way Josh was.

“Josh, don’t 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 didn’t like it much either, at first. But now I wouldn’t live anywhere else.” He winked at me. He had a cute dimple in his chin when he smiled. “Let’s go inside. It’s really quite nice. You’ll 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 school’s 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 wasn’t going to give my parents a break, even though we’d both promised to be open-minded about this move.

I don’t 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 hadn’t been able to sell our old house yet.

I didn’t 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 wouldn’t have to worry at all about money anymore.

Josh should at least give it a chance. That’s 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.

“Petey—quiet! Quiet!” I shouted. Petey usually listened to me.

But not this time.

“I’m going to let him out!” Josh declared, and took off down the driveway toward the car.

“No. Wait—” Dad called.

But I don’t think Josh could hear him over Petey’s wails.

“Might as well let the dog explore,” Mr. Dawes said. “It’s 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 hadn’t seen us in weeks and then, to our surprise, he started growling menacingly and barking at Mr. Dawes.

“Petey—stop!” Mom yelled.

“He’s never done this,” Dad said apologetically. “Really. He’s 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 Josh’s 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.

“Let’s 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.

“I’ll 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. “I’m not going to argue with you. Don’t 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. “He’ll be fine,” he said softly, smiling at Mom.

“He can be so stubborn sometimes,” Mom said apologetically. She peeked into the living room. “I’m really sorry about Petey. I don’t know what got into that dog.”

“No problem. Let’s start in the living room,” Mr. Dawes said, leading the way. “I think you’ll 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 he'd start to cheer up.

I couldn't 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 didn't really keep track of the time. I think all three of us were feeling cheered up.

"Well, I think I've shown you everything," Mr. Dawes said, glancing at his watch. He led the way to the front door.

"Wait—I want to take one more look at my room," I told them excitedly. I started up the stairs, taking them two at a time. "I'll be down in a second."

"Hurry, dear. I'm 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.

I'm going to put my bed against that wall across from the window, I thought happily. And my desk can go over there. I'll 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. "Hey—come look!"

With a shock, I realized it wasn't 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. “Who’s 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 I’m afraid this isn’t one of them.”

“I—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 don’t 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.

“Josh! Josh!”

First I called Josh. Then I called Petey. But there was no sign of either of them.

I ran down to the bottom of the driveway and peered into the car, but they weren't there. Mom and Dad were still inside talking with Mr. Dawes. I looked along the street in both directions, but there was no sign of them.

“Josh! Hey, Josh!”

Finally, Mom and Dad came hurrying out the front door, looking alarmed. I guess they heard my shouts. “I can't find Josh or Petey!” I yelled up to them from the street.

“Maybe they're around back,” Dad shouted down to me.

I headed up the driveway, kicking away dead leaves as I ran. It was sunny down on the street, but as soon as I entered our yard, I was back in the shade, and it was immediately cool again.

“Hey, Josh! Josh—where are you?”

Why did I feel so scared? It was perfectly natural for Josh to wander off. He did it all the time.

I ran full speed along the side of the house. Tall trees leaned over the house on this side, blocking out nearly all of the sunlight.

The backyard was bigger than I'd expected, a long rectangle that sloped gradually down to a wooden fence at the back. Just like the front, this yard was a mass of tall weeds, poking up through a thick covering of brown leaves. A stone birdbath had toppled onto its side. Beyond it, I could see the side of the garage, a dark, brick building that matched the house.

“Hey—Josh!”

He wasn't back here. I stopped and searched the ground for footprints or a sign that he had run through the thick leaves.

“Well?” Out of breath, Dad came jogging up to me.

“No sign of him,” I said, surprised at how worried I felt.

“Did you check the car?” He sounded more angry than worried.

“Yes. It's the first place I looked.” I gave the backyard a last quick search. “I don't believe Josh would just take off.”

“I do,” Dad said, rolling his eyes. “You know your brother when he doesn’t get his way. Maybe he wants us to think he’s run away from home.” He frowned.

“Where is he?” Mom asked as we returned to the front of the house.

Dad and I both shrugged. “Maybe he made a friend and wandered off,” Dad said. He raised a hand and scratched his curly brown hair. I could tell that he was starting to worry, too.

“We’ve *got* to find him,” Mom said, gazing down to the street. “He doesn’t know this neighborhood at all. He probably wandered off and got lost.”

Mr. Dawes locked the front door and stepped down off the porch, pocketing the keys. “He couldn’t have gotten far,” he said, giving Mom a reassuring smile. “Let’s drive around the block. I’m sure we’ll find him.”

Mom shook her head and glanced nervously at Dad. “I’ll kill him,” she muttered. Dad patted her on the shoulder.

Mr. Dawes opened the trunk of the small Honda, pulled off his dark blazer, and tossed it inside. Then he took out a wide-brimmed, black cowboy hat and put it on his head.

“Hey—that’s quite a hat,” Dad said, climbing into the front passenger seat.

“Keeps the sun away,” Mr. Dawes said, sliding behind the wheel and slamming the car door.

Mom and I got in back. Glancing over at her, I saw that Mom was as worried as I was.

We headed down the block in silence, all four of us staring out the car windows. The houses we passed all seemed old. Most of them were even bigger than our house. All of them seemed to be in better condition, nicely painted with neat, well-trimmed lawns.

I didn’t see any people in the houses or yards, and there was no one on the street.

It certainly is a *quiet* neighborhood, I thought. And shady. The houses all seemed to be surrounded by tall, leafy trees. The front yards we drove slowly past all seemed to be bathed in shade. The street was the only sunny place, a narrow gold ribbon that ran through the shadows on both sides.

Maybe that’s why it’s called Dark Falls, I thought.

“Where is that son of mine?” Dad asked, staring hard out the

windshield.

"I'll kill him. I really will," Mom muttered. It wasn't the first time she had said that about Josh.

We had gone around the block twice. No sign of him.

Mr. Dawes suggested we drive around the next few blocks, and Dad quickly agreed. "Hope I don't get lost. I'm new here, too," Mr. Dawes said, turning a corner. "Hey, there's the school," he announced, pointing out the window at a tall redbrick building. It looked very old-fashioned, with white columns on both sides of the double front doors. "Of course, it's closed now," Mr. Dawes added.

My eyes searched the fenced-in playground behind the school. It was empty. No one there.

"Could Josh have walked this far?" Mom asked, her voice tight and higher than usual.

"Josh doesn't walk," Dad said, rolling his eyes. "He runs."

"We'll find him," Mr. Dawes said confidently, tapping his fingers on the wheel as he steered.

We turned a corner onto another shady block. A street sign read "Cemetery Drive", and sure enough, a large cemetery rose up in front of us. Granite gravestones rolled along a low hill, which sloped down and then up again onto a large flat stretch, also marked with rows of low grave markers and monuments.

A few shrubs dotted the cemetery, but there weren't many trees. As we drove slowly past, the gravestones passing by in a blur on the left, I realized that this was the sunniest spot I had seen in the whole town.

"There's your son." Mr. Dawes, pointing out the window, stopped the car suddenly.

"Oh, thank goodness!" Mom exclaimed, leaning down to see out the window on my side of the car.

Sure enough, there was Josh, running wildly along a crooked row of low, white gravestones. "What's he doing *here*?" I asked, pushing open my car door.

I stepped down from the car, took a few steps onto the grass, and called to him. At first, he didn't react to my shouts. He seemed to be ducking and dodging through the tombstones. He would run in one direction, then cut to the side, then head in another direction.

Why was he doing that?

I took another few steps—and then stopped, gripped with fear.

I suddenly realized why Josh was darting and ducking like that, running so wildly through the tombstones. He was being chased.

Someone—or something—was after him.

Then, as I took a few reluctant steps toward Josh, watching him bend low, then change directions, his arms outstretched as he ran, I realized I had it completely backward.

Josh wasn't being chased. Josh was *chasing*.

He was chasing after Petey.

Okay, okay. So sometimes my imagination runs away with me. Running through an old graveyard like this—even in bright daylight—it's only natural that a person might start to have weird thoughts.

I called to Josh again, and this time he heard me and turned around. He looked worried. "Amanda—come help me!" he cried.

"Josh, what's the matter?" I ran as fast as I could to catch up with him, but he kept darting through the gravestones, moving from row to row.

"Help!"

"Josh—what's wrong?" I turned and saw that Mom and Dad were right behind me.

"It's Petey," Josh explained, out of breath. "I can't get him to stop. I caught him once, but he pulled away from me."

"Petey! Petey!" Dad started calling the dog. But Petey was moving from stone to stone, sniffing each one, then running to the next.

"How did you get all the way over here?" Dad asked as he caught up with my brother.

"I had to follow Petey," Josh explained, still looking very worried. "He just took off. One second he was sniffing around that dead flower bed in our front yard. The next second, he just started to run. He wouldn't stop when I called. Wouldn't even look back. He kept running till he got here. I had to follow. I was afraid he'd get lost."

Josh stopped and gratefully let Dad take over the chase. "I don't know what that dumb dog's problem is," he said to me. "He's just *weird*."

It took Dad a few tries, but he finally managed to grab Petey and pick him up off the ground. Our little terrier gave a halfhearted yelp of protest, then allowed himself to be carried away.

We all trooped back to the car on the side of the road. Mr. Dawes was

waiting by the car. “Maybe you’d better get a leash for that dog,” he said, looking very concerned.

“Petey’s never been on a leash,” Josh protested, wearily climbing into the backseat.

“Well, we might have to try one for a while,” Dad said quietly. “Especially if he keeps running away.” Dad tossed Petey into the backseat. The dog eagerly curled up in Josh’s arms.

The rest of us piled into the car, and Mr. Dawes drove us back to his office, a tiny, white, flat-roofed building at the end of a row of small offices. As we rode, I reached over and stroked the back of Petey’s head.

Why did the dog run away like that? I wondered. Petey had never done that before.

I guessed that Petey was also upset about our moving. After all, Petey had spent his whole life in our old house. He probably felt a lot like Josh and I did about having to pack up and move and never see the old neighborhood again.

The new house, the new streets, and all the new smells must have freaked the poor dog out. Josh wanted to run away from the whole idea. And so did Petey.

Anyway, that was my theory.

Mr. Dawes parked the car in front of his tiny office, shook Dad’s hand, and gave him a business card. “You can come by next week,” he told Mom and Dad. “I’ll have all the legal work done by then. After you sign the papers, you can move in anytime.”

He pushed open the car door and, giving us all a final smile, prepared to climb out.

“Compton Dawes,” Mom said, reading the white business card over Dad’s shoulder. “That’s an unusual name. Is Compton an old family name?”

Mr. Dawes shook his head. “No,” he said, “I’m the only Compton in my family. I have no idea where the name comes from. No idea at all. Maybe my parents didn’t know how to spell Charlie!”

Chuckling at his terrible joke, he climbed out of the car, lowered the wide black Stetson hat on his head, pulled his blazer from the trunk, and disappeared into the small white building.

Dad climbed behind the wheel, moving the seat back to make room for his big stomach. Mom got up front, and we started the long drive home. “I

guess you and Petey had quite an adventure today,” Mom said to Josh, rolling up her window because Dad had turned on the air conditioner.

“I guess,” Josh said without enthusiasm. Petey was sound asleep in his lap, snoring quietly.

“You’re going to love your room,” I told Josh. “The whole house is great. Really.”

Josh stared at me thoughtfully, but didn’t answer.

I poked him in the ribs with my elbow. “Say something. Did you hear what I said?”

But the weird, thoughtful look didn’t fade from Josh’s face.

The next couple of weeks seemed to crawl by. I walked around the house thinking about how I’d never see my room again, how I’d never eat breakfast in this kitchen again, how I’d never watch TV in the living room again. Morbid stuff like that.

I had this sick feeling when the movers came one afternoon and delivered a tall stack of cartons. Time to pack up. It was really happening. Even though it was the middle of the afternoon, I went up to my room and flopped down on my bed. I didn’t nap or anything. I just stared at the ceiling for more than an hour, and all these wild, unconnected thoughts ran through my head, like a dream, only I was awake.

I wasn’t the only one who was nervous about the move. Mom and Dad were snapping at each other over nothing at all. One morning they had a big fight over whether the bacon was too crispy or not.

In a way, it was funny to see them being so childish. Josh was acting really sullen all the time. He hardly spoke a word to anyone. And Petey sulked, too. That dumb dog wouldn’t even pick himself up and come over to me when I had some table scraps for him.

I guess the hardest part about moving was saying good-bye to my friends. Carol and Amy were away at camp, so I had to write to them. But Kathy was home, and she was my oldest and best friend, and the hardest to say good-bye to.

I think some people were surprised that Kathy and I had stayed such good friends. For one thing, we look so different. I’m tall and thin and dark, and she’s fair-skinned, with long blonde hair, and a little chubby. But we’ve been friends since preschool, and best friends since fourth grade.

When she came over the night before the move, we were both terribly awkward. “Kathy, you shouldn’t be nervous,” I told her. “You’re not the one who’s moving away forever.”

“It’s not like you’re moving to China or something,” she answered, chewing hard on her bubble gum. “Dark Falls is only four hours away, Amanda. We’ll see each other a lot.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. But I didn’t believe it. Four hours away was as bad as being in China, as far as I was concerned. “I guess we can still talk on the phone,” I said glumly.

She blew a small green bubble, then sucked it back into her mouth. “Yeah. Sure,” she said, pretending to be enthusiastic. “You’re lucky, you know. Moving out of this crummy neighborhood to a big house.”

“It’s *not* a crummy neighborhood,” I insisted. I don’t know why I was defending the neighborhood. I never had before. One of our favorite pastimes was thinking of places we’d rather be growing up.

“School won’t be the same without you,” she sighed, curling her legs under her on the chair. “Who’s going to slip me the answers in math?”

I laughed. “I always slipped you the *wrong* answers.”

“But it was the thought that counted,” Kathy said. And then she groaned. “Ugh. Junior high. Is your new junior high part of the high school or part of the elementary school?”

I made a disgusted face. “Everything’s in one building. It’s a small town, remember? There’s no separate high school. At least, I didn’t see one.”

“Bummer,” she said.

Bummer was right.

We chatted for hours. Until Kathy’s mom called and said it was time for her to come home.

Then we hugged. I had made up my mind that I wouldn’t cry, but I could feel the big, hot tears forming in the corners of my eyes. And then they were running down my cheeks.

“I’m so miserable!” I wailed.

I had planned to be really controlled and mature. But Kathy was my best friend, after all, and what could I do?

We made a promise that we’d always be together on our birthdays—no matter what. We’d force our parents to make sure we didn’t miss each

other's birthdays.

And then we hugged—again. And Kathy said, “Don’t worry. We’ll see each other a lot. Really.” And she had tears in her eyes, too.

She turned and ran out the door. The screen door slammed hard behind her. I stood there staring out into the darkness until Petey came scampering in, his toenails clicking across the linoleum, and started to lick my hand.

The next morning, moving day, was a rainy Saturday. Not a downpour. No thunder or lightning. But just enough rain and wind to make the long drive slow and unpleasant.

The sky seemed to get darker as we neared the new neighborhood. The heavy trees bent low over the street. “Slow down, Jack,” Mom warned shrilly. “The street is really slick.”

But Dad was in a hurry to get to the house before the moving van did. “They’ll just put the stuff anywhere if we’re not there to supervise,” he explained.

Josh, beside me in the backseat, was being a real pain, as usual. He kept complaining that he was thirsty. When that didn’t get results, he started whining that he was starving. But we had all had a big breakfast, so that didn’t get any reaction, either.

He just wanted attention, of course. I kept trying to cheer him up by telling him how great the house was inside and how big his room was. He still hadn’t seen it.

But he didn’t want to be cheered up. He started wrestling with Petey, getting the poor dog all worked up, until Dad had to shout at him to stop.

“Let’s all try really hard not to get on each other’s nerves,” Mom suggested.

Dad laughed. “Good idea, dear.”

“Don’t make fun of me,” she snapped.

They started to argue about who was more exhausted from all the packing. Petey stood up on his hind legs and started to howl at the back window.

“Can’t you shut him up?” Mom screamed.

I pulled Petey down, but he struggled back up and started howling again. “He’s never done this before,” I said.

“Just get him quiet!” Mom insisted.

I pulled Petey down by his hind legs, and Josh started to howl. Mom turned around and gave him a dirty look. Josh didn't stop howling, though. He thought he was a riot.

Finally, Dad pulled the car up the driveway of the new house. The tires crunched over the wet gravel. Rain pounded on the roof.

"Home sweet home," Mom said. I couldn't tell if she was being sarcastic or not. I think she was really glad the long car ride was over.

"At least we beat the movers," Dad said, glancing at his watch. Then his expression changed. "Hope they're not lost."

"It's as dark as night out there," Josh complained.

Petey was jumping up and down in my lap, desperate to get out of the car. He was usually a good traveler. But once the car stopped, he wanted out immediately.

I opened my car door and he leaped onto the driveway with a splash and started to run in a wild zigzag across the front yard.

"At least *someone's* glad to be here," Josh said quietly.

Dad ran up to the porch and, fumbling with the unfamiliar keys, managed to get the front door open. Then he motioned for us to come into the house.

Mom and Josh ran across the walk, eager to get in out of the rain. I closed the car door behind me and started to jog after them.

But something caught my eye. I stopped and looked up to the twin bay windows above the porch.

I held a hand over my eyebrows to shield my eyes and squinted through the rain.

Yes. I saw it.

A face. In the window on the left.

The boy.

The same boy was up there, staring down at me.

“Wipe your feet! Don’t track mud on the nice clean floors!” Mom called. Her voice echoed against the bare walls of the empty living room.

I stepped into the hallway. The house smelled of paint. The painters had just finished on Thursday. It was hot in the house, much hotter than outside.

“This kitchen light won’t go on,” Dad called from the back. “Did the painters turn off the electricity or something?”

“How should I know?” Mom shouted back.

Their voices sounded so loud in the big, empty house.

“Mom—there’s someone upstairs!” I cried, wiping my feet on the new welcome mat and hurrying into the living room.

She was at the window, staring out at the rain, looking for the movers probably. She spun around as I came in. “What?”

“There’s a boy upstairs. I saw him in the window,” I said, struggling to catch my breath.

Josh entered the room from the back hallway. He’d probably been with Dad. He laughed. “Is someone already living here?”

“There’s no one upstairs,” Mom said, rolling her eyes. “Are you two going to give me a break today, or what?”

“What did *I* do?” Josh whined.

“Listen, Amanda, we’re all a little on edge today—” Mom started.

But I interrupted her. “I saw his face, Mom. In the window. I’m not crazy, you know.”

“Says who?” Josh cracked.

“Amanda!” Mom bit her lower lip, the way she always did when she was really exasperated. “You saw a reflection of something. Of a tree probably.” She turned back to the window. The rain was coming down in sheets now, the wind driving it noisily against the large picture window.

I ran to the stairway, cupped my hands over my mouth, and shouted up to the second floor, “Who’s up there?”

No answer.

“Who’s up there?” I called, a little louder.

Mom had her hands over her ears. “Amanda—please!”

Josh had disappeared through the dining room. He was finally exploring the house.

“There’s someone up there,” I insisted and, impulsively, I started up the wooden stairway, my sneakers thudding loudly on the bare steps.

“Amanda—” I heard Mom call after me.

But I was too angry to stop. Why didn’t she believe me? Why did she have to say it was a reflection of a tree I saw up there?

I was curious. I had to know who was upstairs. I had to prove Mom wrong. I had to show her I hadn’t seen a stupid reflection. I guess I can be pretty stubborn, too. Maybe it’s a family trait.

The stairs squeaked and creaked under me as I climbed. I didn’t feel at all scared until I reached the second-floor landing. Then I suddenly had this heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I stopped, breathing hard, leaning on the banister.

Who could it be? A burglar? A bored neighborhood kid who had broken into an empty house for a thrill?

Maybe I shouldn’t be up here alone, I realized.

Maybe the boy in the window was dangerous.

“Anybody up here?” I called, my voice suddenly trembly and weak.

Still leaning against the banister, I listened.

And I could hear footsteps scampering across the hallway.

No.

Not footsteps.

The rain. That’s what it was. The patter of rain against the slate-shingled roof.

For some reason, the sound made me feel a little calmer. I let go of the banister and stepped into the long, narrow hallway. It was dark up here, except for a rectangle of gray light from a small window at the other end.

I took a few steps, the old wooden floorboards creaking noisily beneath me. “Anybody up here?”

Again no answer.

I stepped up to the first doorway on my left. The door was closed. The smell of fresh paint was suffocating. There was a light switch on the wall near the door. Maybe it’s for the hall light, I thought. I clicked it on. But nothing happened.

“Anybody here?”

My hand was trembling as I grabbed the doorknob. It felt warm in my hand. And damp.

I turned it and, taking a deep breath, pushed open the door.

I peered into the room. Gray light filtered in through the bay window. A flash of lightning made me jump back. The thunder that followed was a dull, distant roar.

Slowly, carefully, I took a step into the room. Then another.

No sign of anyone.

This was a guest bedroom. Or it could be Josh’s room if he decided he liked it.

Another flash of lightning. The sky seemed to be darkening. It was pitch-black out there even though it was just after lunchtime.

I backed into the hall. The next room down was going to be mine. It also had a bay window that looked down on the front yard.

Was the boy I saw staring down at me in *my* room?

I crept down the hall, letting my hand run along the wall for some reason, and stopped outside my door, which was also closed.

Taking a deep breath, I knocked on the door. “Who’s in there?” I called.

I listened.

Silence.

Then a clap of thunder, closer than the last. I froze as if I were paralyzed, holding my breath. It was so hot up here, hot and damp. And the smell of paint was making me dizzy.

I grabbed the doorknob. “Anybody in there?”

I started to turn the knob—when the boy crept up from behind and grabbed my shoulder.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't cry out.

My heart seemed to stop. My chest felt as if it were about to explode.

With a desperate, terrified effort, I spun around.

"Josh!" I shrieked. "You scared me to death! I thought—"

He let go of me and took a step back. "Gotcha!" he declared, and then started to laugh, a high-pitched laugh that echoed down the long, bare hallway.

My heart was pounding hard now. My forehead throbbed. "You're not funny," I said angrily. I shoved him against the wall. "You really scared me."

He laughed and rolled around on the floor. He's really a sicko. I tried to shove him again but missed.

Angrily, I turned away from him—just in time to see my bedroom door slowly swinging open.

I gasped in disbelief. And froze, gaping at the moving door.

Josh stopped laughing and stood up, immediately serious, his dark eyes wide with fright.

I could hear someone moving inside the room.

I could hear whispering.

Excited giggles.

"Who—who's there?" I managed to stammer in a high little voice I didn't recognize.

The door, creaking loudly, opened a bit more, then started to close.

"Who's there?" I demanded, a bit more forcefully.

Again, I could hear whispering, someone moving about.

Josh had backed up against the wall and was edging away, toward the stairs. He had an expression on his face I'd never seen before—sheer terror.

The door, creaking like a door in a movie haunted house, closed a little more.

Josh was nearly to the stairway. He was staring at me, violently motioning with his hand for me to follow.

But instead, I stepped forward, grabbed the doorknob, and pushed the door open hard.

It didn't resist.

I let go of the doorknob and stood blocking the doorway. "Who's there?"

The room was empty.

Thunder crashed.

It took me a few seconds to realize what was making the door move. The window on the opposite wall had been left open several inches. The gusting wind through the open window must have been opening and closing the door. I guessed that also explained the other sounds I heard inside the room, the sounds I thought were whispers.

Who had left the window open? The painters, probably.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, waiting for my pounding heart to settle down to normal.

Feeling a little foolish, I walked quickly to the window and pushed it shut.

"Amanda—are you all right?" Josh whispered from the hallway.

I started to answer him. But then I had a better idea.

He had practically scared me to death a few minutes before. Why not give *him* a little scare? He deserved it.

So I didn't answer him.

I could hear him take a few timid steps closer to my room. "Amanda? Amanda? You okay?"

I tiptoed over to my closet, pulled the door open a third of the way. Then I laid down flat on the floor, on my back, with my head and shoulders hidden inside the closet and the rest of me out in the room.

"Amanda?" Josh sounded very scared.

"Ohhhhh," I moaned loudly.

I knew when he saw me sprawled on the floor like this, he'd totally freak out!

"Amanda—what's happening?"

He was in the doorway now. He'd see me any second now, lying in the dark room, my head hidden from view, the lightning flashing impressively and the thunder cracking outside the old window.

I took a deep breath and held it to keep from giggling.

“Amanda?” he whispered. And then he must have seen me, because he uttered a loud “Huh?!” And I heard him gasp.

And then he screamed at the top of his lungs. I heard him running down the hall to the stairway, shrieking, “Mom! Dad!” And I heard his sneakers thudding down the wooden stairs, with him screaming and calling all the way down.

I snickered to myself. Then, before I could pull myself up, I felt a rough, warm tongue licking my face.

“Petey!”

He was licking my cheeks, licking my eyelids, licking me frantically, as if he were trying to revive me, or as if to let me know that everything was okay.

“Oh, Petey! Petey!” I cried, laughing and throwing my arms around the sweet dog. “Stop! You’re getting me all sticky!”

But he wouldn’t stop. He kept on licking fiercely.

The poor dog is nervous, too, I thought.

“Come on, Petey, shape up,” I told him, holding his panting face away with both my hands. “There’s nothing to be nervous about. This new place is going to be fun. You’ll see.”