

·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·