

Chapter 5

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. Whowhos 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. Whos 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. Whos 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. Ohhhhhh, 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.

Chapter 6

That night, I was smiling to myself as I fluffed up my pillow and slid into bed. I was thinking about how terrified Josh had been that afternoon, how frightened he looked even after I came prancing down the stairs, perfectly okay. How angry he was that I'd fooled him. Of course, Mom and Dad didn't think it was funny. They were both nervous and upset because the moving van had just arrived, an hour late. They forced Josh and me to call a truce. No more scaring each other. It's hard not to get scared in this creepy old place, Josh muttered. But we reluctantly agreed not to play any more jokes on each other, if we could possibly help it. The men, complaining about the rain, started carrying in all of our furniture. Josh and I helped show them where we wanted stuff in our rooms. They dropped my dresser on the stairs, but it only got a small scratch. The furniture looked strange and small in this big house. Josh and I tried to stay out of the way while Mom and Dad worked all day, arranging things, emptying cartons, putting clothes away. Mom even managed to get the curtains hung in my room. What a day! Now, a little after ten o'clock, trying to get to sleep for the first time in my new room, I turned onto my side, then onto my back. Even though this was my old bed, I couldn't get comfortable. Everything seemed so different, so wrong. The bed didn't face the same direction as in my old bedroom. The walls were bare. I hadn't had time to hang any of my posters. The room seemed so large and empty. The shadows seemed so much darker. My back started to itch, and then I suddenly felt itchy all over. The bed is filled with bugs! I thought, sitting up. But of course that was ridiculous. It was my same old bed with clean sheets. I forced myself to settle back down and closed my eyes.

Sometimes when I can't get to sleep, I count silently by twos, picturing each number in my mind as I think it. It usually helps to clear my mind so that I can drift off to sleep. I tried it now, burying my face in the pillow, picturing the numbers rolling past 4 6 8 I yawned loudly, still wide awake at two-twenty. I'm going to be awake forever, I thought. I'm never going to be able to sleep in this new room. But then I must have drifted off without realizing it. I don't know how long I slept. An hour or two at the most. It was a light, uncomfortable sleep. Then something woke me. I sat straight up, startled. Despite the heat of the room, I felt cold all over. Looking down to the end of the bed, I saw that I had kicked off the sheet and light blanket. With a groan, I reached down for them, but then froze. I heard whispers. Someone was whispering across the room. Whowhos there? My voice was a whisper, too, tiny and frightened. I grabbed my covers and pulled them up to my chin. I heard more whispers. The room came into focus as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. The curtains. The long, sheer curtains from my old room

that my mother had hung that afternoon were fluttering at the window. So. That explained the whispers. The billowing curtains must have woken me up. A soft, gray light floated in from outside. The curtains cast moving shadows onto the foot of my bed. Yawning, I stretched and climbed out of bed. I felt chilled all over as I crept across the wooden floor to close the window. As I came near, the curtains stopped billowing and floated back into place. I pushed them aside and reached out to close the window. Oh! I uttered a soft cry when I realized that the window was closed. But how could the curtains flutter like that with the window closed? I stood there for a while, staring out at the grays of the night. There wasn't much of a draft. The window seemed pretty airtight. Had I imagined the curtains billowing? Were my eyes playing tricks on me? Yawning, I hurried back through the strange shadows to my bed and pulled the covers up as high as they would go. Amanda, stop scaring yourself, I scolded. When I fell back to sleep a few minutes later, I had the ugliest, most terrifying dream. I dreamed that we were all dead. Mom, Dad, Josh, and me. At first, I saw us sitting around the dinner table in the new dining room. The room was very bright, so bright I couldn't see our faces very well. They were just a bright, white blur. But, then, slowly, slowly, everything came into focus, and I could see that beneath our hair, we had no faces. Our skin was gone, and only our gray-green skulls were left. Bits of flesh clung to my bony cheeks. There were only deep, black sockets where my eyes had been. The four of us, all dead, sat eating in silence. Our dinner plates, I saw, were filled with small bones. A big platter in the center of the table was piled high with gray-green bones, human-looking bones. And then, in this dream, our disgusting meal was interrupted by a loud knocking on the door, an insistent pounding that grew louder and louder. It was Kathy, my friend from back home. I could see her at our front door, pounding on it with both fists. I wanted to go answer the door. I wanted to run from the dining room and pull open the door and greet Kathy. I wanted to talk to Kathy. I wanted to tell her what had happened to me, to explain that I was dead and that my face had fallen away. I wanted to see Kathy so badly. But I couldn't get up from the table. I tried and tried, but I couldn't get up. The pounding on the door grew louder and louder, until it was deafening. But I just sat there with my gruesome family, picking up bones from my dinner plate and eating them. I woke up with a start, the horror of the dream still with me. I could still hear the pounding in my ears. I shook my head, trying to chase the dream away. It was morning. I could tell from the blue of the sky outside the window. Oh, no. The curtains. They were billowing again, flapping noisily as they blew into the room. I sat up and stared. The window was still closed.

Chapter 7

Ill take a look at the window. There must be a draft or a leak or something, Dad said at breakfast. He shoveled in another mouthful of scrambled eggs and ham. But, Dad its so weird! I insisted, still feeling scared. The curtains were blowing like crazy, and the window was closed! There might be a pane missing, Dad suggested. Amanda is a pain! Josh cracked. His idea of a really witty joke. Dont start with your sister, Mom said, putting her plate down on the table and dropping into her chair. She looked tired. Her black hair, usually carefully pulled back, was disheveled. She tugged at the belt on her bathrobe. Whew. I dont think I slept two hours last night. Neither did I, I said, sighing. I kept thinking that boy would show up in my room again. Amandayouve really got to stop this, Mom said sharply. Boys in your room. Curtains blowing. You have to realize that youre nervous, and your imagination is working overtime. But, Mom I started. Maybe a ghost was behind the curtains, Josh said, teasing. He raised up his hands and made a ghostly oooooooh wail. Whoa. Mom put a hand on Joshs shoulder. Remember what you promised about scaring each other? Its going to be hard for all of us to adjust to this place, Dad said. You may have dreamed about the curtains blowing, Amanda. You said you had bad dreams, right? The terrifying nightmare flashed back into my mind. Once again I saw the big platter of bones on the table. I shivered. Its so damp in here, Mom said. A little sunshine will help dry the place out, Dad said. I peered out the window. The sky had turned solid gray. Trees seemed to spread darkness over our backyard. Wheres Petey? I asked. Out back, Mom replied, swallowing a mouthful of eggs. He got up early, too. Couldnt sleep, I guess. So I let him out. What are we doing today? Josh asked. He always needed to know the plan for the day. Every detail. Mainly so he could argue about it. Your father and I still have a lot of unpacking to do, Mom said, glancing to the back hallway, which was cluttered with unopened cartons. You two can explore the neighborhood. See what you can find out. See if there are any other kids your age around. In other words, you want us to get lost! I said. Mom and Dad both laughed. Youre very smart, Amanda. But I want to help unpack my stuff, Josh whined. I knew hed argue with the plan, just like always. Go get dressed and take a long walk, Dad said. Take Petey with you, okay? And take a leash for him. I left one by the front stairs. What about our bikes? Why cant we ride our bikes? Josh asked. Theyre buried in the back of the garage, Dad told him. Youll never be able to get to them. Besides, you have a flat tire. If I cant ride my bike, Im not going out, Josh insisted, crossing his arms in front of his chest. Mom and Dad had to argue with him. Then threaten him. Finally, he agreed to go for a short walk. I finished my breakfast, thinking about Kathy and my other friends back home. I wondered what the kids were like in Dark Falls. I wondered if Id be able to find new friends, real friends. I volunteered to do the breakfast dishes since Mom and Dad had so much work to do. The warm water felt soothing on my hands as I sponged the dishes clean. I guess maybe Im weird. I like washing dishes. Behind me, from somewhere in the front of the house, I could hear Josh arguing with Dad. I could just barely make out the words over the trickle of the tap water. Your basketball is packed in one of these cartons, Dad was saying. Then Josh said something. Then Dad said, How should I know which one? Then Josh said something. Then Dad said, No, I dont have time to look now. Believe it or not, your basketball isnt at the top of my list. I stacked the last dish onto the counter to drain, and looked for a dish towel to dry my hands. There was none in sight. I guess they hadnt been unpacked yet. Wiping off my hands on the front of my robe, I headed for the stairs. Ill be dressed in five minutes, I called to Josh, who was still arguing with Dad in the living room. Then we can go out. I started up the front stairs, and then stopped. Above me on the landing stood a strange girl, about my age, with short black hair. She was smiling down at me, not a warm smile, not a friendly smile, but the coldest, most frightening smile I had ever seen.

Chapter 8

A hand touched my shoulder. I spun around. It was Josh. Im not going for a walk unless I can take my basketball, he said. Joshplease! I looked back up to the landing, and the girl was gone. I felt cold all over. My legs were all trembly. I grabbed the banister. Dad! Come hereplease! I called. Joshs face filled with alarm. Hey, I didnt do anything! he shouted. Noitsits not you, I said, and called Dad again. Amanda, Im kind of busy, Dad said, appearing below at the foot of the stairs, already perspiring from uncrating living room stuff. Dad, I saw somebody, I told him. Up there. A girl. I pointed. Amanda, please, he replied, making a face. Stop seeing things okay? Theres no one in this house except the four of us. and maybe a few mice. Mice? Josh asked with sudden interest. Really? Where? Dad, I didnt imagine it, I said, my voice cracking. I was really hurt that he didnt believe me. Amanda, look up there, Dad said, gazing up to the landing. What do you see? I followed his gaze. There was a pile of my clothes on the landing. Mom must have just unpacked them. Its just clothes, Dad said impatiently. Its not a girl. Its clothes. He rolled his eyes. Sorry, I said quietly. I repeated it as I started up the stairs. Sorry. But I didnt really feel sorry. I felt confused. And still scared. Was it possible that I thought a pile of clothes was a smiling girl? No. I didnt think so. Im not crazy. And I have really good eyesight. So then, what was going on? I opened the door to my room, turned on the ceiling light, and saw the curtains billowing in front of the bay window. Oh, no. Not again, I thought. I hurried over to them. This time, the window was open. Who opened it? Mom, I guessed. Warm, wet air blew into the room. The sky was heavy and gray. It smelled like rain. Turning to my bed, I had another shock. Someone had laid out an outfit for me. A pair of faded jeans and a pale blue, sleeveless T-shirt. They were spread out side by side at the foot of the bed. Who had put them there? Mom? I stood at the doorway and called to her. Mom? Mom? Did you pick out clothes for me? I could hear her shout something from downstairs, but I couldnt make out the words. Calm down, Amanda, I told myself. Calm down. Of course Mom pulled the clothes out. Of course Mom put them there. From the doorway, I heard whispering in my closet. Whispering and hushed giggling behind the closet door. This was the last straw.

Whats going on here? I yelled at the top of my lungs. I stormed over to the closet and pulled open the door. Frantically, I pushed clothes out of the way. No one in there. Mice? I thought. Had I heard the mice that Dad was talking about? Ive got to get out of here, I said aloud. The room, I realized, was driving me crazy. No. I was driving myself crazy. Imagining all of these weird things. There was a logical explanation for everything. Everything. As I pulled up my jeans and fastened them, I said the word logical over and over in my mind. I said it so many times that it didnt sound like a real word anymore. Calm down, Amanda. Calm down. I took a deep breath and held it to ten. Boo! Joshcut it out. You didnt scare me, I told him, sounding more cross than I had meant to. Lets get out of here, he said, staring at me from the doorway. This place gives me the creeps. Huh? You, too? I exclaimed. Whats your problem? He started to say something, then stopped. He suddenly looked embarrassed. Forget it, he muttered. No, tell me, I insisted. What were you going to say? He kicked at the floor molding. I had a really creepy dream last night, he finally admitted, looking past me to the fluttering curtains at the window. A dream? I remembered my horrible dream. Yeah. There were these two boys in my room. And they were mean. What did they do? I asked. I dont remember, Josh said, avoiding my eyes. I just remember they were scary. And what happened? I asked, turning to the mirror to brush my hair. I woke up, he said. And then added impatiently, Come on. Lets go. Did the boys say anything to you? I asked. No. I dont think so, he answered thoughtfully. They just laughed. Laughed? Well, giggled, sort of, Josh said. I dont want to talk about it anymore, he snapped. Are we going for this dumb walk, or not? Okay. Im ready, I said, putting down my brush, taking one last look in the mirror. Lets go on this dumb walk. I followed him down the hall. As we passed the stack of clothes on the landing, I thought about the girl I had seen standing there. And I thought about the boy in the window when we first arrived. And the two boys Josh had seen in his dream. I decided it proved that Josh and I were both really nervous about moving to this new place. Maybe Mom and Dad were right. We were letting our imaginations run away with us. It had to be our imaginations. I mean, what else could it be?