

Chapter 10

The black clouds overhead seemed to lower. The air felt heavy and damp. Josh was fussing with Peteys collar and still didnt 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 Id been holding my breath. I took a deep breath and opened my mouth to cry out. Hey, kidswhats going on? It was a mans 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. Whats going on? he asked again. He didnt 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 dont 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 doesnt know, another kid replied quickly. Hes 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 didnt see you there. Good morning, I muttered. I was feeling very confused. A moment ago, Id felt terribly scared. Now everyone was laughing and kidding around. Had I imagined that the kids were moving in on us? Ray and Josh hadnt seemed to notice anything peculiar. Was it just me and my overactive imagination? What would have happened if Mr. Dawes hadnt 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. Im crushed, he said. Your dog still doesnt like me. He bent over Petey. Hey, doglighten up. Petey barked back angrily. He doesnt seem to like anybody today, I told Mr. Dawes apologetically. Mr. Dawes stood back up and shrugged. Cant win em all. He started back to his car, parked a few yards down the street. Im heading over to your house, he told Josh and me. Just want to see if theres anything I can do to help your parents. Have fun, kids. I watched him climb into his car and drive away. Hes 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 hadnt 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 hadnt screamed or made a scene. At least I hadnt 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. Im not the best softball player in the world. I can hit the ball pretty well. But in the field, Im 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. Wed better quit, he said, looking up at the brightening sky. We promised our folks, remember, that wed 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 couldnt 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 couldnt 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 couldnt have been what she said.

Chapter 11

Several days went by. Josh and I were getting used to our new house and our new friends. The kids we met every day at the playground weren't exactly friends, yet. They talked with Josh and me, and let us on their teams. But it was really hard to get to know them. In my room, I kept hearing whispers late at night, and soft giggling, but I forced myself to ignore it. One night, I thought I saw a girl dressed all in white at the end of the upstairs hall. But when I walked over to investigate, there was just a pile of dirty shirts and other backpacks against the wall. Josh and I were adjusting, but Percy was still acting really strange. We took him with us to the playground every day, but we had to leash him to the fence. Otherwise, he'd bark and snap at all the kids. He's still nervous being in a new place, I told Josh. Hell calm down. But Percy didn't calm down. And about two weeks later, we were finishing up a softball game with Roy, and Karen Somerset, and Jerry Franklin, and George Carpenter, and a bunch of other kids, when I looked over to the fence and saw that Percy was gone. Somehow he had broken out of his leash and run away. We looked for hours, calling Percy! wandering from block to block, searching front yards and backyards, empty lots and woods. Then, after circling the neighborhood twice, Josh and I suddenly realized we had no idea where we were. The streets of Dark Falls looked the same. They were all lined with sprawling old brick or shingle houses, all filled with shady old trees. I don't believe it. We're lost, Josh said, leaning against a tree trunk, trying to catch his breath. That stupid dog, I muttered, my eyes searching up the street. Why did he do this? He's never run away before. I don't know how he got loose, Josh said, shaking his head, then wiping his sweaty forehead with the sleeve of his T-shirt. I tied him up really well. Hey maybe he ran home, I said. The idea immediately cheered me up. Yeah! Josh stepped away from the tree and headed back over to me. Is he yours right, Amanda. Hes probably been home for hours. Wow. Were been stupid. We shouldve checked home first. Lets go! Well, I said, looking around at the empty yards, we just have to figure out which way is home. I looked up and down the street, trying to figure out which way we'd turned when we left the school playground. I couldn't remember, so we just started walking. Luckily, as we reached the next corner, the school came into sight. We had made a full circle. It was easy to find our way from there. Passing the playground, I stared at the spot on the fence where Percy had been tied. That troublingmaking dog. Hed been acting so badly ever since we came to Dark Falls. Would he be home when we got there? I hoped so. A few minutes later, Josh and I were running up the gravel driveway, calling the dogs name at the top of our lungs. The front door burst open and Mom, her hair tied in a red bandana, the leashes of her jeans covered with dust, leaped out. She and Dad had been painting the back porch. Where have you two been? I exclaimed. It was two hours ago! Josh and I both answered at the same time. Is Percy here? Were been looking for Percy! Is he here? Moms face filled with confusion. Percy? I thought he was with you. My heart sank. Josh slumped to the driveway with a loud sigh, sprawling flat on his back in the gravel and leaves. You havent seen him? I asked, my trembling voice showing my disappointment. He was with us. But he ran away. Oh. Im sorry, Mom said, nodding for Josh to get up from the driveway. He ran away? I thought youve been keeping him on a leash. Youve got to help us find him, Josh pleaded, not budging from the ground. Get the car. Weve got to find him right now! Im sure he's out there somewhere, Mom said. You must be starving. Come in and have some lunch and then well No. Right now! Josh screamed. Whats going on? Dad, his face and hair covered with tiny flecks of white paint, joined Mom on the front porch. Joshwhat all the yelling? We explained to Dad what had happened. He said he was too busy to drive around looking for Percy. Mom said shed do it, but only after we had some lunch. I pulled Josh up by both arms and dragged him into the house. We walked up and gulped down some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Then Mom took the car out of the garage, and we drove around and around the neighborhood searching for our lost pet. With no luck. No sign of him. Josh and I were miserable. Heartbroken. Mom and Dad called the local police. Dad kept saying that Percy had a good sense of direction, that hed show us any minute. But we didnt really believe it. Where was he? The fear of an at-dinner in silence. It was the longest, most horrible evening of my life. I tied him up really good, Josh repeated, close to tears, his dinner plate still full. Dogs are great escape artists, Dad said. Dont worry. Hell show up. Some night for a party, Mom said glumly. Id completely forgotten that they were going out. Some neighbors on the next block had invited them to a big potluck dinner party. I sure dont feel like partying, either. Dad said with a sigh. Im beat from painting all day. But I guess we have to be neighborly. Sure, you kids will be okay here? Yeah, I guess, I said, thinking about Percy. I kept listening for his bark, listening for scratching at the door. But no. The hours dragged by. Percy still haied down us by bedtime. Josh and I both slinked upstairs. I felt really tired, weary from all the worrying, and the running around and searching for Percy. I guess. But I knew Id never be able to go to sleep. In the hall outside my bedroom door, I heard whispering from inside my room and quiet footstep. The usual sounds my room made. I want at all scared of them or surprised by them anymore. Without hesitating, I stepped into my room and clicked on the light. The room was empty, as I knew it would be. The mysterious sounds disappeared. I glanced at the curtains, which lay straight and still. Then I saw the clothes strewn all over my bed. Several pairs of jeans. Several T-shirts. A couple of sweatshirts. My only dress-up shirt. That strange thought. Mom was such a neat freak. If she had washed these things, she surely would have hung them up or put them into dresser drawers. Sighing wearily, I started to gather up the clothes and put them away. I figured that Mom simply had too much to do to be bothered. She had probably washed the stuff and then left it here for me to put away. Or she had put it all down, planning to come back later and put it away, and then got busy with other chores. Half an hour later, I was tucked into my bed wide awake, staring at the shadows on the ceiling. Some time after that lost track of the time was still wide awake, still thinking about Percy, thinking about the new kids Id met, thinking about the new neighborhood, when I heard my bedroom door creak and swing open. Footsteps on the creaking floorboards. I sat up in the darkness as someone crept into my room. Amaraashhhhh me. Alarmed, it took me a few seconds to recognize the husked whisper. Josh! What do you want? What are you doing in here? I gaped as a blinding light forced me to cover my eyes. Oops. Sorry, Josh said. My flashlight. Idnt mean to Ow, thats bright, I said, blinking. He aimed the powerful beam of white light up at the ceiling. Yeah. Its a halogen flashlight, he said. Well, what do you want? I asked irritably. I still couldnt see well. I rubbed my eyes, but it didnt help. I knew where Percy. Josh whispered, and hes going to go get him. Come with me? Huh? I looked at the little clock on my bed table. Its after midnight, Josh. So? It wont take long. Really. My eyes were nearly normal by now. Staring at Josh in the light from the halogen flashlight, I noticed for the first time that he was fully dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved T-shirt. I dont get it, Josh, I said, swinging around and putting my feet on the floor. We looked everywhere. Where do you think Percy is? In the cemetery, Josh answered. His eyes looked big and dark and serious in the white light. Huh? Then where he was the first time, remember? When we first came to Dark Falls? He ran to that cemetery just past the school. Now, wait a minute. I stared. We drove past it this afternoon, but we didnt look inside. Hes there, Amanda. I know he is. And Im going to go get him whether you come or not. Josh, calm down, I said, putting my hands on his narrow shoulders. I was surprised to discover that he was trembling. Theres no reason for Percy to be in that cemetery. Thats where he went the first time. Josh insisted. He was looking for something there that day. I could tell. I know hes there again, Amanda. He pulled away from me. Are you coming or not? My brother has to be the stubbornest, most headstrong person in the world. Josh, youre really going to walk into a strange cemetery so late at night? I asked. Im not afraid, he said, shining the bright light around my room. For a first second, I thought the light caught someone, lurking behind the curtains. I opened my mouth to cry out. But there was no one there. You coming or not? he repeated impatiently. I was going to say so. But then, glancing at the curtains, I thought, its probably no more spooky out there in that cemetery than it is here in my own bedroom! Yeah. Okay, I said grudgingly. Get out of here and let me get dressed. Okay, he whispered, turning off the flashlight, plunging us into darkness. Meet me down at the end of the driveway. Joshs quick look at the cemetery, then we hurry home. Got it? I told him. Yeah. Right. Well be home before Mom and Dad get back from that party. He crept out. I could hear him making his way quickly down the stairs. This is the craziest idea ever, I told myself as I searched in the darkness for some clothes to pull on. And it was also kind of exciting. Josh was wrong. No doubt about it. Percy wouldnt be hanging around in that cemetery now. Why on earth should he? But at least it wasnt a long walk. And it was an adventure. Something to write about to Kathy back home. And if Josh happened to be right, and we did manage to find poor, lost Percy, well, that would be great, too. A few minutes later, dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, I crept out of the house and joined Josh at the bottom of the driveway. The night was still warm. A heavy blanket of clouds covered the moon. I realized for the first time that there were no streetlights on our block. Josh had the halogen flashlight on, aimed down at our feet. You ready? he asked. Dumb question. Would I be standing there if I werent ready? We crunched over dead leaves as we headed up the block, toward the school. From there, it was just two blocks to the cemetery. In so dark, I whispered. The houses were black and silent. There was no breeze at all. It was as if we were all alone in the world. Its too quiet, I said, baring to keep up with Josh. No crickets or anything. Are you sure you really want to go to the cemetery? Im sure, he said, his eyes following the circle of light from the flashlight as it bumped over the ground. I really think Percy is there. We walked in the street, keeping close to the curb. We had gone nearly two blocks. The school was just coming into sight on the next block when we heard the scraping steps behind us on the pavement. Josh and I both stopped. He lowered the light. We both heard the sounds. I wasnt imagining them. Someone was following us.

Chapter 12

Josh was so startled, the flashlight tumbled from his hand and clattered onto the street. The light flickered but didn't go out. By the time Josh had managed to pick it up, our pursuer had caught up to us. I spun around to face him, my heart pounding in my chest. Ray? What are you doing here? Josh aimed the light at Ray's face, but Ray shot his arms up to shield his face and ducked back into the darkness. What are you two doing here? he cried, sounding almost as startled as I did. Youyou scared us, Josh said angrily, aiming the flashlight back down at our feet. Sorry, Ray said. I would've called out, but I wasn't sure it was you. Josh has this crazy idea about where Petey might be. I told him, still struggling to catch my breath. Thats why were out here. What about you? Josh asked Ray. Well, sometimes I have trouble sleeping, Ray said softly. Dont your parents mind you being out so late? I asked. In the glow from the flashlight, I could see a wicked smile cross his face. They dont know. Are we going to the cemetery or not? Josh asked impatiently. Without waiting for an answer, he started jogging up the road, the light bobbing on the pavement in front of him. I turned and followed, wanting to stay close to the light. Where are you going? Ray called, hurrying to catch up. The cemetery, I called back. No, Ray said. Youre not. His voice was so low, so threatening, that I stopped. What? Youre not going there, Ray repeated. I couldnt see his face. It was hidden in darkness. But his words sounded menacing. Hurry! Josh called back to us. He hadn't slowed down. He didnt seem to notice the threat in Rays words. Stop, Josh! Ray called. It sounded more like an order than a request. You cant go there! Why not? I demanded, suddenly afraid. Was Ray threatening Josh and me? Did he know something we didnt? Or was I making a big deal out of nothing once again? I stared into the darkness, trying to see his face. Youd be nuts to go there at night! he declared. I began to think I had misjudged him. He was afraid to go there. Thats why he was trying to stop us. Are you coming or not? Josh demanded, getting farther and farther ahead of us. I dont think we should, Ray warned. Yes, hes afraid, I decided. I only imagined that he was threatening us. You dont have to. But we do, Josh insisted, picking up his speed. No. Really, Ray said. This is a bad idea. But now he and I were running side by side to catch up with Josh. Petseys there, Josh said. I know he is. We passed the dark, silent school. It seemed much bigger at night. Joshs light flashed through the low tree branches as we turned the corner onto Cemetery Drive. Waitplease, Ray pleaded. But Josh didnt slow down. Neither did I. I was eager to get there and get it over with. I wiped my forehead with my sleeve. The air was hot and still. I wished I hadnt worn long sleeves. I felt my hair. It was dripping wet. The clouds still covered the moon as we reached the cemetery. We stepped through a gate in the low wall. In the darkness, I could see the crooked rows of gravestones. Joshs light traveled from stone to stone, jumping up and down as he walked. Petey! he called suddenly, interrupting the silence. Hes disturbing the sleep of the dead, I thought, feeling a sudden chill of fear. Dont be silly, Amanda. Petey! I called, too, forcing away my morbid thoughts. This is a very bad idea, Ray said, standing very close to me. Petey! Petey! Josh called. I know its a bad idea, I admitted to Ray. But I didnt want Josh to come here by himself. But we shouldnt be here, Ray insisted. I was beginning to wish hed go away. No one had forced him to come. Why was he giving us such a hard time? Heylook at this! Josh called from several yards up ahead. My sneakers crunching over the soft ground, I hurried between the rows of graves. I hadn't realized that we had already walked the entire length of the graveyard. Look, Josh said again, his flashlight playing over a strange structure built at the edge of the cemetery. It took me a little while to figure out what it was in the small circle of light. It was so unexpected. It was some kind of theater. An amphitheater, I guess youd call it, circular rows of bench seats dug into the ground, descending like stairs to a low stage-like platform at the bottom. What on earth! I exclaimed. I started forward to get a closer look. Amandawait. Lets go home, Ray called. He grabbed at my arm, but I hurried away, and he grabbed only air. Weird! Who would build an outdoor theater at the edge of a cemetery? I asked. I looked back to see if Josh and Ray were following me, and my sneaker caught against something. I stumbled to the ground, hitting my knee hard. Ow. What was that? Josh shone the light on it as I climbed slowly, painfully, to my feet. I had tripped over an enormous, upraised tree root. In the flickering light, I followed the gnarled root over to a wide, old tree several yards away. The huge tree was bent over the strange below-ground theater, leaning at such a low angle that it looked likely to topple over at any second. Big clumps of roots were raised up from the ground. Overhead, the trees branches, heavy with leaves, seemed to lean to the ground. Timberrr! Josh yelled. How weird! I exclaimed. Hey, Raywhats in this place? Its a meeting place, Ray said quietly, standing close beside me, staring straight ahead at the leaning tree. They use it sort of like a town hall. They have town meetings here. In the cemetery? I cried, finding it hard to believe. Lets go, Ray urged, looking very nervous. All three of us heard the footsteps. They were behind us, somewhere in the rows of graves. We turned around. Joshs light swept over the ground. Petey! There he was, standing between the nearest row of low, stone grave markers. I turned happily to Josh. I dont believe it! I cried. You were right! Petey! Petey! Josh and I both started running toward our dog. But Petey arched back on his hind legs as if he were getting ready to run away. He stared at us, his eyes red as jewels in the light of the flashlight. Petey! We found you! I cried. The dog lowered his head and started to trot away. Petey! Heycome back! Dont you recognize us? With a burst of speed, Josh caught up with him and grabbed him up off the ground. Hey, Petey, whats the matter, fella? As I hurried over, Josh dropped Petey back to the ground and stepped back. Ooohhe stinks! What? I cried. Peteshe stinks. He smells like a dead rat! Josh held his nose. Petey started to walk slowly away. Josh, he isnt glad to see us, I wailed. He doesnt even seem to recognize us. Look at him! It was true. Petey walked to the next row of gravestones, then turned and glared at us. I suddenly felt sick. What had happened to Petey? Why was he acting so differently? Why wasn't he glad to see us? I dont get it, Josh said, still making a face from the odor the dog gave off. Usually, if we leave the room for thirty seconds, he goes nuts when we come back. Wed better go! Ray called. He was still at the edge of the cemetery near the leaning tree. Peteywhats wrong with you? I called to the dog. He didnt respond. Dont you remember your name? Petey? Petey? Yuck! What a stink! Josh exclaimed. Weve got to get him home and give him a bath, I said. My voice was shaking. I felt really sad. And frightened. Maybe this isnt Petey, Josh said thoughtfully. The dogs eyes again glared red in the beam of light. Its him all right, I said quietly. Look. Hes dragging the leash. Go get him, Joshand lets go home. You get him! Josh cried. He smells too bad! Just grab his leash. You dont have to pick him up, I said. No. You. Josh was being stubborn again. I could see that I had no choice. Okay, I said. Ill get him. But Ill need the light. I grabbed the flashlight from Joshs hand and started to run toward Petey. Sit, Petey. Sit! I ordered. It was the only command Petey ever obeyed. But he didnt obey it this time. Instead, he turned and trotted away, holding his head down low. Peteystop! Petey, come on! I yelled, exasperated. Dont make me chase you. Dont let him get away! Josh yelled, running up behind me. I moved the flashlight from side to side along the ground. Where is he? Petey! Petey! Josh called, sounding shrill and desperate. I couldnt see him. Oh, no. Dont tell me weve lost him again! I said. We both started to call him. Whats wrong with that mutt? I cried. I moved the beam of light down one long row of gravestones, then, moving quickly, down the next. No sign of him. We both kept calling his name. And then the circle of light came to rest on the front of a granite tombstone. Reading the name on the stone, I stopped short. And gasped. Joshlook! I grabbed Joshs sleeve. I held on tight. Huh? Whats wrong? His face filled with confusion. Look! The name on the gravestone. It was Karen Somerset. Josh read the name. He stared at me, still confused. Thats my new friend Karen. The one I talk to on the playground every day, I said. Huh? It must be her grandmother or something, Josh said, and then added impatiently. Come on. Look for Petey. No. Look at the dates, I said to him. We both read the dates under Karen Somersets name. 1960-1972. It cant be her mother or grandmother, I said, keeping the beam of light on the stone despite my trembling hand. This girl died when she was twelve. My age. And Karen is twelve, too. She told me. Amanda Josh scowled and looked away. But I took a few steps and beamed the light onto the next gravestone. There was a name on it Id never heard before. I moved on to the next stone. Another name Id never heard. Amanda, come on! Josh whined. The next gravestone had the name George Carpenter on it. 1975-1988. Joshlook! Its George from the playground, I called. Amanda, we have to get Petey, he insisted. But I couldnt pull myself away from the gravestones. I went from one to the next, moving the flashlight over the engraved letters. To my growing horror, I found Jerry Franklin. And then Bill Gregory. All the kids we had played softball with. They all had gravestones here. My heart thudding, I moved down the crooked row, my sneakers sinking into the soft grass. I felt numb, numb with fear. I struggled to hold the light steady as I beamed it onto the last stone in the row. RAY THURSTON.