

ONE

Lightning ripped across the northern California sky, then splintered down through the rain and disappeared behind our neighbor's house. Letting the door slam shut behind me, I ran away from the warmth of our porch light into the darkness of our backyard. My mom would've killed me if she'd caught me outside that late at night. Especially in a thunderstorm, and on the night before my fifteenth birthday, with the big party she had planned for tomorrow. But I had to get out of the house before I fell asleep and they came for me. And they were coming!

A gust of wind blew my hair against my face. I swiped it out of my eyes just in time to see a plastic lawn chair tumbling through the air. I covered my head with both arms, but a leg of the chair smashed against my elbow. *Ouch!*

I dropped onto the wet grass, pulled my knees into my chest, and rocked nervously back and forth. Water soaked up through my nightgown and my underwear, making me shiver.

None of these things mattered, though. Because something far worse was happening inside my head. A memory of me as a little girl, on the night my grandpa Dahlen disappeared from his cottage, was trying to claw its way into my consciousness. And I didn't want to think about that night. Ever.

Still, I couldn't stop it, which didn't make sense. I was awake, and outside, where I was supposed to be safe, yet the aliens from my dreams were somehow messing with my thoughts, rearranging things, trying to make me think about that night! But how?

And why? It happened eight years ago, and my grandpa was dead now.

Although, before he disappeared, he'd—

No! Stop, Courtney! I yelled at myself.

I bit my fingernail and took a deep breath, hoping to

calm down.

No luck. I was remembering the musty old-books smell from my grandpa's bookcase. Butterflies rushed into my stomach and I sprang to my feet.

"All right. Is that what you want me to do?" I shouted into the rainy darkness. "Remember my grandpa? What happened that night? If I do that, then will you leave me alone?"

I wiped the rain from my eyes, and suddenly it was like I was right there, in the cottage. His notebook sat on the plaid couch, opened to a map he'd drawn of the ancient wormholes linking the alien world to our own.

I stumbled backward over a tree root and my butt hit the ground; my head clunked against an even bigger root. *Oww!* I started to sit up. But suddenly the memory I'd been running from took over the screen in my mind. I fell back into the wet grass and watched the scene unfold as if I were seven years old again, right there in the cottage.

It was raining outside, and the air smelled like old, musty books and burnt hamburgers. I glanced over at my grandpa Dahlen. He was busy in the kitchen, forking ears of corn out of a pot of boiling water. Standing tiptoe on the comfy reading chair, I reached up to the bookcase and ran my fingers along the dials of what he called his ham-radio/alien-transport machine.

"Courtney!" Grandpa stared at me over his steamed-up glasses.

"Fine." I plopped down on the reading chair and crossed my arms over my chest. Then I lowered my eyes. Blood was seeping through my shirt again from earlier in the day, when my grandpa's nun friend had stopped by with a guy with a tattoo gun. They'd come to give me a tattoo. I hadn't wanted a tattoo! But my grandpa had told me it was important, and the way he'd said it, I'd believed him. So now I had a blue mark on my rib cage that looked like four dead bugs

arranged in a square.

“So tell me this, Grandpa,” I said. “If these aliens who visit you are really your friends, then why do they make you keep everything secret?”

He turned away from the steaming pot and eyed me with suspicion. “Because people are frightened of what they don’t understand. And frightened people can be dangerous, Courtney,” he said. “Now come sit down for dinner.”

I slipped into a wobbly kitchen chair, rested my elbows on the wooden table, and stared down at my burnt hamburger. “Mom doesn’t believe in aliens, so does that make her dangerous?” I asked.

Grandpa chuckled. “Your mother is only interested in facts and evidence. Even when she was a child, she had no tolerance for intangibles. Or even comic books, for that matter. Can you imagine?” He set a plate of corn on the cob in the center of the table, then sat down across from me. “But dangerous? No. I think we’re safe from her.” He flashed me a wink.

I winked back. People always told me that I shared his silvery-blue eyes. Hearing someone say it would make my mom cringe, though, because she thought Grandpa was crazy. And the last thing she wanted was for me to turn out like him. But she and my dad were spending the weekend with their old law school friends on Lake Tahoe, so they’d dropped me off with Grandpa on their way.

“Well, if these alien things are real living creatures, then did God make them?” I asked. “Or are they just imaginary?” “Good question.”

I smiled proudly. I was about to finally get the truth from him.

“How’s your burger?” he asked.

“But you didn’t answer—” I started to protest, when a bang on the front door made me jump.

My grandpa ran over and covered his ham-radio/alien-transport machine with an afghan.

More quick pounding! Grandpa shoved his notebook under the couch.

I tried to read his expression, to see if he was frightened or just cleaning up, but he wouldn't look at me. He rushed to the door and glanced through the peephole, and I held my breath.

When he unlocked the door, three men barged into the cottage.

I immediately recognized them as professor friends of my grandpa's from when he'd taught at Berkeley. But what were they doing out here at night? I mean, hadn't they heard of cell phones?

They stared over at me. "Hello, Courtney," said one, a tall man with a thick beard and black suit coat.

I shot my grandpa a pleading look, like *Make them go away*. But he quickly shook his head. I stomped into the guest bedroom and slammed the door.

"They're coming," one of the men whispered, loud enough for me to hear. He sounded worried. Which made me worry. About what, though, I wasn't quite sure.

I bit my thumbnail, and it tasted like wormy dirt from the woodpile. *Gross!* I wiped my mouth with the bottom of my shirt.

"She's not safe," another man said.

Not safe? I froze. "*She*"? *As in me?* My heart started racing, and suddenly I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

I grabbed the black metal latch of the window next to me and opened it. The *chirr-chirr* of crickets filled the bedroom, and I breathed in the smell of wet leaves. Pressing my face against the screen, I glanced up at my grandpa's ham radio tower, standing tall along the side of the house. The siren on

top of it glistened with rain under the silvery moon. It would sound off if any bad guys snuck into the backyard and tried to mess with my grandpa's things. Or that's what he'd told me, anyway.

Suddenly a familiar shiver trickled down my neck. *Oh wow!*

I turned away from the window and locked eyes with Astra. "Nice of you to show up," I said.

She was a few years older than me. Like eleven, maybe. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to the closet; her eyes shone bright green against her pale skin and black hair. She bit into her plump bottom lip, which meant she was worried about me. "You think I'm going to climb out the window and run away?" I asked her.

She didn't answer. For an imaginary friend, she wasn't very talkative. But she seemed to show up whenever I was in trouble. And there was no getting rid of her; our minds were connected. My grandpa said she was probably a real person somewhere, and that we shared consciousness because we came from the same bloodline. As crazy as the idea seemed, I liked to think that there might be someone real out there who would understand me if we ever crossed paths. Most people just thought I was weird like my grandpa.

"I'm glad you're here," I told Astra.

Outside my door, I could hear the men pacing around on the creaky wooden floorboards.

"When?" my grandpa asked.

"We don't know," another man said.

I didn't like the sound of that. My stomach tightened with nerves. I sat down on my bed and rocked back and forth, staring at Astra.

"You're crying," she said. Or I could hear her voice in my head, anyway.

“No I’m not.” I swiped my cheek. Then I looked down at the spot of blood on my shirt. “I got a tattoo,” I said, trying to change the subject.

A siren wailed outside. *The alarm!* I jumped up, turned toward the window. But the bedroom door burst open behind me. I spun back around, and my grandpa stood in the doorway.

“Grandpa! What’s happening?” I started toward him. He quickly shook his head and then pressed his finger to his lips: *Stay quiet.*

I nodded.

Grandpa looked scared. And he was never scared. My heart pounded against my rib cage. Astra was gone. This was bad.

Bright light lit up my grandpa’s face. It was coming through the window behind me. *Oh no!* I whipped around to see who was there, and someone grabbed me from inside the room.

I started to scream, but a hand covered my mouth. My feet lifted off the floor. Frantically I twisted my head around to see who it was, but I was being dragged backward, down the hall, into the bathroom. Kicking at the bathroom wall, I bit into the hand covering my mouth, and for a second my head was free. I whirled around to see my grandpa, his finger gushing blood from where my teeth had cut into his skin.

“Grandpa? What are you doing?”

He whispered something in my ear. Then he lifted me up, ignoring my flailing legs.

The next thing I knew, I was underwater. Screaming!