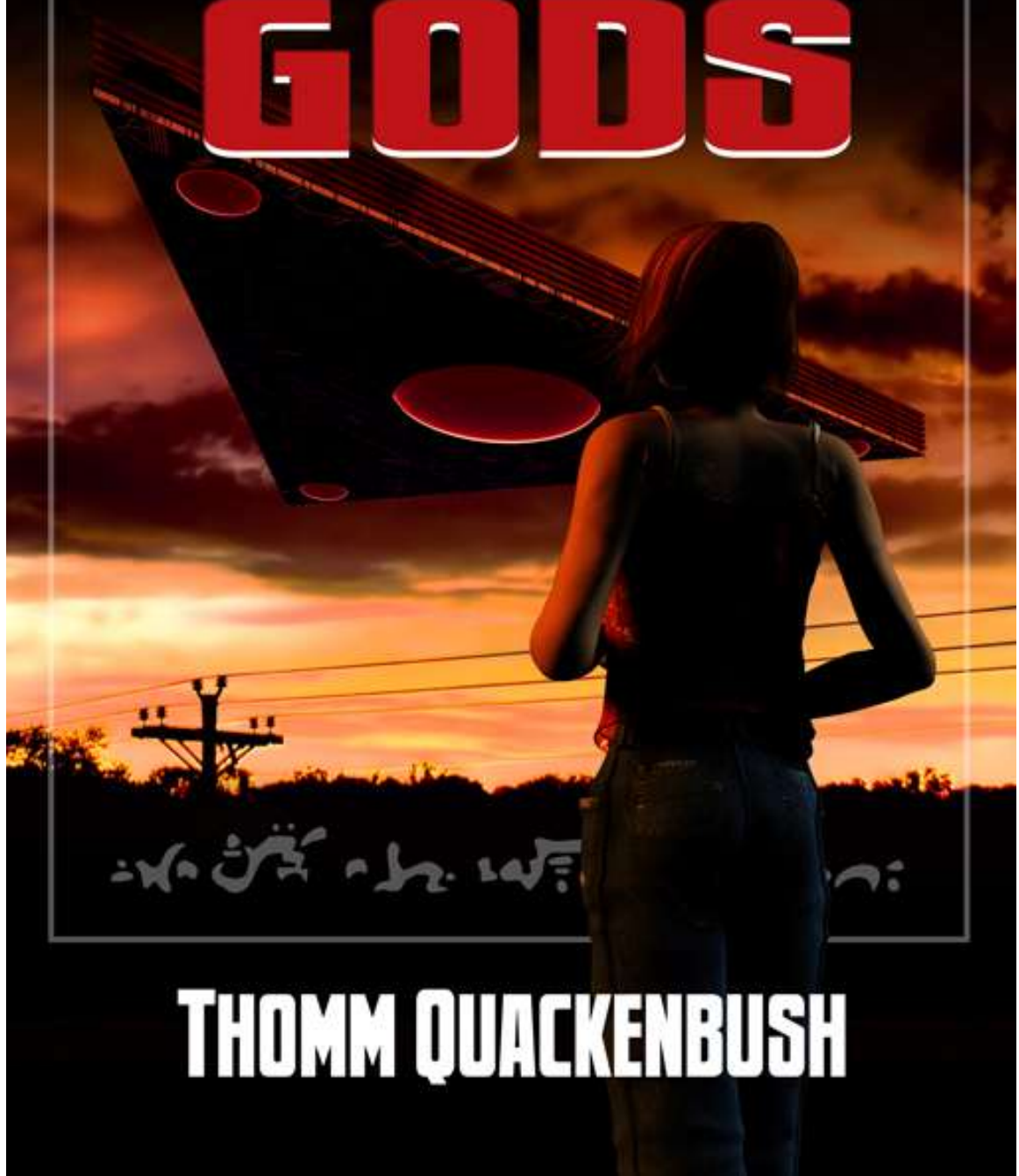


BOOK THREE OF THE NIGHT'S DREAM SERIES

ARTIFICIAL GODS



THOMM QUACKENBUSH

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, and events aside from those historical are purely fictitious and a product of the author's imagination. In no way does this story reflect on the community of Pine Bush, NY or the members, past or present, of the United Friends Observer Society.

For Amber

*We, Hermia, like two artificial gods,
Have with our needles created both one flower,
Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
As if our hands, our sides, voices and minds,
Had been incorporate. So we grow together,
Like to a double cherry, seeming parted,
But yet an union in partition;
Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
-A Midsummer Night's Dream, act 3, scene 2*

01: Roswell

Jasmine Woods phoned home, wondering when her parents would pick her up from college. Her dorm was packed. Except for the boxes on which she sat, it seemed foreign to her. No, worse, her room *should* have been familiar but now reminded her of nothing so much as a cage. She felt a claustrophobia she recalled only from dreams, of being trapped, immobile, somewhere too bright.

Chrys answered and assured Jasmine. "The 'rents are on their way. You must chill if you don't want your heart to explode before you're twenty-one."

Her parents arrived within the hour. After loading her worldly goods into the back of her father's car, Jasmine fell into a deep sleep, losing an hour to the hum of the engine.

She awoke just outside of Pine Bush, Jasmine's home since before Chrys was born. Passing the Cup and Saucer Diner, Jasmine swore she saw her sister in the embrace of a scruffy man and felt protectiveness flare through her chest, but her mother turned too quickly for confirmation. Chrys had not seemed too keen on boys when last Jasmine saw her, to the latter's relief. A semester apart was not likely to change that.

Jasmine unpacked in her bedroom, feeling like a visitor in the only home she could remember. She was a year away from graduation, an adult in her own right. But all through dinner that night, as she stared across at Chrys's vacant seat, Jasmine could not shake the feeling someone had abducted the softness of childhood and in its place implanted a stinging nettle.

After dinner, Jasmine flipped through her address book, leaving messages she couldn't hope would be heard until someone answered her call. Kathleen was not someone Jasmine liked especially—a sharp-featured girl with ears like a mouse, who seemed to have grown this odd look to suit her personality. But time with Kathleen had to be better than staring at her ceiling on this first day of summer break.

Jasmine met Kathleen at the diner for dessert and distraction. Kat was no different from the day they had graduated, seemingly frozen in time both mentally and physically. She told Jasmine she remembered her as so beloved by boys that she could hardly swat them away fast enough. It wasn't true, as far as Jasmine thought, but it felt relaxing to be someone else's myth.

They talked frivolously, Jasmine catching up on all the local gossip she never really cared about but which ruled her friend's life. Jasmine's only interruption was in asking whether Kat knew if Chrys were dating anyone.

"What do you care?"

"I don't. It's just... I guess I wondered."

"I don't know. I only keep up with people a bit more mature. Plus, she's your sister. Why wouldn't *you* know?" Kathleen asked, seeming almost affronted.

"She's a kid, like you said," Jasmine said. "We don't really have much to talk about. We're barely on the same planet."

Jasmine arrived back home after midnight, swearing to start fresh tomorrow and see if her other social accounts had gained interest in her absence. She mounted the stairs, noting the darkness in every room. Her parents must have gotten more boring in her absence. She nestled into her bed, and then noticed the faint glow from beneath her window shade. She opened it and saw something hovering over her backyard, the lawn tapering into a vast field of wild wheat. Without consciously willing, she pulled her clothes back on and tiptoed down the staircase, taking pains to mask her footfalls, as she had not on the way up.

She slunk around the corner, seeing the object in the sky for only a moment. The fiery afterimage stained her vision. As though it sensed it had been spotted, it tipped to one side and extinguished all lights. When her eyes adjusted, she could not find anything in the sky, no absence of stars that could justify what she had seen.

Jasmine exhaled slowly, and she decided it was an atmospheric phenomenon of which she knew little. She thought she had heard about swamp gas or will-o'-the-wisp. Pine Bush surely had enough rotting vegetation to make this a possible, if not likely, explanation.

In her ignorance, she felt there was ample room to explain away whatever had just been in the sky. It was nothing she should let worry her, she decided.

As she turned to go in, whispering to herself to relax and forget, she smacked into a yielding obstacle. She jumped back, flailing, smacking the boy several times as her fight-or-flight response became confused from the collision.

She knocked him to the grass. "Who the hell are you?"

"Dylan," he answered, making no effort to rise, as though he had meant to be on the ground this whole time. "You?"

"Jasmine."

He seemed flustered for only a breath. "Chrys's sister? I've heard some about you. It's nice to meet you."

"I've heard *nothing* about you. What are you doing in my backyard?"

He raised his eyebrows, both as indication of direction and incredulousness. "I guess the same thing you are."

"What do you mean?" she asked, feeling suddenly defensive.

"The UFO. You saw it too. I watched you."

Jasmine backed up as though these words were blows from a bat. "What are you talking about? I don't know what I just saw."

"And it was *flying*. Which is why we call them Unidentified Flying Objects." He gave her a warm smirk that only irritated her further, as she knew this must have been how he charmed Chrys. He wore an Xir T-shirt, a local band made good that Jasmine managed to not dislike, and jeans that were not artfully frayed as much as left to utter disrepair. Around his neck hung a pair of expensive-looking binoculars Jasmine briefly worried she had broken in shoving him.

"Wait, you were sitting in my backyard looking for UFOs?" Jasmine asked. "You didn't break anything, right?"

Dylan finally rose from the ground and began to brush grass from his clothes, checking the lenses of his binoculars for damage. "Nothing that can't be brushed off. Chrys told me it was okay."

"Why here?"

Dylan crinkled his brow as he looked up from the lenses. "Seriously? UFOs *love* Pine Bush. This place is like sugar to ants."

"You believe in aliens?" she asked as though he had admitted to eating these ants.

He shrugged. "I don't know what I believe yet, but there *are* UFOs. You just saw one."

"Maybe it was light off a cloud. We are directly on the flight path of Stewart Air Force Base, you know."

He nodded absently. "I do, actually, know that. I just think it's kind of cool, you know? That this is the Roswell of the Northeast. Mostly, though, I think the people here are hilarious. I've never been anywhere with better people-watching capabilities."

Jasmine crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't think my neighbors would be happy with you laughing at them."

He loosely brushed errant strands of his hair back with his fingers and gave what she assumed to be an apologetic smirk. He seemed like the sort to have a vast arsenal of smirks, shaped over a decade of nonverbal conversation.

"You really didn't know about the UFOs in Pine Bush, did you?"

"Of course not!"

"Why do you think the diner is the Cup and Saucer?" he asked, pointedly, one eyebrow raised.

"That's reaching. It's obviously after a tea saucer, not a flying one. Anyway, I think you should get out of here before my gun-toting father comes out to investigate all the noises."

Dylan looked up at the dark windows, angling his eyes exactly on Jasmine's parents' bedroom window. "Fine, I'll see you."

As she showed him to the yard's edge, the object returned. In the glow of the two streetlights, there was no question this was not a cloud. Smooth and metallic, the silent triangle hovered fifty feet above their heads. Jasmine could hear nothing but her heart pounding in her ears and Dylan's breath coming in even gasps. There were no crickets chirping, no frogs singing their pickup lines. The object tipped toward them again as if to get a better look. Jasmine thought she could see small windows and behind the windows were—

There came a bright flash. Within a blink, the object had vanished to nothingness as though it had been nothing more than a fancy.

Jasmine's breath returned in shallow bursts. She fell onto the grass, hyperventilating and weakened by her inability to reconcile. Dylan sat beside her and rubbed her back, tentatively and kindly, until her breathing normalized. She wished she

had remembered to put her bra back on before coming outside again, but she did not wish to call attention to this by rejecting appreciated comfort.

"We need to call the police," Jasmine said when she felt she had air enough to spend on words.

He laughed without malice. "And tell them what exactly?"

"That we... We saw a...an object."

"The spotters see them all the time. The cops don't care. I don't think the ship broke any earthly law. On the other hand, it is a misdemeanor to 'sky watch' in this county."

She looked to him, accepting this as an unfortunate probability. "So what do we do?"

"Nothing. It's all we *can* do."

Dylan helped Jasmine onto her feet and led her to the front door. She had no more words for him, not even a "thanks" or "goodnight." She locked the door behind her. Once in her room, she pulled the sheets over her head as though to evade a monster under her bed and wished without success for the blankness of sleep.

Jasmine willfully forgot enough details by morning that what had happened last night barely bothered her. A voice within her assured her it was always best to forget about anything that varied from the world she knew. The sooner she let this slip from her mind the better. She had a coworker, not a friend, barely an acquaintance at college who was obsessed with the paranormal at the expense of acknowledging the unflattering normal that ruled his life. Spookiness might keep him occupied, but it was tedious to her. What had happened last night did not bear further thought. It must have been a waking dream caused by her being so tired as to be suggestible. It had to be explicable, even if she were not presently in a position to explain it.

Chrys came down the stairs in tie-dyed pajamas, bobbed hair bouncing, and a broad smile across her thin lips. Though growing into her prettiness at a glacial pace, Chrys had been composed almost entirely of recessive traits. While Jasmine's hair was silky brown, nearly black, and pin straight to the middle of her back, her sister had a bramble of strawberry-blond curls that had been cut close since she was an unkempt

girl and their mother had gotten tired of trying to comb out Gordian knots. Chrys looked like a dandelion, a thin stem leading to fluff. Even her nose was petite. Her eyes were burnished steel to Jasmine's verdure, though Chrys made up in ocular size what she lacked in style. Jasmine reasoned some man out there might want a lemur-eyed puffball, but hoped it would not be any time soon. She still prayed the puberty fairy would one day visit her little sister with a figure, but it seemed less likely with every day that elapsed.

"So, I met a guy at the Cup and Saucer last night..." Chrys said in lieu of "good morning" as she prepared her cornflakes.

"Yeah, I noticed."

Chrys paused midcrunch, the bolus of her breakfast on presentation. "Wha?"

"Your boyfriend was lurking in our backyard last night."

"Oh," Chrys said, slicing a banana in the mush her cereal was becoming. "He's not my boyfriend."

"But you want him to be."

She swallowed her mouthful. "I dunno... Why were you in the backyard?"

"I heard a noise. He was there. I told him dad would shoot him. He left."

Chrys laughed and pointed a near-full spoon at Jasmine. "Dad is the least violent guy ever, despite the guns."

"Dad might change his tune if he knew strangers lurked in the backyard."

"Not likely... What did Dylan say about me?" Chrys asked, leaning forward.

"That you gave him permission to be there. And you told him about me. That's all."

"Oh." Her smile dropped. "He's coming to pick me up in an hour."

"Where are you two going?" Jasmine asked over her yogurt out of a duty to conversation.

"Driving, I guess. Maybe to New Paltz, check out some of the shops."

"And you met him *yesterday*?"

Chrys rolled her eyes. "Yeah, so?"

"Your funeral."

Chrys dumped the remaining cereal in the sink, the soggy flakes clogging the

drain. Jasmine finished her yogurt and did not give Chrys the satisfaction of a reaction. Then, with a clenched jaw, she cleared out the sink and washed her sister's bowl.

Chrys galloped down the stairs when the doorbell chimed. She was freshly showered, smelling of orchids, honey, and patchouli. She wore an overlarge Siouxsie and the Banshees T-shirt that had once belonged to their mother, though Chrys had cut off the collar to expose a bony shoulder. Her jeans were so ripped as to provide far less protection from the elements than shorts would have.

Jasmine got to the door first, glancing backward to stick her tongue out at her sibling. "Dylan, come in."

Chrys tried to get in front of her and out the door. "No, really, we have a big day ahead of us and—"

"You don't, Chrys, and I want to make sure Dylan will keep you safe."

Dylan subdued the argument by walking between the sisters and flouncing onto the living room couch.

Jasmine sat across from him in a dark-blue chair. In the light of day, she could almost see what her little sister found appealing about him. Tendrils of brown hair escaped his loose ponytail and framed his tanned, long face peppered with two days' growth of beard. One could almost say Dylan took "devil may care" to an art, except art needs to be practiced, and he gave the aura of obliviousness toward any effort. If he knew he was in for an interrogation, his demeanor gave no indication. If anything, he telegraphed gratefulness to be off his feet, as though he had worked all day in the fields, and this was his first chance to sit. He occupied the maximum amount of space he could on the sofa, the knees of his torn jeans spread wide in a posture that would be immodest were he a woman.

Chrys sat next to him, shot her sister a look, and then nestled closer. Dylan seemed likewise indifferent to this increase in physical closeness, but it was not for him that Chrys cuddled.

"Where are you taking my sister?" Jasmine began.

He studied her for a moment. "Is that the question you want me to answer?"

"That's why I asked it."

"Because you are her mom proxy?" he asked not snidely, as Jasmine would have

were she offering the question.

"No, because I'm her sister, and I care about her welfare."

Dylan, despite the near amoebic levels of comfort he seemed to be experiencing, relaxed farther into the sofa. "No, I don't think that's what this is. I walked into some sibling rivalry, am I right?"

Chrys rolled her eyes and nodded.

"Thought so. We're just going to drive around, enjoy this day, *carpe our diem*. You are welcome to join us as a chaperone if that's really what you're into."

Chrys pulled away and shook her head such that her hair nearly sparked with its newfound static. "No, she isn't welcome. She's absolutely *not* coming."

"You don't want me there, Chryssy?" she asked, calling her the nickname she disliked almost as much as her given name and offering a mockery of a pout.

"No, Jazzy, I don't," Chrys said, responding in kind.

Dylan interrupted their battle of eyebrows and flared nostrils. "I do. You should come. I can entertain two Woods girls as easily as one."

Both sisters let out a sigh of disgust, their expressions twins even if their faces were far from. Dylan did not react to this, either.

With no more questions, having felt she somehow lost this skirmish, Jasmine let this boy take off with her sister. She assumed Chrys must have a brain in her head, but it did not appear to be one that contained common sense.

When she returned to the living room, she saw a new book on the coffee table, a hardcover emblazoned with the words *Silent Siege*, below which glared a drawing of half an alien's face, its black, almond-shaped eye shining. Jasmine sniffed and brought this lover's token up to her sister's room, throwing it on her bed before its incense ghost could haunt the rest of the house.

02: Men in Black

Jasmine spent her afternoon trying to summon forth company of the non-Kathleen kind before her parents eventually returned home from their respective jobs and put her to work on chores. She guessed most of her friends, the casual acquaintances to the ones who she truly missed, were spending their summers far from Pine Bush. She considered it her own fault for not keeping in touch. She had spent the last two summers hopping from one summer program to another to circumvent requirements at Annandale, ignoring old friends as she was now ignored. Still if someone didn't rescue her soon, she was doomed to a dull summer.

Around two in the afternoon, someone knocked on the door, three perfect sets of raps like a clockwork woodpecker soliciting entrance. Jasmine glanced through the peephole and saw two men in stiff black suits. Behind them, distorted by the fisheye lens, she saw a black Cadillac. The Jehovah's Witnesses certainly upped the ante.

She opened the door a crack, leaving the security chain in place. "Sorry, we already have a savior and we aren't accepting solicitations, but thanks for coming by."

Jasmine slammed the door, but it didn't close. She looked for what was blocking it and saw four pallid fingers like maggot sausages squeezed between the door and the frame. Immediately, she slid the chain free and opened the door so the fingers could be liberated. The front-most man slowly retracted his hand and put it at his side. "You are going to let us in."

"What? Yes, yes, of course! I'm sorry about your hand. I didn't see it there."

Both men nodded in unison and walked into her house. There was something about the way each moved that reminded Jasmine of a cheap wind-up soldier she had been given as a little girl, its parts never quite moving in a sensible way. It was as though these men had not grown up with joints and were uneasy about using them now.

The men sat on the couch. The short one fumbled with a curling wire projecting from behind his ear. Jasmine wondered why a Jehovah's Witness would need that, but then decided it must be for an old hearing aid, though the man was too young to need one. Or was he? It was difficult to settle on an age for either man. Certainly older than her, but in no specific way.

"Let me get you some ice," Jasmine offered.

"Ice?" asked the taller man. "Yes. Ice. You will get us ice now."

Jasmine dashed into the kitchen and placed some ice cubes in a Ziploc bag, covering this in a paper towel. How much more than this would be required for mashing some religionista's hand in her door? It was mostly his fault for putting it there. She would accept a copy of *The Watchtower* and pretend to care for a few minutes, but then they were out of there.

She returned and asked to see the injured man's hand.

"Yes. Let us show our hands," the man said. Both men stuck their arms out, palms up. Jasmine pursed her lips at this strangeness and reached out for the injured man's left hand. His fingers were long and pale, cool to the touch. The skin around the knuckles was torn but bloodless, and for a moment, Jasmine thought she saw something more beneath the torn skin, something silver or gray. The man retracted his hand to his side.

"What is this?" the other man demanded, looking up at her with his mouth half opened. His eyes were dark and unblinking, the irises almost black.

"It's ice. For your friend's hand."

"Yes," said the first man, matching Jasmine's cadence. "It's ice. For your friend's hand."

The two men took the bagful of ice and after a cursory examination, disassembled it on the coffee table into its components: ice, plastic bag, and paper towel. Then they began to put each, in turn, into their mouths. Jasmine backed away from them. Their attention returned to her. Both of their mouths were opened now, a sliver of paper towel sticking to the bottom lip of the smaller man.

"I think you two should leave now. My parents will be back any minute, and my father might shoot you."

"The only functional firearm in this house is locked in a case five meters from you," the first one said as though he were trying to mimic the robot from a fifties sci-fi movie. He flashed a badge, but all she could recall once he had put it away was that it was an inverted seven-pointed star with letters between each prong, but no notion remained of which. "We are from your government. We have questions."

"Then you should talk to my parents."

"If you want to see your parents alive, you will answer our questions," the smaller one said. "I am Ensign Donald and this is Vice Admiral Erikson. You will answer our questions."

Jasmine sat, though her instinct was to run. Donald removed a device from his jacket pocket, a small gray box with lights, and put it on the table between them. "What do you know about UFOs?"

Jasmine wanted to leave the room, to lock herself somewhere until they left, but found herself answering, "I don't know anything. People see them. I've never been interested."

Erikson jumped to his feet, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and back as though about to topple. "The most important subject in the universe and you are not interested?"

She shook her head. "They were always beneath my radar."

Donald leaned forward at the waist, his gaze transferred from Jasmine to a blank spot on the table. "You will give us all of your radar readings and your machinery now."

"I don't have... It's a figure of speech."

Donald unbent himself and looked at her. He tore a piece of plastic bag free and began chewing it, his mouth remaining opened and only his bottom jaw moving.

"You did not see anything last night," Erikson insisted.

"I didn't," Jasmine said.

"You took a photogram of what you did not see last night. You will give this to me now," Donald said, the plastic bag gone from his mouth and the ice melted to a puddle. He turned his head sharply, up, down, side to side, and then back to her. "Jasmine Woods, you cannot hide your thoughts from us. We are from the center of your planet. You did not see anything last night. You will come with us in our transport vehicle, and you will show us where it was."

Erikson reached for her. Jasmine pulled away and Erikson moved back into position. He picked a coin up from the table and held it to her. Then he closed his hand around it and opened it a moment later, empty. "Just as this coin is no longer in this dimension, your heart...will not...be if...you...tell...an...y...one ab...out this. Discharging! Discharging! We need to speak to your sister! Bornless, she has no head! Perform the

Star Sapphire. Bring the moon! Ka ka ka ka ka," he said like a cheap electronic toy frying its circuit board.

Donald then sang "Mary Had a Little Lamb" in a falsetto, but skipped back to the beginning after one and a half verses with the hiccup of a broken record. Both men rose and with their awkward gait, hobbled out of the house again without another word. Jasmine looked out the window and saw another man in a black suit standing at the far door of the car, staring back at her. He was about seven feet tall, but the suit seemed tailored for someone a foot shorter. They all entered the car—none in the driver's seat—and it sped off.

When she was sure they were gone, she called Chrys's cell phone, and when that failed, called Kathleen and told her to come pick her up.

"What's wrong?" Kathleen asked.

"Nothing. I don't know. Can you drive me to New Paltz?"

"Um, sure, I guess. When is good?"

Jasmine looked down at her watch, startled her interaction with these men had taken so long. "Three. I just need to get some stuff ready."

There was a pause on the other end. "In the morning?"

"What? No."

"I don't understand. You want to go to New Paltz tomorrow?"

"No, in like fifteen minutes."

Again, the pause. "So, *five* o'clock, then?"

Jasmine looked down at her watch, then to the clock on the mantle for confirmation. She peered out the window at the sunlight. "One second." She turned the television on to the Weather Channel, which stated the time as 4:44.

Available in:

[eBook](#)
[Kindle](#)

All Jasmine wanted was a calm summer in Pine Bush. When she sees a UFO her first night home from college, she is willing to brush it off as swamp gas reflected off Venus, until two men arrive at her door to harass her into silence about a picture she did not take. Soon she realizes Men in Black may be the least of her worries and that ignoring the Grays and their plans for her will only embolden them. If she doesn't figure out why she is so interesting to aliens, Men in Black, and a mysterious man who seems to brush off harm, she may not have an autumn to look forward to.

Audio sample: [Chapter 1](#), [Chapter 2](#)