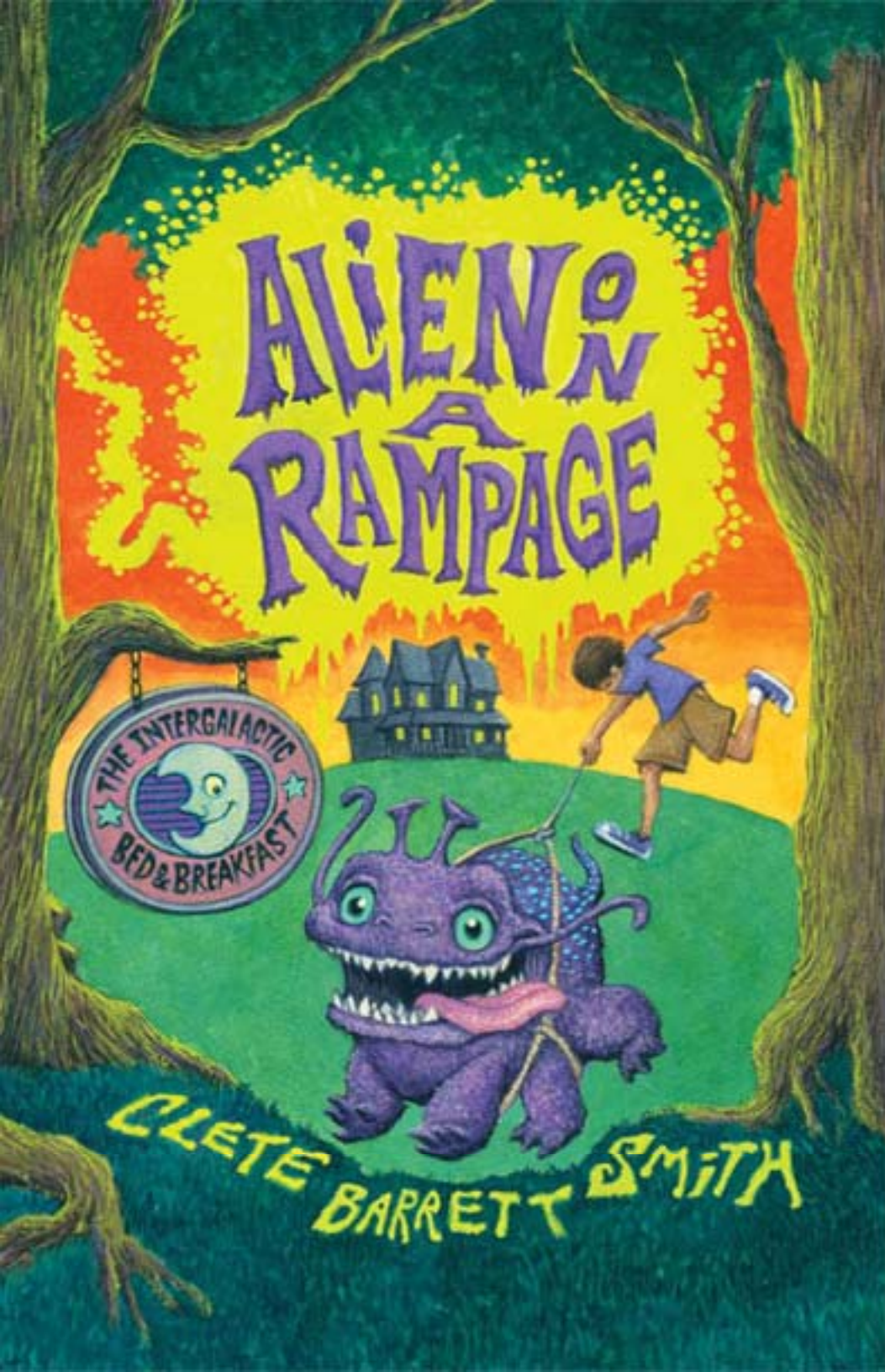






When the taxi pulled up to Grandma's place, I opened my door before the driver had even come to a complete stop. "Whoa, buddy, take it easy," he said. "You'll get there on time—it's not going anywhere."

Then he stopped at the curb and got a good look at The Intergalactic Bed & Breakfast. His mouth dropped open, forming a circle that matched his wide eyes. I guess some people just aren't used to seeing a huge Victorian-style house covered in a mural of swirling galaxies, with silver spaceship sculptures jutting up all over the front yard. Especially at

the edge of a forested wilderness on the outskirts of a tiny Pacific Northwest town.

"Ummm...okay...on second thought, that place looks like it could blast off any minute. I guess you better hurry up."

I hopped out of the taxi, pulling my suitcase off the back-seat. "Thanks for the ride," I said, handing the driver a wad of cash through his open window. The driver nodded and collected the money but kept his eyes fixed on the house.

Jogging along the white picket fence, I thought about how different this was from my arrival last year. Back then the only thing I had to worry about was starting seventh grade in the fall. But that was before Grandma gave me my summer job and put me in charge of defending the biggest secret on the planet.

I stopped at the front gate and took in the view. I had been a little worried that things might've changed since I was last here. But everything looked to be in the right place, just the way I remembered it.

Well, okay, maybe not the *right* place. Grandma's house could only be in the right place if it was hosting a Klingon birthday party on one of Jupiter's outer moons. But it looked the same as last summer, and that was good. Seeing it again felt like coming home.

But as I looked up at the porch...I don't know, I guess I felt a little disappointed. It's not like I expected a big WELCOME BACK! banner and a marching band playing under a blizzard of confetti. But maybe I had expected *something*. Maybe someone sitting on the front porch, waiting for me. Maybe Amy. I mean, I'm pretty sure she knew I was flying in today.

No big deal. This would give me a chance to surprise them. If I had planned it better, I could have brought an alien disguise and mingled with the dinner crowd in the dining room, to see how long it took Grandma to figure out I was in there with the rest of her customers. But I'd have to settle for sneaking in through the back door and catching someone off guard.

I left my suitcase just inside the gate and darted between the spaceship sculptures for cover. When I reached the side of the house, I ducked below the first-floor windows and made my way to the back. As I tiptoed up the back porch stairs, I heard someone rustling around in one of the sheds behind me.

Perfect. I could sneak up and startle them and then we'd laugh about it...unless it was Sheriff Tate. I mean, "Head of Security" Tate, or whatever his official title was, now that he was working here. Last summer I had devised a secret plan to humiliate him in front of the entire town. But only because he had led everyone in Forest Grove to the front lawn of the bed-and-breakfast, threatening to storm the place and drag Grandma's customers off to jail, or worse.

So it was probably not a real good idea for me to give that guy another big surprise. Ever.

The door to the shed stood partially open, and someone was kneeling on the ground, hunched over a scattering of spare parts. The carcasses of an old computer, a lawn mower, and a carpenter's nail gun rested against the far wall. It looked like pieces had been stripped from all three and mashed together to form the device in the center of the shed.

I crept forward for a better look. The figure inside the

doorway was wearing a pair of black coveralls. A pale hand punched a string of numbers into the computer's keyboard. Instantly the blade from the lawn mower whirled to life and rose in the air, a mini helicopter propeller. Attached below was a sheath of tubing that held a cartridge of nails. The gadget hovered in the air in the middle of the shed.

The figure in coveralls grabbed the computer's mouse and whipped it back and forth, clicking furiously at the button. The floating thing rotated in the air and spat out a machine-gun stream of nails.

Yikes! I jumped back in case one of those nails flew right out the doorway.

Then I heard a noise over the whirring of the blades. It might have been laughter, but it was so harsh it almost sounded like someone choking. I had a pretty good idea this wasn't Grandma or Amy. Or anyone who called Earth home. Not even Tate.

I looked up and saw paper targets spread across the walls of the shed at varying heights. Although the device had only been in action for a few seconds, each target had at least a dozen nails slammed through its bull's-eye. The nails were sunk into the wood all the way to their heads.

Bzzzzt! Sparks shot from the computer's mainframe where the casing had been cracked open to expose the circuit boards. It sizzled, and the smell of burning plastic was awful. The figure in the coveralls shouted, "Curse these cave dwellers and their primitive toys!" just before the flying device spun out of control and smashed into a wall. The wreckage crashed to the ground in a smoky heap.

"Whoa." I barely breathed the word, but the being on the

ground jumped up as if he'd been electrocuted. He stepped out of the shed and slammed the door.

Then he turned and loomed over me. His skin was bone white and smooth all over, making his head look like a skull. The dark purple lips and black eyes didn't help much. I stumbled backward and almost fell onto the grass.

But I recovered quickly. Sure, it had been almost a year since I had seen an alien, but you only had to remember they were pretty much just like us inside. Even the really creepy-looking ones. "Hey, sorry if I startled you," I said.

His upper lip contorted into a sneer, revealing sharp teeth. "You are equipped with neither the cognitive capacity nor the physical dimensions necessary to alarm one such as myself." He made a shooing motion with the back of his hand. "Now, return to your little village of like-minded dirt-crawlers."

Excuse me? First, no welcoming committee—and now this? I stared at him for a moment before I could even muster a response. "Oh, no. I'm not from Forest Grove. I just got here from—"

"Your point of origin is irrelevant. Despite a few insignificant biological variations, humans are the same everywhere." The smile he gave me would have looked fake and condescending on any planet. "My meaning—and here I shall speak very slowly to aid your limited comprehension—was that you should vacate the premises immediately. Your ultimate destination means little to me."

I took a deep, calming breath. Usually Grandma's customers were really nice, but occasionally you came across a rude one. And then you had to remember the best thing about meeting them at a bed-and-breakfast: they would be gone in

a day or two. "You know, you're not in a very good mood for someone on vacation." I tried to keep my tone light; it would kind of spoil my arrival if I got into a big argument with a Tourist before I had even seen Grandma.

He made a face like he had just noticed that my clothes were made of flaming manure. "Vacation?" he said. "You presuppose that I would choose to spend even one moment here of my own free will?"

What was this guy's problem? "Well... you're here, right? And this is a popular vacation spot for those who are, you know"—I leaned in and whispered so he would know that I was in on Grandma's secret—"*like you*."

The alien cleared his throat. "There exists no one in this pathetic little galaxy who is"—he leaned in and did an impression of my voice that was very unflattering and highly accurate—"*like me*." He straightened back up. "And certainly you did not say *popular*?" The alien scoffed so forcefully it sounded like he was hawking up a big wad of phlegm. "Your species' affinity for self-delusion is appalling."

Okay, so I might not have known what some of those words meant, but I could tell he was trying to insult me. And probably everyone I've ever met. But I remembered my training from last year. No use getting mad. Time to just start over. "Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot, with my sneaking up on you. Sorry about that." I stuck out my hand. "I'm David. I'll be working here this summer."

"Oh, I have managed to deduce that all by myself at this point in the conversation." He glanced at my hand distastefully. "There actually exist a few of us in the universe who

put our brains to more use than obsessing over matters of fancy and trivia. You must be the visiting earthling child, two generations removed from the proprietor here."

I dropped my hand. Despite how rude the alien was acting, I was kind of glad that Grandma was apparently excited enough about my visit to mention it to one of her customers. "Right. So, I'm David. And you are..."

"Your barely evolved vocal mechanism could not begin to pronounce my true name."

I noticed the lettering stitched above the pocket on his coveralls. "So... I should just call you 'Bob,' then?"

His black eyes narrowed into slits. Little gray spiderweb lines appeared on his throat, creeping out of his collar and up his neck. They looked like cracks in his skin. "If a cockroach could insult a king, then I might be offended by that comment."

I couldn't help but snort a little. Maybe this is what passes for humor on the Planet of the Sarcastic Skull-Faces. I figured that since I wasn't officially on the clock yet, there was really no point in trying to get along with this guy anymore. Soon he would step into one of the transporters and get beamed back home. Maybe somebody there would be willing to listen to his antihuman tirades.

"See ya," I said.

I started to turn away, but he stepped closer. "The average life span of a human is laughably brief." He glanced up at the house, checking the windows, and then leaned in even closer. Two small red dots glowed in the center of his black eyes. The spiderweb lines turned darker and reached up past his

jawline. He whispered, "If you ever sneak around and try to catch me unawares again, yours will be much shorter than average."

The look in those eyes totally freaked me out. But I forced myself to stare right back at him. "Don't worry about it," I said. "We'll probably never see each other again."

"How I wish that were true." The crack lines on his skin faded and his face was smooth and white again. He pulled on a cap that matched his workman's coveralls. "It is the great shame of my existence to admit that we are fellow employees at the moment."

My mouth fell open. "Fellow employees?"

The alien sighed heavily. He looked straight up and addressed the sky. "Why must these humans repeat everything as if the veracity of a statement will be altered somehow through its repetition?"

"Fellow employees?" I said again. I couldn't believe this. Any of this.

He looked back down at me. "Yes, that's right. Say it a few more times and you might just get it." He leaned even closer. "But here is something I shall only say once. Tell no human of the circumstances of our meeting here. And stay as far away from me as possible."

He straightened back up and marched away, along the side of the house and up the steps to the porch out front.

I just stared after him. I don't think I blinked for over a minute.

So much for my big *Welcome Back!* party.