

Max and the  
Gatekeeper

Book I

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# 1

## To Grandpa's House

"Where are you heading, boy?" the stranger asked in a raspy voice.

"To my grandfather's," Max Rigdon sighed gloomily as he watched the countryside zoom by his bus window. He brushed a lock of wavy brown hair out of his green eyes and adjusted his baseball cap.

"You sound like a condemned man," the traveler said.

"I am."

"Don't like your grandfather?"

"I don't know. I've only met him once."

"Rubbed you the wrong way, did he?"

Max's green eyes flashed. "You might say that." He turned from the window to look at his fellow passenger. Across the aisle, the man had a hood pulled up over his head and was dressed all in black. Max couldn't see his face but it seemed like a shadow hung over him, as if he emitted a kind of darkness. Max shivered.

"Rubbed a lot of people the wrong way, he has," the man's voice turned cold.

"You know my grandfather?" Max felt a little uneasy and frightened.

"Yes, and I know who you are, Max Rigdon," the stranger hissed.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Max glanced around and noticed they were the only passengers.

"To kill you," the man roared as he lunged for Max. His hood fell away to reveal a hideous, skull-like face. The man's eyes were blood red like the eyes of an albino rat, and his skin was black as night.

Max flinched and blinked his eyes as a blinding bolt of lightning lit the bus. A roar of thunder and pounding rain followed. Max's heart raced as he opened his eyes and looked around but the strange passenger had disappeared. "What was that? Where. . ." he muttered.

Even though the man was gone, Max's anxiety increased because he was still traveling to an undesired destination, his grandfather's. Ever since their first meeting at his father's funeral, Max thought of Grandpa Joe as a crazy old man.

Not only that, but he was about to ruin Max's summer. Only two days earlier, his mother had shattered his dream of being the starting pitcher on his little league all-star baseball team when she told him he would be spending the summer with his grandfather.

He was so angry at her for sending him, and furious at his grandfather just for living. He didn't want to be there. He didn't want anything to do with his weirdo grandfather. "How could he do this to me?" he spat. *He. . . I mean she.* No, he was actually mad at *him* and the *him* wasn't his grandfather. Max was upset with his father. *Why did he leave me?*

Max and his mother had some very hard times since his father's death. His mother had been a stay-at-home mom with only a high school education. The accident forced her to be the breadwinner for the family, but her education level kept her in low-paying jobs. Sending Max to live with his grandfather for the summer would help financially.

More lightning flashed outside Max's window followed by raging thunder that shook the vehicle. The downpour echoed through the bus like stampeding cattle. The storm, like the stranger, made him uneasy.

As the bus slowed, Max glanced out the window and saw a large group of people standing on a hill across the road. They appeared to be watching the bus as it pulled into the terminal. Every one of them was dressed in a black cloak with a hood, disturbingly like the stranger.

The squeal of the bus's air brakes broke through the sound of the rain. "We're here," the driver called as the bus came to a stop.

Max retrieved his backpack from the seat next to him, swung it over his shoulder, and walked towards the front of the bus.

"Any bags below?" the driver asked.

Max shook his head.

The driver opened the door, and a gust of wind slammed into Max. His grandpa stood in front of the door, wet gray hair plastered against his head. Max forced his feet to take the last few steps off the bus.

"Hello, Max." His grandfather gave him a firm handshake with his bony but strong grip.

Max peered into his grandfather's beaming face and managed a weak smile. "Hello, Grandpa."

After the bus drove away, the brisk wind whipped around them. "Some storm." Grandpa used a handkerchief to wipe the rainwater off his face.

As lightning zipped across the sky, the landscape went from dark to light revealing Grandpa's small town, population thirty-five hundred. The resulting thunder echoed off the surrounding hills and mountains.

The flashes from the electrical storm confirmed what Max had seen from the bus. There was a crowd dressed in black standing in the rain. Max couldn't see their faces, but he could feel their eyes staring at him. Above the sounds of the storm Max thought he could hear moaning or chanting.

"Who are they?" Max nodded in the direction of the strangers.

"This way." His grandfather pointed up the street as if he hadn't heard Max's question. He started marching with his head down and barreled into the storm.

"What about those people?" Max tried again, running to keep up, but got no answer.

Max trudged along behind his grandfather, and the chanting grew in volume. He glanced over his shoulder to get a better look at the strange people. To his surprise, they were following. Max was amazed that his grandfather didn't seem to notice or was ignoring them altogether. As they continued up the street, they passed through a nice neighborhood. Through the windows of the houses, Max caught sight of more people staring at him.

"COOOOOOMMMMMMMEEEEEE WIIIIIIITH USSSSSSSSS," howled the wind and Max whirled around. The crowd moved up the street and gathered in front of the houses. His grandfather continued to push on in an unconcerned manner.

The unusual people alarmed Max. An hour ago, he thought this was going to be a boring summer. Now he worried about what might happen before it even began. For reasons he couldn't explain, he felt a strong desire to join the group of strangers.

"Home at last," his grandfather called over the howling wind.

The sight of his grandfather's house troubled Max. The old large three-story with a tower on the far side reminded him of a house in a horror movie. It stood alone at the end of the street and could easily pass for a condemned building. Several of the windows were cracked and the shutters were missing or damaged and every window on the third floor was boarded up. The wooden structure looked like it hadn't been painted in years. The yard was as bad. Weeds grew everywhere and the trees and shrubs were overgrown. A rusty iron fence surrounded the spacious lot with a gate at the center of the front yard.

“You live here?” Max tried to hide the disappointment in his voice.

“Yes,” Grandpa said with a crooked smile as water streamed down his face and off his mustache.

Max could barely hear the skreak of the rusty gate above the rain, wind, and the creepy voices. Yes, there were voices, and they were coming from the strangers.

His grandfather closed the gate behind them and led Max up to the house.

*At least we're out of the rain.* Max stood under the shelter of the porch while his grandpa searched his pockets for his keys.

“Here we go.” Max’s grandfather unlocked the door and Max followed him into the darkness of the entryway. He waited as his grandfather fumbled along the wall for the light switch. “Close the door, please.”

Max started to shut the door and spotted the crowd lining up around the fence. “Grandpa, who are those people?” he asked as he held the door slightly ajar.

“People? What people?” Grandpa winked.

“The ones outside! The ones who followed us from the bus station,” Max said, raising his voice as he closed the door. His grandfather had to have noticed. He wasn’t imagining them.

His grandfather took off his coat and gave it a good shake, spraying rainwater everywhere. He then hung it on the coat rack next to the door. “This way,” he waved.

Max, still hoping that this was some sort of mistake and that he wouldn’t be staying, held onto his jacket and backpack. He followed his grandfather down a hallway to the left of the main stairs into a large dated kitchen at the back of the house. In the middle of the room was a rectangular table with two place settings and a steaming pot of what Max assumed was dinner. The house, although spacious, felt warm and homey.

“Are you hungry?” his grandfather asked.

“Yes, I’m starved.” Max realized that he hadn’t eaten in several hours.

“Have a seat then.” Grandpa motioned to a chair at the table.

Max set his backpack on the floor and hung his jacket over the chair in which he sat while his grandfather dished up two bowls with stew.

“Dig in.” Grandpa placed a bowl in front of Max.

Max took a spoonful and blew across its steamy contents before taking a bite. To his astonishment, it was delicious and he devoured the entire bowlful in seconds.

“That hungry?” his grandfather asked. “Well, there’s plenty more. Help yourself.”

Max started filling his bowl again but paused halfway feeling his grandfather's eyes on him. "What?"

"You remind me of your father when he was your age."

Max resumed stuffing his face in an effort to avoid a conversation about his father. Even though it was four years since his father's death, it was still a painful topic.

His grandfather seemed to sense that the matter was not a good place to start and changed the subject. "How was your trip?"

"It was okay," Max muttered, trying to keep the food he had shoveled into his mouth from falling out. "I slept most of the way," he added, wanting to end that conversation as well. He resented being here. *Look at him. He's wearing a suit right out of a Tom Sawyer novel. Why, he looks just like Mark Twain. All he needs is a corncob pipe.* Max struggled to stifle a laugh.

"You find something amusing, do you?"

"Has anyone ever told you that you look. . .?" Max felt his cheeks flush with embarrassment.

"Like Mark Twain?" his grandfather finished. "All the time. I've even signed autographs as the famed writer."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. I don't think those crazy people realized he has been dead for almost a hundred years." Grandpa chuckled.

*Who's he calling crazy?* But Max liked the fact that his grandfather had a sense of humor about his appearance.

"Are you finished?" Grandpa pointed to Max's empty bowl.

"Yeah."

"Good." His grandfather scooped up the dishes and hauled them to the sink. "You can help me do these later. Now I'll give you the grand tour. Bring your backpack."

Max retrieved his stuff and accompanied his grandfather out of the kitchen. The rain pounded on the windows as they entered the main hallway. "On the right is the front room. As you can see by the sheet-covered furniture, I haven't used it in a long time.

"On the left is my study. You may read any book you want." He then pointed to a door on the side of the staircase. "That leads into the basement. Again, I haven't been down there in years. My room is at the end of the hall by the kitchen. You, on the other hand, are upstairs."

Max followed his grandfather upstairs and into the first room on the left.

"This is your bedroom." Grandpa turned on the light. "You may toss your things in here."

Max took a quick look around the clean room, which contained a double bed in the center of one wall. A slight musty smell reached his nostrils as he placed his backpack on an oak dresser beneath the window overlooking the backyard. A movement outside caught his eye. The people. They were still there, standing around the fence in the rain. He had forgotten about them during dinner. “Grandpa. . .”

“This way. There is more to see.” Grandpa went out into the hall.

“But those people.” Max protested.

“Not everything in this town is as it seems.” Grandpa led Max into the next room, which appeared to have a theme. It reminded Max of a science lab. In fact, all of the remaining rooms he saw had their own themes. One was devoted to mathematics, one to history, and even one to weaponry. There were so many rooms with different themes that Max couldn’t remember them all.

*My grandfather really is loony!* Max thought as they left the room devoted to mythology.

“You can explore any of these rooms whenever you like. Feel free to read any of the books in them. I only ask that you put each book back where you found it when you are done.”

“Read? Don’t you have a T.V.?” Max had no intention of learning or studying anything new during his summer vacation. Didn’t his grandpa know that summer is the time to forget everything learned during the previous school year?

“Television.” Grandpa snorted. “No, never had one. I never knew anyone who could survive in this world with the things they learned from television.”

“No television,” Max complained. “What am I going to do this summer?”

“Oh, I have that all taken care of.” Grandpa Joe smiled slyly. “Now, for the last room in the house.”

They stood at the bottom of the tower where a spiral staircase led up to what Max assumed was the third floor.

“All the rooms in the house you may enter whenever you like. The third floor; however, you may only enter when I’m present,” Grandpa said with a stern look.

“Why do spooky old houses always have forbidden rooms?” Max muttered under his breath.

“They are forbidden for your protection.”

Max felt his face turn red. He hadn’t intended for his grandfather to hear that. He looked up the staircase and saw a landing and a door at the top of the stairs. “Can we go up now?”

“Not today but soon. Now let’s go wash up those dishes.”

Downstairs, Max washed the dishes while his grandfather dried and put them away. He could see his reflection in the window over the sink until lightning flashed across the sky. He was amazed and afraid to see the people still out there. His grandfather continued to pretend that he either did not notice or did not care.

“Do you like card games?” his grandfather asked.

“I haven’t ever really played any.”

“Well, maybe I will teach you one after we finish up here.”

“Shouldn’t I call my mom to tell her I got here okay?”

“Oh, yes. I forgot. I can finish up here. Go, give her a call. There is a phone in the study.”

Max hurried to the study, which was a lot larger than he’d realized on the tour. Thousands of books lined the built-in shelves that stretched from the floor to the ceiling on every wall. In the middle of the room was a huge oak desk with a red leather chair. The phone sat on the desk next to an assortment of pictures.

One picture caught Max’s eye. It was the last picture taken as a family with his father before he died. There was a picture of his grandfather when he was a lot younger standing next to an attractive woman. *She must be my grandmother.*

Max picked up the phone and dialed. A wave of homesickness washed over him when he heard his mother’s voice.

“How are you? Did you arrive safely?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Mom.”

Max couldn’t remember the conversation with his mother as he lay on his bed in the dark. Every once in a while, a lightning strick illuminated the room and a house-shaking boom would overwhelm the rain tapping against the window. He had never been homesick before. Not only did he miss his mother but he was terrified of the people outside. He could still hear their eerie chanting mingled with the storm. What really scared him was his desire to go outside and join them.

Max spent half an hour staring at them after his grandfather said goodnight. He tried to make out their silhouettes every time the lightning flashed. They appeared to be of all shapes and sizes. They were tall and short, fat and skinny, old and young. Why were they out there? What did they want? The longer Max studied them the greater the urge to be with them grew. Their persistence astounded him. After observing them for a time, his eyes grew heavy. The more he watched and the harder he listened the

drowsier he felt. All of his muscles ached and his head pounded. His discomfort forced him to move to the bed where he lay down and curled into a ball.

Suddenly, Max found himself in his grandfather's front yard without a clue as to how he got there. He stood barefoot in the rain facing the people on the other side of the fence.

"Come with us," they called and Max walked towards the gate. He had no control over his feet, they moved as if they had a mind of their own. When he reached the gate, he unlatched it and stepped through.

The mysterious group seized Max from all sides, grasped his right arm, and forced him to hold his right hand out with the palm facing up. One of the figures placed a small metallic object, some kind of symbol Max did not recognize, on his open palm. The chanting of the group grew in tempo and intensity, the words dark and biting.

A piercing pain caused Max to gasp as the metal burrowed into his hand. It twisted and turned as if alive. One second it was on the surface of his hand and the next it was beneath the skin.

The chanting changed. With the sound of each strange new word, the symbol now embedded in Max's hand began to glow. At first, he felt a weird tingle, but then it burned fiercely. He screamed and didn't know how much longer he could withstand the pain. The people held him tight as he struggled to free himself.

Max jerked up when the pain became unbearable. He realized he was sitting on his bed as another bolt of lightning flashed outside his bedroom window. The roar of thunder muffled the cry that escaped his lips.

He sat in the dark covered in sweat. *Is this rainwater?* His hand tingled; his breathing was heavy and his heart was racing. He lay back on the bed and listened for any sound of movement. Max held his hand up before him, to see if there were any marks. He waited for another flash of lightning to provide enough light to see by. The minutes dragged into an hour. His arm grew tired and his hand fell slowly onto the bed.

Max remembered thinking that the rain had stopped before he fell asleep.