



CHAPTER 1

Maria had never much cared for spiders.

That was the difference between her and Grandma Esme. Esme *loved* spiders — strangely so. She had pictures of them on everything, from plates and cups to dresses and socks. She had a spider-shaped ring that she never took off — “a gift from an old friend” was all she would say about it. And she wouldn’t let Maria or her little brother, Rafi, kill a real spider in her presence. “You never harm a spider,” she’d said more than once, “because trust me, children, a spider never forgets.”

Grandma Esme’s love of spiders wasn’t the only strange thing about her. She wore black, silky shawls patterned with stars and planets. She could stand on her

head during her morning yoga, even though she had to be at least seventy years old. She owned a collection of fancy whistles, left over from the days when she wasn't Grandma Esme but Esmerelda the Magnificent, the world's tamest lion tamer, at least according to her stories.

She also wore glasses, just like Maria. And just like Maria, she preferred reading to the outdoors.

So while Maria disliked anything with more than four legs — *especially* spiders — she absolutely loved her grandma Esme. Her mom and her brother thought Esme was weird. Maria thought she was, well, *magnificent*.

It was not unusual for Maria to ask, as she did one Friday morning in February, “Mom, can I go to Grandma Esme’s house after school?”

Her mother was buried from the waist up in the fridge, scrounging for things to pack for lunch. Now she peeked out at Maria and frowned.

“Again?” she said. “I don’t know, *mija*. I feel like I haven’t seen you all week.”

“I promise I’ll be home before dinner. I’ll even be here before you get home from work.”

Maria’s mother was a ranger at Falling Waters, a

park that came all the way up to their backyard. On Fridays, it was so busy with the arrival of weekend campers that Maria's mother had to get to work early and stay even later. While she drove Maria and Rafi to school the rest of the week, on Fridays, they had to ride the bus.

"Can you take your brother with you?" Maria's mother asked her now.

"Take me where?" Rafi asked through a yawn as he stepped into the kitchen. He was wearing the same camo fishing vest he wore every day, and his mess of curly brown hair was particularly unruly.

"To your grandmother's house. I won't be home until after five, so I need you two to stick together."

"I'm almost eleven," Rafi said. "I can take care of myself."

Maria snorted. Just last week, she'd caught him trying to cook a hot dog over the open flame of their stove.

"Plus, I was going to ask if I could go home with Rob after school. His dad said he'd take us fishing in his lake."

Rob McCormick was Rafi's best friend. Unlike the Lopez family, the McCormicks were rich. Instead of living in a small house in a neighborhood where all the small houses looked the same, the McCormicks had

fifteen acres of land, including their own lake. Instead of shopping at the secondhand store, they got all their clothes brand-new at the mall.

Another big difference was that Rob's father was alive. He took the boys fishing. It was easy to see why Rafi liked spending time with them.

Maria's mother sighed. "All right," she said. "Maria, you can go to Grandma Esme's, and, Rafi, you can go over to Rob's. But I expect you both to be home in time for dinner. Agreed?"

"Agreed," they said.

"And, Maria, honey, go change your shirt. You've got a hole in your sleeve."

Maria looked down and realized her mom was right. Her favorite shirt, a button-up top with a pattern her grandmother had called "paisley," now had a nickel-sized hole where the left sleeve met the shoulder. She must have ripped it putting it on this morning. She'd have to sew a patch over the hole like she'd done with her jeans and her book bag. She even had a spare purple star that might be a good match. But she hardly had time for that now. The bus was going to be here any minute.

She ran back to her room and threw on the first T-shirt she touched. When she returned, her brother was standing at the front door with their lunches, motioning for her to hurry.

“C’mon, or we’ll have to walk,” he said.

“Bye, Mom!” Maria called as she ran out the door.

She was in such a rush, she hadn’t noticed the spiders that had built webs overnight in the hallway outside her room. Nor had she noticed the cluster of spiders that now hung from the awning above her front door, watching her as she sprinted to catch the bus. And she certainly hadn’t noticed the man in the black silk suit who’d been pretending to check the mailbox across the street.

Maria hadn’t noticed any of these things. But all of them, waiting, had noticed Maria.

It was going to be a very long day at school.

Maria had a quiz in math, an oral report in social studies, and a solar-system drill in science, all in the same day. But before any of those, she had to survive honors English.

Honors English was Maria’s least favorite class. Not

because she didn't like reading or writing, either. Once, in a diary her dad had given her for her birthday, she'd written that she wanted to grow up to be a travel reporter, and have adventures like Agatha, her favorite character from a book. No, the reason Maria hated honors English was that Claire McCormick was in it, too.

Claire was Rob's older sister, but she was as mean as her little brother was nice. While Rafi and Rob were practically inseparable, Maria and Claire couldn't be further from friends. Claire always made fun of Maria's thrift-shop clothes, her vintage glasses, and the fact that she was smart. Maria always said that Claire had followers instead of friends.

Maria stayed out of Claire's way whenever she could, but she couldn't avoid her in honors English. Thanks to the cruel twist of fate known as alphabetical order, Claire sat directly behind Maria, whispering nasty comments whenever Ms. Wainscott wasn't paying attention. Today, Claire was using the time before the bell to brag about her thirteenth birthday party, to which Maria was *not* invited. Looking around, Maria got the feeling she was the only person in her class who wasn't.

“We’re going to put a platform over the pool to make a dance floor,” Claire said. “I’m already working on the perfect playlist.”

“That sounds awesome,” said Mark Spitzer, the only boy on both the soccer team and the math club.

“You always make the best playlists,” added Tina Brown, whose parents owned a restaurant Maria’s family couldn’t afford even on special occasions.

It seemed like everyone in seventh grade was in a contest to see who could kiss up to Claire the most. Everyone except Maria and her best friend, Derek — who, unfortunately for Maria, did not take honors English.

No one was mean to Derek, though. Everyone liked Derek because he made people laugh, even teachers. When it came to Maria, who couldn’t even make her own mom or brother laugh, people found it easier to side with Claire. It’s not like Maria really cared all that much. Grandma Esme said that all the most interesting people were misunderstood during their lifetimes.

“Oh my gosh, Maria, is that *food* on your shirt?”

Maria tried to look over her shoulder at the back of her T-shirt, the one she’d grabbed quickly while getting

ready that morning. In the edge of her vision, there appeared to be a mustard stain — probably from when she'd helped Rafi make the hot dogs. Her face flushed with embarrassment as Tina and Mark and the rest of the kids around her snickered. Whatever Grandma Esme said, a lifetime was a long time to be misunderstood.

“You should just put another patch over it,” Claire said. “Or maybe a piece of duct tape? I'm sure the janitor has a spare roll you could borrow.”

“Wait, Claire, I think you have something on your face,” Maria said hotly. “Oh, no, sorry, that *is* your face.”

Claire scowled and opened her mouth like she was about to snap back, but thankfully the bell rang, and Ms. Wainscott stepped in from the hall.

“All right, class,” she said. “Let's see how well you've been studying your vocab this week. That's right — pop quiz. It won't require any talking, thank you. You'll just need one sheet of paper and a pen.”

Why had Maria thought her day couldn't get any worse? She was starting to think someone was out to get her.