

## CHAPTER ONE

The little red convertible pulled into the driveway of the Spain house on a Saturday morning. Sixteen-year-old Jaris Spain peered out the front window.

“She’s here,” he announced.

“Yeah!” Jaris’s father, Lorenzo, sighed. “An’ pretty soon the seasonal flu’s gonna be here too. Can’t wait for that either.”

“Lorenzo!” Monica Spain, Jaris’s mother, chided. “Will you stop acting as if my mother is some terrible person!”

“Hey,” Pop protested, “she’s a swell lady. Just ’cause she hates me is no reason not to love the old girl to pieces.”

“Lorenzo, she does *not* hate you,” Mom asserted. “Just because she disagrees

with some of your ideas doesn't mean she hates you."

"Oh yeah!" Pop agreed. "If I'd only come around to her way of thinkin', she might even like me. First off, I gotta stop breathin'. Now, *that'd* make me a hero in her book."

"Oh!" Mom snapped as she went to the door to let her mother in. Before she got there, she whispered to Jaris's sister, fourteen-year-old Chelsea, "Don't tell your grandma anything that might upset her. Don't mention that your friend Athena got drunk on vodka at that crazy party she gave. And don't bring up the murder on Grant."

"She might have read about that in the papers," Jaris remarked.

Chelsea's eyes widened. "You mean Athena Edson getting drunk was in the papers?" she gasped.

Jaris smiled. "No, the murder," he grinned.

"Be nice to her, little girl," Pop chimed in as Mom glared at him. "But don't talk

too much about what goes on around here. Talk about harmless stuff, like the new baby panda at the zoo. Yeah, that's a good topic right there. Oughta take up twenty, thirty minutes, like what they're gonna name the panda."

Mom put a smile on her face and swung open the door. Her sixty-eight-year-old mother beamed and threw her arms around Monica, her only child. Grandma—Jessie Clymer—was a widow who used to sell real estate. She was now semiretired, still taking on an occasional listing. She had a lot of investments, and she was well-fixed. She totally adored her grandchildren, Jaris and Chelsea.

Grandma Jessie had tried to get both her grandchildren enrolled in a ritzy private school in Santa Barbara. She offered to pay full tuition for both. The school was far from the graffiti-marred, crime-ridden area around Harriet Tubman High School. That's where Jaris was now a senior and Chelsea was a freshman. Grandma Jessie

thought the Spains were ruining their children's lives by making them live in the area.

But the Spains didn't want to send their children away, and Jaris and Chelsea didn't want to live away from home. The kids loved Tubman High, and they wanted to be with the friends they'd known for most of their lives.

"There's the birthday girl!" Grandma Jessie gushed, spotting Chelsea, who would soon be fifteen. The purpose of this visit from Grandma was to celebrate Chelsea's birthday, just the two of them.

Chelsea didn't like her grandmother. Grandma hated Pop, and Chelsea loved him very much. A few times, Grandma tried to interfere in the Spain's family life so much that she created trouble between Chelsea's parents. Sometimes her mother called Grandma Jessie and complained to her about some of Pop's flaws. Chelsea hated that. Grandma Jessie made no secret of her feelings about Pop. She considered him well below her daughter in every way,

from education to manners to intelligence. When her beautiful, precious daughter married Lorenzo Spain, Grandma's heart almost broke.

But Chelsea was determined to have a nice day with Grandma Jessie anyway. She *was* her grandmother—in fact, her only grandparent. Jessie's husband was dead, and both Pop's parents were dead. So all the Spain kids had in the way of a grandparent was Grandma Jessie, such as she was.

Chelsea smiled, and when her grandmother hugged her, she hugged her back.

"I'm so glad to see you, sweetheart," Grandma Jessie told the girl, drawing back and taking a good look at Chelsea. "Oh, you are so beautiful! Thank God you take after your mother's side of the family. The Clymers have always been very attractive people."

Pop was sitting in an easy chair in the living room, reading the newspaper. He looked up, smiling cordially. "Yeah, little girl," he chuckled. He held his newspaper

high, concealing his face. You could hear him but not see him. “You wouldn’t want to look like the Spains. When we Spains get together at family events, we’re all so ugly that mothers cover their kids’ eyes. But that’s good ’cause some o’ us got good jobs in the circus. My cousin was the Amazin’ Ugly Man for the sideshow!”

Chelsea covered her mouth to suppress a giggle.

Grandma ignored Pop, as usual. She looked over at Jaris, who was keeping a respectful distance. He was hoping his grandmother would forget to embrace him, even though that was her custom.

“Come over here, you big, handsome boy,” Grandma cried, dashing Jaris’s hopes. She threw her arms around him and kissed him on the cheek. Jaris escaped from the hug as soon as he could without hurting his grandma’s feelings. He took a step back, closer to Pop, hoping she wouldn’t want another hug. He could see Pop, but no one else in the room could.

“My, you’re so tall and handsome!” Grandma Jessie added, looking him up and down.

“Dark too,” Pop added, still speaking from behind the newspaper. Pop was darker-skinned than Mom.

Grandma Jessie cast an angry look in Pop’s direction and returned her attention to Jaris. “It won’t be long before you’re turning seventeen, dear,” she reminded him. “Then it will be you and me going off for the day, as Chelsea is today. Don’t think I’ve forgotten that. You children are the lights of my life. You are both so special to me.” A little quiver was in her voice.

“Hey, Jaris,” Pop boomed from behind his paper. “There’s somethin’ to look forward to. You wanna put a big red circle on the date there when Grandma Jessie is comin’ for you. Yeah, boy.”

Then he dropped his voice so that only Jaris could hear. Pop added, “Gotta rank right up there with getting a bad case o’ acne.”

“What did you say, Lorenzo?” Grandma demanded, her eyes narrow with suspicion.

“Oh, nothin’ much, Jessie,” Pop replied amiably. “Just that the kids so look forward to hangin’ with you that they get very happy, if you know what I’m sayin’.” Pop winked at Jaris from behind the newspaper.

Grandma Jessie glared at the newspaper for a long moment, certain that Pop had insulted her in some sly way. Then she forced a smile back to her lips. “Come on, Chelsea, let’s go,” she urged. “I know it’s still a week to your actual birthday, but you will probably have a nice party then. That way, we have today for us to celebrate. And we don’t want to miss a minute of this wonderful day.”

“Now you girls have a wonderful time,” Mom chirped as her mother and daughter went out the door.

“Yep,” Pop sighed, “now Little Red Riding Hood, you go and have a good time with the wolf.” The door was closed, so Grandma couldn’t hear him.



“Oh, you!” Mom snapped. “You’re impossible. Mom is a lovely person. No grandmother could love her grandchildren more. They are very lucky to have her in their lives.”

Jaris thought his mother would soon turn to him for support. So he turned on his heel and scurried down the hall to his room.

Meanwhile, in the driveway, Grandma Jessie got behind the wheel of the convertible. As she started the car, she announced, “First we’ll have a nice breakfast, Chelsea.”

“The Chicken Shack!” Chelsea chattered. “That’s where Jaris works. It has a good deal for breakfast. They got these breaded chicken sandwiches, and they got chicken burritos too.”

“Oh, deliver me!” Grandma gasped. “That greasy house of horrors. That den of salmonella and rodents. I wouldn’t let my cat eat there.”

“They got a good rating from the health department, Grandma. A or something,” Chelsea protested. “Jaris said they’re really