

Chapter 1

You do know it's haunted . . . don't you?

LIFE IS WEIRD. When my mom died six months ago, I didn't even know what my grandparents looked like. Now, I'm getting ready to bake cookies in their hundred-something-year-old mansion with their photos looking down on me in almost every room.

Like the rest of the house, my grandmother's kitchen is huge, twice as big as our old one. Because Mom never bothered to clean the place out after Grandma died, the cabinets are still stocked with all kinds of bowls, spoons, and pans. Obviously, Grandma Carmen was majorly into cooking, a lot like Mom who ran her own catering business back in Crescent City.

Ever since I found Grandma Carmen's rosquillos recipe in one of the drawers yesterday, I've been dying to try it. So what if they're Christmas cookies, and this is only September?

I gather my supplies. Mom taught me to be super clean when I cook, so I squeeze my thick and annoyingly curly brown hair into a Scrunchy and wash my hands. All set except for one thing. I can't find the powdered sugar, and we just bought it this morning.

It's supposed to be in the walk-in pantry. There's no light, so I leave the door open. Standing in the center, I turn in slow circles and check all the shelves for the second time. Dad threw out all of Grandma's old cans and boxes, so everything in here is new. Since Joey and I have both inherited Dad's huge sweet tooth, we're all stocked up on baking powder, flour, everything I need to keep us supplied with cakes and cookies. Besides the baking stuff, the shelves now hold rice, noodles, a case of Pepsi, a family-sized bag of Nacho Cheese Doritos, and three kinds of cereal, among other things. When I realize I only know this because I recognize their colors and shapes, I take off my glasses and use my shirt to clean them. Amazing. I was blind, but now I see.

Fuzzy vision magically cured, I move everything around looking for the powdered sugar. No luck.

After snagging a handful of Doritos, I step back into the kitchen to do another search, this time with clear lenses. Five minutes later, I still haven't found the sugar.

There's a staircase in the corner. Unlike the main stairs, which is all hand-carved wood, this one is plain since it was only for servants, a luxury I can't imagine. Joey, my nine-year-old brother, trots down the steps as I'm about to check the pantry for the fifth time.

"Theresa, you said you were going to bake rosquillos."

"I am going to bake rosquillos."

"When?" His eyes fix on the teapot-shaped clock on the wall above the stove. "You said that seventeen minutes and twenty-three seconds ago."

I've laid out some utensils on Grandma's old butcher-block table. Joey saunters over and eyes the empty bowl. "Have you been eating Doritos this whole time?"

"What? No." I lick my lips, and the taste of nacho dust comes back. Geez, does he see everything? "Look, I didn't come in here to stuff my face. I haven't made the cookies yet because I can't find the powdered sugar."

"Are your lenses clean?"

He reaches for my glasses, but I brush aside his hand before he can snatch them. Since people with Asperger's aren't always good at reading expressions, I put on an angry face and point at it. "See this look?" I push my eyebrows together for dramatic effect.

"Yes."

"What's it mean?"

"You're annoyed."

I nod hard. "Grabbing someone's glasses is rude." How do you say rude in Spanish? When I can't come up with it, I settle for very bad, or *Muy malo*.

Once he's got the idea, I drop the act and hold out my newly wiped specs so he can see them.

“At first I didn’t realize they were smudgy, but . . .” My words trail off as he strolls across the kitchen, opens the ancient avocado-green refrigerator, and pulls out a jar. The kid’s not even listening.

Well, I can be annoying too. “Did you open up all the windows like Dad told you?”

He fishes out a huge dill pickle, his favorite food. “Not yet. I haven’t finished watching the DVD on poisonous spiders.”

Just as I suspected. “Weren’t you the one complaining about the moldy smell? If you want it to go away, you’re gonna have to open this place up.”

“I will.”

“Do it while it’s still warm out. Dad likes it when he doesn’t have to tell you twice.”

“I’ll do it after I watch the part about brown recluse spiders.” I cross my arms like Mom used to.

“But it’s my favorite part.”

“You’ve seen that a hundred times, Jojo. Do it now.”

“Oh, all right.” He takes a huge bite and mumbles, “Let me know when the rosquillos are ready,” through a mouthful of pickle. With that, he trots back up the stairs. Across the room, the pickle jar sits open on the counter. Big help he is.

I put Joey’s pickles away and head back into the pantry.

Uggghhhh . . . what color is that stupid powdered sugar box? Red? Blue?

There’s a case of bottled water on the top shelf, an easy reach for Dad but not for somebody who’s barely five feet tall. Lucky for me, the shelves are sturdy. I climb onto the lowest and shove the bottled water aside to check behind. Nothing.

Creeeeaaak. Thump.

The noise comes from the kitchen, so I step out of the pantry. “Thanks for coming back, Jojo. Maybe you can find the . . .” Nobody’s there. Not Joey. Not Dad. Just me and the blue-and-white box lying on the white tiled counter across the room.

Above it, the cupboard door slowly swings shut with the same eerie creaking sound that drew me out there. What the heck?

Ignoring the goose bumps that have popped up on my arms, I creep over and turn the box face up. Yup, it’s the powdered sugar, all right. I yank open the cupboard door. Coffee cups.

A ghostly cold finger seems to press against the base of my spine, and I shiver as I remember what happened at the grocery store this morning.

“So it was you and your kids that moved into the old Ramos House?” The old poofy haired cashier looked at Dad as if he just tore open one of our cereal boxes and poured Fruit Loops over his head. “But that place has been haunted ever since—you do know it’s haunted . . . don’t you?”

Later, in the car, we chuckled at the old woman’s wacky stories. But now . . .

So what if some old grocery store lady thinks this house is full of ghosts? That doesn’t mean there’s one messing with me right now. Yeah? Well then, who put that box up there? Dad? Me? Obviously not Joey. He’d rather eat dirt than put something in the wrong place. And how come I didn’t see it the first ten times I looked?

Another thump.

Now the powdered sugar is on the floor.

“Whoa!” I jump back as if expecting the tiny cardboard box to sprout feet and run up my leg. “Grandma Carmen . . . ?” If she’s really here, then where is she? Floating on the ceiling? Behind me? Suddenly paranoid, I look everywhere.

“Theresa . . . ?”

Even though I recognize Dad’s voice, I spin around, half expecting my grandmother to be standing behind him, rubber spatula in hand.

He squints at me like I'm some weird zoo animal. "What's wrong? ¿Qué te pasa?"

An invisible hand squeezes my chest, and I realize I've been holding my breath this whole time. Knowing Dad will laugh if I tell him what I'm really thinking, I fumble to come up with something he will believe.

"Did you feel anything weird a minute ago? You know . . . like tremors?" A reasonable question since we live in California.

"What, you think you felt an earthquake?" He runs his fingers through his tweaked out hair, shrugs, then spots the box on the floor. "What's that doing there?"

For gosh sake, don't tell him it jumped off the counter. I pick it up. "I found some of Grandma's cookie recipes. Decided to make us some rosquillos. When the tremor happened I got scared, so I . . ."

"Rosquillos, huh? Your mom only made those at Christmas." He heads for the fridge, then turns back, the corners of his mouth curved upward.

He's smiling. Must be the cookies. I bounce on my toes, happy I decided to bake them.

But instead of thanking me, he says, "Hey, remember, at breakfast, when I told Joey to open up the windows? He's doing it now, and I never even had to remind him. Great kid, huh?"

"Yup . . . great kid." I put down the box and stand there, nodding and smiling, as Dad grabs himself a can of Pepsi. Why am I the only one who wears glasses in this family? He's the one who's half blind.

Once my oblivious father leaves, I slump against the counter, studying the powdered sugar. Did I stick you in the cupboard and just don't remember doing it? Dad always says the simplest answer is usually the right one. Okay, so that explains how you ended up with the coffee cups, but what made you fall . . . twice?

I give the box a few pokes with my finger. When it doesn't do any more tricks, I carry it over to the table and set it alongside the other ingredients. A half

hour later, the smell of Christmas cookies fills the kitchen. Time to update Joey.

This is a big day for the Martinez family. After suffering the tortures of no TV or Internet for nearly a week, we're finally getting hooked up. I know the guy started with the living room TV, so I head there first. As I expect, Joey's flopped on the sofa, watching cartoons. But that's not why I smile. From what I can tell, every window in the house is wide open.

"Good job with the windows, little brother."

Because I haven't asked a question, Joey says nothing and continues to stare at the big-screen TV, one of the few things Dad didn't sell before the move.

I drop into the empty space on the end of the sofa, careful not to touch him. "When somebody says something nice, you're supposed to say thank you."

"Thank you."

"And the rosquillos will be ready in about ten more minutes." Joey's lack of eye contact is something we've been working on, so I tap his foot with my finger.

He looks at me between blinks. "Thank you. And there's white stuff on your left lens."

I yank my glasses off and hold them up to the light. Geez, he's right. Flour.

As I'm cleaning them, we hear Dad and the cable guy make their way down the main staircase to the foyer. After handshakes and goodbyes, Dad strides over to us.

"We're set. All the TVs and computers are officially operational."

"Is this another thank you situation?" Joey asks, eyes never leaving the TV.

"Yes." I stand up. "Thanks, Dad. That's great. And I made the rosquillos. They'll be ready in about—"

Dad steps past me and smiles down at my brother. "Joey . . . thanks again for remembering to open up the windows. That was very responsible, and with such a big house, I need all the help I can get."

What about me? I'm helpful. Those rosquillos are from scratch, for gosh sakes.

I flop back onto the sofa and glare at Dad as he heads off down the hall. It doesn't take long before I start feeling guilty. Maybe I shouldn't be so touchy. He just knows that the windows got opened, not that I nagged Joey into doing it.

Feeling slightly better about myself, I hop up from the sofa and head for the kitchen to check the cookies. At least we have the Internet now. Maybe getting away from our old house will start Dad writing again. Author of five-and-a-half historical novels about the kings and queens of Spain, he hasn't written a thing since Mom died. When she was around, money from her catering business took care of the bills when Dad got his writer's block. With no money coming in, we started to get letters. First, about credit card bills, later for the overdue mortgage. That's why we ended up here. Free rent.

I walk by the dining room and hit the brakes. The room is dark, and the curtains are flapping in the breeze. "Joey," I call back to him. "Why didn't you open the curtains when you opened the dining room window?"

"I did open the curtains."

"Obviously not."

Joey swings himself over the back of the sofa and scoots into the dining room on blue socked feet. I follow.

"I pulled them open with this cord . . ." His hand slips behind the thick green drapes and they slide open, exposing cracked windows framed with cobwebs. "Then, I turned that crank as far as it would go."

"Maybe a ghost closed the curtains." It sure pushed that powdered sugar box around easily enough.

"Dad says ghosts aren't real."

"Maybe they aren't . . . maybe they are." But seeing as there's no reason Dad would have shut them, that only leaves two explanations: One, Joey only thinks he opened them or two, a ghost really did close them—why, I have no clue.

Like most kids with Asperger's, Joey's always one hundred percent honest. Knowing he'd pass a lie detector test if asked and that my openminded ideas about ghosts will get back to Dad if I argue the point, I drop the subject and peer out the window at a huge backyard.

Untended since Grandma died, it's filled with half-dead grass and overgrown shrubs and trees. But Joey couldn't care less about those things. It's the swimming pool that catches his eye. He squashes his nose to the glass, and a rare smile crosses his lips. If the water was clean, he'd probably be splashing in it right now. I love swimming too, but in rivers or the ocean. Something about pools has always given me the creeps. Maybe it's the way I can see my reflection in the still blue water.

It's almost as though there's another me in there.

"I bet Mom swam in that pool a lot," Joey says.

Yeah, probably. I let out a sigh. "Don't worry. You'll swim in it someday, just like she did." I stare at the shallow moss-covered swamp and try to imagine the pool back when Mom was a kid. Did she play Marco Polo with her friends or dive for weight rings like kids do today?

My happy thoughts fade when I notice something in the water.

"What's that?"

"Where?"

"Over by the far wall. That dark shape. It's this big." I hold my hands two feet apart.

"I see leaves and a plastic bag."

Again, my chest tightens. "Look . . . it's over there . . ." I tap the glass with my finger. "Just under the surface."

"Are you talking about the diving board's shadow?"

"No, not the stupid shadow. Are you—?" Teasing? He can't be. He doesn't know how.

I take a step back, ready to leave. "Never mind."

Back in the kitchen, I quickly forget the pool and whatever I saw floating beneath its surface. I've got more important things to worry about, like frosting these cookies and facing all those new kids and teachers at school tomorrow.