

Eleven-year-old Danny Wexler would rather contemplate the Bermuda Triangle's connection to UFOs than worry about being the only Jewish kid in town. And when a local kid goes missing, Danny is convinced that aliens are involved. With his two best friends and a telescope, Danny heads to his backyard to investigate. As Danny attempts to unmask the extraterrestrials, he uncovers the antisemitism in his town and finds out that things aren't always what they seem.

THE BACKYARD  
**SECRETS**  
OF DANNY WEXLER

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## CHAPTER I

# HAIRY MYSTERY

My older sister, Alice, told me my new piano teacher, Mr. Schneider, was part tarantula. At first, I didn't believe her, but lately, I wasn't so sure. Even his name rhymed with spider.

Mr. Schneider's fingers were long, pointy, and covered in a million tiny black hairs. More hairs than I'd ever seen on anyone's hands before. I couldn't stop staring at them. They scurried across the piano as he played, leaving a trail of sweaty prints.

"Daniel?" Mr. Schneider asked.

My attention snapped up to his head. He was completely bald. Did tarantulas have bald spots? And why would Mr. Schneider have so much hair in one place but none up top?

“Daniell!” His voice echoed off of the walls in my living room.

“Sorry.” I put my fingers on the keys, careful to avoid his sweat marks. Nothing I played sounded right.

My tarantula teacher sighed. “Our time is up. One hour of practice every day. Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

He stood, but didn’t move.

“So, see you next week?” I took two steps toward the front door hoping Mr. Hairy-hands would get the hint it was time for him to leave. He still didn’t budge.

“Did your mother leave anything for me?” He remained standing next to our piano.

“Right.” My body stayed straight and confident while I walked backwards to get to the entry table where Mom had left his check. I kept my eyes on him the entire time. I learned that in science class. Out in the wild, a predator was more likely to pounce the moment its prey turned its back. My living room wasn’t exactly the wild, but tarantulas were poisonous. And the longer we stood there, the more Mr. Schneider’s eyes bulged. I wasn’t taking any chances.

“Here you go.” I held his weekly payment by the

edge of the corner, making sure our fingers didn’t touch when he snatched it from me.

“Thank you.” He shoved the envelope into his shirt pocket. “I’ll see you next week, Daniel. And don’t forget to practice.” He darted out the door and scuttled away.

I sat back down at the piano. An hour of practice started with fifteen minutes of scales, the most boring thing ever—even more boring than math homework, if you can believe that.

Mom’s 1976 collector’s plate sat on top of the piano. It rattled in its stand as I played. Mom had a thing about dishes, and we had more than anyone else I knew. We had everyday eating ones, fancy china for holidays and company, and Mom’s even fancier collector plates that no one was allowed to touch, ever . . . not even Dad. Most of those were kept in the glass cabinet in the dining room, but Mom liked to keep this 1976 one on top of the old piano that used to be in Grandma Esther’s house. Grandma gave us the piano last year when she moved into the nursing home in Larston. That’s when I started taking lessons.

Mom got this 1976 plate two years ago at the bicentennial celebration. July 4, 1976, was a big deal.

Here in Croyfield we had a huge parade with marching bands and people dressed up as old-fashioned soldiers. Afterward, we all went down to the river to watch the big ships roll by. Even our neighbor, old Mrs. Albertini, came out to see the fireworks, and she hardly ever left her house.

“Enough with that racket!” Alice stood in the doorway of the living room with her hands on her hips. She was fifteen years old and thought she was the boss of me, especially when Mom and Dad weren’t home.

“I’m supposed to practice,” I told her. “An hour a day. Mr. Schneider just said so.”

“He didn’t mean starting today. You just had a lesson. That *was* your hour, dork face.”

“You’re a dork face,” I said.

“Good one.” She rolled her eyes. “It’s five-thirty. Dad’s going to be home soon.”

I followed her into the kitchen. Friday was the day Mom worked late at the hospital. Well, Wednesdays and Fridays. Those were the days Alice and I had extra chores.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked.

“What am I? The maid?” Her eyes popped out almost as much as Mr. Schneider’s. Maybe she was

also part spider. “You can make dinner once in a while too, you know.”

“But it’s not on my list.” I pointed to the paper taped to the refrigerator and read out loud: “*Daniel: Load and unload dishwasher, set and clear table, sweep floor after meals, take out trash.* Nothing about making dinner.”

Alice pulled a tray of chicken out of the oven. She gave it a long sniff and put it back in, slamming the door shut. Then she filled a pot with water and put it on the stove.

“Maybe it’s time for a new list,” she said. “Maybe I should remind Mom and Dad that you’re eleven and can handle more stuff. Isn’t that what you’re always telling them? *Come on, I’m not a little kid anymore. I’m double digits.*”

I grunted. I did say that a lot, but that was because I wanted to hang out with my friends more, not ’cause I wanted to cook.

“If you bring up the list,” I said, “you’re only going to get stuck with more work.” I didn’t actually know if that was true, but it was worth a try. Worst-case scenario: Mom and Dad would want a family meeting on Sunday. A family meeting meant a reminder from Dad that he worked a thousand

shifts a week at the factory, followed by Mom telling us she saved a million lives every day working as a nurse in the emergency room at Croyfield Memorial Hospital.

Not that I didn't appreciate how hard they worked. It was just that my best friend, Frank, and I wanted to go to the movies on Sunday to see *Star Wars*. Yeah, I saw it last year when it came out. I mean, who didn't? But I wasn't going to pass up a chance to go see it again, especially when it was only back for one weekend. I couldn't risk my plans getting bumped for a stupid chore meeting.

"Nice try, but it's not working on me," Alice said. "It won't work on Mom and Dad either. You're not as cute as you used to be."

"What does that have to do with anything? And, yes, I am." I reached up to my hair and attempted to tame my curls.

"Trust me, you're not. Don't worry, though; the awkward stage only lasts six or seven years."

I bent down to check out my reflection in the metal teapot on the stove. A distorted, stretched-out, wild-haired face with an extra-pointy nose blinked back at me. Alice was right. I wasn't cute at all. When had that changed?

"Don't sweat it. You have some of the same genes I do, so you'll probably turn out halfway decent if you survive. Did you at least remember the challah?"

I pulled the plastic bag out of my backpack. Every Friday on my walk home from school, I stopped at Scholly's Bakery for Dad's weekly challah. Mr. Scholly, an Italian man who barely spoke English, always had it ready for me. He made one loaf a week, and it was always for us, the only Jewish family in Croyfield.

I handed the braided bread to my sister.

"Why's it so flat? What'd you do, sit on it or something?"

"I had it in my book bag."

She shoved the sides together, trying to push it back into a loaf shape, and put it on the cutting board in the center of the table. When it came to religion, my family didn't seem all that into it, but Dad had a thing about his challah. He had to have one every Friday night, no matter what.

Alice took a step back and tilted her head, examining it as if it were a work of art instead of a braided lump of bread. "Better."

She walked over to the refrigerator and scribbled *make salad* on my side of the chore list.



“Hey!” I yelled, but she didn’t seem to care. “Why can’t we just have TV dinners? We can dump them onto plates and pretend we cooked real food. I won’t tell.”

“Gross,” she said. Then she opened the fridge and threw a head of lettuce and a bag of carrots at me with a smirk.

I would have put up more of a fight, but there was no way I was going to miss my chance to see *Star Wars*, so I chopped lettuce and carrots into bite-sized pieces and tossed everything into one of the bright orange bowls that matched our bright orange dishes. In this house full of dishes, they were the only ones we were allowed to touch.

The digital clock over the stove flipped to 5:50. Dad wouldn’t be home for ten more minutes. I ran upstairs to my bedroom before Alice decided I had enough time for another chore.

My Super-Secret Spy Notebook was just where I’d left it, in the third drawer of my desk under my pile of Superman comic books. I’d already solved a bunch of mysteries since I started keeping a Super-Secret Spy Notebook, like why Dad lost his keys twice (he had a hole in his coat pocket) and whether Alice was stealing my Halloween candy (yes). Some

mysteries were still unsolved, like what type of meat was in Grandma Esther’s stew. I opened to my *Unsolved Mysteries* page and wrote: *Is Mr. Schneider a spider?*

Figuring him out would take some work.