Chapter One

*A Park in Havana, Cuba Spring 2014*

“You want a lollypop, little girl?” the man in the robe and headdress asked in accented English, startling Stephanie. He had a grumbling voice, like a truck going up a hill in low gear. He was huge. Stephanie had been so caught up in the unfolding drama between the lady bug and the spider she hadn’t seen him approach. Dressed all in white, the man stood out in the festival crowd wearing shorts and t-shirts like a hippo on a ski slope. *A friendly Arab tourist,* Stephanie thought. She decided to be careful, anyway. Her mother had warned her about sexual predators before leaving with Stephanie’s twin sister, Sophia, to browse around the starving artists show on the other side of the park.

“Don’t talk to anyone,” had been her mother‘s parting words. “And don’t accept candy from strangers!”

“No, thank you,” Stephanie answered, and turned her attention back to the captivating scene.

 “Here!” The man insisted, waving a hand in front of her face and obstructing her view. “Take it, little girl!”

This was the second time the man had called her a little girl. Stephanie hated to be called a little girl, especially by a stranger on the street. She was ten years old already, a big girl! She scowled at the intruder. *Who are you, creep? First you barge in on me, and then you insult me.*

“No,” Stephanie said, a hard edge on her words now. “Didn’t you hear me the first time?”

The man shrugged as if he didn’t care and pocketed the candy. Stephanie stepped to one side in an effort to have a better view. Again, she focused on the awesome scene she’s been watching in the azalea shrub before the man showed up: a spider trying to catch a lady bug. The stranger moved closer, and his body odor wafted after him – a pungent mixture of rancid sweat and poor hygiene. *Phew!*

She wrinkled her nose. The man stood next to her, not talking. Stephanie did her best to ignore him.

She watched the spider expand its web till the outer strands were nearly touching the lady bug. Unaware of the danger, the beetle was busily extracting the sweet nectar off a bright red azalea. Stephanie’s heartbeat quickened. She had a camera inside the tote bag hanging from her shoulder, and she was tempted to snap a quick photo to capture the moment, but decided against it. She didn’t want to risk scaring the lady bug away.

Stephanie exhaled slowly and tried to memorize every detail of the scene. The lady bug had the typical orange-red oval body with black dots and a curious ebony head. It was a fine specimen, larger than most. The spider’s color was nearly indistinguishable from the deep-green of the azalea leaves.

“That nasty spider is going to eat the pretty insect,” the man whispered into Stephanie’s ear. “She’s mean, that spider.”

Stephanie had forgotten about the man. He had bad breath, too. She felt like screaming at him now for being so ignorant. Her sister Sophia had a special name for grown-ups like the man with the weird headdress, “People who live in La-La Land.”

“That *nasty* spider is a garden orb-weaver!” She wanted to yell. “And the *pretty* insect is a lady bug!”

Stephanie liked to read anything she could get her hands on about insects and bugs. Her dislike of the man grew with his ignorance. Besides, the man had been treating her like a dumb little girl, which infuriated her even more. Stephanie gave him a closer look. He was brown-skinned and had a black goatee sprinkled with silver. She remembered him now. He had been standing under a tree by the crowded sidewalk when they arrived at the park.

“Where’s your mama, little girl?”

“I’m not a little girl,” Stephanie said. “I’m a big girl.”

The man gave her a broad smile. “How old are you?”

“None of your business.”

The man’s smile vanished. Stephanie held her breath as the orb weaver’s web expanded closer still to the lady bug.

“Yes, you’re a big girl. When is mama coming back?”

“Any moment now.”

“Where is her?”

*She,* Stephanie corrected the grammar in her mind and emphasized the word when she answered. “*She* is shopping with my sister.”

“Where?”

Without looking at the man, Stephanie pointed to the center of the park where the starving artists’ art show was being held. It was so crammed with onlookers that it was impossible to see the tents protecting the artists, and their art, from the harsh sun.

“Your mama left you all alone?”

“She’ll be right back.” Stephanie gave a small shrug and pointed with her chin to the spider and the lady bug. “I prefer insects to art.”

“You’re an odd girl.” The man’s eyes darted to the park and then back to Stephanie. “Smart.”

The man gave her a crooked smile that flashed a couple of gold teeth, extracted a cell phone from his clothes and punched a number. Stephanie turned her head away. She heard the man squawk something into the phone and then snap it shut. Stephanie flinched at the sound.

A moment or two later a white van turned the corner and rocketed down the narrow street, scattering passers-by and distracting Stephanie. The street was packed with people, and the van was moving too fast. A shrill woman’s voice screamed *“*idiot!*”* and a man’s voice bellowed “watch it!*”* The driver ignored them, leaning on the horn. He brought the van to a full stop with a screeching of brakes two yards away from Stephanie, raced to the back and flung open both doors. He was a thin man with a beard and a hat like those of the man standing next to her.

Stephanie was momentarily sidetracked and a warning alarm went off in her mind. But the lure of the drama between the orb weaver spider and the lady bug was too powerful. Her attention returned to the spider just in time to see a strand touch the beetle*.* She drew in short, shallow breaths. Stephanie knew the strand had a powerful sticky substance that wouldn’t allow the beetle to move. The poor lady bugwas trapped.

“Little girl!” The man yelled in her ear, and Stephanie smelled his foul breath.

“I’m not a little girl!” Stephanie spun around.

The man’s calloused hand clamped a dirty handkerchief on her nose. In a panic now, Stephanie held her breath and tried to run away, but the man’s powerful arms lifted her off the ground and rushed her toward the open door of the van. Stephanie tried kicking at the man, but the man was holding her from behind.

“Breathe, you little bitch,” the man murmured in her ear. “Breathe!”

Stephanie struggled, shaking her head stubbornly.

“Breathe!” the man commanded.

Stephanie couldn’t hold it anymore. Her ears were ringing and her lungs were burning. She took a cautious, little breath. Immediately, she felt lightheaded. The strong smell of the handkerchief, like rotten alcohol, made her eyes tear. The world started whirling around her, slowly at first and then faster and faster. She took another breath, deeper this time, and her eyelids started closing.

She felt herself being thrown, like a package, inside the van. Her body bounced hard on the rough floor and rolled to a stop, but Stephanie felt no pain. She tried with all her might to get up but her arms and legs felt like limp noodles. Tiny black stars rushed at her from the edges of her vision. The last thing she saw before darkness totally enveloped her was the man with the weird headdress slamming shut the van doors.