

CHAPTER 1



Connor stared at his bedroom ceiling and, for the second night running, tried to ignore the sensation creeping behind his ears and down his neck.

Someone — or something — was watching him.

He slid further down the bed and pulled the quilt up as far as it would go. It blocked out the blue glow from his clock radio and muffled the night sounds. He couldn't see out. Great! But he couldn't see anything sneaking up on him either.

Connor stuck his head out from under the quilt. He'd already climbed out of bed and checked underneath. He'd looked in the wardrobes, and under the desk. There'd been nothing to find — yet his hands still trembled and his lungs felt as useless as flat footballs.

It wasn't just that he was alone in the house.

It was more than that. He could feel it.

He screwed his eyes shut and forced his breathing to slow. He listened to the sounds of his night room, his ears aching for an unguarded exhalation of air, a tense gulp, the click of cramped leg-bones shifting weight, the growl of hungry intestines. He strained to catch what he didn't want to hear — another presence in the room.

But, just like the night before, there was only the breezy rustling of trees outside his window and the familiar night-time scurrying of Alf, the spider he kept in a jar on his desk.

He had to get a grip. He lay still, concentrating on breathing in ... and out ... in ... and out ... like the yoga teacher on his mum's morning television. He tried to think of a happy place. Slowly, he drifted back to when he'd first met his hairy-legged friend ...



CHAPTER 2

It all started towards the end of last summer.

'NASA?' Mr Spinner the science teacher had yelped.

Connor nodded.

'You mean *the* NASA — the lot who launch rockets?'

Connor nodded again. Old Spinner couldn't believe it. One of his pupils was going to have an experiment go up on the next space shuttle.

'How did it all come about, boy?' Mr Spinner rubbed his long hands together as though warming them in front of a fire.

'I was surfing the net, Sir,' said Connor. 'On the NASA website they ask for ideas. It's a kind of competition. I thought of those Moonbeam spiders that you see around the place. There are heaps of

them up on Mt Whaleback. You know, the ones that build colonies and stay together as families?’ Mr Spinner nodded. ‘I just thought it would be kind of neat to see what they did in Space. You know, see whether they still made their interlocking nests, check out if they still looked after each other like they do on the ground.’

Spinner, grinning like a skeleton, insisted that Connor tell the science class next day.

‘In the USA,’ said Connor, tugging nervously at the hem of his shorts in front of a sea of stifled yawns, ‘spider web research is really big. There’s this company that’s put spider genes into goats so that they produce a kind of spider-web milk.’

The class snorted in mass disbelief.

A hand waved. ‘Yes Butler?’ said Mr Spinner.

‘Sir, why would anyone want to make spider-web milk? I wouldn’t want to put it on my Weeties!’ called Butt Scuttle from the back of the class.

Connor cleared his throat. ‘Well what they do is, they boil it down till it’s really thick like a stew —

and then they make it into stuff. They reckon that this spider web stew is so strong that if you twist it into a rope as thick as your thumb it could hold up a jumbo jet!’

‘Aw, that’s nuffing! My little sister’s snot is stronger than that!’ yelled Butt.

Mr Spinner snapped his fingers for quiet. ‘Quick! Who can tell me how many eyes a spider has?’

Everyone went quiet for a moment. A few hands ventured beyond ear height.

‘Two, but they’re compound!’

‘Hundreds!’

‘Twenty-three!’

Finally, ‘Eight?’

‘Well done, Lucy!’ said Mr Spinner, clapping his hands. ‘Yes, spiders nearly always have eight eyes — the same number as their legs. Two big main ones and six smaller ones. But they don’t use them nearly as much as we do.’ Waving his fingers close under his nose to demonstrate, he said, ‘They sense the world through lots of hairs on their legs and around their mouth.’

‘Sir?’

‘Ye-e-es, Butler?’ said Mr Spinner.

‘You’re talking about my grandma, Sir!’ called Butt Scuttle.

When the class had settled down again, Mr Spinner resumed. ‘Now then, people ... Connor is going to need our help with his arachnid project,’ he announced. ‘Over to you, boy.’

‘Well, said Connor, ‘we need to start collecting spider egg sacks.’ There was a bit of shuffling in chairs. ‘We need to have a few colonies in different stages of development, so that when NASA’s ready for us we’ve got one that’s just right.’

‘Moonbeam spiders are pretty simple to find around here, except they’re only active at night so you might not have noticed them before. But they’re interesting because the baby spiders — you call them spiderlings — stay together for about six months and build an interlocking nest. It’s pretty amazing really. It’s like they really care about each other.’

A few in the class tittered and Butt made a kissing noise.

‘Oh, and there’s one more thing.’

‘You’re wearing frilly knickers?’ suggested Butt, to an eruption of sniggers.

Connor blushed past his eyebrows. Mr Spinner waved his arms and said, ‘This will interest those of you with adventure in your veins.’ He nodded at Connor. ‘Go on, boy.’

‘Well, this guy Herman Hatch who’s in charge of the experiment at NASA ... well, him and me ... me and he ... well anyway, he reckons that if everything goes to plan some of us could be invited to NASA to watch the shuttle landing.’

From the ‘Oooh!’ that went up, you’d have thought a tightrope walker had slipped into a tankful of sharks.

The hand at the back of the class waved again. ‘Ye-e-es, Butler?’ said Mr Spinner.

‘Sir? Can whoever brings in the most spiders get to go?’

At first, Connor’s classmates brought in a Moonbeam spider egg sack every couple of days, along with the

eggs of geckoes and other sacrifices. Mr Spinner started to worry that the lower strata of the district's food chain would be depleted. He needn't have, though. After a couple of weeks, only Butt Scuttle was still hanging in there.

Connor and Butt became known as the Arachnerds. Lunchtimes when the handball courts were full they tinkered in the science lab with the various colonies set up in old aquariums. Sometimes after school they wandered up to the bush blocks on the edge of town and scuffled around, searching for spiders.

Connor often drifted up to Mt Whaleback on the weekend. It was peaceful up there at the old observatory, away from his noisy big sister and the *doom-doom-doom* of her dance music. He preferred bobtails, cicadas and spiders for company. Plus he could see for miles around. It was almost as good as being in Space.

Eventually the call came from NASA.

CHAPTER 3

It was as though the President of the United States himself was coming to the school. At five-thirty on the dot, when everyone but the Arachnerds, Mr Spinner and the school's Principal had gone home, a glossy black van with ink-dark windows crawled through the school gates. Like a giant beetle, it eased over the neatly mown grass, the footpath and one half of the gardener's prized daisy bed, pulling up at the door of the science lab.

The beetle unfolded its wings and four of the most solemn people Connor and Butt had ever seen climbed out. The NASA officers shook everyone's hand in turn without even the tiniest stretch of a smile. Connor felt his own eager grin loosening from his face and wondered if he should even *try* to make it stay.