





# CHAPTER 1

Maria Pepper always made her bed the moment she got up.

Her favorite book was titled *How to Make Friends, Influence People, and Crush Your Enemies into Dust*. This is what it says about beds: *You think Genghis Khan didn't make his*

*bed before he rode off and pillaged a village? HA!  
A messy bed means a messy life.*



Maria definitely did *not* have a messy life. She kept her room clean, orderly, and organized. In other words, everything was perfectly perfect.

Well . . . nearly everything. Only half the room was hers. The other side, which belonged to her sister Annie, was always a total disaster. Half-read comic books, half-completed art projects, half a hoagie, and half a hundred other long-discarded things lay everywhere.

Maria never did anything halfway.

She'd been that way ever since she was a baby. Infant Maria had learned to change her own diapers. She'd skipped first words and gone straight to complete sentences. Apparently, perfection was in the Pepper genes. Sadly, she got all of it, leaving none for her brothers and sisters.

On her way to the bathroom, Maria stepped over Annie's Chihuahua, Azzie, and into something squishy. It turned out to be a half-eaten slice of pizza her sister had left on the floor. She looked down at a bit of pepperoni poking up between her toes.

She hopped out of the room on one leg, the slice of pizza dragging behind her by a long string of cheese stuck to her foot.



Maria wanted to scream, but she had bigger fish to fry. It was the first day of the mascot contest at San Pimento Grade School.

Maria smiled. It was a contest she planned to win.

But when she entered the kitchen, her smile vanished. The room was full of her brothers and sisters eating breakfast before school, and they were already being incredibly, annoyingly Peppery.

Maria tried to ignore everyone. It wasn't easy.

Her big sister, Megs, was spinning what looked like a cross between a basketball and a pancake on her finger. She lost control and the wobbly-looking ball knocked over a glass of orange juice onto Maria's plate.

"Megs!" Maria cried.

“Sorry! I’m just trying to get my froosbetball working before school!”

Maria didn’t know what a “froosbetball” was, and she didn’t care. She sighed and turned to get some cereal, but her brother Ricky was blocking the way.

He was practicing a crazy hip-hop dance move where his arms waved every which way in fast, jerky motions. Every time Maria made for the cereal box she had to pull back quickly or he’d wallop her.

“Ricky! Stop it! I can’t get to the Wheaty Oats!”

But Ricky couldn’t hear her. He had his headphones on and was singing along to a rap song.





1. Maria Pepper (age 9) Plotting to win School mascot contest
2. Megs Pepper (age 10) Creating a new sport
3. Scoochy (age 2) Being a mess, as usual
4. Tee Pepper (Mom) Running late for work



5. Ricky Pepper (age 12) Practicing his dance moves
6. Annie Pepper (age 8) Reporting SPN News
7. Beta Max Pepper (age 9) Filming SPN News
8. Sal Pepper (Dad) Cooking chili
9. Meemaw Pepper (ancient) Looking for her teeth

She tried yelling, “RICKY! LET ME HAVE SOME WHEATY OATS!!!”

Meemaw, who had lost her dentures, snapped her fingers. “The Wheaty Oats! That’s where I left ’em!” She easily ducked Ricky’s elbow and grabbed the cereal box. Meemaw dug around in the box and pulled out her lost set of teeth. She popped them into her mouth and gave her granddaughter a big, false-toothed grin.

Maria suddenly lost her appetite.

Their father, Sal, spoke up from where he was cooking his nearly-award-winning chili. “Hey, kiddos! Are you all excited to see your dear old dad at school today? It’s my very first day as lunch lady! I’m mixing up a nice, tasty batch of chili to celebrate!”