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URBAN
UNDERGROUND

WILDFLOWER

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CHAPTER ONE

“Hold on there, little girl!” Lorenzo Spain called out to his fourteen-year-old daughter, Chelsea. She was coming down the hall, carrying her books. “Chelsea Spain, am I seeing things, or is my daughter going to Marian Anderson Middle School dressed like a Vegas showgirl?”

“Oh Pop!” Chelsea rolled her eyes and groaned.

Monica Spain shouted from the living room. “What’s all the hollering about?”

“Monie,” Pop replied, “your daughter is about to go to school without most of her clothes on.” Pop was shouting even louder now. His son, sixteen-year-old Jaris, was doing some last-minute studying for an

English test. Jaris sighed. He closed his book and looked down the hallway at his sister.

“Chili pepper,” Jaris pleaded, “please go put something else on. Don’t get Pop all riled up before he has to go to work. There’s enough stress for him down at the garage.”

“Mom!” Chelsea screamed. “Pop’s being impossible again.”

Mom came down the hall, and she looked from her husband to her daughter. Monica Spain was a well-regarded fourth grade teacher at the local elementary school. Before she could say a word, her husband demanded, “Where does this little wildflower get these clothes? Monie, you got no sense? You let her dress in trash like this? You help her buy these clothes that aren’t fit for decent girls?”

“Lorenzo, calm down,” Mom responded. “Trudy Edson took Chelsea shopping with her daughter, Athena. I gave Chelsea a hundred dollars. I had a late

faculty meeting. I just couldn't take her there myself."

"Trudy Edson and that daughter of hers!" Pop chided in a scornful voice. "You let those freaks dress our daughter?"

"Lorenzo, Trudy is not a freak," Mom asserted. "She teaches at a high school in the district."

"Ohhh!" Pop said. "That makes it all different. If she's a big shot teacher, then it's okay that she lets Chelsea buy trashy clothes."

Jaris moved alongside Chelsea. "Please, Chelsea, change your clothes," he urged. He hated it when his parents started fighting. The argument always turned into a clash of wills between his tough-minded conservative Pop and his more liberal mother. "Chili pepper, just go in your room and put on something else!"

Chelsea turned around and headed back to her room, stamping her feet all the way. "This is so totally stupid," she whined. "I dress like every other girl at school. I mean,

why don't we set up inspection like in the army so I can be checked every day?"

Monica Spain looked at her husband. "You've upset her so much," she said.

"Oh a thousand pardons," Pop replied with mock contrition. "I would never want to upset our daughter when she's goin' out on the street with the whole front of her showing like she's doin' a revue in Vegas or something."

"Lorenzo, just get a hold of yourself," Mom demanded. Lorenzo Spain worked as a mechanic at Jackson's Auto Repair. He hated his job. As a boy, he had dreamed of using his athletic skills to win a scholarship. Then he'd go to college and perhaps be an engineer or some other type of professional. But all his dreams crashed with a sports injury. Now he was often in a dark, bitter mood. He was disappointed by how his life had turned out. Jaris worried about him. Sometimes the darkness seemed to spread over the entire house.

“I got to go down to that stinking garage and work hard all day with Jackson yelling at me,” Pop complained. “And all that keeps me going is you and having good kids. If Chelsea is going down the drain, then what am I working for?”

“She’s not going down the drain, for goodness sakes!” Mom objected.

Chelsea came back down the hall wearing a modest blue top and jeans. “I hope this satisfies you, Pop,” she said. “Maybe I should wear a cape that covers me even more. I mean, wouldn’t it be horrible if somebody noticed that I’m a girl?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that, little girl,” Pop growled. “Everybody can see you’re a girl. Just make sure you look like a nice girl, not like that trashy Athena who looks inappropriate.”

“Pop,” Chelsea cried, “don’t call Athena names. She’s my friend. I don’t insult your friends!”

“Who are my friends?” Pop asked. “Old Jackson, my boss? He’s not my friend. He’s

my enemy. I don't hang around creepy people like you do, Chelsea. That Trudy Edson wears so much makeup she looks like a clown. I think the next time I see her I'm gonna suggest she sign up for the circus. She can work with Bozo."

"Mom!" Chelsea wailed. "Don't let Pop insult Athena's mom."

"He's not serious, sweetie," Mom said, frowning so much that there were deep lines in her usually smooth brow.

"The devil I'm not," Pop protested, grabbing his truck keys off the wall hook. He went roaring down the driveway, as he always did when he was angry.

Mom looked at Jaris and commented. "Your father really got out of the wrong side of the bed this morning."

Jaris shrugged. He loved both his parents. He didn't want to take sides, though in his heart he usually agreed more with Pop. Mom had a kind of Pollyanna approach to life. Jaris didn't think her view squared with the real world. She didn't know what it

was like out there on the streets or even in school. If a girl dressed as if she was asking for attention, she sometimes got too much of the wrong kind of it.

Chelsea usually walked to school with her friend, Inessa Weaver. Inessa was a sweet, quiet girl whom Pop approved of. Now she was at the door, waiting for Chelsea. “Is Chelsea ready?” Inessa asked Mom.

“Yeah, I’m ready,” Chelsea bounded out the door and fled down the walk. Jaris overheard her complaining to Inessa. “Pop was absolutely crazy this morning! I had on this really cute top I just got at Lawson’s. I was so excited to be wearing it to school. Pop went bananas! He made me take it off and put this dumb thing on that I’ve worn *forever*.”

“That top looks cute on you, Chel,” Inessa remarked.

“It’s old and it’s blah, Chelsea groaned. “*Everybody’s* seen it a zillion times. The new top was so fierce.”

Jaris didn't have to leave for Tubman High for a few more minutes. He was alone with Mom.

"Jarvis," Mom asked, "do you think Chelsea's top was so bad that your father had to throw a fit like that?"

"Well," Jaris replied carefully, "Chelsea is really growing. Last year she was a skinny little girl. This year she's, you know, filled out some. And, well, the top was a little bit . . . uh . . . *hot*."

"I didn't think it was bad," Mom insisted. "I see tops like that on all the young girls."

"Mom," Jaris told his Mom, "uh, the guys at school, even middle school, they're looking at the girls and making cracks. I mean, they hassle the girls with jokes and stuff. Chelsea's only fourteen. Next year she'll be at Tubman. It'd be good if she could, you know, hold off on the really sexy clothes."

"You know, though, Jarvis," Mom countered, "your father's problem is that he still

sees Chelsea as a child. He thinks she's ten years old and he can boss her around. She's becoming a young lady. She has to be allowed to make her own decisions." Mom disappeared into the bedroom to get ready for school, where she taught.

Jaris didn't have to wonder whom Mom was talking to on the phone when he heard her voice in the bedroom. Whenever Mom had the slightest problem with Pop, she called her mother to talk about the issue.

Mom's mother, Jessie Clymer, was an active, sixty-eight-year-old retired real estate agent. She was in good health and well fixed economically. She had never liked Pop, even before Mom and Pop were married. Sometimes Jaris thought that his grandmother would actually be pleased if the Spains got a divorce. Jaris once heard his grandmother lamenting how many years Mom had already "wasted" on Lorenzo Spain. To grandma, Dad was an obvious loser. It would be a pity, Grandma Clymer had said, if Monica wasted the rest