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URBAN
UNDERGROUND®

The
RESCUERS

 **SADDLEBACK**
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CHAPTER ONE

Ewww,” Inessa Weaver cried, wrinkling her nose. “Look at that awful looking man over by the side of the road!”

Jaris Spain was driving his younger sister, fourteen-year-old Chelsea, and her friend, Inessa, to the mall. They were going to buy new summer outfits. It was late on a summer afternoon. The kids were just out on summer break, and the first day of school seemed far, far away. Both Chelsea and Inessa would be freshmen this year at Harriet Tubman High School. Jaris was going to be a senior.

“He’s got something in his arms,” Chelsea pointed. “It’s furry looking, and

it's moving and,"—Chelsea shuddered—"it looks all bloody and stuff."

"His face looks so weird," Inessa commented. "He looks like one of those guys in horror movies."

Jaris slowed down his car and began pulling toward the curb near the man.

"You're not going to stop are you?" Inessa screamed. "That monster could attack us!" Only the seat belt was keeping Inessa from scrunching down onto the car floor.

"Oh, Inessa," Chelsea scolded. "Don't freak. That's just some poor guy who had an accident or something. It's not his fault he got burned in a fire or something."

"Probably got hurt in the war," Jaris remarked. Once the car was stopped, Jaris could see the bloody creature in the man's arm was an opossum. "Hey bro!" Jaris called out to the man, who looked about thirty-five or forty. "Opossum get whacked by a car?"

The man nodded. He had one good eye. The other eye was covered by a patch.

Inessa covered her eyes with her hands and crouched in the car. She couldn't stand to look. "I get them all the time," the man answered. "Wounded opossum. Cars hit 'em. Sometimes big dogs tear 'em up. Poor little critters. They're trying to make their way in a world without much use for them. They're like the rest of us, I guess."

Chelsea looked out the window of the car. "What's gonna happen to the opossum you got there?" she asked.

"I'm part of an opossum rescue group," the man explained. "We bring 'em back to health, or we put them down painlessly. Not right to just let them die in the street or the brush. Too much suffering there."

Chelsea stepped from the car. "Can I see it closer?" she asked. Jaris got out too.

"Chelsea!" Inessa screamed. "Don't go near that man and that horrible animal."

"I'm Jaris Spain," Jaris said, extending his hand. "This is my sister, Chelsea. We're Tubman High students. Chelsea loves animals."

The man took Jaris's offered hand with his left hand. That hand wasn't bloody. "Hello," he replied, "I'm Shadrach." He had once been handsome, but something had happened to his face. His right eye was gone, and the right side of his face was scarred. He was tall, about six feet, and he had a nice smile. Chelsea liked him immediately.

Shadrach looked at Chelsea. "Would you like to learn more about the opossum rescue work?" he asked her. "If so, go to Shadrach.com."

"Do you help the opossums all by yourself?" Chelsea inquired.

"No, people help me, people like you. Check out our Web site," Shadrach responded.

Chelsea looked closely at the beady-eyed little opossum with the pink nose. "Good luck, Mister Shadrach," she wished, meaning the opossum and the man.

When Chelsea got back into the car, she spoke to Inessa. "You shoul'da come with me and seen the opossum, Inessa," she said.

“It was so cute. And the man wasn’t bad either. He’s just hurt. He rescues wounded opossum. That’s really nice, I think.”

“They give me the creeps,” Inessa complained. She was relaxing a little now that the car was moving away from the man and the opossum. “Sometimes at night the opossum come in our yard, and I’m afraid to go out. They’re so spooky. My pa goes out and chases them.”

“I saw a TV piece last month,” Jaris remarked. “It was about the work the opossum rescue people do. It’s pretty cool. They even got a nursery for the baby opossums. They say sometimes the mother gets killed, and the babies are still alive in her body. Sometimes they can save the babies.”

“Maybe I could do something like that this summer,” Chelsea thought. “I could volunteer at that place.”

“Yeah, chili pepper,” Jaris agreed. “That’d be good.”

Jaris thought volunteering like that would keep his little sister out of trouble.

While she was an eighth grader at Marian Anderson Middle School, Chelsea had a few bad scrapes. She started hanging with a creepy Tubman freshman, Brandon Yates. He lured her to a party, where the kids were drinking liquor, and doing drugs. Jaris had to rescue her.

Then she went for a wild ride with Yates and his dopehead brother Cory. They'd pulled up in front of Marian Anderson Middle School in a silver Mercedes. The boys talked Chelsea, Athena, and Keisha into taking a short ride with them in the car. The ride turned into a dangerous high-speed race on and off the freeway. Luckily, no one was killed.

After that, Pop came down hard on her. He grounded her for a long time. In fact, Chelsea was still grounded. She couldn't go anywhere by herself. Normally, she and Inessa would have taken the bus to the mall by themselves. But Chelsea was grounded, and her freedom was curtailed. Jaris felt he was the one who was suffering for her

mistakes. Either her parents or Jaris had to drive her. Mom kept promising that maybe she'd get her freedom back when she started as a freshman. But she'd have to convince her father first that she was responsible.

On their way to the mall, Jaris drove past Spain's Auto Care. Pop, Lorenzo Spain, had just bought the garage where he had worked for many years for old man Jackson. The Spains had to put a mortgage on their home to buy the garage. But having the business meant the world to Pop. Mom had to swallow her fears of having a big mortgage so that Pop could have his dream. Jaris's parents fought for weeks over risking everything for the business. He and Chelsea listened fearfully while their parents argued.

"But what if you fail, Lorenzo?" Mom had wailed.

"What if you trusted your husband more, babe," Pop had answered.

Now, as Jaris passed the garage, he slowed down and hit the horn. Pop was

working on an old Chevy Malibu. He turned, grinned, and waved.

“Pop’s smiling a lot more these days, huh, chili pepper?” Jaris commented.

“Yeah!” Chelsea agreed. “He used to be so gloomy all the time. He kept saying he was just an old grease monkey. Now he owns his own business. I’m so happy for Pop.”

The girls peered silently out the car windows as Jaris thought about how things used to be. He remembered the many times his father came home from work, angry and frustrated. He was always talking about his bitter regrets. A sports injury had kept him from his dream of winning an athletic scholarship to college. He felt like a loser most of the time. Sometimes Pop was often down and depressed. A darkness seemed to engulf the whole house. Even Jaris felt overshadowed by it, and he thought maybe he was a loser too.

“I’m gonna text Athena,” Chelsea declared. “She said she might meet us at the

mall. That'd be so fun. Athena is fun to shop with."

"I don't want *her* shopping with us," Inessa grumbled. "She's always getting into trouble."

Chelsea had to admit it. Athena did have a way of attracting trouble, but she was Chelsea's best friend. Inessa was nice, but she was too cautious. You could hardly have any fun with Inessa.

"Athena's okay, Inessa," Chelsea responded, texting her.

"My parents don't want me texting and tweeting and stuff like that," Inessa commented. "My father says that's all a big waste of time and money. My dad works hard, and he can't afford nonsense."

Meanwhile, Chelsea got a text back from Athena. "She says she can't come," Chelsea reported. "I'm gonna ask her about her rescuing opossums this summer. Would you like to do that too, Jaris?"

Jaris smiled. "I'd like to chili pepper," he replied. "But this summer I'm gonna be