ANNE SCHRAFF

URBAN UNDERGROUND

# Outrunning the DARKNESS

SADDLEBACK EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

## Chapter One

Jaris Spain turned numb when the girl took her seat in American History I. Goose bumps crawled up his arms like caterpillars. Sereeta Prince was a honey-skinned beauty with glossy black curls making little halos around her face. Jaris had been in love with her since junior high. Now the feelings grew stronger. But Jaris was sure that he was no more to her than the yellowing ivy plant in the classroom. She seemed to look right through him like he was made of plastic wrap.

Jaris felt crushed. At times like these he would remember some of his father's bitter

sayings. He didn't want to share in his father's hopelessness. But sometimes it came over him like an onrushing darkness.

"The best dreams always get away," Pop would say. "Just when you think you got it all made, it crashes around your head."

Ms. McDowell, the history teacher, came clicking into the classroom on her red high heels. Most of the lady teachers at Harriet Tubman High School wore comfortable shoes, but Ms. McDowell was a striking young woman. She dressed fashionably. And she was one of the best teachers at the school.

"We've been reading *The Grapes of Wrath* by Steinbeck," Ms. McDowell said, "and now we're going to watch the movie that was made of it."

"Isn't that a real old movie where everybody is jumpy and stuff," Derrick Shaw complained, making a face. "Those jerky old movies give me a headache."

"No, Derrick," Ms. McDowell said patiently, "it's a well made movie."

"I've seen it," Sereeta said, "but I'd love to see it again. The director won an Academy Award for the movie. It really makes Steinbeck's book come alive."

Ms. McDowell smiled at Sereeta. "Thank you for your comments, Sereeta. I'm sure the whole class will get a lot out of watching it."

Jaris couldn't help but admire Sereeta's cool, confident voice. Even in junior high she always seemed more mature than everybody else. When she glanced back for some reason, Jaris smiled at her, but she didn't seem to notice. And then he felt foolish for smiling at all. He worried that she'd think he was an idiot or something.

Jaris figured she was looking at somebody else anyway.

After class there was a break, and most of the students headed for the machines. Jaris knew Sereeta's routine. She'd always buy an apple or an orange and take it to the little patch of lawn by the bronze statue of Harriet Tubman to eat it. Jaris kept a respectful distance until she had bought her bright red apple. Jaris bought an apple too. He had no intention of invading her space, but he did walk slowly by as she nibbled on her apple.

"These are really good, aren't they?" Jaris commented.

Sereeta looked up, smiling. "Yes, sweet and crunchy." Her light brown eyes sparkled. She almost seemed pleased to be talking to Jaris. His heart took a wild leap.

"They're really delicious," Jaris said.

"Yes, that's their name," Sereeta said.

"Really?" Jaris asked. He didn't know one kind of apple from the next. "You mean they call them that?"

"Sure," Sereeta answered. She giggled a little. Was she laughing at him for being stupid about apples. "Don't you ever buy apples in the store, Jaris? They got these little stickies on them telling what kind they are."

"I never noticed," Jaris said. Sereeta was so lovely when she was smiling, even if she was laughing at him. Jaris wanted to stare at

her, but he was afraid she would resent that. "Uh, Ms. McDowell sure was glad you said good things about that movie we're going to see."

"Yes. *The Grapes of Wrath*," Sereeta said. She seemed to be looking past Jaris now, at somebody else. Still holding her now half eaten apple, Sereeta got up slowly, her whole expression changing. "Excuse me, Jaris," she said. She skipped across the grass onto the sidewalk, and Jaris heard her say, "Hi Marko."

"Hey babe," the boy answered. "Chillin'?"

Marko Lane was a junior at Tubman High too. He was tall and broad shouldered with a flashy personality. Jaris thought he was a phony, but the girls liked him. Jaris had seen Sereeta talking to Marko before, but now she seemed really excited to be with him. Jaris thought about the lame conversation he had just had with Sereeta, and he winced in embarrassment.

Jaris felt flushed and warm. Sereeta would probably laugh with Marko about the whole

stupid conversation she'd had about apples with this nerd who was coming on to her. Jaris stuffed his hands into his pockets so hard that he almost broke through the bottoms of them.

"Hey Jaris," Alonee Lennox asked. "You okay? You look like your dog just died." Alonee was cute and friendly, and Jaris had known her all his life. They made block buildings together in Head Start.

"I'm okay," Jaris answered. His voice was grumpy. He had a fine baritone voice, and he had won some awards for regional speech contests. But when Jaris was down, as he often was, his voice rasped like his father's. Like a rusty old hinge screeching for oil. Pop always sounded hoarse as if all his sorrows and disappointments settled in his vocal chords.

"You sure seem down, Jaris," Alonee pressed. "Gotta be something wrong."

"Always something wrong, girl," Jaris said in a snarl. "Like Pop says, if it's not wrong today, it'll be wrong tomorrow."

Alonee laughed. "You're being a drag! And just when I had this exciting news to share with you. But if you're too down in the dumps to hear it, I'll just keep it to my own self."

Jaris couldn't stay in a bad mood for long around Alonee. She was too much like a little kitten jumping on a ball of yarn. "Okay girl, what's the exciting news?"

"Tubman High School is going to put on a new play by some lady from New York," Alonee told him. "Seems like her brother graduated from here a long time ago, and she feels close to us. She wants to do something special for the school. Anyway, it's a really cool play, and there's a part just right for you in there, Jaris." Alonee was breathless when she finished.

Jaris laughed. "Girl, I'm no actor. What're you thinking of?"

"You got such a fabulous voice. You've done dramatic readings like Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Gave me chills," Alonee said. "I'm telling you, Jaris, this is something you can do!"

Jaris shrugged. Except with close friends like Alonee, Trevor Jenkins, and Sami Archer, Jaris was shy. He was no actor. When he was making speeches, he turned into a different person, but that was a far cry from acting. Still, maybe actors did that too, turned themselves into the characters they were playing. "I'll think about it, Alonee. You got a lot of faith in me."

Jaris didn't live far from Tubman. He rode his bike or jogged home. He lived in a nice neighborhood of single-family homes with nicely kept yards. Still, in the past few years hard times had hit a lot of the families. Several houses had been foreclosed. The windows were boarded up, and the lawns had turned brown. But those houses were the exception.

Across Grant Avenue was a whole other world. People lived in apartments and there was graffiti all over, on the walls, fences,

everywhere. Gangbangers roamed at will. The Nite Ryders were the worst, but there were smaller, deadly bands. Some of the kids who lived across Grant attended Tubman High, but few graduated.

As Jaris jogged home, he thought about his father. It was Friday and that was always worrisome. If Pop had a bad day at Jackson's Auto Repair, he didn't come right home. He stopped off for some drinks. Pop hated his job as auto mechanic, even though he was very good at it and he earned excellent money. He called himself a "grease monkey," a name that always angered Mom. She and Pop would argue and Jaris hated listening to them. All evening they would bicker, and late at night they would start yelling. So Jaris dreaded Fridays.

Jaris slowed down his gait and turned the corner to his street. From this far off he could see the family driveway. Jaris took some deep breaths. If it was going to be a good Friday night, Pop's green pickup would already be in the driveway. That would mean he had not

stopped for drinks. He would be sitting in front of the TV watching basketball. That was good, very good.

Jaris's father was a tall, lanky man. Jaris figured that when his father was his age, he looked a lot like Jaris. "We're lean and mean. boy," Pop would say when he was in a good mood. He was an LA Lakers fan, and he got really excited when the team was on a winning streak. He was always a little sad that Jaris had no athletic ability. But then he often said, "I was a football star and look where it got me. They called me the 'Little Terror' 'cause I could carry the ball underneath those big men. But in the end I got busted, and my football dreams went down the john, right? So don't sweat it that you're not a jock, boy. You won't get no gripin' from me. No way."

Pop had counted on a sports scholarship to get him into college. He was smart, but they weren't awarding as many academic scholarships in those days. So the career-ending injury blew away all Pop's dreams. "That's ANNE SCHRAFF

URBAN UNDERGROUND

# WILDFLOWER

SADDLEBACK EDUCATIONAL PUBLISHING

"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

### WILDFLOWER

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."

### WILDFLOWER

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

"Jaris," 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, Jaris," 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