

CHAPTER ONE

You free Sunday afternoon?” seventeen-year-old Jaris Spain asked his girlfriend, Sereeta Prince. They were both seniors at Harriet Tubman High School. “They got a cool street fair going across town. Lotsa little alt bands and great food. Somebody told me they got hot dogs to die for. And the bands are good too. Nobody famous but talented little groups at the edge of what’s hap’nin’.”

“Sure,” Sereeta responded. “Grandma’s gonna be busy. Her old friend from high school, believe it or not, is coming to visit from Alabama. They’re gonna hang out.” Both Sereeta’s parents were divorced and remarried, and she had gone through a lot. Now she lived with her grandmother,

Bessie Prince. Life was more serene with her grandma.

“There’s one band you gotta see, Sereeta,” Jaris went on. “They started out with these two guys, one on guitar and the other on drums. They sang too, but they were kinda lame. Now they got a new singer who really rocks. It’s, like, unbelievable.”

Sereeta smiled. She was one of the most beautiful girls at Tubman High. Jaris had loved her since middle school, but he had won her over only in his junior year.

“By the way, Jaris,” she asked him, “when are you gonna find out if that story you entered in the English contest won anything? What’s it called—‘Rings of Saturn’?”

“Yeah,” Jaris replied, grinning sheepishly. “The more I think about it, the more I think I never even should’ve entered the contest. Lotsa seniors can write better stuff than me. But, anyway, next week they announce the winners.”

When Jaris had first entered his story in the contest, he thought even winning

honorable mention would boost his spirits. The top prize in the contest was one thousand dollars, and the second prize was five hundred. Jaris thought if he won third prize of two hundred and fifty dollars, he'd be on top of the world. Even if he only won one of the three honorable mentions, which just came with a certificate, that would be good.

But the more he thought about it, the less he believed in his story. Self-doubt was typical of him. Jaris often sank into pits of self-doubt. His father was the same way. The darkness seemed always close by, ready to engulf him, telling him he wouldn't succeed at anything.

"I wish I knew what your story was about," Sereeta said.

"It's bad luck to talk about a story before it's judged," Jaris responded. "I read that somewhere. I got enough bad karma—or whatever—just thinking about it."

Sereeta looked at the tall, handsome, dark-eyed senior she had come to love. "Babe, why are you so downbeat?" she asked.

“Oh, just little things,” Jaris shrugged. “You know me. I’m like my pop, always doing the ‘what-if’ game. Pop’s doing great since he bought the garage from old Jackson. But now he needs to spend a lot of money putting in new equipment so that he can keep on doing smog checks. The smog-check business really brings in new customers for other things. But Mom goes ballistic when he talks about spending more money on up-keep. She never liked putting the mortgage on the house to buy the garage in the first place. Lately they’ve been arguing. Mom thinks Pop should just drop the smog business.”

“Well,” Sereeta declared, “maybe going to the street fair is just what you need. It’ll get your mind off that stuff. I can’t wait to hear this guy you say is so good.”

Jaris grinned as he responded to Sereeta. “You won’t believe it when you see him, Sereeta. He’s got dreadlocks, and he wears this leather vest and no shirt. He’s well built, and he wears just the vest. The chicks go crazy.”

“Oh, my!” Sereeta laughed. “That sounds exciting.”

“I think this dude is just what the band needs to break out of so-so success and maybe land a recording contract,” Jaris remarked.

“What’s the guy’s name?” Sereeta asked.

“He’s got this one name—Antar. It’s a stage name,” Jaris replied.

“Jaris, you have a funny look on your face,” Sereeta noted, staring at him intently. “Why do I get the feeling you’re hiding something about this guy?”

“Sereeta, would I do that?” Jaris asked, putting on a fake hurt-feelings look.

Sunday dawned cool and sunny, a perfect day for a street fair. Jaris picked up Sereeta at her grandmother’s house in the used Ford Focus he’d just bought. Several of the small downtown communities held street fairs, but the one on Pueblo Street was the best. It attracted bands on the verge of

success, and a couple of them had gone on to national recognition. The Pueblo Street fair also had legendary food.

Jaris wore jeans and a T-shirt, and Sereeta looked stunning in a red-striped tank top and torn jeans. They walked past craft booths that Sereeta loved and that bored Jaris. Then they wandered over to where the bands were setting up.

“Oh, there’s the band that Oliver Randall likes so much,” Sereeta pointed. “Life of Amphibians.”

Oliver Randall had become Jaris and Sereeta’s close friend since coming to Tubman last year. He dated Alonee Lennox, one of Jaris’s best old friends. Oliver’s father was a seventy-year-old astronomy professor at the community college, and his mother was an opera singer.

“I’m surprised Oliver and Alonee aren’t here,” Sereeta remarked.

“Maybe they’ll show up,” Jaris said.

Life of Amphibians consisted of a white guy named Todd, who had red hair and a

red beard, and a black guy named Rex. Rex had a shaved head and lots of earrings, nose rings, and a lip ring. They were both good on the guitar and drums. They'd been together since they had started out as a teenaged garage band about four years ago. Both guys were twenty-two years old.

"So, Jaris," Sereeta asked, "where's that band with Antar in it that you were so anxious for me to see?"

"You're looking at it, babe," Jaris answered.

"You mean Antar is with Life of Amphibians?" Sereeta responded. "Oh, wow! I bet Oliver's excited about that. He wants those guys to succeed so bad. If they got a hot new singer, he'll be thrilled."

"Yeah," Jaris agreed. "The new guy brings an awesome vitality to the band. You can just feel the excitement."

The crowd was swelling in front of the Life of Amphibians' spot. Word had already got around that Antar was with them today.

“I guess I’m out of the loop, Jaris,” Sereeta commented. “The buzz is really strong around here, and I’ve never even heard of Antar. Where do you find this stuff out?”

“I have my sources,” Jaris replied. By now, Jaris had a funny look on his face.

Rex and Todd started playing, and the music built to a crescendo. Suddenly somebody else was on stage, cradling a guitar in his muscular arms. His back was to the crowd. He was tall, with dreadlocks. When he began to sing, his voice was like rolling thunder. As he turned slowly to face the audience, the girls in the crowd began to scream. The young man flashed a smile, dazzling white in his dark face. He was handsome and electrifying as he seized the lyrics of well-known rock classics and made them his own. His voice soared with heart-wrenching emotion, then sank to a mournful moan. He moved around the stage like a wildcat, turning, twisting, kneeling on one knee, and then jumping up to do a guitar solo.

“Jaris!” Sereeta gasped. “You tricked me!”

“What?” Jaris asked, an innocent look on his smiling face.

“It’s Oliver! It’s Oliver Randall! Oh, Jaris—he’s so . . . so *good!*” Sereeta exclaimed. “Oh my gosh! I knew he had a beautiful voice when he sang at the talent show last year, but . . .”

Jaris was shaking with laughter.

Sereeta gave him a mock punch in the chest. “You!”

“I just found out myself last week, Sereeta,” Jaris explained. “I couldn’t believe it when I first heard him at a little club downtown. Then I heard he was gonna be at the street fair. I just couldn’t resist getting you down here. He calls himself Antar after some old African poet from over a thousand years ago. He’s amazing, huh? He has such a great voice. He could do opera if he wanted, but he can really rock!”

The applause was deafening. It seemed that everyone at the street fair had gathered