

# Adventures



*of an*  
**OPOSSUM**

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *Stranger in the Coop*

“Grandma! Grandma! Come quick!” Jezzie yelled.

“What is it?” Grandma called out. She got up from shelling peas as fast as her old bones would let her and hurried over.

Jezzie was just outside the chicken coop. She held the door shut with both hands. The chickens were clucking and prancing about and having a fit!

“Come look, Grandma. There’s an ugly, one-eared animal in the chicken coop!” She opened the door slowly, and Grandma peeked in.

“Why, it’s just an old opossum,” Grandma chuckled.



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“A what?” Jezzie had never heard of it.

“An opossum,” Grandma repeated, “is a marsupial.”

Jezzie scratched her head but didn’t say anything.

Grandma continued.

“Marsupial means that its babies live in a pouch.”

Jezzie’s face lit up, “Oooh! You mean like a kangaroo!”

“Yes, exactly,” Grandma said. She pulled her gardening gloves from her apron and put them on. “They are the only marsupial that lives in North America. Normally they are nocturnal, which means they only come out at night. This one must be very hungry to be out in the daylight.”

“Do they eat chickens?” Jezzie asked. She was worried about her pet hen, Banty, that stayed in the coop.

Grandma opened one of the doors behind a nesting box and bent over to look inside. The nest was full of broken eggshells. “No, they don’t eat chickens. But they do love eggs.” She closed the door again and stood up straight. “Now then, the question is how to get it out without getting bitten.”

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“You’re going to touch it?” Jezzie was horrified.

Grandma chuckled, “Hopefully, it’ll get scared and play possum.”

“How can it *play* possum, Grandma?” Jezzie wondered. “It *is* a possum.”

“Well, yes, that’s true. Only an opossum can play possum. It’s a phrase we use to describe what they do when they’re scared,” Grandma answered. “If an opossum gets really scared, it will fall over, curl up, and start drooling like it’s dead. Sometimes it even makes itself smell dead.”

“Eww. That’s yucky. Let’s hope it doesn’t play possum for us, then,” Jezzie said.

Grandma opened another nesting box door near the opossum. As soon as the door opened, the animal took a step back, crouched down, and started hissing. “I think this opossum would rather fight than play possum.” She closed the door.

“You keep saying opossum and possum. I’m confused. Is it called both?” Jezzie questioned.

“Sometimes, yes. Especially in certain parts of the

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country like here in the South. I guess playing possum was just easier to say than playing opossum.” Grandma walked to the small storage shed next to the chicken coop, the noisy hens right on her heels. She began rummaging around the shed as she talked. “The two are really very different, though. Our little visitor is an opossum. They live on this side of the world in North, South, and Central America. The possum, on the other hand, lives in only two places on the other side of the world—Australia and New Guinea.”

“Do they look the same?” Jezzie wondered, thinking about the rather scary-looking animal in the coop.

“No, not at all,” Grandma answered, pulling a small fishing net from a bucket. She inspected it for a moment and then put it back. “The possums of Australia and New Guinea are actually quite cute. They have short snouts and cute little faces with black, brown, or gray fur that is fluffy. Some of them can grow rather large as well. While our opossum visitor will only be about eight to ten pounds, a possum can be up to thirty-two pounds!”

Grandma put her gloved hands on her hips and sighed softly. Jezzie was just about to ask what she was looking for when Grandma turned to her.

“Run to the house and get a spare pillowcase from the hall closet,” Grandma said as she walked back toward the chicken coop.

“Yes, Grandma,” Jezzie answered and ran as fast as she could toward the house.

As soon as Jezzie ran around the corner, Grandma quickly opened the nesting box door again. She reached in and grabbed the opossum’s tail before it could react. Then she pulled it out of the coop. It hissed and growled and showed its teeth. Grandma frowned. She had never seen an opossum be so defensive. She had always known them to be fairly sweet-tempered and if very afraid, to either run away or play dead. She thought this one must be sick.

Grandma held the animal out as far as she could. She was confident that the opossum didn’t carry rabies. Her neighbor, a longtime veterinarian and farmer, had assured her that an opossum’s body temperature was

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much too low to be a carrier of rabies. She was less certain that it didn't carry something else. She seemed to recall reading about a sickness spread by opossums that could cause many life-threatening complications. It was best to be safe and keep well away from those teeth and claws.

Jezzie soon came running back with the pillowcase. She stopped short when she saw Grandma holding the opossum.

"Oh! Be careful, Grandma! It looks mad!" Jezzie said. She held the pillowcase out to Grandma.

"Yes, it certainly does," Grandma answered. With her free hand, she shook the pillowcase open and slid it up over the angry opossum. As soon as she did, the animal started to calm down. She just stood there a moment, holding the opossum with one hand and the pillowcase with the other.

Jezzie watched. "What are you doing, Grandma?" she asked softly. She thought the opossum fell asleep, and she didn't want to wake it up again.

"Well," Grandma began, "when I grabbed the



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opossum's tail, it became scared. It wrapped its tail around my hand. Now I'm waiting for it to calm down and let go."

Jezzie thought about the barn cat's tail. She had never seen the cat wrap its long tail around anything. She looked over at the opossum's long, hairless tail. It was curled tightly around Grandma's fingers. "How does it wrap its tail like that? I've never seen any animal's tail do that. Well, maybe a monkey."

"Yes, it is just like a monkey! Monkeys and opossums both have prehensile tails. That means they can use their tail like another paw to grab hold of things like branches," Grandma explained.

"And hands!" Jezzie added with a giggle.

Just then, Grandma felt the tail begin to loosen its grip. She carefully lowered the opossum to the ground. Then she pulled the pillowcase over the tail just as it let go. She quickly tied the pillowcase opening and stood up.

"Now we just have to figure out what to do with it!" she said.

# Adventures *of an* OPOSSUM



*"Grandma! Grandma! Come quick!" Jezzie yelled.*

Fascinated by the opossum she finds in her grandmother's chicken coop, Jezzie wants to learn more. Follow along with her as this charming nature reader explores the antics and life of one fascinating animal.



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