

ago. “Never let a man put his hands on you without *your* permission.” Those words served me well throughout the years; however, neither one of us could have fathomed the horrifying day when she’d need to remember them the most.

CHAPTER 1

Protection

The first time Angela Juanita Henning, aka AJ, came to my rescue was 1991. I was a thirteen-year-old high school freshman who had become the object of all female hatred.

“Who the hell is she?”

“She thinks she’s fine, ’cause she’s from Europe and got those green eyes and good hair.”

“And she thinks she knows it all, too.”

I had only been back in the United States for one month and all the girls rejected me before I had a chance to open my mouth. Whenever I did dare to speak, eyes rolled and attitudes were unleashed. They were ready to burn me at the stake for having an accent, green eyes, wavy hair, and for being intelligent. It was only a matter of time before the boys joined in.

James “Asshole” Armstrong was a lanky kid whose basketball palming hands took the liberty of smacking me on my bum with the precision and power of a professional tennis player. The smack echoed over the mechanical ritual of students slamming lockers on their way to fifth period classes. The sound halted every passerby in motion.

At first, James pretended to be my friend. I thought he was cute and welcomed all the flattering attention. I secretly hoped that maybe he would be my first American boyfriend. On the first day of Biology class, he volunteered to be my lab partner since I was the new student. However, everything changed the day I received an A on a lab report and James got a C-. From that moment on, James' mission in life was to harass only me.

The next day in school, the stage was set for James to take hitting practice on my bum yet again. Everything in me said to take a different route, but I knew I would never gain any respect in that school if I took the coward's way out, so I vowed I would just walk in clear view just in case someone had come to their senses from the day before and felt compelled to come to my aid. Never allowing my backside to cross his path, I could already see the same crowd gathering, anticipating another show. It was then I saw his calloused filled hand reach back behind his body like a slingshot, ready for the exact moment of release onto my bum. I shut my eyes tight and sped up, but this time instead of the deafening smack of yesterday, all that was heard was an agonizing "Ahhhhhhhh!" coming from the ground behind me. The mob paused and when I opened my eyes and turned around, James was on his knees with his head down and his right shoulder and arm twisted so far back behind his body, it looked like he was praying.

AJ, a respected junior, towered over him with her right hand clasped tight on his outstretched arm and her left hand gripping his shoulder blade so hard you could see the blood fill her mahogany knuckles.

James somehow managed to release a falsetto, "Bitch, let me go."

"Now James, you know that's not my name."

And as if on cue, the bell rang, and the security guards approached. AJ dropped James from her damaging grip, stepped over him like spit on a sidewalk, and walked past me without even a glance.

After school, AJ stood cool and collected behind the school, leaning against the gate with some girls I recognized but didn't know. She was

talking and dramatizing some event and the girls were doubled over gasping for breath from laughter. I talked myself out of approaching her several times, but I knew I had to thank her, or at least introduce myself. Five minutes turned into ten. I was already late for the informational meeting for track and field. Then one by one the girls began to leave until she stood against the gate all alone. I decided to make my move, but before I could speak, her words halted my steps.

"Hey. Never let a man put his hands on you without *your* permission."

Thirteen years from that very day at that gate, AJ and I have been inseparable.



7:15 a.m. every morning from that day on the gate, I climbed the steep steps to AJ's second floor flat so AJ and I could take the bus to school together. I can't recall how many times Ms. Henning, a full-figured woman, would answer the door in beige bras, oversized panties, gold house shoes, pink foam curlers, and a Kool Mild Light cigarette dangling from her lips. Ms. Henning was busy getting ready for work at the post office, so putting on clothes just to open the door for me was not part of her daily routine. She was comfortable in her skin and basic attire. Embarrassment was a luxury she could not afford as she dressed for work.

As I took my usual place on the plastic wrapped couch in the living room, Ms. Henning would resume her breakfast of sausages, rice and nicotine at the kitchen table. Her offer was always the same.

"Have some breakfast, Lime?"

"Oh no thank you, I'll eat at school."

AJ would emerge ten minutes later rushing past Ms. Henning with a quick "bye mama." Ms. Henning would always grab her arm and turn her around for a final look over before tapping her finger on her cheek for a kiss.

“Behave yourself, and hey, be aware of your surroundings. I’ll call at the usual time.”

I was the constant voyeur spying and learning from this womanly community of two that I had adopted as my own. In their home and presence, I felt safe.

AJ and I were two refugees. I was abandoned in Europe and rescued back to United States. AJ and her mum were from Memphis, Tennessee fleeing to Chicago, Illinois on a Greyhound bus in the middle of the night. Ms. Henning had had enough of being Mr. Henning’s sparring partner. The day AJ jumped on his back to help her mum, Mr. Henning flung her so hard across the room she hit the back of her head on the kitchen floor. Ms. Henning grabbed for the cast iron skillet on the stove and swung with all her might knocking him out cold. There were still pieces of hot water cornbread in the skillet. They’ve been protecting each other ever since and now AJ has chosen to protect me.

As AJ’s new best friend, I went from being the school oddity to someone you knew not to mess with or else. Despite AJ’s popularity and quick wit, we had more in common than what the eye could see. We were both the only child with only one parent. The unconditional love I received from living with my dad made up for Asmeret Amde’s negligence, but no matter how hard he tried, it couldn’t replace female guidance. So, I spent all my free time with AJ and Ms. Henning learning what girls needed to know. I just wish I could remember the exact moment when AJ and I both stopped learning.

CHAPTER 2

The Honeymoon Phase

Maybe it was when I met Rohan Saxton. The boys in high school were all like James; immature, sex crazed, and dumb. At university, I thought I had hit the jackpot. The guys were tall, handsome, and socially conscious of the world around them, but five minutes into a conversation they would forget my name and start to drool. Five minutes after that, they were inviting me back to their room under the guise of listening to some music or just to chill. And then there was Rohan. He was a slender, suave, dark chocolate senior who carried his trumpet in his backpack wherever he went. There was no question about it; Rohan could make a trumpet talk. He spotted me during one of my daily runs on campus. Rohan didn’t approach me; he serenaded me with a song he wrote just for me. *Red Velvet* quickly became our song and according to him described my skin and slightly reddish brown hair.

“My girl, yo ‘kin smooth like any little coco-butter and yuh sweet like red velvet.”

In my mind, he was a good Jamaican boy who wasn’t as fascinated with my British accent as other guys, because he had a language of his

own. Patois sat heavy on his lips. When I decided to marry him, the year I graduated from college, I figured my half-Jamaican dad would be pleased.

“Why so soon, Lime?”

“It’s not soon, dad. I’m twenty and I finished university like I promised, plus he’s Jamaican.”

“Mi neva even see de mon before.” When my dad started speaking Patois, I needed to be careful.

“Trust me dad, please”

I can’t honestly say I was ready to get married. I had a job offer as a junior accountant at Boyd & Woods Accounting Firm, one of the largest in the Chicago area. In the entire accounting firm, there were only two women accountants, but Rohan had already left college to travel across the country in a dilapidated van with his best friend Pepper to play lead trumpet in smoky clubs in unheard of towns. He seemed ready to get off the road for a bit and settle down, but Ms. Henning forgot to tell me that it’s a fine line between ready and impatience.

“Lime, mi a touch de road for a couple of weeks. Mek sure when mi come back, yuh ave mi food ready an your lovin a wait pon mi.”

I knew with that statement he was going to be disappointed. What did I know about marriage at twenty? Let alone how to cook a good meal and we won’t even mention good loving, but I conceded. Instead of a big wedding, Rohan only had time for the justice of the peace before the “road” called. AJ was my maiden of honor. Right before we went inside the room where I would become Mrs. Saxton, AJ leaned over to me.

“My car is right outside. You just say the word and we’re gone.”

“No, I’m okay, just a few butterflies. You know how I get.”

“Lime, you know I support whatever you do, but you and I both know when you’re lying. Again, my car is right outside.”

I did my best to convince AJ that I’d be okay, but I knew she wasn’t convinced. When she saw Rohan standing next to the magistrate in a pair

of jeans and a tight fitting suit jacket, she eased her keys out of her purse and dangled them in my direction as a last ditch effort.

It wasn’t three months after that day that Rohan started working all day and performing or practicing all night. Then the phone calls from Pepper started. There were gigs in New York that he couldn’t miss, and if I dared to ask anything about all his travels, he snapped. Rohan only seemed interested in me in public. If his friends were taking their girlfriends or wives to some event, he wanted me there in the clothes he bought for me to wear. In a weird way, I believe his friend’s flirting seemed to arouse him. He cared more about their opinions of me than my own. When he came home one day with a flyer from a modeling contest at McCormick Place, it was all about what Pepper said. Pepper said I could win the contest hands down. Pepper said think what we could do with all the money. Pepper said he would even give us the fifty dollar registration fee. Pepper, Pepper, Pepper... Rohan insisted that I get my dad to take some head shots of me. When the contest turned out to be phony, Rohan was done.

January 1, 2000. Rohan woke me up early in the morning and told me to get dressed. He had just come in from celebrating New Year’s Eve in Chicago with his friends. I asked him where we were going, but he didn’t answer. He just kept telling me to hurry up and get dressed. When we arrived at my dad’s house, I figured maybe he and my dad had planned a New Year’s Day breakfast for me, although I knew my dad hated getting up early on days he didn’t have to open the studio. Rohan didn’t look at me the entire time, although I searched his face for a clue as to what he was up to.

As we waited for my dad to answer the door in the freezing snow, I tried again, “Is dad expecting us?”

Rohan just rang the bell again, as Marley, my dad’s chocolate lab, barked louder. My dad was not awake nor was he expecting company. His short, straight, reddish hair was all over his head and his robe was inside out. Rohan was standing in front of me when dad did open the door.

He was in the middle of yawn when he asked, “What’s going on?”

With a straight face, Rohan replied, “Mi sai Prince, see hare ere, mi bring are back if yuh.”

“What?” Dad and I said in unison.

“She a go be appier with yuh.”

I moved to the other side of Rohan and looked at him as if he had two heads. “Rohan, what are you talking about?”

He ignored me and kept addressing my dad. “I check yuh later with are thing before mi touch the road fi the Big Apple tomorrow.

“Rohan, t’hell yuh talkin’ ’bout?”

Dad asked in Patois, which meant one thing; he was pissed.

He grabbed my arm and pulled me inside out of the cold. Rohan was unfazed by the outburst and repeated that he would bring my things over later that afternoon.

“Bwoy, yuh got zero seconds to get t’hell off mi porch.”

Rohan turned to leave, my dad slammed the door, and I stood there dazed, trying to process what just happened. In less than three minutes, my husband made a decision about my life in front of me without even acknowledging me. I waited for the part when I would awake in a state of panic, but it never happened.

CHAPTER 3

Highway to New Beginnings

It is only the first of June, 2001 and it is so bloody hot. This heat and humidity in Ohio is suffocating. The sun is filling every crevice of my Mazda Protégé. I love the yin and yang of the cool Freon air mixed with the humid breeze of the great outdoors against my skin, and since it is my turn to drive, I have driver’s privilege. AJ insists it is a good waste of air conditioning, but after a few minutes of the same mixture against her moist skin, she fell asleep in her seat with her left chin nestled on her collar bone; her hands forgotten by her sides, and her feet crossed at her ankles sticking straight out of the passenger side window. Every time I hit a bump in the road, her feet obstruct the manufacturer’s warning that “Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear.”

I took the wheel forty-five miles shy of Cleveland, Ohio. We left Chicago at 5:00 A.M. AJ drove the first leg, almost six hours straight through, because I stayed up all night packing and finalizing things with the modeling agency. In less than eight hours, my life as I’ve known it in the Windy City will be brand new.



I'll never forget that call from Mrs. Laylah Nassiri. I was sitting in my cubicle at work running my index finger down the center of my head. Ever since I was three, my trademark sign that I am either tired, bored, frustrated, or all three is to run my index finger down the center of my head. Since I was computing stats for our division's annual report, the message was clear. I was bored. I let the phone ring three times before I even looked up. I just didn't want to be bothered. With each ring, I made a game out of it. My finger competed to reach the nape of my neck before the ring ended. After losing three times, I lost interest. Kevin, my co-worker and good friend, gave me the evil eye after the third ring.

I lifted my head to answer the call only to see Faces Modeling Agency on the caller ID. I grabbed the receiver so fast that I said "Hello" into the wrong end of the phone.

"Yes...Is this Lime... Lime Prince?"

I took a deep breath to regain my composure. "Yes, yes, it is."

"Lime, this is Laylah Nassiri, with Faces Modeling Agency in New York. We received your photos and I must say dahling, you are eclectic in every way."

She seemed to be yelling into the phone as if she were talking over a bad connection. It was the first time in my life a woman had ever described me as eclectic, and I wasn't quite sure how to respond, so I chose to listen.

"Dahling, you still there?"

"Uh, yes, I'm still here."

"Well, when your photos arrived in my office I was *très* impressed, to say the least. You seem to be having a love affair with your photographer. By the way, who was your photographer? The inscription on the back of the photos says Apple of My Eye Photography."

For some reason, I didn't think saying 'my dad is a photographer' would go over well, so instead I whispered, "Malcolm."

"Does Malcolm have a last name? I know all the hottest photographers."

"He just calls himself Malcolm."

"Hmm . . . I think you and Mr. Malcolm have some chemistry going on." She changed subjects like a New York minute. "Anyhoos, as I was saying, we are going edgy this year . . . gone are the days of cute and pretty. America is ready for unique, daring, and eclectic, and we feel you would be the perfect poster model. What do you say to that?"

My pause was longer this time.

"You still with me dahling?"

"Yes, I am." She was talking a mile a minute.

"I can see you aren't much of a talker. Not to worry, no one takes pictures of models talking or pay to hear them give speeches down the runway." She let out a breathy yet faint chuckle. "So dahling, I'm going to fax you over some information about our agency, but I'll tell you right now, New York is ready for you. The million dollar question is are you ready for New York?"

I blurted out, "I'm not sure, but I will think about it," more out of skepticism than anything rational.

"Oh, so not a talker, but a thinker. Well, don't think too long. We New Yorkers move fast."

"Okay."

"Oh, another thing before I forget, the green contacts are yesterday. Although, I must admit they add a mesmerizing *je ne sais quoi*, but dear, you don't really need them. Like I said, you are mesmerizing enough, plus—"

I had been defending the color of my eyes since I could talk, but I was older now and just plain tired of the assumption, so this time I responded before she could finish her final thought.

"Contacts? Did you say contacts, Mrs. Nassiri? I've never worn contacts a day in my life, and if you can find lime green contacts, I'm suing someone for false impersonation."