

W°NDER CITY ST°RIES

**VOLUME 3:  
TRUST No. # 1**

**BY JUDE MCLAUGHLIN**

**EPISODE #83**

PER ANGUSTA AD AUGUSTA

**Copyright Notice**

Copyright ©2015, 2014, 2013, 2012. Jude McLaughlin. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from Jude McLaughlin.

## PER ANGSTA AD ANGSTA

I had told my mother, "I'll be damned if I'm going to shake the hand of our first African-American President with a robot proxy, but I don't have a damned thing to wear!"

And so there I was, getting out of my sister Reesy's car with Mama and my other sister LaShawna, going shopping like a normal person.

Well, not really normal. The shop we were going to was a little boutique that LaShawna's friend Majestiq ran, and it was after normal hours. It was a hot, thick-aired, breezeless August evening, tall buildings shading us from the late rays of the fast-approaching sunset. I could hear the music down the block, and the kids shrieking as they played some game, and traffic noises. I could smell people's late dinners cooking, the rich, savory scents of the Haitian restaurant the next block over, and my sister LaShawna's perfume, floral and sweet.

I wasn't in my bunker. I was dressed in my breeziest (and best) black dress and flats. I was going out with my mother and sisters. They were taking me shopping for the first time in thirty-odd years.

Majestiq, a gorgeous dark-skinned black woman, unlocked the front door for us. Her natural hair was in an updo and she was wearing the most gorgeous purple dress I'd seen in a long time. She was a good three or four sizes larger than me, at least, I guessed.

While Majestiq and LaShawna hugged, Mama gave me a "Told you so" look—we'd had an argument about whether my tall, skinny sister could *possibly* know someone who could clothe me. Reesy looked vaguely uncomfortable when Majestiq hugged her too.

"LaShawna's told me so much about you, Renata," Majestiq said, not attempting to hug me, but shaking my gloved hand when I offered it. She gave me a delighted grin. "Us big girls gotta stick together, right?"

"You bet," I said, and we fistbumped. Reesy rolled her eyes, but Mama jabbed her (always very sharp) elbow into her.

The boutique was small. When we walked in, there was a set of drawers up on a table on our right, against the wall, a cash register podium in front of us, and the rest of the room to our left, containing one long rack of dresses, two stacked racks of blouses, and a long rack of slacks. There was a short rack, tucked in the odd corner next to the door to the changing room, which held coats. There were hatboxes stacked on shelves above the racks.

Majestiq walked around me thoughtfully, biting her dark-red glossed lower lip. After completing her circuit, she nodded and said, "I got a few things for you to try." She walked directly to a spot on the dresses rack and started pulling tea-length afternoon dresses out for me to look at.

We all decided that the flounced chartreuse trumpet dress and sun-yellow one-shoulder dress with the pencil skirt were probably not for me, but the emerald green strapless fake-wraparound was a possibility, as were the scoop-necked royal blue sheath with the three-quarter-sleeve jacket, the sleeveless purple keyhole neckline, and the short-sleeved Queen Anne a-line in black silk jacquard. Back to the changing room for me.

I was wearing my little alien charm and I was also on some serious meds, but that didn't stop my ears from overhearing my mother explaining to Majestiq, possibly after some other comment, "She's my daughter from my second husband, God rest his soul, and favors him more than me."

Reesy said, "I'm the one who looks like Mama, so at least I know how good I'm gonna look when I'm 84."

That froze me right there. Was Mama *really* 84? I did the mental math... oh, lord, yes, she was. It took a lot of effort not to burst into tears—the meds always made me a little weepy—thinking about how much I'd missed of her because of the institution and then being trapped in my bunker. Because of a stupid accident of genes.

As I slipped on the dress, I did more mental math. I was 47, going on 48, which meant LaShawna was 61 and Reesy was... 65? Seriously? That meant my older brothers, Raymond and Darius, were 64 and 62. My younger brother Michael was 45. I was always grateful for the younger sibling when I was growing up, because the others were *so* much older than me.

The black jacquard was too much like a funeral, and was a little tight in the shoulders ("Damn, woman, I wish I had shoulders like yours," Majestiq said, tugging gently on the fabric. "You work out?" "All the time," I said.), but the emerald green wraparound looked amazing—in the body at least, but there was just something off about it. ("Mmm, no, Rennie," LaShawna said. "She's right," Mama said, "though I can't quite say why.") I nearly cried then, because I really wanted the sleeveless purple one to work on me, since a very similar one looked so good on Majestiq, but I kept it together and it was worth it. The keyhole neck showed just enough cleavage and my admirable shoulders apparently looked great in a sleeveless dress. Through the body, it was a little big. ("Don't you fret," Majestiq said, "I do alterations.")

But the royal blue was flawless, if a little plain. "Oh, you just wear a scarf and that dresses right up!" Reesy said, deflecting my worry with a dismissive little handflick.

I ran a hand over the raw silk covetously. "You think so?"

"Oh, honey," Majestiq said, "have I got a treat for you."

She fetched out a ladder, climbed up, and brought down a hatbox, which she set on a little pedestal table. Then she went to the drawers and fetched out another slim box. Then, with a wink, she opened the hatbox: inside was the most amazing feather-bedecked cartwheel sunhat in a perfectly matched royal blue. Then the smaller box: dress gloves, dyed to match the blue.

I tried on the hat reverently. I'd never gotten to an age where I could wear to church the kinds of hats my mother and her friends did. Well, I mean, yes, of course I had gotten to the age, but I wasn't going to church then. So I'd never had the chance.

I stared at myself in the mirror. The dress and the hat and the gloves all went together to turn me into a woman I'd never seen before.

"You need your hair done properly before you meet him," Mama said. "You come with me to the salon—Florence will open up just for you, I know."

"You are *stunning*, Rennie," LaShawna said in an awestruck tone.

Reesy, I saw in the mirror, got teary and turned away, and said, a little muffled, "Yes, she is."

"Oh, Majestiq," I breathed. "You have some serious talent."

"Baby, the talent's all you in that outfit," she said. "You go take that off, and I'll get out some shoes for you to try on. We'll find the most comfortable and we'll dye them to match. You can't go this far and not have matching shoes."

"No," I said, unable to look away from the mirror.

"I have always said that *all* my daughters are beautiful," Mama said, defying some invisible person. "And I have always been right."

"We know, Mama," LaShawna said, and she joined me in the mirror, her long light-skinned smiling face next to my rounder dark-skinned one. "You're gonna give the FLOTUS a run for her money, Rennie."

"Not a chance," I said, finally turning from the mirror. I set the hat gently back into its box and tugged off the gloves. "I'll go change. We don't want to keep you in your shop any later."

"Oh, I wouldn't have missed this chance for the world," Majestiq said, boxing things up neatly.

There was some murmured discussion in the outer room while I changed back into my own dress. I didn't pry, though it would have been easy enough.

When I emerged, I tried on several styles of silk shoe, and inevitably settled on the lowest heel in the lot.

"I can pick up the shoes for you, Rennie," LaShawna said. "I drive right past here on my way home from work."

Majestiq wrapped up everything with violet tissue paper watermarked with her shop's logo and slid it into a big bag with a silky rope-style handle. When I stepped toward the cash register, though, Reesy touched my arm to restrain me, and Mama stepped forward. Mama gave me an arch look when I started to protest. "I couldn't buy you a prom dress or a

graduation gown or a wedding dress. I *will* buy you a dress in which to meet the President after you have saved the world."

I swallowed hard and said, "Yes, Mama. Thank you."

Reesy slipped me a clean handkerchief to dab my eyes with; I hadn't thought to bring even a tissue.

I asked Majestiq if I could hug her as we left, and she accepted graciously, though I could sense she was nervous. She was all smiles as she closed and locked the door behind us.

We walked to the car, and Reesy said, "How are you feeling, honey?"

I knew that this was the point at which I needed to decide if I would take them up on their offer of a little family party (LaShawna had promised it would be quiet, and I knew she was lying, because there was nothing about our family that was quiet). My head was starting to ache a bit, and I was starting to feel like all my skin was raw from the pressure, but I also knew I'd disappoint everyone terribly if I didn't come home with them.

Hell, I'd disappoint myself, I realized.

"Let me take something for my head," I said, opening my purse and reaching for the medicine bottle, "and I think I'm good."

Darius had brought his grill, and so everything spilled out naturally into the joint backyards of Mama's row of houses. Everyone was there: all my brothers, all my nieces and nephews, half my cousins, aunts, and uncles, and pretty much Mama's whole neighborhood.

The migraine lasted a week, but I didn't give a damn.