

seventeen

November 2010

My town in Florida is straight out of the movies — smiling people taking strolls and little kids riding bikes. So sweet! Every morning, I'd walk the mile on the sidewalk along a main road from my house to my high school. The walk scared me at first because I had to leave while it was still dark, before the sun was fully up, and I passed an empty parking lot. But after a few weeks, I relaxed and that creeped-out feeling went away.

GRABBED!

Then one day last spring, I was walking by the parking lot and in my own little world, with Mary J. Blige on my iPod, when suddenly my headphones were knocked off my head and a man threw his arm around my neck! It happened fast. I heard a deep, scary voice say, "Just be quiet," in my ear. I was being attacked, and this man's arm was closing tightly on my neck! I wasn't about to be quiet. I started yelling my head off and trying to pull his arm away from me, but he squeezed tighter! He was behind me, but when I was able to turn a little, I saw that he had his T-shirt pulled up over half his face. The struggle seemed like an eternity—he was forcing me to walk toward the back of an auto repair shop and he just kept saying, "Be quiet." Cars drove by and we passed two guys at a bus stop across the street, yet no one helped. My mind was frozen with fear. For a few seconds, I couldn't even see! But then I heard my great-grandmother's voice in my head.

She was talking in her gentle way, saying, "Come on now, I know you're stronger than that!" She was the rock in our family until she passed away four years ago. She was soft-spoken but she was no joke — you knew she meant what she said.

I snapped back to reality and adrenaline kicked in. I didn't know what this man wanted to do— kidnap, rape, or rob me, or maybe all three, but I had to get out of the situation alive. I started coaching myself in my head. Okay—you need to get calm and figure out what to do.

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

I've never had any self-defense training, but I went for it — I pulled his arm off my neck with all my might and let out a loud scream as I kicked my leg back into his shin with everything I had! He let go of me and I took off running. When I looked back to see if he was chasing me, he was running the opposite way. At the same time, he looked back at me too, and I saw him clearly — he was short with puffy cheeks and small eyes. Then I turned again and ran like crazy until I got to a nearby drugstore.

My hands were shaking and I couldn't calm down. I asked the girl at the counter for the phone and I called my mom. I was so scared I could hardly talk. She kept me on the phone with her while she drove to the store to meet me. "You have to calm down," she pleaded. She arrived five minutes later and I was finally able to explain what happened

through sobs. "I'm calling the police!" my mom exclaimed.

When we got home, two officers were waiting for us. While one cop took down my story, the other went looking for the guy. I was heartbroken when he returned and said, "We don't see him."

INNER STRENGTH

I stayed home for a few days after the incident. School officials warned students that someone was assaulted and they gave everyone the guy's description. At first no one knew that it was me who'd been attacked, but as people found out, they asked me tons of questions. I cried every time I had to relive the story, so my close friends formed a protective bubble around me to keep people away.

At first the attack made me afraid to do anything. My boyfriend and I broke up because I was scared to go out. I made friends come to my house. Things slowly got better, but I still don't like anyone to get near my neck.

The fear isn't totally gone — after all, the guy is still out there somewhere—but I have a new appreciation for my own strength. I never expected to be able to fight off an attacker; I'm stronger than I realized. Now I know always to listen to my instincts, and everyone else should too. If something seems unsafe or makes you nervous, stay away. I've learned the hard way that you never know what's going to happen, but you need to be prepared no matter what. **17**

17 EXPERT: Dallas Jessup, 18, founder of *Just Yell Fire*. Go to justyellfire.com to download a film about how to fight back

PROTECT YOURSELF

Don't be paranoid — be prepared. These three simple tricks can keep you safe.

If a mugger demands your purse, don't hand it to him — throw it away from you, then run the other way. He'll go for the cash, and you can escape.



Be aware of your surroundings.

Listening to music can distract you from what's around you. Keep one earbud out so you can stay alert.



Keep your keys in your hand, and hold one between your fingers. If you're grabbed, you can use it as a weapon to gouge your attacker's eye, which will buy you time to get away.

