

The unusual sound outside my low budget apartment scared me once again. I opened my left eye slightly, only to see that my bedroom door was still locked and securely in place. I clearly remember the maintenance man clowning me when I paid him extra money to come by and install the double bolt on the inside of my bedroom door. He thought my cautious nature was over the top, and laughed at me, saying the neighborhood wasn't that bad. Little did he know, I'd gone up against worst things in my life than just a few neighborhood criminals. Hell, maybe the maintenance man was crooked too, 'cause I'd been taught to trust no one.

As usual, my hallucinating antics had gotten the best of me. I wanted to get up and double check the noises that I was sure came from outside, but my body lay stuck like it had been glued to the bed. I had just finished another twelve hour shift at Texaco, and wanted to sleep my ass off. Although I'd tossed and turned for hours, the rattling sounds became clearer. *Four o'clock*, I thought, *nobody should be out and about at this hour*. I lifted my head for a quick second and stared at the clock again, just to verify there were only three more hours before my ass needed to clock back in for work. I closed my eyes tightly, deter-

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mined to get what sleep I could.

Despite all that had gone on over the past year, I managed to fall back into a light sleep. After all, this was the safest place the feds had found for me so far. The one bedroom garden apartment was a far cry from my last residence in Flint, Michigan, where drug dealers and pimps lived only two blocks away. It reminded me of Brooklyn, where I was born and raised, and where my life was ruined.

Normally, the witness protection program only offered *some* financial assistance to start you off and *some* employment, but I was classified under special services as *needy*, a nut case is what they really thought. Eight months ago, I started my first day in the program, and nothing had worked until this place outside of Hamilton, New Jersey came along.

It was a decent spot, but I still couldn't figure out why the feds would put me so close to New York City, where everything originally went down. I mean, I'd been sent clear across the country, and now I was only two and a half hours away from the place that got me in this situation.

As I slipped into what I thought was a deep sleep, I could still hear my mother calling me the day she was arrested; the day we were *all* arrested. "Candice! Candice!" I thought I heard her say. I frowned and twitched under my sheets at the sound of her raspy voice, but was determined to ignore it. I desperately needed some uninterrupted sleep.

I sunk deeper into the covers, and pulled my knees closer to my stomach. I had almost found that perfect position, until the crashing noise of my front door being

ripped off its hinges, scared the shit out of me.

Instinct kicked in. I jumped up trying to remember what I was supposed to do. My escape route had been planned and practiced from the first day I moved in. I knew there would come a time when I'd have to run. She wouldn't let me testify alive; she told me to my face. I remember it like it was yesterday. My own mother really wanted me dead. The rambling and thrashing sounds told me they were trashing my living room. My heart must've stopped. All I heard were the words, "She's in there," someone said, as they continued to bang.

The voices were deep, muffled, and unfamiliar. From what I understood, my mother, Velma 'Big V' Holmes was still locked down, and would be until the trial. Unfortunately for me, she was like God—*there even when I couldn't see her*.

Her connections were strong, even in Jersey. Once, these three armed men ran up in her stash house, unloading round for round. Their aim was to knock off everybody in her operation. My uncle said it was like a scene out of an Italian mafia movie. Big V, not only walked toward the bullets, she was somehow able to grab one of the assailants and shoot him dead in the face, blowing off his nose. Always prepared, he said that after her sniper rifle was empty, she exposed a revolver, finishing off the job. My baby Rich told me he was the only one who didn't run. Everybody else fled after shooting a few rounds. Still in all, Big V and Rich finished the job. I heard my mother never flinched.

The crazy part was that all this went down at an illegal stash house, but somehow, even after the bodies were taken out and the news reporters publicly aired her dirty

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laundry, she still managed to beat the charges. She got off because the property was in her name, and the assailants entered illegally, with the intent to harm her. Not only that, she dealt with her workers who didn't stand strong.

We all knew it was bullshit, but her money was long, and her talk-game was right. So, as far as I knew, she could be out on bail right now. *Damn, if this is what she meant by bringing in the heavy artillery, she meant business*, I thought.

"Bitch, you dead!" one of the voices shouted, from the other side of my bedroom door. His raging voice brought me back to reality.

Twenty seconds passed and I was still in my bed, scared to move.

"Where da fuck you hidin'!" one of the voices shouted in between more smashing sounds. Shit, shit, shit, what the hell am I going to do? I panicked even more. Fear took hold of my thoughts. I inched back in the corner of my bed pulling my covers with me. For some reason I thought if I'd shielded myself, they wouldn't be able to get into the room. The hard rattling and powerful shaking of the knob made me wet myself a little. I wanted to yell back just to see if my mother was on the other side, but decided against it. I also wondered if my old love, Rich was out there too. He claimed to love me, but Big V had probably convinced him that I was the enemy. Hell, for all I knew she could've been screwing him. That's how she got down. She did anything to stay at the top of her game and keep her crew loyal. Unfortunately, she and Rich were two of a kind-ruthless. So if he was after me, I would be yesterday's trash.

Boom! I felt the vibration of someone's body hit the

door. I sat up in attention. My heart raced so fast it skipped beats. I couldn't catch my breath. Okay move dumb ass, I whispered inside. But for some reason my body still didn't respond. Sweat poured down the center of my back.

"Make sure you cut that hoe's neck straight across the center," I heard one of the intruders say to another.

"Bitch where you at?" one yelled, while they continued to ram into my door. I heard my ceramic plant vases hit the walls. Glass shattered. I wondered how many were out there. Those guys obviously meant business the way they rummaged through my apartment.

Bam! They kicked hard enough for the top hinge to break off my bedroom door. Oh my God! I leaped from the bed getting my feet tangled up in the sheets. I fell flat on my face.

"We gon' rape your ass?" one of them whispered through the slight opening at the top of the door. It was almost like he could see me. I kicked the air trying to break free. As I squirmed, I scrambled to grab my shoes from near the dresser, but my arms were too short to reach them.

"Oh bitch, you mine now," the one with the deeper voice yelled, as he peeled the first hinge from the door.

I wanted to cry but I had no time to get into my emotions. It was do or die. As I freed my left foot, I slid across the floor like a soldier in combat. My closet seemed so far away.

My aim was to retrieve my purse with my life savings and my identification, then head straight for the window. When I reached the closet I stood to my feet. I felt around in the dark like a blind woman without her cane.

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Bam! I watched as the second hinge separated. Oh shit...shit...shit! I began to throw my clothes on the floor when I couldn't find the hook with my purses.

"Run bitch run, 'cause we coming to get yo' ass!" The man squeezed his arm through the slight opening of the door, and shined the red laser from what appeared to be his gun. *Please don't let them kill me.*

Finally, I felt the metal beads on the handle of my fake Prada bag. I yanked the long strap, threw it across my shoulder, and darted toward the window. Within that one second, shots rang out. I ducked praying that the bullets would go around me and under me, but not through me. I pulled the thick curtain aside to escape. I don't know why I looked back, but I did. I could see in the shadow two big bodies, one headed straight in my direction. I wrestled with the window as the bullets kept coming. One hit the window and glass went everywhere. What the hell!

Just when I raised the window, even though it was already broken, the one headed for me grabbed my top. I tussled to get loose banging my head on the frame.

"Bitch you dead!" His voice sent chills down my spine.

He put the gun to my head. I'm dead! I thought. I almost surrendered until he pulled the trigger.