

Opening

Three strikes—you're out! I tell myself as the sharp, cold metal of the handcuffs slide down my bony wrists and bite into my bloodstained hands as the arresting officer shoves me into the back seat of the police car that is taking me to jail for the third frickin' time.

With my hands cuffed behind me, I fall against the hard plastic of the back seat. My elbows are aching with the pressure of the awkward position; so, as I lean forward to try to find some comfort, I peer through the windows, all four—front, sides, and back—and see an ambulance pull up.

While the medics are strapping my antagonist in place on a gurney and hooking up an IV, I notice a bunch of nosey neighbors gawking at me as I play my role in this gory lifetime movie.

This must be a movie or a dream because this isn't how my life is supposed to be. I had it all mapped out and going to jail dressed in a brown form-fitting t-shirt, an ancient pair of rundown, dingy-white, New Balance sneakers, and some frumpy old gray lounging shorts—all spattered with blood—wasn't a stop on my map.

At this stage of my journey, I'm supposed to be rich and famous, draped in diamonds and pearls, just like the original Queen Bee (Lil Kim) who was once under the tutelage of my former colleague, Sean Combs.

No, I didn't stutter. You heard right. Puffy (P. Diddy, Puff Daddy, Brother Love, or whatever he calls himself these days) and I used to work together. The day I landed that gig at Uptown Records, I said to myself: you're about to blow uuuuuuuup! Within a few months' time, Puffy and I were promoted to top-level executives.

First, I was promoted from receptionist straight to the head of publicity: the department that arranges for feature stories, interviews, and record reviews in local and national newspapers, magazines, webzines, and all kinds of stuff like that.

Not long after, Puffy was promoted from intern directly to head of Artists & Repertoire (A&R): the department that locates and sign new talent.

"I think you're the youngest A&R in the music game," I said to Puffy. "I could have my friend, Sonia, write an article on you. She works at *Class Magazine*. Would you like that?"

In his new position and new office space adorned with music equipment—unlike mine, which was decorated with posters of Doug E. Fresh I'd cut out of *Word Up!* and *Right On!* magazines—19-year-old Puffy slid his scrawny legs off his desk and exploded straight up in his chair. A broad smile inched across his face.

"Yeeeah! I wanna be in a magazine!" he replied. "Can you hook it up?"

"Okay. I'mma call Sonia and set up the interview."

As Puffy swiftly climbed the ladder to success, I whooshed down like greased lightning—ALLLLLLLLL the way down to my current situation.

During the ride from where I am arrested on San Gabriel Avenue in Decatur, Georgia to the county jail on Memorial Drive, I maneuver out of the handcuffs and place my hands on my lap. When the police car stops at a red light, I contemplate escaping out of the side window that's cracked wide enough for my slender frame.

I envision placing the cuffs underneath the seat before sliding closer toward the window. The arresting officer isn't paying attention to me; she's looking down at her phone or something. I

reckon this is the perfect time to make my move. Like a snake, I swiftly slither out of the window the same way I slithered out of those handcuffs. I fall on the ground—ouch! I’m okay—I think; I get up assuming a low partial squatting position, then I duckwalk ‘round to the back of the police car. The officer is still unaware I’m now outside of the car. It’s now or never, I say to myself; then, I make a dash for the nearest bushes.

Knowing that I wouldn’t get far before being tackled to the ground and slapped with another charge, if I wasn’t shot to death by a trigger-happy cop, I snap back to reality mad quick and remain seated.

Reluctantly, I slide the cuffs back on so that the arresting officer in the driver’s seat doesn’t suspect I just had the silliest of silly thoughts. I spend the rest of the ride thinking about where it all went wrong and the penalty I’m about to face for my idiotic actions...and the adverse effects of my time spent in prison on my two children—children who will now have both of their parents locked up and in different states, too.

We arrive at the county jail in less than ten minutes. The arresting officer turns me over to blue-eyed, middle-aged Detective Buice. The first thing he notices is my loose-fitting cuffs. So, he tightens them, then places me in the back seat of his unmarked vehicle. I try to take the cuffs off again, but this time, they’re too tight. Oh well, at least he left my hands cuffed in front.

“Am I gonna get a lot of time?” I ask Buice.

“Yes.”

“How much?”

“You’re looking at...well now, let’s see...the victim lost a lot of blood...you could be facing twenty years, but—”

Whatever else Buice says, I don’t hear him; I’m too busy noticing that smirk on his colorless face. Does he think my going to jail is a joke? I’m not going to say anything else to him. It’s apparent he’s no fan of mine, which is understandable; nevertheless, those little smirks etched on his face, the ones I keep seeing in the rearview mirror, pisses me off.

He reminds me of one of those sleazy detectives I’ve seen in movies. You know the kind—a rogue detective like leading character Alonzo Harris in the movie *Training Day*.

We finally reach our destination. Buice exits the driver’s side and walks on over to my side. He opens my door, and I step out of the car and onto the curb. I don’t know where I am exactly, or what’s about to go down; the only thing I know is that I’m in deep doo-doo.

We walk inside a big building, seems like some type of office building. Inside are employees, or maybe other detectives, sitting at their desks paying us no mind as Buice escorts me through the office.

We pass a bathroom. “Can I wash my hands, please?” I ask Buice.

We make an about-face, and I enter the tiny one-man bathroom first, with Buice close behind, still smirking. With the door wide open, he reaches over me and turns on the water, a little cold mixed with a little hot, then he continues to stand behind me while I stand in front of the sink.

Surprise he’s allowing me to wash away some of the evidence, I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror hanging above the sink. Whoa! Is that a crackhead staring back at me? I notice my afro is sprinkled with blood. It’s only been a year since I first decided to embrace my natural hair.

In addition to the blood, there’s dirt in my ‘fro. Must’ve found its way there during the altercation that somehow had me sprawled out on an asphalt driveway, sprinkled with soil, and landed me in the care of Detective Buice. Now my once beautiful hair looks matted and stank.

I proceed to scrub my hands as hard as I can to remove the dried blood. Maybe it’s just me, but this blood isn’t coming off easily. Fragments of it are on the upper parts of my arms, too, but I can’t

reach way up there with these stupid cuffs on.

“Okay, let’s go,” Buice says after what seems like two seconds.

“I’m not finished,” I mutter. “Can’t you see I still have blood on my hands? Dang!”

“Excuse me, did you say something?”

“No, just talking to myself.”

I imagine Buice couldn’t care less about me getting cleaned up; after all, to some folk, I’m nothing but another black nigger. Maybe that’s the reason he doesn’t even bother to give me a paper towel to dry my wet hands. Oh well, whatever. I’ll just let ‘em drip dry.

We continue along; where we’re heading, I have no clue. We stop in front of a closed door. Buice opens it and allows me to enter first. Even though I’ve never been in this room before, it looks familiar—just like one of those rooms I’ve seen on television, where those slime ball detectives throw the so-called bad guys so that they can give them the third degree or trick them into spilling the beans. The interrogation room! Yup, that’s what it is!

I quickly scan the small, drab room and discover nothing in it but a small table, two chairs, and a slab of dirty carpet on the floor. The window, or two-way mirror, is pretty large, and I can’t see a darn thing except for my reflection when I look in it. Even when I zero in on it, still nothing. I assume, just as on television, somebody’s watching me from the other side.

Inside the lonely room, I guess Buice to be about six feet tall as he towers over my five-foot-two-inch pocket-sized frame. His light-colored hair, sprinkled with a dash of salt and pepper, is cropped short, and it appears his hairline is gradually receding.

If only he’d wipe that annoying smirk off his face for one cotton pickin’ minute, he wouldn’t be bad looking. The smirk makes him look devilish—speaking of the devil, is it fair to say the white man is the devil?

Oh, never mind me. That question used to pop in and out of my head—before truth set me free—mostly when I’d see photographs of smiling white faces encircling the dead black person they’d just lynched and castrated or live footages of white boys in blue gunning down (mostly) black people for no good reason at all, except for the fact that they’re black, which, by the way, is a very good reason for a white supremacist or a devil—but, who am I to judge?

Buice seems fit, nonetheless. No beer belly protruding. He could actually be a ladies’ man; not my type, though.

He tells me to stretch out my arms, and then he inserts a key in my handcuffs, the same key he used to tighten my cuffs, jabbing it in and out of the keyhole numerous times.

“I can’t unlock the cuffs,” he claims, still wearing that silly looking grin. “I’ll have to get another key.”

I don’t believe him because as the saying goes: the devil is a liar.

He leaves me cuffed in the interrogation room for what feels like hours. In his absence, I lie on the stained, carpeted floor in the fetal position, shivering like a slave facing corporal punishment.

Feeling like the biggest loser in my grubby, blood-spattered clothes, I ruminate on how easily I’d allowed some random person to board my life train, causing me to spiral out of control, sliding off the rational track, straight into an emotional ditch. Why didn’t I simply take the high road?

Dog-tired, I close my big brown eyes and plead my case to the Divine Energy Source I’m sourced from: forgive me, God, for all my wrongdoings; deliver me from evil; show me the true meaning of life. I’m tired, God. I’m tired of running on this treadmill, chasing after the wind. And God, while you’re at it, please get me outta here! Pleeeeeassee!

Detective Buice’s entry back into the interrogation room startles me.

“Can you please take off these cuffs?” I ask.

“I forgot to get the key,” he says. “Have a seat.”

I sit in a chair facing the entrance. He sits in the other chair, the one facing the two-way mirror, and begins grilling me. Since committing felonies isn't exactly my forte, I naïvely tell him snippets of my version of what happened. I even let him feed me details of what he believes happened as well.

“You started it, right?” he asks.

“No.”

“You swung first, right?”

“Yes...I mean, no...I don't know.”

“The victim didn't have a weapon, right? You were the only one with a weapon, right?”

“Yes...no...huh?”

Then I sign the confession statement he writes in pencil on a pad of lined paper, a statement that will probably be used as evidence to assist the prosecution.

As I continue to play my role as the protagonist—or an unseasoned perpetrator, according to my voluntary admission statement—I don't even realize I have the right to remain silent, even though I've heard it many times on television, and even though the arresting officer robotically recited that speech to me: “You have the right to remain silent. If you choose to give up your right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law...”

After Buice is through outwitting me, we return to his unmarked car, and he drives me around the corner to the booking facility, where he turns me over to a black female correctional officer.

Before he leaves, a key miraculously appears in his hand, and he unlocks my cuffs without difficulty—Things that make you go hmmm, as Arsenio Hall would say.

After I'm fingerprinted, photographed, and processed, the correctional officer ushers me to a small, ice-cold holding cell and hands me a plastic bag full of food, even though I have no appetite.

“Can I get a blanket, please?” I ask the officer. “I'm freezing in here.”

“Don't have any,” she says with a snap.

Inside the icebox are three other female detainees and by the looks of two of them, I assume they're crackheads; then again, they're probably thinking the same about me because, as the saying goes, when you point one finger, there are three fingers pointing back to you.

“Hey, girl. What's yo' name?” asks one of the crackheads.

“Vanessa.”

“Vanessa, do you want yo' food?” asks the other crackhead.

“No.”

“Can I have it?” they ask simultaneously.

I stretch out my hand. Both crackheads reach for my bag, and onto the dirty concrete floor goes all the contents: a cold bologna sandwich, a moldy orange, and a four-ounce container of milk that's spoiled, according to the date on the carton. They both scramble to pick up the nasty-looking food.

“I asked first,” says crackhead number one.

“I did!” yells crackhead number two.

“Just look at 'em,” whispers the third redbone detainee with the good nine-ether hair. “Dem crack ho bitches look like two starved scavengers.”

After I spend several hours freezing my buns off, the officer opens the cell door and takes me to a nearby doorless cubicle. She hands me an oversized, wrinkled orange jumpsuit, then holds up a white sheet while I stand inside the booth and change out of my blood-spattered clothes into my jailhouse garbs.

I hand her my civilian clothes, and she throws them into a plastic bag; then once again, I'm

placed in cuffs and escorted into an elevator by another female officer—a half-pint Latina.

“I heard choo be takin’ off yo’ handcuffs,” she says to me in a Spanish-ghetto drawl. Standing several inches shorter than I, she looks to be in her mid to late 20s.

When I don’t respond, she presses the number four button. As the elevator travels upward in slow motion, terror seeps through my body. I picture myself locked in a tiny cell with a big ol’ burly stud-woman—yikes!

We finally arrive on the fourth floor, on the northeast side of the jail. There are six dorms—100 through 600—called pods. We stop in front of pod 300.

“Oooh, girrrr!” Miss Half-Pint says to me. “Choo going into cell 301 with that crazy girl. I feel sorry for choo.”

A crazy girl? I feel a quiver of fear as thoughts of what may happen to me in a miniature cell with a loony-toon takes several spins around my mind. I mean, after all, I’m no real gangster. I’m not even a fake one. I see myself as nothing less than a dainty lady, despite my present condition. Besides, if you ask me, the real thugs and criminals are sitting in their high seat of honor exploiting the peasants they govern.

“Excuse me, señorita,” I beg. “I don’t wanna be in a cell with a crazy person. Can you please put me in another cell? Pleeeaaasse?”

“Nope! Choo no have no choice here, honey. Choo just does what’ever we tell choo. Besides, choo must be crazy, too. I heard what choo did.”

The correctional officer sitting in the control booth pops open the metal door to pod 300. Inside, inmates are sitting around, all over the pod, wearing the same orange getup as myself; some, however, look like men, others scary, some are sitting in front of a colored television mounted on the wall, and some are in their cell either asleep or standing by their cell door observing the scenery, while others are sitting around at a table doling out cards for a game, I reckon of Spades. I feel all eyes trail me as Miss Half-Pint escorts me to my new home: cell 301.