

UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS

ADVENTURES ARE HUSH
WHAT HAPPENS IN VEGAS...

Vazmin Taylor & Reid Randolph
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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually-explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Shout Outs

Thank you Reid for not trying to escape yet. Jeanie and Jayha, because of you I know what a real woman should be. You've created a world for so many and given me life in it. Thank you for letting me look up to you and stand beside you at the same time.
-Yazmin

To my Mom. You raised me alone and have never ceased to be an excellent role model for womanhood. You have always been there for me and always supported my dreams. Without you I would not be where I am today and your love has given me the courage to fly. To Jeanie and Jayha. I want to thank you both for all of your support and faith. Knowing you both has been life changing and for this I will be forever appreciative.
-Reid

As always, to our Mr. Me's. To Reid and Yazmin, thank you for allowing us to add our two cents.
-Jeanie and Jayha

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The following quotation is from “*What’s Your Life’s Blueprint?*” speech given by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at to students of Barrett High School in Philadelphia, PA:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry.”

Chapter 1: Let Me 'Splain You Something

Four years ago, Cota de Caza, California

If I wasn't sure that maintaining my weave in federal prison would be damn near impossible, right now I'd be being led off in handcuffs, foot shackles and one of those Hannibal Lecter-type face muzzles instead of leaning over the sink in the ladies room trying to talk myself down from a double homicide. I wonder how much time I'd get for a light maiming and a drive-by cussing out. *Strange talk in the midst of a party.*

I don't hate parties, *per se*. I simply hate lame parties. And I especially hate lame, *surprise* parties where I catch my fucking man being a little too friendly to women that aren't wearing the two-carat princess cut on their hand indicating that they're his fiancée. Before you think that I'm simply being overly dramatic because someone cut into my weekend, by friendly I'm not talking saying one too many 'hey y'all's'; I'm talking one too many some other woman's mouth on a cock that in two months I was going to have papers on. Yeah, I especially hated that. And I especially hated the fact that chick was giving him head so good that neither of them had noticed my entrance or exit.

So no, I wasn't happy at all. Despite the '*vying for a crown and a sash announcing me Ms. Something or Another*' smile on my face, I was seething mad. I was mad at Ellis, at her, but also at myself. How could I have been so clueless? I made a living at being on top of my game but I'd slacked off in my vigilance and now I was reaping the ramifications of the seeds that I'd sown.

Looking at my reflection I didn't look any different. I was as fine right now as I was twenty minutes ago, but I was different where it mattered

most. I was different on the inside. Always erring on the side of caution when it came to my personal life, I didn't let many people in. But I'd let him in. In hindsight the reason that I'd let him in was shallow (*he was fine*), but the reason that I'd let him stay in was stupid. I'd settled. Sure, by most accounts I'd settled for a damn good man, but regardless of how rich he was, how fine he was, how educated he was; he wasn't a man that I ever should've considered anything more than a one night stand (*okay a one month stand because he was fine and bringing it in the bedroom*) with, but I had.

Ellis didn't hit me. He didn't waste money. He did all of the things he was supposed to do. That is, he went to the gym and work religiously, which was ironic being that 'religious' isn't a word that I'd associate with him, especially since the only time he sat foot in any kind of religious institution was for special events ... you know the ones where they served food. He watched what he ate, and I mean literally, after all that's how he got me. He'd been eyeing me for a hot minute before he strolled his fine ass up and greeted me. I knew he was watching me because how could you not watch a man who looked like he did. Ellis Slater was fine and I mean fine. Baby put the f-sound in the word and the silent e at the end. He was fine you hear me? Dammit, see I got all off subject, which I tend to do when discussing his fineness. I mean, really, like the subject of Mona Lisa's smile, it did deserve some kind of dissertation. Hell, who am I kidding? It deserved an entire class at college. Something kind of like the *Fineness of Ellis Slater* and dammit they needed an intro, a 100, 200, 300, 400, and graduate level of the class because like an onion, his fine had layers to it.

So yeah, he did all the right things. An architect, he had the best-looking house in the neighborhood, which was fitting since his firm had

designed every house in the gated community. Not only did he have the best-looking house in the area, he had the best looking yard in the area and that was saying something in a neighborhood the locals called Coto de Caza. Then again, he tipped his maid, gardener, and pool boy so well that it was no wonder he had a home that looked like it was too fly for the likes of Home and Garden Television.

Yeah, so he had it all including the luxury sedan, the 401K, the country club membership, a good seat at the jaw-dropping beautiful local church, and the freaking banging ass girlfriend ... that would be me. And I'm not bragging; but I know that I'm rocking some serious curves in my 5'7" frame. And then there's my hair. They ain't never made a weave that was so me. My subtle, golden-colored highlights went well with my chestnut brown complexion. A solid size eleven, my pants were usually two sizes larger to accommodate my ass. I'm not saying that my ass fit into another area code; I'm just saying that when it was encased in some Apple Bottoms jeans, then by law it should've been framed and placed behind some velvet ropes. And don't get it twisted with the Hottentot Venus because yeah, just don't. That's a whole 'nother thing. And now that we've had a brief foray into our world's ugly history, let's get back to my favorite subject: me. *Go me! Go me! Go me!*

Without being conceited or anything about my looks (*but I do look good*), I'm not one of those chicks who is eye candy only. Nope, I've got substance beneath this hotness. Why? Two reasons: First, because a sister don't like being broke; and, second, because Vera and Daniel Knightsen are my parents. My daddy who'd never missed a day at his job at Natural Touch Landscapers wasn't playing that missing days from school shit ... and it didn't matter that you had a communicable disease. If you weren't under

federal quarantine or bleeding from the eyes then your ass was going to school. As hardnuts as my daddy was, my momma as encouraging, loving, and supportive as she was about the big dreams of my brother Walker and myself, wasn't playing that '*bringing home a B shit*' when we were in school. For that matter she didn't tolerate it when we were in college at UC-Irvine. Pause while I give the obligatory shout out to the Anteaters. Don't sleep on UCI, because not only is it a damn good school; three researchers from our school have Nobel Peace Prizes to prove it. Okay, back to my story.

It wasn't the B grade that my momma hated *per se*; it was the B-effort that led to the B grade in the first place. Many a day she'd look over the rim of her cat girl-style glasses and ask: '*What if Fanny Lou Hamer, Rev. Dr. King, Septima Poinsette Clark, or Fred Shuttlesworth gave B efforts?*' Yep, no discussion whatsoever about what grades Walker and I would be bringing home. My parent's expectations caused me to dream; their encouragement took the 'impossible' out of my vocabulary and replaced it with possibilities. As a result, my personhood wasn't limited to traditional black/female/gifted student activities.

That's why I'm the paradox that I am. I hike (*which to some of my friends is breaking all kinds of rules of blackness*) whilst listening to hip-hop (*which to some of my friends is breaking all kinds of rules of taste*). I rock boy clothes with super-fem accessories. Ain't nothing for me to wear cocoa lip gloss or boy shorts with an anklet and hoop earrings. I ride my bike to Mission Inn Bed and Breakfast. And don't get it twisted, when I say bike, I don't mean some cute little thing with a basket attached to the handlebars. I don't even mean a mountain bike or a crotch rocket. I mean my customized purple and black Ducati Monster S4RS Testastretta

complete with b-diggity, customized riding gear designed by none other than the badass Rickie M. Cascade.

Yep, I'm one fineass, hell-on-wheels paradox alright. My parent's guidance, my own sweat, and a whole lot of praying got me to where I am today. And though I'm not on the blue spots on the Monopoly board; I'm doing a'ight. I might not have a corner office (*yet*) at Cutting Edge Consulting but dammit I have an office complete with a shiny gold nameplate and ficus tree. Well, it used to be a shiny gold nameplate, but you know that I had to jazz that up and now it's the only purple and gold nameplate in the building. The ficus tree ... yeah I killed that off a month after I got there. Apparently, ficus trees don't like to be watered with black coffee. *Who knew?* Dammit, I'm not a plant person and one day when I get my own home, I'm either going to get a smoking hot gardener to tend to my lawn or I'm digging it up and laying down Astroturf complete with the lines and numbers.

Cutting Edge Consulting is one of the hottest ad/publicity firms pretty much in existence and you know why? Because they have me on their payroll. Yeah, we have a staff full of peeps with MBAs and Ph.D.s' in Marketing and shit like that. Though I only have a lowly B.A. in Business Management and another B.A. in Marketing, I offer a fresh approach. Note to y'all: the mention of my lowly degrees was sarcasm. A'int a damn thing lowly about my degrees. I worked my fucking ass off for those. Okay, as I was saying, I offer a fresh approach to advertising and promoting in the same way that I offer the heathen approach at church.

You know, I just realized that I am way the hell off topic. That happens, when I start talking about me. I was talking about Ellis. Yeah, he had it all except for manners. Well, he used to have them. Maybe it was in

utero, but I'm sure he used to have them or maybe his fine simply concealed the fact that his manners was like that dude's job in the television show *Martin* ... you heard about it but never saw it. But today, was the last straw. Despite his fine, today was the straw that broke the camel's back. He was so fucking rude to me ... but not in that gangsta rap misogynistic way, but in that I have two graduate degrees so my digs will go over pretty much everyone's head. And his digs usually did just that, but he'd made one mistake. He aimed one of his digs at me ... in front of witnesses after his little indiscretion that was going to be responsible for the unexpected beat down he was going to get later on from my big brother. Walker wasn't just any big brother; Walker was *my* big brother. A risk management trainer by trade, he was also a full-contact stick fighter for relaxation.

I might not have a graduate degree, but I don't need one to craft a comeback. I can go toe-to-toe with pretty much anybody and not simply because I was the captain of the debate team in college but because my last name was Knightsen, which meant that on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings I was sitting in somebody's pew. I'm not saying that my parents were the paradigms for being Christian, after all my first name is Vegas; but, they are Christians and God had brought them a long way so they stayed in the church and did what they could to smooth the way for other people.

We didn't attend just any old church. Nope, mmm hmm. The Knightsen family attended a Black Church that was socially conscious. I was walking picket lines before I could walk; family legend says that my first word was '*no*' and my first complete sentence was '*hell no, we won't go*'.

While other people learned to sing in the church and have the platinum CD's to prove it; I learned to craft a sound argument (*talk good game*) in Sunday school and later in Bible Study. And you had to talk like you had some sense just to get a chance to talk if you were under the age of Methuselah in church. And being that I like to talk, I learned to talk the talk of not only the Black Church, but all places where I was spending an inordinate amount of time. So not only am I fluent in Christian, Academic, Round the way, Middle Class America, and Rich People, I am also the undisputed czar of cock-blocking bullshit, the empress of talking a crazy motherfucker down, and the commander-in-chief of beating you with your own words.

So anyway, I hit him with a look that informed him that I wasn't pleased with his remarks. Then, I asked to speak to him ... in private. I might not hesitate to call someone an asshole, but that didn't mean that I had to make the event a Public Service Announcement. But we didn't make it to someplace private because he was too busy hamming it up for his cronies and since I'd ridden with him and wasn't about to pay for a cab from Sage to my apartment back in downtown Culver City, nor was I even about to pretend that I was walking any damn place in my Jimmy Choos, I slapped on my '*do not disturb*' face and planned my next move.

I plotted and planned all the way back home. Truth be told, I also hurt all the way back home. I tried to stop the bleeding but how do you put a tourniquet on your heart? *This was the man that I was willing to settle for?* Refrains of *'he's a good man'* went through my head, but it was too late for that. A man who would cheat on me – regardless of how discreet he attempted to be; a man who would insult me – no matter how subtly - was a man that would eventually move to more violent forms of abuse. I might

have made mistakes that were causing my heart to break but I wasn't going to wait around for him to break something else on me like my sanity or self-respect.

I had to close my eyes so I wouldn't be distracted by his fine. And I went home and thought. And the next day I packed up my three suits and drawer full of belongings, glad that I hadn't committed and moved in with him. Even though I spent most nights sleeping over something in me bristled at living with a man that I wasn't yet married to. Then again maybe I didn't think enough of myself to spend the night as much as I did. After packing my few belongings, I went to the bank and got a cashiers check for seven thousand, seven hundred US dollars, which represented half his house note for the seven months that I'd been kinda, sorta living there. I took the cashiers check, his house key, and the *'fuck you and the horse you rode in on'* letter that I'd stayed up half the night penning to my attorney and washed my hands of him ... and the old me.

After that watershed moment I marched my fine across the street and put a down payment on that Ducati Monster S4RS Testastretta that had caught my eye. The *'fuck you'* attitude came with it for free. And that was the beginning of my new love life.

That was four years ago. And though I've made the move back home to LA, I haven't had a date since. And Ellis is still fine as hell. Meanwhile, my coochie hasn't been used in so long that I'm scared I'm going to see dust when I wipe. I have to keep doing the coochie-lates to make sure I keep it in working order.

Chapter 2: Area Codes

Vegas didn't care what anybody said. Despite the fact that they might break off and fall into the Pacific Ocean after the next big quake, she loved California. How could she not? It had everything from planned pooch birthday parties at restaurants to natural hot springs mud spas. And then it had the Lakers, Disneyland, Chinatown, Hollywood, and over eight hundred miles of coastline along the beautiful Pacific Ocean – not that she was particularly crazy about the beach. Though LA was currently her home, she loved spending time hiking Amir's Garden in Griffin Park and riding her bike on the ever popular Route 66.

Cali was the bottom of that big melting pot called America. Cali was where all the good stuff hung out and swirled around creating pot liquor. Cali was the one place where it was okay to blend in or stand out. It was a state where she could build a snow man in the afternoon or have a bonfire at the beach on Christmas Day. Like her, Cali had many sides to it and she loved all of those sides. Okay, not all of them but a whole lot of them being that she loved being able to change on the drop of a dime. She liked the smorgasbord of topography to choose from: the ocean, the snow-capped mountains, the hot ass desert with its hills, and the open land.

She had a multitude of cultures and activities in her backyard, but then there was the little something-something that totally sold California: it's proximity to Las Vegas. She didn't like Sin City because it was named after her (*yeah, yeah, so the city was founded in 1905 and she was in her thirties*) she liked it because it was Las Vegas. What other city had such an illustrious beginning mired in atomic bombs, mobsters, gambling and over-the-top entertainers? What other city could you have a drive-through

wedding, cruise the Strip, pick up a hooker, see a magic show, and get a five dollar steak breakfast? What other place on earth was as tacky? Crazy? Fun?

Stretching, she took off her sleeping mask (*she didn't need one; she just wore it because it was kinda cool*), picked up the remote control and hit the button that opened all of her blinds. She took a moment to appreciate the way that the sun lit up the purple and gold that covered her bedroom like snow covered Antarctica. Taking a moment she thanked her Father for the color purple and another day.

And it might've been tacky, but she also gave thanks for her house. She had a great house ... okay it hadn't started off as a house *per se*, but it was home now. Vegas lived in an old fire station ... and she freaking loved it. Sure, she could've bought a four-bedroom, two and a half bath, with double attached garage in some cookie cutter suburb, but that wasn't her.

She knew this because she'd tried it. She'd got a sweet deal on a lease-to-own in a respectable suburb filled with a nice mix of older, distinguished homes and more recently-built homes with an older feel. Sure, she'd gotten some perks being an almost-homeowner such as the new type of respect from potential creditors and a groovy relationship with Captain Simon Laverie –her most favoritest firefighter in all of the world. But she'd also gotten finagled into being the acting president of the Woodbridge Homeowner's Association when the real president lost his mind and fucked off on his wife. He'd decided to get the hell out of dodge when she'd come after him with a pack of attorneys and a meat cleaver. Somehow, her saying '*that's what the bastard gets*' in response made her an instant favorite with the wives and next thing she knew she was being

handed a gavel, a book of the bylaws and an assload of ‘good lucks’. If that wasn’t enough, she’d also gotten fucking arrested.

Just like it always did, her eye began to twitch when she thought of that so not cool moment in her life. And just like she always did, she took the name of Basil Sarantos – bane of her existence – in vain. Damn hottass, built like Mt. Olympus, Greek man. If he didn’t cause her brain to hurt from working her last nerve, she so would’ve made him her bitch. Oh wait, she’d already done that and she didn’t feel the least bit of remorse about it, especially after what he’d done.

Vegas remembered that day so well she should’ve made it a one-woman play and pressed it on DVD for posterity. On the way to score some barbequed chicken salad, she’d just turned off of her cul-de-sac when she passed *that* house. A beautiful house, it bugged the spit out of her. She couldn’t find fault with the Prairie-style house with its low-pitched roof and overhanging eaves; what she did find fault with was the fact that the fucking Christmas lights were still up. It was too far past Christmas to have lights on your roof even if they were not turned on. In fact, it was so far past Christmas that it was close to being Christmas again. That ish really burned her cookie. The only thing that could burn her cookie more was if he had a lawn jockey out front. And the only fucking way there better be a lawn jockey on his lawn was if he was a stop on the Underground Railroad and being that they were firmly out of the 1800s she better not see hide or hair of any such thing.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she found herself pulling into the driveway. Sighing, knowing that this little foray was going to put her further away from her hot date at one of her favorite eateries, she exited the car and marched up to the door. Ringing the doorbell on behalf of the

“association” she planned to ask the inhabitants nicely if they would take the shit down. One day, she’d get around to reading the manuals that had been entrusted to her and learn the names of her neighbors but really as long as they paid their HOA dues on time and didn’t engage in anything that would result in the neighborhood being under the spotlight of a helicopter belonging to the LAPD then she really didn’t give a fuck what their names were.

When a full minute had passed without anyone answering her summons, she started eyeballing the fence. Maybe they were out back. She didn’t hear any noise, not that the absence of noise equaled ‘no one home’. This was Cali and tanning was practically the official state sport. Tipping around back, she didn’t notice any inhabitants but she did notice a ladder.

Wrestling the ladder from the corner where it was resting (*still in the upright and unlocked setting like someone was fixing to set off some kind of project*), she set it up and climbed onto the roof. As she began snatching out the staples that held the lights in place she heard a crash and realized it was the ladder falling. Fuck. Getting down was going to be difficult – but not impossible. Good thing the roofline was flat. Continuing her crawl around the roof she felt like she should check her wrists for some kind of device that shot webbing.

Her musing was interrupted by the barking of the neighbor’s dogs. Accustomed to the sound of dogs barking, she put it on ignore and went about her mission. The mission was made tougher by the fact that the owner of the house obviously took his/her Christmas lights seriously. Scrolling through her memory banks, she recalled that this house did have the most hooked Christmas lights not simply in their enclave but probably in the whole of Cali. They had an eloquence that only served to highlight

the beauty of the home's architecture, still it was damn near Oktoberfest and it was well past time for them to go.

If she'd been a little less intent on her mission, she might've considered her circumstances. Her circumstances being that a) she was on the roof of somebody's home; b) although she rocked Victoria's Secret PINK brand sweat pants and hoodie – she looked suspicious rocking her all black boyfriend fit ensemble; c) she had the hoodie up to protect her hair; and d) whoever the inhabitants of the house were, they had Delores Ware as a neighbor. She might have a good reason for not knowing who the inhabitants of the house were, but she had no excuse for not realizing where Delores was at all times.

Delores Ware was nosy for no damn reason. Not only was she the nosiest neighbor in the neighborhood; she'd bet her next hair weave that Delores was the nosiest being in all of creation. She had Channel 5, the hospital, and all emergency services – *and some not-so-emergency services* - on speed dial. And she had a personal vendetta against her. Apparently, she didn't appreciate a young, whippersnapper like herself being the HOA President. Unbeknownst to her, by exercising her powers (*okay, maybe she'd made up her own powers but dammit you couldn't simply give her a gavel and expect her not to exercise power*) she'd given Delores the perfect opportunity for payback.

The woman had called not only called the news, the police, the fire department, and the Department of Homeland Security, she'd called animal control. She knew this because they were the first to arrive on the scene, followed closely by the fire department. The police were next. She was sure she could've gotten down off of the roof just fine but that was before the animal control officer had startled her so badly that she'd tripped

over the chimney and gotten tangled in the mass of Christmas lights. She'd gone down hard and in the process knocked all of the breath from her body. Gritting her teeth from the sudden shockwave of pain that had shot through her, moving had been the last thing on her mind.

That's where the fire department had come in. She'd always dreamed of being rescued by some smoking hot firefighters. They'd be all oiled up wearing nothing but their helmets, boot, pants and suspenders because in her fantasy it was simply too damn hot for the jackets. Though she was getting rescued by firefighters, they weren't hot, young studs. *Dammit*. Still, they'd rescued her. When Captain Simon Laverie had climbed the ladder her first thought was that it was just her luck to get the fire brigade that had battled the fire that had burned down the Ancient Library at Alexandria a few decades after the world clock had switched from BC to AD. However, when he'd taken her in his arms and held her one hundred fifty pounds like it wasn't shit, she couldn't help but feel anything except for grateful.

Captain Laverie was extremely nice to her and gentle with her, however the cops were not so nice once they discovered that she did not live there. Five-o didn't buy her story for being on the roof and decided to arrest her. Even though they were gentle as they handcuffed her and placed her in the back of the squad car, she was all kinds of pissed. Not only did she not appreciate being in the back of a scummy car where who only knew what kind of germs had marched through, she did not appreciate the complete lack of concern that they had for her germophobia. The only thing that saved her from completely losing her mind was the fact that Captain Laverie was there.

Having known the police officers that had shown up on the scene, he'd talked them into uncuffing her. That accomplished, he'd leaned down on his haunches and gently tugged her into his arms and engulfed her in the biggest hug she'd ever had from a man that was not her daddy. He'd rubbed her back and told her it would be fine and asked her the numbers of who'd he should call to come get her being that it was Friday evening and County was bound to be full to overflowing.

By the time the owner of the house had returned, she was well on her way to being half in love with the Captain who'd she renamed Uncle Firefighter; the squad car was already well on its way to County; and her ankle was well on its way to bursting from her Timberland Canard mid boots. It was only after she'd actually gotten all the way down to the station that she'd laid eyes on Basil Sarantos – the owner of the house. He'd driven up to his yard and been blindsided by the sight of a grip of strangers milling about the area, police tape roping off part of his yard, and his precious Christmas lights hanging off of his beautiful house like a bad weave.

Knowing Basil as she now did, she'd bet her ankle-length trench coat that his primary reason for trekking down to County was to bitch about his Christmas lights. In fact, his first words to her had been: *'are you the person responsible for making a mess of my Christmas lights?'* The words that she wanted so desperately to say in return would've gotten her an express ticket to the electric chair. So instead of threatening to end him, she'd gone all Psalms 25:8 on him and morphed into one of those meek people who was in line to inherit the earth. She'd been all good, church-going girl on him and explained what had happened. Her act must've worked because not only did Basil decide not to press charges, the officer

who'd arrested her apologized to her and gave her a hug too. She'd been all meek and humble right until they arrived back at his house.

Limping her way to his porch she sat down and watched as he cleaned up the mess from her little foray into criminality. Trashing the crime scene tape, he'd stripped out of his hand-tailored jacket, French blue dress shirt and tie and climbed the ladder in his black Kenneth Cole's to begin the task of unraveling the mess she'd made of his lights. Sure, she could've gone home being that her car was still in his driveway, but she didn't for three reasons. First, she needed to call Uncle Firefighter and let him know that she was okay. Second, she still needed to cuss Basil out. Last, she needed to use his shower.

Already having determined that Mr. Sarantos was not a closet serial killer or guilty of anything greater than being tacky, she decided that she was going to shower at his house. There was simply no fucking way that she was getting in her car or her home without first undergoing some serious decontamination. And there was also no fucking way she was going home hungry. It was Mr. Tacky's fault for having his Christmas lights up way past their expiration date that she was even in this situation. Basil had been so lost in his task that he'd forgotten all about her until he made his way back to his front porch. Before he could ask what she was still doing there, she took charge of the situation.

"I need to check out your house and if it passes inspection we'll go from there."

She watched as a slow smile spread over his face. Basil may play the laid back guy but underneath that laid back façade, lurked a male who didn't bow to a whole lot ... but he would bow to her. Quirking her brow, she simply waited for what he'd say in response.

“And I should let you in my house why considering you’ve destroyed my lights?” he asked as he gathered the clothes he’d so carelessly discarded.

“Because you don’t want me to tell my big brother that you were mean to me,” she said.

“Ah, being a big brother myself I understand the power of that threat. Still, you are the one who is at fault,” he said as he unlocked the door.

She waited for him to walk inside and slam the door. In fact, she expected that so much that she was already considering how much time she should let pass before she could safely toilet paper his yard and egg his windows so the authorities wouldn’t think it was her when she’d noticed that he’d stepped aside. He was waiting for her to enter. Smiling, she rose from the chair and carefully made her way into his home. She’d made it to the edge of the kitchen when she realized that for all of his faults, Basil had a serious case of OCD. Although he had a serious problem with color selection, he had floors like she did: ones you could eat off. Sauntering deeper into the living room, she marched in the direction of his bedrooms.

“Where’s your guest bathroom?” she asked.

Before he could answer, she threw out directives. “I like my coffee black and I want some barbequed chicken salad. And I’m going to need a garbage bag for these clothes and something to wear while I eat.”

Not only had Basil shown her to an opulent guest bathroom, he’d set out fresh toiletries for her, fluffy towels, and some clean sweats. He’d made her coffee so good that she couldn’t help but purr and he’d ordered a full out seven-course meal for her. He’d pleased her so well that she’d decided that she would only make him pledge fealty to her once a year every year instead of making him her bitch. She liked him and over the course of their knowing each other her like had grown so much that she’d commandeered

one of his guest rooms and his guest bathroom and stocked it with her favorite stuff. She didn't plan on sleeping over a lot but in case she was ever on the run from the law, she'd have a nice place to lay low.

Basil was good people ... even though he still made her eye twitch most of the time. She'd let him live without undergoing the Inquisition that was her brother because well, because of him she'd met Uncle Firefighter. And because of Uncle Firefighter, she'd adopted the whole fire station. Upon seeing her love for their fire station, they'd given her the run of the place even going so far as to turn their backs when she'd engaged in her favorite activity – that being sliding down the fireman's pole. She'd made that fire station home and when they'd moved into new digs, she'd put in her bid and a few weeks later had been the proud new owner of a fire station. Yay her!

Sighing, she ignored the fact that her life would run so much smoother if she'd simply make an effort to be like the people she designed for – John and Jane Q. Public. But alas, she'd never been a '*jump on the bandwagon*' type of chick regardless of if one was talking clothes, men, or houses. If she'd settled for a regular house in a regular neighborhood, she might've had a picket fence and a community pool but she wouldn't have been able to start off her mornings by sliding down the fireman's pole that led from her bedroom to the kitchen. Wasn't nothing like starting a day to a bumping Prince song, a slide down the fireman's pole and a black cup of coffee in her all-black kitchen. She had black appliances, black ceramic tiles on the floor, black cabinets, and black walls. She would've had her ceiling painted black but she needed a splotch of color so she'd painted it purple.

Finishing her coffee, she rinsed her cup out and headed out to Cutting Edge Consultants to see what new project awaited her. It wasn't that she liked work; she liked the challenge of creating desire. Not a narcissist/egomaniac/megalomaniac her coochie tingled every time she came across one of her advertisements. She might not ever have a book on the required reading list; she may not do anything worthy of getting her name included in the history tomes; but she was in the pages of media print and on the billboards that lined the 405 freeway.

Coffee Break

Slipping off her Manolo's, she walked into the shrine that served as her office. As always, she stopped and inhaled the smell of undiluted clean and scanned her domain with a critical eye. Though she wasn't a big dog in the company – *yet* - no one touched her things but the cleaning crew. Damn, *her* cleaning crew was the shiznit. And yes, she called the cleaning crew hers because she'd dibbed Maid Just for You, Inc. Of course, how could they not be the shiznit being that she left them detailed instructions (*along with a nice bribe*) to insure that her office was always up to her standards? She was good to Mrs. Hernandez and Company and in turn, they were good to her.

The bribes helped insure the cleanliness of her office but it was Mrs. Hernandez's work ethic that was the real deal. Not only was her office always two levels of cleanliness above a science lab, it always surpassed her particular standards. After she'd met Mrs. Hernandez she wasn't surprised at all that the woman had such high standards. The woman might have roots in Mexico but she clearly she had some African-American in her blood because her and Vera Knightsen were two fucking peas in a pod.

She'd had many late night talks-dinners with Mrs. Hernandez mmm-hmming over her shoulder as she completed some campaign or another. No one else could get away with looking over her shoulder but then Mrs. Hernandez wasn't exactly anyone else. Nope, she'd decided that she was her *duenna* and as such she could tell her what to do. And she did ... a lot but Mrs. Hernandez could get away with that because she fed her *tortas* while she hovered and lectured. While she'd never consumed the Mexican sandwiches before making her acquaintance, once she'd wrapped her lips

around the concoction she was a fan. Ms. Hernandez was her food pimp and she was her john – metaphorically speaking. She also gave her damn good advice and many swift kicks in her ass. And when she said ‘*swift kick in the ass*’ she didn’t mean that metaphorically. She meant that literally.

The first time Mrs. Hernandez had dared such a thing, she’d turned on her with every intention of making her eat marble tile. Three things had stopped her. First, she really wanted to beat the shit out of her so-called colleague, Leticia Keller, not Mrs. Hernandez. Second, she could see a warm place in hell for her if she beat down an old woman. Last, the words that poured from Mrs. Hernandez’s mouth had stunned her into silence. She’d put her hand on her hip, raised her brow and said: ‘*Yes, I dared such a thing, mijita and stop acting like it hurt you. You got too much ass for that to scarcely register much less actually hurt.*’ Before she could come back with a snappy (*but respectful*) reply, Mrs. Hernandez had grabbed her by the collar of her Donna Karen suit and dragged her to her own office where she preceded to read her. *Da hell?*

“What right do you have to...” she began.

“I’m a *mami*. That’s what right I have and although I’ve never met your *mami* I know that she raised you better than that. Now instead of you quitting and cussing that *vagabundo* (tramp) out you get your behind in there and out do her like you been doing since the first day you got here. They might all have fancy degrees but you have respect for yourself, what you do, and the job that you’ve been entrusted with.”

Vegas was about to protest when Mrs. Hernandez went all Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr./“*What’s Your Life’s Blueprint?*” on her. “*Si un hombre es llamado a ser un street sweeper, él debe barrer las calles aún como que Miguel Angel pintó, o Beethoven compuso música o Shakespeare*

escribió poesía” (If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry).

“But,” she’d begun only to be cut off with a rapid stream of Spanish.

“*Pero nada* (but nothing). *Haga justo como dije* (just do as I said).”

That was the beginning of their unorthodox but satisfying relationship. Over time she’d learned to refer to Ms. Hernandez as *Tía* Martha. She’d also learned that *Tía* wasn’t simply a maid (*not that there was anything wrong with that in a city where even the maids had maids of their own*) but the CEO of the company that was responsible for over fifty percent of the office buildings in the area. She smiled recalling *Tía*’s face when she’d learned that juicy tidbit.

“*Mijita*, I know that being Latina and doing cleaning is a stereotype but life taught me something that my master’s in economics couldn’t. People are ruled by their prejudices. While they hesitate to hire me to be the face of their firm despite my academic credentials, they trip over themselves to hire me to clean their homes and offices. Spanish-speaking domestics are all the rage you know. At first, I was pissed but then I realized that while people won’t always need advertising, their basic needs won’t change. That is, they’ll need to eat, take a shit, have stuff cleaned and fixed ... and make a little love. That’s why my *niños* are chefs, plumbers, electricians and...”

“Please don’t say brothel owners,” she’d chimed in.

“Nope, but they all know kung fu so when someone makes the mistake of treating my girls like that, they can beat their asses.”

She smiled thinking of her Spanish-speaking, masters-degree holding, empire- building Tía and the fact that she had the cleanest office in all of North America. Not that she would, but if she had to, she could eat off of the floor. When she got heavy into a project/advertising campaign, it was blanketed with the tools of her trade, but it was never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever dirty.

She was anal about her workspace and everyone knew it, which is why they kept their hands. One did not come to her office without first having an invitation. And one did not step foot in her office without either removing their shoes or donning contractor booties. At first, she allowed them the option of simply removing their shoes but some people had sock issues (*like they didn't wear them, didn't wash them, had so many holes in them that one would be hard-pressed to identify it as a sock in a sock lineup*) so she nixed that. She didn't want feet that didn't meet her quality control touching her floor. It may not have been the Art Institute of Chicago, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts or the Griffith Observatory, but it was treated like a museum. She was its benefactor and Michael Schaefer was its curator.

Chapter 3: Basic at its Best

Sean Lodi was a straight blue collar, lunch pail, meat and potatoes guy – unlike the other ninety-nine point nine percent of his family. The antithesis of flash, he had simple tastes which were reflected in his waterfront home, his dark wood furnishings, and the earth tones that decorated it. His simple tastes were reflected in his clothes. Unlike his brothers who owned wardrobes full of clothes that had designer labels, his wardrobe consisted primarily of comfortable, well-worn jeans, t-shirts, and steel-toed boots. He had a handful of suits but he saved those for special occasions like for when he needed to show his face at family reunions and tell people to fuck off. He wasn't a complete Neanderthal, but he was too close to it for his mom's comfort and for the comfort of the women that initially chased him before turning to the more civilized, flashier males in his family. That's why he preferred simple women. He didn't care if they were blond, redheads, or brunettes; statuesque or petite, Ph.D.s or plant workers. The women that he preferred had one thing in common: they went along with what he wanted.

Yes, he was a simple man and had been so since the days when he'd picked a Big Wheel while his brothers and cousins had whined for the Green Machine. His simplicity had even carried over to college. While the overwhelming majority of Lodi's had headed straight to Alabama where they worshipped at the temple of Bear Bryant before donning their Roll Tide shirts, he'd broken ranks and had headed straight to the military. Having spent his youth tooling around with cars and bikes, he'd selected mechanics. Though he was technically a wheeled vehicle mechanic, he'd learned to fix anything with an engine during his stint in the army. After

his tour he'd taken his know-how and headed to the historically black Alabama A&M where he'd earned the nickname 'Milk' and a B.S. in Mechanical Engineering.

His decisions might not have been popular but they'd paid off affording him the lifestyle that he'd craved ever since he saw the world outside of Thorsby, Alabama. Though he had a deep affinity for the south, he'd outgrown it. Maybe he'd go back to his beloved Alabama the day when Charles Barkley finally became governor of their great state. But until such a day, he'd remain in California – and not simply any part of the Golden State, but specifically the Northern part. In his eyes, California began somewhere around San Francisco and ended right below the Oregon border.

He loved this part of the country. It was rugged and wild and colored in the browns of the mountains and the blues of the many bays, the handful of lakes and the Pacific Ocean. He could ride for hours on Highway 101 and never see the same scenery twice ... or grow tired of it if he did. Northern California was a living, growing thing and he enjoyed watching it grow. It might not be an exciting pastime then again he enjoyed the simple things like the simple man that he was.

Yes, he was a simple man when it came to pretty much everything except for the vehicle he drove - a money green Hummer HT SUT - and the bikes that he built. And he built some damn fine choppers if he said so himself. Of course, it wasn't just him that said so. His gross sales said it for him. Sean's Cycles had made a profit since he'd opened the doors a mere five years ago and his profits had continued to grow every year. Last year had been his best year ever with sales topping over a hundred thousand.

He'd like to say that his success was due all to his own grit and sweat, but that'd be a lie. A whole lot of it was due to his apprentice, Cannon Cascade.

He'd been reluctant to take on an apprentice, especially one with such a spotty work history and lengthy criminal record but he'd been "talked" into it by Andrew Treunmhor who was the only male he'd ever encountered that might be more caveman than himself. Andrew's manners were not existent; everything after the word '*or*' usually involved some kind of dismemberment or death; and his wardrobe was worse than his and for that matter he wasn't sure if the man had more in his wardrobe besides kilts, steel-toed boots and t-shirts. Sean would've said yes to Andrew for those reasons alone and then Andrew's wife and her cronies had descended upon him and threatened him with all manner of horrific endings to his existence ... while they fed him fried everything. It was a good thing that he was fluent in southern else he might've mistaken their feeding him for friendship.

Southern women were flat out special. They'd feed you so well and use that soft drawl to talk a body into digging their own grave and laying down in it. The women had turned out to be good friends to him. And Cannon turned out to be one of the most naturally talented motorcycle mechanics he'd ever come across. He was going to miss him when he went back to Colorado but he sure wouldn't miss his smirk.

Two years ago, Cannon had broken his customary silence and told him that he needed to get some better advertising. Last year, he'd finally taken his advice. He thought that would be the end of it but no, at the beginning of the fiscal year Cannon had walked in with an advertisement, dropped it on his desk and grumbled something that sounded suspiciously like '*you need whoever did this*' before walking off.

Sean had growled out a response of his own. His grumbles weren't aimed at Cannon's actions; his grumbles sprang from the fact that Cannon was once again right. As soon as he'd eyed the advertisement he'd found himself pulling out his wallet to order the product not knowing what in the hell the product was. So here he was wearing a suit, south of his border sitting in LA traffic on his way to see the guru who'd designed the ad that had caught Cannon's attention. Yeah, he was so going to start a good, old-fashioned brawl with Cannon as soon as he got back. Being that Cannon had a good four inches in height and about eighty pounds in weight on him the outcome wasn't looking too good for him, but a beating had to be better than sitting in LA traffic any day of the week.

Michael Schaefer was having a bad fucking day and that was saying something being that it was Friday. First, he was going to have to fire one of his execs. Leticia Keller had credentials out the ass including an undergrad from Harvard and a MA in Advertising from Bradley University but she was more interested in fucking the clientele than in using the knowledge that her education should have supplied her. If that wasn't bad enough he was going to have to go to Vegas and eat crow. Knowing Vegas she'd make him bow to a new low in groveling. But also knowing Vegas she'd allow him to grovel in private. In spite of Vegas' ways (*and believe me she had some ways about her*) he appreciated the fact that she showed nothing but the utmost respect while in the company of others. Now when they were alone it was a whole new ball game. She didn't think anything about making a covered dish, making an appointment with him and feeding him something that he was sure his doctor would've said 'hell no' to whilst reaming his ass up one side of Santa Monica Boulevard and down the other.

She'd warned/cussed him out about Leticia. He'd never forget it because it was the one time when Vegas had been anything other than calm, cool and collected. *'How are you going to work your way up from the mailroom doing every and any job you could talk somebody into letting you do and then allow someone like Leticia to fuck it all up for you? You need to watch your fucking back, Michael or else everything you've done to raise this firm from the ashes is going to be for nothing.'*

Dammit, he had worked his way up from mailroom clerk at ad firms all the way to being CEO of his own. It rankled that one of his employees would stoop to stealing accounts from their own colleagues, but what had really burned his ass was the fact that she'd jeopardized Cutting Edge's reputation by sleeping with clients. There'd been talk but before now he couldn't prove it. The threat of a fat sexual harassment lawsuit had prevented him from even hinting at such a thing.

When Vegas had first approached him with this, he'd thought it'd been jealousy but after getting to know Vegas, deep down he'd known that the only jealousy had been squarely in Leticia's camp. Vegas was a straight shooter – both metaphorically and literally. He couldn't help but smile recalling the first (*and last*) corporate retreat Vegas had attended. She didn't mingle; she didn't toss back cocktails; hell, she'd even turned her nose up at the high-end food being that it didn't meet her stringent requirements for cleanliness. Apparently, she'd seen one of the chefs taste something and put the spoon back into the pot and that was a categorical hell no in the book of Vegas.

Vegas had been the new kid on the block and though she didn't know how to engage in vapid small talk, she did know how to handle a high-powered double-barreled over and under shotgun. She might not be fluent

in small talk but she was unrivalled in skeet shooting. When she'd finished blowing away the clay disks, he swore he heard the theme music from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* and saw a mirage of Clint Eastwood tipping his hat at her. After that moment, Vegas may as well have worn brown leather pants, cowboy boots, spurs, a leather duster and a Stetson because she was all cowboy under the Louis Vuitton suits and pumps.

Vegas didn't have the credentials that everyone else had had but she had talent and big, brass balls. The other execs had made it apparent that they didn't want her in their sandbox. But more egregious to them was the fact that Vegas had let it be known that she didn't give a damn about their sandbox. The other execs knew that Vegas didn't have the credentials but they'd seen her portfolio and they were nervous. Hell, he was the fucking CEO and he was nervous. Vegas was damn good at her job. In fact, she was better than anyone he had on staff. If she'd had a graduate degree he would've made her a Junior CEO at hire, but she didn't have one and he couldn't justify hiring her off the street as one. Still, knowing just how talented she was, he'd made her the best offer on the market and topped it by ten percent. He'd told her that he would pay for her to go to the University of Southern California and get her MA in Public Relations, Advertising, and Applied Communication but she'd told him that she'd rather stick a hot poker in someone's eye.

A lot had changed in four years. He had more grey hair. Cutting Edge Consulting had more clients and those clients had deeper pockets. Vegas' portfolio had expanded and become even more cutting edge. The reality was that Vegas no longer needed him. She had the portfolio and the contacts to start her own firm, but she'd stayed when he knew that she'd had offers for bigger paychecks. It was time for him to anti-up. Four years

ago was a long time ago in advertising circles. Vegas might not have the credentials (*yet – he hadn't given up working on her*) but she had everything else. Today, Vegas got the position that her work entitled her to. Of course being Friday, she wouldn't know about it until Monday morning.

Calling security, building maintenance, and the IT department, he arranged for the locks and security passwords to be changed. Calling HR he arranged for her new position to be reflected with an appropriate pay raise. After seeing to that, he arranged for Mrs. Hernandez to get the now vacant corner office up to Vegas standards. Knowing she didn't like people pawing through her things, he decided to wait until Monday morning to move her furniture (*minus the dead ficus ... seriously how did one kill a freaking ficus? He'd bet good money that Vegas could kill a pine tree and they sprang up between cracks in concrete*) into her new digs. He'd give her a few hours to get used to her new position ... and then he'd drop all of Leticia's clients on her. He smiled thinking of the cussing out that he'd get.

Vegas had strolled into the offices of Cutting Edge at 7:45 am PST. It was now noon and she hadn't come close to doing a damn thing other than telling people to move stuff more to her liking. *The bad thing about it?* She didn't feel the least bit of remorse about it. Nope, she was entitled being that she was now Junior CEO and shit. The other reason that she didn't feel bad about it was because she knew Michael Schaefer and dollars to doughnuts he was about to pull some straight bullshit and smile at her in that grizzled old bastard way of his while he was doing it. Still, she did have an office twice as big as her old one and that bag of trifling named Leticia was no longer a problem she had to plan for. And, she had that big pay

raise to go with her shiny, new position. *How bad could whatever Michael was going to drop on her be?*

It had started out like any other morning, except for this one sucked. He'd donned his seven hundred dollar monkey suit complete with the hundred dollar tie. He'd navigated LA traffic without running anyone off of the road. He'd had some kind of pitiful liquid that the barista tried to pass off as coffee along with some kind of sad-looking bread thing that couldn't hold a candle to biscuits. Now he was waiting in the office for an ad exec when all he'd rather be doing is being up to his elbows in motorcycle parts. But he was in LA, land of the lunatics, wannabe lunatics, and undiagnosed lunatics and a disproportionate percentage of them worked in this building. Apparently there was some kind of rule in LA that mandated that people have at least one thing from the weirdo category and that included ad execs.

Please let me have an exec that's less than thirty percent weird, he prayed. Seeing the distinguished older gentleman who seated himself at the conference table, Sean breathed out a sigh of relief. He was expecting, well he didn't know what he was expecting but it wasn't normal. Mr. Schaefer was the very definition of normal – even if his business was not. Maybe he should've been paying attention to what the man actually said rather than engaging in an internal conversation because then he might've had time to raise some kind of objection to the man's next words. For that matter he might've heard the words that preceded them.

"Again, I'd like to thank you for trusting Cutting Edge Consultants with your project," he said as he shook his hand once more. "Vegas will be with you shortly," he said right before exiting the room.

Did he say 'Vegas?' Surely, the man was not going to entrust him with someone named Vegas. He was already nervous enough about this endeavor without having someone who was all flash be the one in charge of his well-planned, simple life. No, he was sure Mr. Normal wouldn't do that to him. He was still debating with himself when the door opened and *she* walked in.

It wasn't the fact that her name was Vegas and she was wrapped up temptingly that caused him to grit his teeth; it was the fact that she strutted in (*strutted, not walked*) humming *Pistol Grip Pump* by volume 10. He bet nine out of ten of Cutting Edge's clients wouldn't have known that, then again how many of them had attended an HBCU and had seen it performed at halftime.

And to be honest with himself it was also the fact that Ms. Vegas got to him in a man-woman way. She wasn't simple like he liked his women. She was trouble – like the city she was named for. Thankful for his years of training, he was able to look at her without drooling and he was able to smile without grinding his teeth down to grit. Vegas was trouble ... and despite all of the warning bells going off in his groin and head like slot machines in a casino he was tempted to go on the adventure that he knew she was. Fuck. He was in trouble. As soon as he got back to Discovery Bay he and Cannon were fighting.

Vegas was going to kill Michael Schaefer and then she was going to create an ad campaign around it. She'd entitle it: *'Offing your Boss with Style and Dignity.'* Right after that she'd have to call her girlfriend who'd advise her to kick off *'Match and Gasoline Day'* to cover her tracks. Of course, the whole ad campaign might point to her as the culprit but by the

time the ad hit mainstream she could already be lounging on the beach in a country that didn't have an extradition treaty with the US, drinking a fruity concoction that had a miniature, sanitized umbrella in the glass. The problem was that the countries that didn't have extradition treaties with the US tended to fall on the wrong side of suckdom. Adding insult to injury, they probably didn't have sanitation requirements for their eateries, which was going to severely curb her dining out experiences.

Dammit, she guessed that she was going to have to be the one to deal with Mr. Sean Lodi and his bike shop. It wasn't that she had anything against Mr. Lodi. It was that having Mr. Lodi dropped into her lap was going to interfere with her wooing of Dr. Perry Sebastian. That sister was the straight out shiznit. The face of clinical psychology, the well-dressed doctor was a frequent guest on television shows and an expert witness in court cases but what she wasn't was in any advertising firm's hip pocket – yet.

Vegas wanted her not because she gave two flying fucks about the field of psychology but because the sister was the African-American version of Jackie O. Dr. Sebastian was one of only a handful of women that could make her stop in her tracks and stare. Of course the other three women were herself when she was checking out her bootyliciousness in a three-way mirror (*she was leaving one slot open just in case*). She wasn't munching carpet or anything; she just admired style when she saw it and sister had it in spades. And Mr. Sean Lodi was jeopardizing her future relationship with the psychologist. Asshole.

After briefly glancing through Mr. Lodi's jacket it was clear that someone had obviously strong-armed him into coming here. Whoever it was she couldn't fault them on their taste, but she should kick their ass over

their timing. The man had a bike shop named Sean's Cycles. *Seriously, who the fuck did that?* Was he trying to suck on purpose? How could you make such bad ass bikes and have such a humdrum name? With bikes like his, the name of his shop needed to have as much swagger as his bikes did. And one thing Mr. Lodi's bikes had was swagger. A motorcycle enthusiast herself, she'd almost creamed herself when she saw the cycles in his portfolio. Sean Lodi bikes were made to showcase an ass like hers but she couldn't afford one. Well, she couldn't afford one before this morning; still, she couldn't see herself paying that much for one. And now, being that he was going to be her client and all, it'd look all shady if she asked for a discount. Asshole.

Sighing, she grabbed up Mr. Lodi's folder and walked to the conference room just in time to see Michael Schaefer exiting. Seeing her, he pivoted and walked off in the other direction. Good thing because she was tempted to shoot him the bone regardless of the fact that he was an old man and shit. Asshole. It seemed that she was knee deep in assholes today but she'd deal with it.

Walking into the room whistling the melody of *Pistol Grip Pump* by volume 10, Vegas was glad that she didn't have anything sharp or liquid in her hand because she would've done some serious damage. Sean Lodi might be throwing a wrench in her wooing plans of her favorite clinical psychologist but his fineness almost made up for it. Sean Lodi looked like Luke Wilson in the movie *Home Fries* – except with blond hair, fuller lips, about three more inches of height, and thirty more pounds of muscle. *Oh damn.*

Sean Lodi was the only man that she'd come across in the last four years that challenged Ellis Slater for the throne of fine. Too bad he was a

bastard ... and a client. Because if he wasn't, she'd have to ask him if it would be wrong if she brought some oil in a Tide container right before asking him if she could do him like some laundry ... with a double spin cycle? Yeah, that might've warranted a trip to the DMV (*her version of hell*) but yeah, whatever. Sean Lodi was the kind of man that made such things worth it so whatever. Damn, this was going to be a long campaign.

Chapter 4: An Evening to Remember

Vegas gritted her teeth. It hadn't even been seventy-two hours and she was yay close to beating the ever-loving shit out of Sean Lodi. Not even his fineness was going to save him. The man might build bikes like the ancient Egyptians built pyramids but he had zero personality if you didn't count being an asshole as personality. So far he'd answered every question with grunts of varying lengths. As far as she could tell a half grunt meant maybe; a full grunt meant no; and, a deep-throated grunt meant no fucking way in hell. Then there was that thing he did with his eyes. Cornflower blue in color, he'd look at you without really looking at you. Many a time, Vegas was tempted to ask him where he was vacationing because for certain it wasn't in the offices of Cutting Edge Consultants. And then there were the times when he didn't even pretend like he was listening to shit. He simply leaned his head back and closed his eyes effectively shutting out ... everything.

It'd been three full days and every day a little bit more of the asshole slipped out of Sean Lodi's carefully-assembled veneer of civility. Something about him reminded her of that scene in the movie *300* where the dude was walking on the wall casually eating an apple as his soldiers did something unsanitary. Sean Lodi had that kind of badassness about him. Though she didn't particularly want to see him walking atop a wall of human carcasses, she wouldn't mind seeing him in a pair of white boxer briefs walking to ... *no, no, no, no, no Vegas!* You will *NOT* fantasize about Sean Lodi. Besides he had too much asshole in him to make a relationship between them work. Not that she considered fucking him until she couldn't walk a relationship. Still, it wasn't going to happen because fucking a client was a guaranteed

way to get Michael Schaefer to lose all of the culture in his voice. She'd only ever seen him mad once and yeah, she didn't need to witness that again. Old white men trying to dance to hip hop and Michael Schaefer trying to go all '*cutting a CD for Death Row records*' were among the things that Pandora could put right the fuck back in her box.

Blowing out a breath laced with frustration and cherry-flavored Jolly Ranchers, she excused herself after getting yet another noncommittal answer from Mr. Personality. They were at an impasse. Sean Lodi wanted a course, off-the-shoulder some kind of dead animal manner of dress and a cave to drag some poor woman to and she wanted an answer. They were like two ships in the ocean. Okay, well she was like a big ass multi-million dollar yacht and he was like a piece of driftwood that was getting ready to go over a cliff because she was going to push him right over it. Excusing herself, she marched down to Mr. Schaefer's office.

"Mr. Schaefer, I know that I work wonders but miracles are beyond me. That's more in the realm of Jesus. And as nice as Jesus is, Sean Lodi would test him. I mean Jesus would win and all because he's Jesus, but still. This isn't working. This just isn't working," she wailed.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asked all nonchalant like she wasn't about to kill one of his clients in their conference room.

"What's the problem? The problem is that Sean Lodi is an asshole. There are mimes that are more responsive than he is. In fact, he'd frustrate a mime. He doesn't want to be here."

"Hmm, let me talk to him. Maybe I can get him to talk."

"I can get him to talk but you won't let me have a cattle prod," she grumbled. "Or a branding iron."

“Well I let you have a ficus tree and look what you did to it,” he said. “Tell you what? Why don’t you take the rest of the day off? Once you start trotting out your list of torture implements I know that like the Queen, you’ve had it up to here,” he said as he pointed to an area somewhere above her head.

“Oh. My. Damn. You totally just massacred Queen Latifah’s song. I’m going to have to charge you with a musical misdemeanor and I’m so going to have to block out your cable channels.”

“How would I learn about the world if you did that, my dear?” he smiled. “I had visions of us going to an open mic competition and free-styling. I’ve been learning to kick it old school. In fact, I picked up a copy of that song you always sing by Volume 10.”

Vegas froze. Turning to her boss she gave him her best ‘*I will kill you look*’ before speaking.

“Mr. Schaefer, I like you. I really do. And I like your wife and kids but if I hear one syllable of my beloved ‘*Pistol Grip Pump*’ come from your lips, I will be duty-bound to give the eulogy at your funeral. That’s not a threat. I’m just saying.”

“Enjoy your day, Vegas. I will leave your song alone - for now - and see to Mr. Lodi – also for now.”

Vegas didn’t have to be told twice. She didn’t even bother going back to the conference room. She simply ran to her office, grabbed her shit and jetted.

Michael watched Vegas skip out of the room. It was clear that his unflappable Junior CEO was thoroughly flapped. Walking into the conference room it was also clear that Sean Lodi was equally flapped.

Clearing his throat in an effort to hold back his smile he took a seat across from Mr. Lodi and set the wheels in motion.

Having sent Mr. Lodi back to Discovery Bay with his blessings, his personal cellular phone number, and a promise that he wouldn't have to return to Los Angeles, he closed the door to his office and dialed a familiar number. He didn't even wait for her to say hello before speaking.

"If this doesn't work then you are going to owe me two CEOs because Vegas is worth at least that much," he grumbled.

Corinna Parkinson's throaty laughter filled his eardrums. "When has it not worked? I had hot flashes simply walking past the room they occupied. Now stop complaining and tell me when I can expect a donation for the battered women's shelter," she asked (translation: demanded).

Sean couldn't do it. He just couldn't pretend more than two things at once. He was already pretending that he could do civility and he was pretending that he was somewhere else. Trying to pretend that he didn't want Vegas on top of all that was just too much. He knew that Vegas was frustrated with him but he could either hold himself tightly in check and grunt out responses as best he could around his hard cock or he could do what he really wanted. And what he really wanted was to walk up behind her and wrap all 6'2" and 235 pounds of rock hard Bama boy around Ms. Vegas. He wanted to palm her womanly hips in his hands and grind his cock into her. He wanted to palm the softness of her breasts as he wrapped himself tighter around her. He wanted her to feel him, feel what she did to him, feel how he wanted to love her. Even knowing how African-American women felt about their hair, he wanted to wind her hair around his fist and tip her head back so that he could ravish her mouth. She might cuss him

out for messing her hair but her cusses would soon turn to moans as he worked her body over with his lips, his tongue, and his caresses.

When they were both weak from their frantic exploration, he wanted to put her in his lap and engage in a good, old-fashioned necking session. Hell, who was he kidding? Necking didn't have a damn thing to do with what he wanted to do with Ms. Vegas. He wanted to lift her tailored skirt and thrust his hands in her panties and feel that ass that beckoned him like a lighthouse beckons weary sailors. An ass man, Vegas more than satisfied his fantasies. Hell, she had the kind of body that satisfied ass men, breast men, and leg men. Vegas made him feel gluttonous and he knew that the only meal that would satisfy his hunger was named Vegas.

His fantasy was interrupted by the door opening. Stealing himself, he kept his eyes closed and his lower body firmly under the large conference table. Normally a jean man, he knew better than to try and wear his jeans when Vegas was anywhere in the vicinity. His cock would hate him for such a thing. As it was, he wore loose dress pants and his cock still hated him.

He was startled out of his thoughts by the voice of ... Mr. Normal.

"Mr. Lodi," he began.

That made his cock go soft.

"Yes, Mr. Schaefer?" he answered. He wasn't sure what Mr. Schaefer was about to say but he steeled himself for the worst.

"I've sent Vegas home and I'm going to do the same for you. Go home, not back to your hotel, but to Discovery Bay. Vegas will ..."

Sean knew that Mr. Schaefer was still talking but he'd honestly stopped listening after he heard the word home. Standing abruptly and shaking Mr. Normal's hand, he almost knocked the door off the hinges in his haste to quit the room. Having already paid Cutting Edge, he wasn't

worried about them not delivering. He wasn't worried that he hadn't slept a wink since coming to LA and had a 345 mile trek back home. He was only worried that he wouldn't be able to get there fast enough. He needed to sleep in his own bed where he could spend all night dreaming of all of the ways he'd make love to Vegas.

Vegas decided that her not shanking Sean Lodi warranted a massage. Heading over to her gym (*don't get it twisted she was a member but only so she could get massages at discounted rates*). An hour later she was laying face down enjoying the relaxing sounds of music that was usually featured in karate films. The masseuse had worked out every bit of tension in her shoulders and back. And now she was enjoying the cool down portion of her massage.

The calm that saturated the room allowed her mind to wander before she could tell it to come back. And wouldn't you know that it wandered right over to Sean Lodi. She deserved some kind of reward for refraining from jumping on him. Sean might call Northern Cali home but he was a Bama boy through and through. He still had faint traces of an accent. Unfortunately, he had none of that famous southern charm. Of course her pussy didn't give two cents about Sean Lodi's charm. It only cared about the hard body he hid under his white short-sleeved dress shirts and dark, cuffed dress pants.

Nothing he wore could hide how in shape he was. Whatever he did, he did it well because he wasn't built like any motorcycle mechanics she'd ever seen. Biting back a moan she pondered what she would've done to Sean Lodi under different circumstances. She would've beat that fine man to the ground and rode him like a horse in the Kentucky Derby and then to

horse-racing prominence. Sean Lodi had the kind of body that made her glad to be a woman. He had the kind of lips that made her want to drink from him. He had the kind of demeanor that made her want to kick his ass. Even with all that he did something to her. Dammit.

Vegas had just climbed into her car when she saw the text: *Dinner. My house. Hurry up. You bring the dinner. I'll make the coffee.* Blowing out a breath, she swung her car over to In-N-Out to pick up food. Only Basil would be so fucking brazen as to invite her to dinner and demand that she bring the dinner.

As always, whenever she finished a meal from In-N-Out, she needed a nap and a good movie. Even though it was evening she'd grab a nap and then be up until the wee hours of the morning as was her custom. She didn't need much sleep. Having already done the dishes, she was sitting beside him on the leather sectional watching *You Don't Mess with the Zohan*. Being that the sectional was so big she could've sat any number of places but it was her mission in life to annoy Basil.

Just as she suspected Basil raised an imperial brow at her but being that he'd lost this particular argument more than once, he simply gave her another disgusted look before turning back to the television although he did toss her a throw pillow.

"You're mean to me," she pouted.

"Yet you keep coming over," he said.

"You invited me," she said.

"It's my little way of keeping the neighborhood safe. If you're over here then you're not destroying someone's property in the name of the HOA."

"That was so uncalled for," she said.

"And yet I enjoyed every moment of it. Mwah ha ha," he chuckled.

"Yet as much as you act like you hate me you have me over enough that everyone in the neighborhood thinks you're my boyfriend."

"They know that you can't handle me," he quipped.

"Ha! Delusional is what you are."

"Then tell me why you aren't my girlfriend then, smarty pants."

"That whole criminal trespassing thing," she snapped.

"I can't believe that you still haven't let that go."

"Oh, believe, buddy, believe."

"It's old news ... well at least it would be if I didn't bring it up every single chance that I got. Anyway, I dropped the charges. It's not like you actually spent the night in County or anything."

"You only dropped the charges after I was already all the way at the police station. Do you realize what happened to me?"

"Yes, because you remind me like every single day. I believe that it's part of your daily routine right up there with brushing your teeth and showering."

Vegas ignored him as she continued her rant. "Besides having to decontaminate myself, I had to toss out my favoritest Ms. Vicky's jogging suit. For that you must suffer."

"I did. Remember my three broken ribs?"

"Yeah, but that didn't have anything to do with me. That was karma."

"It wasn't karma; it was your brother."

"Really? I'm going to give him the biggest hug when I see him next," she smiled.

Though she made light of it she wondered why Basil had been so good about the whole thing. Finally, she asked him. “How come you’re not mad at me?”

“Because you’re my little sister and as you pointed out there was a law somewhere that said that big brothers can’t stay mad at their little sisters. Plus, I already tried it and you kept coming over.”

“I’m going to need a room in your house for perpetuity.”

“What if I get a wife?”

“Well then she will have already been pre-approved by me thus she will like me and want me to have a room in her house.”

“What happens when you get a boyfriend?”

“He can just shut the hell up.”

“I don’t think any man that you allow the privilege of being your boyfriend will simply shut the hell up when he finds out that you have your own room in the home of a drop dead gorgeous male such as myself,” he said.

“Will too.”

“How much are we betting?”

“You put my Christmas lights up every year from now on when I win.”

“And if you lose?” he asked.

“Not going to happen but if such a thing did occur, the same prize. You put my Christmas lights up every year.”

“Why can’t your man do that?”

“Because I would’ve worn him out too bad to do more than get on his back and let me have my way with him some more.”

“Thanks for the visual. I think I just threw up a little bit.”

Basil was a good man. He was so wrong about pretty much everything but he was still a good man. And soon, she was going to set him up with Nautica. Nautica needed a man like Basil and Basil needed a woman like Nautica. And the ironic thing was that neither of them thought that they needed anyone at all.

Chapter 5: Oil and Water Mix

Now that Mr. Sean Lodi was back in the woods where he belonged she could get back to wooing Dr. Sebastian. Though she missed Sean's fineness, his absence gave her time to kick *Operation: the Black Jackie O* into action. The doctor was still reluctant but she was wearing her down with her calls. Well that or giving her plenty of ammunition for a TRO. The good doctor was coming from court today and she'd be right there to meet her.

Perry had had a rough day at court. Having some expertise in Borderline Personality Disorder wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. All she wanted to do was get a bite to eat and perhaps catch a sale (*if she could fit one in*) as a chaser before heading home and sleeping all weekend. That was her plan but in the brief moment that it took for her to adjust her fly Proenza Schouler short trench jacket and brush a wrinkle out of the matching oxford pencil skirt, Vegas Knightsen had materialized beside her. Vegas had been wooing her for months and for months she'd been politely refusing. She was about to form her lips to refuse her but Vegas beat her to the draw and got her words in quicker than she could get in her refusal.

"Dr. Sebastian, I'd love to take you to lunch to talk ... oh my damn is that a Marc Jacobs quilted Stam handbag?" she said.

Vegas Knightsen didn't just say it; she whispered it and her eyes glazed over just the tiniest bit. Perry couldn't help it. She smiled and before she could change her mind she said yes to lunch. She was hungry and besides spending time in the presence of someone who had the same reverence for her handbag as she did could only lead to good things.

Having secured Dr. Sebastian's strong maybe, Vegas left lunch feeling good. Her stomach was full, her hair looked great, and the sun was shining. She smiled all the way back to her office. And ten seconds after she got behind the desk, Mr. Schaefer came in and ruined her good mood.

Vegas slammed her last suitcase shut, rolled the lock and promptly kicked it down the loft instead of carrying it. Fuck it, it was Samsonite. It was made for abuse. She could so not fucking believe that she had to go all the fucking way to Discovery Bay because Sean Lodi was too pussy to come to LA. Why Mr. Schaefer simply couldn't mail him the papers she still didn't get. Why she had to take Sean Lodi to dinner when he was a complete asshole, she got but didn't appreciate. Why her fucking ass acted like it didn't want to fit in her black skirt she didn't know but if that skirt knew what was good for it, it'd cooperate before it began a new life recycled into something far less cool than material that encased her glorious ass.

Half an hour later she was on I-5 North to the breathtaking 94505 - all 8.08 square miles of it. Discovery Bay was one of those postcard towns with median house values hovering a little above eight hundred thousand dollars. One would expect those prices for any place that had access to the entirety of the California Delta, Suisan Bay, San Francisco Bay, San Pablo Bay and the Pacific Ocean. It was a water lover's wet dream. It was a place that she would've loved visiting under different circumstances.

Along with her packet of papers for Mr. Lodi to sign, she was issued a shiny, new company credit card and instructions to take Mr. Lodi to dinner. Being that she had to drive almost four hundred fucking miles to eat, she was going to make fucking sure that Mr. Lodi did not enjoy his meal although she had every intention of enjoying hers. Knowing how basic his

tastes ran, she'd selected a Persian restaurant in the nearby city of Antioch ... that had belly dancing. She loved Persian and the restaurant scored high in the Vegas Cleanliness of Eateries inspection and it was rated highly by diners but she was sure that Sean would hate every second of it. Yeah, he deserved it for being an asshole.

"Some distinguished-sounding old guy called," Cannon said in passing.

Sean tensed. His hesitation wasn't due to the half-assed message Cannon had just passed on but due to the thought of Cannon actually answering the phone. Cannon might be a fucking magician when it came to bikes but not so much when it came to human interaction. The man had one mood and that was fucking dangerous.

Cannon actually had flip cards with answers on them. Okay, there were only three responses: one was a photo of his extended middle finger; another featured the saying '*Oh hell naw*' in all caps and bold font; and, the last was an instruction to anyone who dared ask him too many questions (*and too many questions according to Cannon was one*). That sign said '*Ask the boss.*' Yeah, Cannon was a real people person, which is why they got along like biscuits and gravy.

"I thought we agreed that you'd stay away from anything involving people."

"And I would've if the damn phone had ever quit ringing, but it didn't so I answered it after the thirtieth ring," Cannon threw back in that rough-hewn voice of his. Cannon had a voice that reminded him of bourbon and bar fights.

“Politely?” Sean asked knowing good and damn well that the answer was a categorical hell no.

“Being such a ray of fucking sunshine yourself, Sean I don’t believe that you’re in any position to judge my interaction with humans,” Cannon came back.

He knew he sounded surly but dammit he was surly and being that it was his shop he could be as big a bastard as he wanted. Besides Cannon could take it. *Cannon can also take you his body reminded him.* Wincing, he stretched his sore muscles. He had indeed picked a fight with Cannon when he returned home and Cannon had indeed given him a good workout. In reality, Cannon gave him more of a workout than he actually wanted. The man had absolutely zero fucking respect for the fact that he was his boss. Cannon treated him like he did anyone else. Cannon’s normal way of interacting with people was to ignore them ... unless they fucked with him and when that happened there was going to be an asswhipping involved. In the few years that Cannon had been his apprentice, he’d only had to hand out one asswhipping and the bikers and hoodlums that had witnessed it still talked about that in hushed tones.

“I had that coming,” he admitted. “Was there anything else to the message or was that it?”

Cannon grunted. “Just like that body punch I gave you. Said something about Vegas coming here whatever the hell that means.”

Despite Cannon’s mangled message, Sean got the gist of it. His heart stuttered at Cannon’s casual words. Sean was thankful that Cannon waited to tell him the news when he was safely away from sharp objects and heavy bikes otherwise he might’ve done damage to himself or one of his beloved bikes. *Vegas was coming here?! When? She was coming here? And how*

the hell dare Cannon act so fucking blasé about the fact that she was coming? Of course he had no idea how he felt about Vegas. For that matter he didn't even know that Vegas was more than a city that had too many lights, too many weirdos, and too much too much. Then again Vegas the woman came dangerously close to having too much too much. Damn, just thinking her name had his cock hard.

Knowing that Cannon wouldn't have any additional information other than what he'd just relayed Sean picked up the phone and dialed Cutting Edge Consultants. He didn't need to look up the number; he'd long memorized it and in his dreams he actually dialed the last number and asked for the woman who had been haunting his dreams at night.

In only a few moments he was connected with Mr. Schaefer. Talking with Schaefer confirmed what Cannon had told him. Vegas was coming here ... today. According to Schaefer, she'd got on the road early this morning. It usually took around six hours to get here from LA but considering the horrific state of LA traffic he'd put it closer to seven and a half. Then considering Vegas' personality he hedged his bets and estimated she'd get here under six hours, which meant that she'd be here before he knew it. Pulling himself out of the chair he hopped in motion. He had to get his shop together then he needed to get his house together and finally he needed to get himself together ... not that he was trying to impress her or anything.

Before he did that he needed to get rid of his brothers – hard to do when they lived with you. Sharing a home with his three knucklehead brothers had seemed like a good idea twelve years ago ... then again, so had bunk beds (*when they were five*). They'd been pooling their resources and buying homes together from the moment they'd first got real jobs. The

Discovery Bay property was the feather in their cap but right now he wasn't thinking of what a find the five-bedroom, four and a half bath house had been. Right now he was thinking that his brothers had better make themselves scarce.

Easygoing on a good day and fucking nuts the other days, Rodeo, Tracy, and Byron would naturally gravitate towards the adventure that was Vegas. Being the antithesis of flash he didn't want them in the vicinity of Vegas. If any Lodi male was going to gravitate towards Vegas, it was going to be him.

Vegas parked her car at the Renaissance Clubsport Walnut Creek Hotel four hours and forty-five minutes after pulling out of her driveway. Exiting the car she couldn't help but throw a fist in the air and execute a little victory dance at her time. She had to stop herself from climbing the façade of the hotel in celebration of her victory. Two things stopped her: First, she didn't have the proper shoes on for such a climb and second, there was the fact that the hotel staff might not get the significance of her act being that it was about 1800 miles from the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. She doubted they'd have the same appreciation for the Brickyard that she did.

Ah, but she didn't select the hotel for their racing knowledge. She selected it for its amenities. About twenty miles outside of Discovery Bay, the four-star hotel had a shitload of amenities but the one that drew her in was the onsite beauty salon. Yeah, she had to be at her most bootylicious before descending upon Mr. Sean Lodi. She also had to be hitting on all cylinders if she was going to retain the upper hand in their silent battle of wills, which is why she was going to nap as soon as her head hit the pillow.

It was a good thing she was already paid up being that check-in wasn't until three p.m. and it wasn't even ten a.m. yet. A good nap would give both her and Sean time to prepare.

A stickler for order she knew that Sean was probably shitting a brick at the wrench in his routine. Being that she'd only discovered yesterday evening that she was scheduled to trek to Discovery Bay to see him, she'd bet dollars to doughnuts that he'd just discovered it himself. She might loathe the fine ass Sean Lodi but it was fucking rude to simply show up at someone's crib and do them in. And she definitely planned to do him ... in that is.

Having set some kind of record for going over his shop and his home with a fine tooth comb and then himself, Sean grew increasingly agitated with every moment that passed without Vegas pulling into his shop. What if she didn't know to come to his shop in East Contra Costa rather than going to his home in Discovery Bay? What if she was lost? What if she'd incited some kind of riot and was battling her way out of some kind of brawl? What if she was hurt? Dammit. Where the hell was she?

It was already noon and he'd not heard from her. To make matters worse his brothers seemed to have nothing better to do than hover around him like bad news. Having already threatened to end them, nothing short of actually killing them would get them to budge. And of course if he killed his brothers his mother would have a thing or ten million to say about that – even as she busted him out of prison. For some reason Katie and Thomas Lodi were attached to their other three sons despite all of the hell that they'd raised.

Disgusted with life in general, he dusted off the counter for what had to be the tenth time. A grunt from Cannon caused him to cease his fussing and go back to his office. If he wasn't mistaken Cannon had a smile on his face. Okay, it wasn't a smile but a smirk but being that Cannon wore it – same thing. The only time he'd truly seen the man smile was when he was fucking someone up. And that time Cannon had completed his first project. The bike had been stunning and as a man who created stunning bikes for a living that was really saying something. Cannon's creation could have garnered him fifty K no problem but instead of taking up the parade of people who'd begged, pleaded and offered their first born for that bike, he'd packed it up and had it delivered to one Ms. Ricky Murphy-Holden in Brickey, Colorado. Lucky woman. Personally, he didn't know any woman worth a bike like that but hey, to each his own. *Speaking of women where the hell was Vegas?*

Vegas pulled up at the home of Sean 'Asshole' Lodi at exactly two p.m. It was a good thing that she'd called before coming being that he closed up shop early on Fridays. Just as she'd suspected, he'd been a complete asshole over the phone even as he gave her directions to his house. And despite having a state-of-the art GPA system she'd needed those directions.

Sean's house was beautiful. Located on the corner lot of a secluded bay, the two story structure looked like something straight off of Home and Garden Television. Wow. Without looking she just knew that there was a boat in the slip out back, a grill on the redwood deck, and a plasma in the living room. If she lived here, she'd be hard-pressed to leave. No wonder Sean had been pissed pretty much the entire time he'd been in LA. Hell,

she loved LA and right now she was pissed that she was going to have to go back.

Getting out of her car, she plastered a smile on her face and walked in the direction of the front door trying not to gawk at the beauty of her surroundings. She was just about to put her foot on the bottom stair when the door burst open and spit out Sean Lodi and three Sean look-alikes. They were unmistakably brothers and they were all fine. Damn, their momma needed to be standing on the top tier of an Olympic medal stand for making hot ass sons. She was about to introduce herself when Sean kicked his assholishness into overdrive and shot his brother's a look. He still looked the same to her but whatever he'd communicated they'd taken that shit to heart and nodded their heads respectfully at her before moving out of his way.

"Hello, Ms. Knightsen," Sean drawled.

"Hello, Mr. Lodi. I have papers for you to sign but..." she began only to be cut off by him.

"Will you still be the exec assigned to my case?"

Did this asshole just interrupt her? And then have the nerve to ask if she'd still be working with him? Oh, no he didn't.

"Yes, I will Mr. Lodi. Is there a problem with that?"

"I'm just asking," he replied.

"Knowing how little you speak, you must 'just be asking' for a particular reason. What is it?" she asked.

"It just seems to be taking a long time is all," he said.

Did this motherfucker. Oh yes, he did. The asshole. Vegas caught herself before she did something bad. She knew that she was close to pulling off something because she'd switched from calling him an asshole to

calling him a motherfucker mid-tirade. She tried to do that whole deep-breathing thing in an effort to calm down but Sean's lips kept moving which meant that he was still talking, which meant that he was still pissing her off.

Rodeo, Tracy and Byron Lodi simply looked at their brother Sean and laughed their asses off like the jokesters they were. Okay, maybe *'laughed their asses off'* wasn't the correct phrase being that there wasn't even a hint of mirth on their faces. All of them wanted to laugh but none of them felt like spending the next half hour brawling with Sean. Not that they couldn't take him if they wanted to; they just didn't want to. What they wanted was to watch the fireworks that were sure to follow.

Fireworks had to follow. Sean was a grouchy and irritating bastard on his best day. On his worst day, Sean was borderline asshole. And today was not his best day.

Though they didn't know the woman who had the misfortune to be assigned their brother as a client; they knew the sign of anger. The lovely Ms. Vegas Knightsen was as mad (*and getting madder by the second*) as she was lovely. As lovely as she was however, the mad was on the cusp of overtaking her beauty.

Rodeo wished he had telepathy because he wanted to know if Tracy and Byron were seeing what he was – an epic battle in the making. Sean had a hell a temper and as evidenced by the stubborn set of his jaw and the chill in his eyes, it was close to the surface. Still, by the way Vegas was clenching her fists and exhaling through her nose, he'd bet good money that she was going to pull the trigger on her temper first.

Looking over at his two brothers he held up a c-note and mouthed her name. Tracy nodded in acceptance of the offer but Byron shook his head

and pointed at Sean. Fool, just like their older brother. He'd take that bet and his money he thought, as he took a swig of his Arizona tea and made himself comfortable against the cab of his truck totally not giving a damn how his outright eavesdropping appeared.

Hearing the tail-end of her conversation, he smiled around his drink. This was going to be so good.

"And not only do you move slow for no damn reason, you're doing a half ass job."

"It's a half ass job because I'm attempting to be thorough? Just because my normal way of going about things is methodical rather than '*by the seat of my pants*' - and by the way you have a lot in your pants - doesn't mean that I'm doing a half ass job," Sean said.

Oh shit. Sean was all kinds of assholes but Rodeo never thought he'd say something like that especially to a woman who looked like she wanted nothing more in life than to fucking kill him. Shaking his head, he paused his mental conversation and cocked his ear back to the conversation.

"You know what? A - I do have a lot in my pants not that it's any of your business and b - if you don't keep your smart ass comments inside of your head, I'm going to beat your ass like a piñata on *Cinco de Mayo* in Santa Ana," she seethed.

And that's the comment that caused him to lose his tight control and let loose great peels of laughter. Obviously little momma had made these kinds of threats before because she was good - real good. If Sean didn't snap her up, he was going to ... just for the pure pleasure of having her around to bust Sean's chops.

"You going to just stand there and eavesdrop," Sean turned to him and asked all annoyed like.

“Being that I’m not making a secret of my listening to you love birds argue; it’s not technically eavesdropping, bro.”

He was sure that Sean had something smartass to say in return but Vegas beat him to it.

“If y’all don’t do something with yourselves I’m going to run y’all lost and make you want to stay there. I’m trying to be kind but you know what my non-work persona is telling me that killing folks with kindness is such bullshit and that it would be better to kill them with a quick jab to the windpipe and a roundhouse to the skull. This here is between your brother and me. If he needs your help, I’ll make sure that he has enough air left in his lungs to yell for you.”

And then she turned her back on them, told their brother to get his fucking ass in the car, and crawled her lovely self into her vehicle.

Vegas could not believe this shit. First, she had to deal with Sean Lodi and then his crazy ass brothers. Apparently, asshole along with fuh-ine ran strong in their blood. If beating the shit out of her client wouldn’t have constituted some kind of ethics violation, she would’ve pumped off a few front snap kicks right to his groin. Sean Lodi might’ve had a sound business, a beautiful city and a tight ass but he was working a sister’s last nerve right now. She couldn’t believe that the man didn’t understand that ‘*Sean’s Bikes*’ might’ve been a logical name but not a memorable name. While his shop didn’t need more bling its name did. Sean was the most stubborn man alive and his goofy – and fine – brothers so weren’t helping the situation. She didn’t say anything to them when they were skulking about – not that leaning against the cab of the flat bed pickup knocking back soda was exactly skulking about – because they’d been skulking

quietly. But then the next finest brother had to go and speak. *Oh, no he didn't just interrupt her when she was on a roll?*

Yes, he did her inner bitch-rista replied. NB: A barista serves you drinks; a bitch-rista serves you attitude and right now her inner bitch-rista was serving them up like it was happy hour.

She could let a lot of things go but not that one. Holding up her finger at Sean to beg pardon for the interruption of his getting told, she turned to the trio of younger Lodi males and went old school NWA on them. She knew they were younger without even having to ask. Only younger brothers would let Sean get away with being an asshole for this long. Older brothers would've bitch-slapped that shit out of him a long time ago. Saying her piece she returned her attention to Sean before sliding into her jet black Acura TL. Well, she attempted to get in. Before she'd done more than open her door, Sean had rounded the car and was using his bulk to hold her in place ... and grinding his cock into her back. Oh damn, he felt so good.

"Let's take my truck instead," he drawled in that *'I have spoken'* voice.

"What's wrong with my car?" she asked. It wasn't that she wouldn't enjoy riding shotgun but she'd seen movies and getting into a fine white guy's expensive ride was horror movie formula number five.

"Nothing is wrong with it if you're a five-foot something woman," he drawled.

"You can put the seat back," she snapped.

"I could and you could also leave me stranded in the mountains."

He had a point. She could, not that she would but he was probably going to tempt her to do such a thing. "And if I get into your truck you could leave me," she returned.

“If our brother does such a stupid thing, I’d be more than willing to come and fetch you,” one of his brothers threw out.

“Yeah, it’d be my pleasure to come rescue you ma’am,” another said.

“Hell, it’d be my pleasure simply to come,” the last one said.

In spite of their suggestive words, Vegas couldn’t help but smile. Sean might be an uptight hater but his brothers wouldn’t know how to be uptight if you gave them a tutorial on it. Hell, Sean was better than any tutorial and they’d still turned out all easygoing and laid back. She was lost in her own thoughts until Sean’s rough words pulled her back out.

“And it’d be my pleasure to go toe-to-toe. Now get lost.”

“We didn’t know you were going to be all possessive, Sean.”

“I’m not being possessive, Rodeo. I’m being polite. In a few more seconds that politeness is going to go by the wayside as will your ability to stand upright.”

“Not that I’m scared of you; I’ve just got better ways to spend a Friday night,” Rodeo said. Throwing one last look at her, he added. “If you get the urge to leave him at the restaurant by himself you call me. I’d love to spend an evening with you, Vegas.”

“How do you know that I wouldn’t leave you too?”

“I don’t, but that’s a gamble I’m willing to take,” he smiled as he looked her over.

Before she could respond, Sean had her hand in his and was marching her over to his Hummer H2 SUT and setting her inside. *Did he just lift her into the seat and buckle her in like she was three? Yes, he did her pussy responded. And girl, if he can lift you like that out here, think what he can do to you in the bedroom. Shut up, you whore,* she told her pussy before turning to Sean Lodi.

“Not that I don’t appreciate being carried and all, but I need my purse and I need to lock my car.”

“Like I’d let a woman pay for my meal,” he mumbled.

“I’m not paying; Cutting Edge Consulting is paying. I do have an expense account.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m paying.”

“Whatever, but I still need to lock my ride.”

“Like anyone is stupid enough to come on Lodi property and violate it.”

“Okay fine, I’ll give you that but I still need my purse, Sean.”

Though he sighed, he went back and got her black leather bag.

Vegas tried not to look too obvious that she was checking out her surroundings but even if Sean did catch her paranoia she could always tell him she was taking in the sights. And she was. If Sean Lodi thought that he was going to kill her and bury her in a shallow ditch on the side of the road or drop her into one of the many bodies of waters that saturated the area he had another think coming. A- she wasn’t getting her weave dirty for any fucking body so trying to put her in any kind of shallow grave was out. And b- while she might not be on the Olympic swim team anytime soon, she could swim her ass off. He probably didn’t suspect that being that she was black.

“Plotting to kill me?” his orgasm-inducing voice cut through her thoughts.

“Already did that before I arrived. I’m just taking in the scenery just in case you’re over there plotting to kill me.”

“Oh, I can think of much better things to do than kill you,” he said.

Well, he’d muttered it but she still heard it (*and so did her pussy who was now doing calisthenics in preparation for taking Mr. Sean Lodi up on his intimation*). She had supersonic hearing thanks to years of eavesdropping. It was kind of like a super power now. All she needed was a cape and some rocking ass boots and she could stand right beside the Man of Steel. DC Comics probably wouldn’t allow that being that her fineness would make the Man of Steel look all bad.

Being in the truck with Sean allowed his scent to surround her. Damn, he smelled good. *Yeah, he does her pussy said. And he’d smell even better on his back under us.* Crossing her legs in an attempt to quell her desire, she thought about the food she was going to indulge in. Hoshang's was a top notch restaurant. Their customers had rated them five out of fives across the board - food, sanitation, and ambiance. Regardless of its high marks she knew that it was going to be somewhat over the top for someone like Sean.

Her suspicions proved to be correct. The restaurant was beautiful. Its lighting was adjusted to set the mood. Decorated in rich colors, ornate lighting fixtures and centerpieces adorned the ceilings, walls, and tables bringing out the dark, cherry wood. Heavy, gilded draperies separated the rooms and matching pillows decorated the low chairs. Persian music played in the background and belly dancers swirled about the room. All of it combined to create an erotic ambiance.

And then there was the food. There were rice dishes galore, kabobs, and of course onions. Brought out on opulent platters Vegas couldn’t help but feel hungry so much so that when the waiter came to take their orders she simply dived into the menu rattling off stuff like she was calling out

dances for a drunken uncle at a family reunion. When she finally glanced up and remembered that Sean was there she had to turn her head to hide her smile. Sean looked like she did when she was forced to sit next to strangers. Of course, she didn't have to have the look Sean did being that she wasn't sitting next to strangers. She was sitting next to Sean and he was strange but at least he didn't look like he was on a day pass from hell.

Sean had lived all of his thirty-four years without ever having eaten at a Persian restaurant and he could've happily gone to the great bike shop in the sky without that experience, that was before he met Vegas '*everything's an adventure*' Knightsen. While he didn't appreciate strange people in his proximity, he had to admit the food was delicious. Or maybe it was the way that Vegas ate that it made it delicious. Vegas was one of those kinds of people that wanted people to enjoy whatever she was doing as much as she was enjoying doing it.

That's how he found himself sharing food with her (*with a clean fork of course, before either of them started eating out of their plates*). He couldn't pronounce half of what she'd ordered but his stomach was too busy cheering to give a damn what it was and his eyes were too busy watching Vegas eat to pay attention to what he was shoveling in his mouth. His cock of course was busy goading him to shove Vegas in his mouth right before shoving it into Vegas.

Vegas was so heavy on his mind that he didn't even pay attention to the scantily-clad belly dancers that circled the restaurant. That is, he didn't pay attention to them until one got Vegas to get up and have a go at it. Of course, Vegas being Vegas had a go at it and with a body like hers he'd bet that every pair of male eyes in the vicinity locked in her. He was too riveted

to take his eyes off of her to confirm his suspicions though. Vegas under normal circumstances felled him; Vegas swaying seductively to erotic music damn near killed him.

He was jealous of the scarf that the belly dancer had wrapped around Vegas' hips. He was jealous of the melody that coerced her to move her hips like she did. He wanted to be the only thing wrapped around her. He wanted to be the only thing that made her sway her hips. He wanted to be the only male drinking in her beauty.

If his cock hadn't been so damn hard he would've joined her. He would've taken her softer, smaller hands in his and placed them on his throbbing cock. He would've lowered his lips to hers and leisurely sipped from her. He would've taken her hips in his hands and dragged her to him fitting them together like puzzle pieces. He would've lowered her on the vibrant pillows and slowly bared her cocoa-colored skin in time to the music. He would've made her his under the candlelight that lit the restaurant. He would've found his way into her heart by the desire that lit his eyes.

He would've done all of that if they'd been alone. He would've done more than that if he hadn't felt his throat itching. His throat had itched like that once before – when he was seven and had discovered that he was allergic to shellfish. Signaling the waiter (*whose eyes were glued to his woman*) he quickly paid the bill. Before he could change his mind, he picked Vegas up and tossed her over his shoulder and walked out to his Hummer ignoring the claps that followed him and Vegas' fists. He'd apologize later. Right now he needed to get to the ER.

Vegas was going to beat the shit out of Sean Lodi. There was nothing he could do to change her mind. Nope, no way, nuh huh. He had this beat down coming. He'd practically been begging for it and as soon as he put her down she was going to oblige him. The nerve of him interrupting her groove and slinging her over his massive shoulder like he was going to take her somewhere and ravish her. The nerve of him to get her worked up like that.

Beating her fists against his back didn't seem to be slowing him down in the least. She was about to redouble her attack on him when she realized that he'd taken her to the wrong side of the truck. Before she could ask the first what, where, or why, he handed her the keys and croaked out two words.

"Emergency room."

Emergency room. Oh shit. Did she beat him that hard? Deciding to save her questions for later (*and her glee at getting a go at driving his Hummer*) she jumped in the truck, gunned the engine and peeled out of the parking lot like she was coming around the final turn in Daytona. Being all paranoid and shit from the many crime shows she watched, she didn't need to ask where the hospital was because she already knew. Checking to make sure that he had on his seat belt she turned on the flashers and kicked that bad boy into the triple digits.

Vegas paced the waiting room of Kaiser Permanente Antioch Medical Center. Any other time she'd stop and admire such architecture, she'd ooh and ahh over the technology that seemed to be GP at the facility, and she'd be all smiles at the care that the staff demonstrated but that was when she wasn't worried that someone who was last seen in her company might die.

Dammit, if she was going to go to federal prison than she should've at least gotten to fuck Sean Lodi.

She pointedly ignored the guilt that coursed through her. Yeah, okay so maybe if she hadn't been intent on making him suffer she would've taken him to a steak house like she did the rest of her clients. But dammit, she wasn't tempted to use a steak knife on her other clients. *Yeah, and you've never wanted to fuck another client either. Kind of makes you a bit of a hypocrite, doesn't it? Oh how our pride builds us up to be holier than we really are and when circumstance reveals that we aren't as holy as we want to believe, anything that we deem worse than us makes us feel better about ourselves, her conscience threw in. Oh shut up,* she told her conscience. She did not need to be berated with John Calvin's theology regardless of how right or wrong it was. She was not Leticia Keller and John Calvin's *Institutes of Christian Religion* was not her Holy Book.

Her self-assessment and her pacing were interrupted by someone calling her name.

"Vegas?" Vegas?"

Turning, she swiftly ran up to the doctor. "Is Sean okay," she asked with tears filling her eyes.

"He's fine, Mrs. Lodi. Probably an allergic reaction to something in the food. We're going to watch him a little bit longer before letting you take him home. Why don't you come on back with me?"

Vegas was too relieved to correct the doctor. She was simply glad that Sean was okay because when he got better she was kicking his ass for scaring her so bad. Catching sight of her reflection in the glass, she emitted a small shriek.

“Oh, damn. I look like hell,” she cried. Okay, she didn’t really look like hell, but she looked less than her best which in her book amounted to the same thing.

“He won’t care how you look. He’s been calling your name non-stop. Now come on,” the doctor coaxed.

Sean woke with a start. He wasn’t sure what exactly had woken him whether it was the sore throat or his hard cock. Feeling something bump him he opened his eyes and immediately received an answer to his question. Vegas had woken him. Sprawled over more than her fair share of the too-small hospital bed, she was demanding more space. He smiled. Even in her sleep she was bossy. Grabbing the cover he arranged it around them both.

Wrapping his arms tighter around her, he couldn’t help but smile when she automatically tightened her arms around him. Rubbing her back, he thought about his day. His first date with Vegas had played out like an *I Love Lucy* episode. Not only had she cussed him out, threatened him with death, and told him that she didn’t trust him, she’d done untold damage to his truck by going from zero to maximum speed in less than five seconds, and it’d ended with him in the hospital.

His musings were interrupted by the doctor entering the room. He was prepared to defend Vegas’ presence when the doctor smiled.

“She’s had a rough day,” the doctor said.

Figures the doctor would take her side when he was the one admitted. Looking down at the beauty in his arms, he’d take her side too.

“Yeah, she has,” he admitted.

“You’re looking better and as soon as your wife wakes up, you’re free to go.”

Wife?! His brain screamed. *Yeah, wife*, his heart said. He’d sort out his body parts after he got some rest. Right now he was simply content to hold Vegas and not be worried that she was going to maim him. It’d been a long day ... but at least it’d ended with he and Vegas in bed.

Chapter 6: Taking it on the Road

After the Persian food fiasco, Vegas decided to be a little nicer to Sean – but just a little bit. Every time she tried to not fuck him up (*or fuck him full stop*) he went and did something that made her want to pull his spleen out. The only thing that stopped her was the vision of how bad he'd looked when she'd burned half the rubber off of his tires when she'd screeched to a halt in front of the ER entrance. Working on his ad campaign she figured out what it was. They were too much alike. Don't get it twisted. She wasn't an asshole like Sean. The thing is they were both competitive ... and set in their ways. Of course, her ways were right and his were full of shit but still, they were set in their ways.

Just the other day, she'd sat in his office at Sean's Cycles – soon to be renamed something that didn't suck ass – and put the finishing touches on several ideas. He'd been hovering but she let him. He needed to see how magic was made. When she'd shown the mockups to his brothers and his apprentice they'd all given her proper adulation. Okay, Cannon had given her some kind of smirk thing that masqueraded as approval but being that he was the kind of man that even Sean tip-toed around, she'd take it.

In the midst of the overwhelming approval of his peeps how did Mr. Sean Lodi respond to her greatness? He was busy trying not to be impressed but it wasn't working. Finally, he had to admit that she was the b-diggity, shiznit, straight out business. Of course he did it in his own little fucked up way.

"It didn't hurt as much as I thought it would," he said before walking back to his shop.

What?! She screamed in her head as she picked up the clipboard. She was rearing back like she was one pitch away from a no-hitter when Cannon stopped her. For such a massive man, he had the gentlest touch. She barely felt his fingers around her wrist as he relieved her of her weapon.

“Don’t kill him until after you get paid.”

“Fine, but only because you asked. And for the record, Sean Lodi is an asshole.”

“No argument from me, Ms. Vegas. None at all,” he said before lapsing back into his customary silence.

Sean had to admit that Vegas was worth every dime he’d paid and probably millions more. She was good – not that he was going to tell his already conceited soon-to-be woman. He knew that he’d irked her temper by being stingy with the praise and walking out. Still, she’d done an awesome job. Picking up the phone in the shop, he dialed the extension to his office.

“You want to go to riding?”

“Why, so you can tell me how mediocre I am?”

“No, so I can tell you how good you are.”

“Okay then. What time and where are we meeting?”

“Here, Friday afternoon, around eleven right before I close up.”

“I’ll be there.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he said.

Though Vegas hadn’t expressed an interest in riding, he hoped she’d say yes to his offer for two reasons. First, he wanted to feel her holding him tight and the fact that she’d be holding him as they rode Northern

California was a bonus. Second, he knew that he cut a fine picture in his riding getup. He wanted Vegas to see him in it and want him (*at least for a little while*) as much as he wanted her (*all the time*).

Vegas knew that Sean thought that he was going to impress the little woman with his big bad bike, but she had a big bad bike of her own and some banging ass riding gear to go with it. If she was trifling she'd hire a film crew to hang out in the woods and film his reaction when she rolled up on her purple and black Ducati Monster S4RS Testastretta rocking her fitted black, leather jacket, her fitted stonewashed jeans, her black chaps and her kickass black Harley-Davidson Beverly Motorcycle boots. *Okay, so she didn't have a Harley but that didn't mean that she couldn't have the boots especially when they rocked so freaking hard.* Yeah, she couldn't wait to see the look on his face. Maybe, she'd ask him if he wanted to ride on the back of *her* bike she thought as she listened to Walker's voice mail confirming their meeting. Walker and Nautica were bringing her bike, which meant that she wouldn't have to drive all the way back to LA.

Jumping in her car, she started the drive to Bakersfield, a hole in the wall city, which was a stopping point city for trips to places in Northern Cali. It was also the halfway point between Cali's Delta area and LA. Normally, she would avoid Bakersfield – even when traveling – because won't shit out there. Given a choice between being stranded in Bakersfield or the seventh layer of Hell, she'd choose Bakersfield but only because hell's humidity would fuck up her weave.

Watching as Walker pulled up and unloaded her bike, she couldn't help but think that he was the best big brother in the world ... of course it was easy being that he had her as a sister. *Go her! Go her! Go her!* She

also had the best best friend in the world in Nautica ... and of course Nautica had her as a best friend too. *Lucky bitch. Again, go her! Go her! Go her!* You know what, the world was so fucking lucky for her existence. She wasn't saying that she wasn't a big as deal as say, Jesus (*because that would be blasphemous*) but she did toy with proposing a surcharge to all that knew her for the privilege and all.

Her illusions of grandeur were interrupted by Nautica's shrill voice.

"Wench, stop fantasizing about your importance and get your ass over here and help."

"Hater," she said as she flipped Nautica the bird, which caused her to look closely at her nails. Dammit, she needed a manicure. Good thing the hotel had someone on staff.

Looking at Nautica she was about to cuss her out some more but stopped herself. Nautica might not appreciate her greatness, still, who else would do this for her? No one, which is why she'd called her and Walker. As her big brother, Walker kind of had to spoil her but there wasn't actually a rule in place that said that Nautica had to. Hmm, maybe should propose some sort of proposition and have it on the ballot at the next general election.

"You better be getting me a good Christmas gift, wench," Nautica threatened as she used her ample hips to bump her out of the way before settling her 5'8", 170 pounds into her ride.

"Remember all throughout undergrad when I didn't smother you in your sleep? Well, this is payback for that so shut up. And no messing with my radio settings," she said.

"So you expect me to drive the two and half hours back to LA listening to a medley of shit that gives me a headache?"

“Well, there’s always silence,” Vegas responded.

“Chick if I don’t have a big present under the Christmas tree this year, I will buy out all of the weave in Cali and set it ablaze,” Nautica threatened.

“Now who’s being blasphemous?” she shuttered.

“You just remember what I said. Acting like I don’t have anything better to do on a Thursday night than come play fetch for you,” she said as she peeled off.

Vegas smiled. Nautica was good peeps. She wasn’t quite sure why she was best friends with her – especially when she had that freaking hair ad hair – and it was real. Whatever the reason, Nautica was her best friend and being that she wanted something big under her Christmas tree, she was going to have to either step up *Operation: Make Basil her Best Friend’s Bitch* or she was going to be reduced to drugging Basil and duct-taping him in place under Nautica’s tree. And she had a feeling that she wouldn’t be able to talk five-o out of arresting her if she did that.

Sighing, she flicked the visor down on her helmet, revved the engine, exchanged fist knocks with her brother and took off up I-5N. She pushed Basil and Nautica to the back of her mind. Right now she had to bring down Sean Lodi.

The time couldn’t go by fast enough to please Sean. Sure he closed early on Fridays but time seemed to be dragging ass. Glancing at the clock that seemed to be stuck on ten thirty for the last three hours, he sighed and pretended to go over his paperwork. It was a good thing that he always kept ahead of his work because if he discounted fantasizing about Vegas he hadn’t done jack shit today.

Closing his eyes he considered Vegas' luscious curves. And her sass. And the way she always looked him dead in the eye and told him exactly what she thought ... even when everyone else was busy getting the hell out of Dodge. The sound of his door opening pulled him from his thoughts.

"Lodi, you might want to get outside," Cannon said before leaving.

Wow, Cannon had spoken seven whole words today, which was about five past his daily quota. It must be something major to trigger Cannon into speech. Getting to his feet he powered down his computer and headed outside. There was a crowd at the door. Maybe Cannon had changed his mind and decided to put his latest project on display. It wasn't unusual for his bikes to gather crowds.

Walking to the middle of the crowd, he whistled at the bike the boys were looking at. A Ducati, it was obviously customized and whoever had done it had done a bang-up job (*although he and Cannon could've done better*). He was checking out the paint job when he realized that the boys weren't looking at the bike ... they were looking at the rider. As soon as he saw a glimpse of that ass, two things happened. First, his cock got hard. Second, his cock got harder.

"You boys might want to stop staring so hard at what belongs to me," he drawled as he walked up to Vegas and put his arm around her.

He felt her tense so he leaned down and whispered in her ear to reassure her.

"Be still, Vegas or I'll have to ask Cannon to help me beat the shit out of all of these boys. You don't want that do you?" he asked as he gently bit her earlobe.

"I," she began.

"Belong to me," he finished.

“But,” she tried again.

“Look too damn good in this getup but we’ll discuss that later.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” she pouted unaware of their audience or uncaring.

Though the boys had stepped a respectful distance away none of them had stopped staring. He would’ve ended them but he realized that they were looking at them ... waiting to see how he was going to react to this feisty woman. He was going to handle her just fine, not that it was any of their business.

“Someone should’ve told you what to do when you were growing up and when you didn’t listen they should’ve put you on restriction.”

“You know the thing about restriction? It’s simply a time of regrouping and remembering what I didn’t get to do last time while on restriction and trying to do it” she threw back.

“Then maybe your mother should’ve paddled your behind then maybe you wouldn’t be so damn spoiled.”

“I know that you’re not talking shit about the way my momma raised me.”

“Not that I am but if I was what are you going to do about it?”

Finger-combing her hair, she began wrapping her weave into a ponytail.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m putting my hair into a ponytail because I need to see my target and I won’t be able to kick your ass properly if I have sweat in my eyes.”

“You’re going to fight me?”

“No, I’m not going to fight you. I’m going to kick your freaking ass, Sean Lodi.”

And she might've tried it if Cannon hadn't come out and stepped in front of him.

"What are you doing, Cannon?" she whined.

"I'm saving Sean from your wrath."

"Why are you always stopping me from beating his ass?"

"Because I don't want you to have to spend time in the big house for messing up his pretty face, not that he comes close to being as beautiful as you, Vegas."

"Fine then," she said. "And thanks for realizing how hot I am."

Turning her blazing eyes on him - well as much as she could with Cannon blocking him - she threw out a challenge of a different kind.

"Let's ride unless you need Cannon to save you from a riding beat down too," she said before hopping on her bike and taking off.

Growling, Sean grabbed his helmet, jumped on his bike and took off after her. She rode hard; she rode well, but dammit, he didn't like her riding like she didn't own his heart.

Opening the throttle, Vegas zipped down the road. As always, the familiar thrill raced throughout her body once Vegas got up some speed on her bike. She loved riding. When she was riding it was just rider and bike. Though she didn't horseback ride much, she'd heard riders talk about horses in the same way she talked about her bike.

When she was riding she felt free. The world around her felt different and looked different from astride a bike than it did from inside of a car, though being all about speed the world was pretty much a big ass, crazy, fun blur. On her bike there was nothing between her and nature/danger/adventure.

Walker had taught her to ride after the first time she'd stolen his bike and gone joyriding. It hadn't mattered that she wasn't even yet sixteen, he'd simply wanted her to be safe. Walker's means of keeping her safe might've been unconventional but they worked.

Riding had gotten her through the rough spots, the bare spots, the spots that didn't come out regardless of how many times she scrubbed them. Riding had gotten her through Ellis Slater. Ellis had been like the B-side in her life, the lost chapter in the book of Vegas. She'd been so wrapped up in him that she'd almost lost herself ... to mediocrity. Before Ellis, she'd been content to ride Walker's chopper. After Ellis she realized that borrowing Walker's bike had been lame. Borrowing someone's bike was like borrowing someone else's life.

Back then too many things and people had liens on pieces of her life. She'd owed so much, too much. She owed allegiances, expectations, she owed, she owed, she owed. It'd been a long road but she'd paid off those debts but in spite of owing so many people the first person she paid was herself. It was a practice that she still stuck to.

Her bike had been the first payment to herself. More expensive than therapy but a hell a lot more fun, riding had been her balm. When she was riding it didn't matter that she didn't have a graduate degree, it didn't matter that she didn't want one. When she lamented over not being good enough for Ellis, riding had taught her that it was Ellis that hadn't been good enough for her.

The roar of a big bike behind her caught her attention. She didn't even have to turn around to know that it was Sean. Smiling, she opened up the throttle and made to shake him. She led him on a merry chase but these were Sean's roads and he knew them like she knew hair weave.

Knowing that she couldn't outrace him unless they were on a 350cc track, she slowed the bike but just a little. If Sean was going to take the lead she wasn't simply going to give it to him; he had to earn it.

She was glad she'd let him take it. Sean didn't just lead her willy-nilly; Sean took her on a postcard tour. Everywhere he led her could've been in the pages of a travel guide. Sean's California was the California that everyone wanted to visit. It was the best of California. For that matter it was the best of life and she was enjoying every beautiful mile of it and a part of her wanted to hold onto it and never let it go.

Sean was glad that Vegas didn't fight him for dominance. He wanted to spend time with her. He wanted to show him his home – not the house that he stored his stuff at – but his home. Alabama might be his birthplace but Northern California was his home. They rode for hours on end. When he'd originally planned this outing he'd only planned to be out for an hour tops but that was before Vegas had rolled up on her bike. Though he favored the custom-made choppers his shop specialized in, he could admit that Vegas' bike was a'ight. It was obvious she enjoyed speed just as it was obvious that she was a true cycle enthusiast.

When she'd conceded the lead to him, he relaxed and took her on a tour of the areas on the western side of the San Francisco and San Pablo Bays. He stayed away from the Interstates and took the back roads that he'd spent his weekends exploring. He alternated between riding hard and riding easy and Vegas' adventurous self was with him every mile of the way. They only stopped once – to top off their bikes and their appetites. Riding made him ravenous ... so did Vegas.

They shared a good meal at an area B&B. Along with the savory dishes they shared an exhilarating conversation. Of course, he shouldn't have been surprised being that Vegas wasn't the kind of woman who did anything by halves. She was as competitive as he was and gave as good as she got. Actually, she gave better than she got and she looked some kind of good doing it.

They ended up riding all day and it was good. If he'd been alone he would've stayed out longer but he didn't want Vegas out at night. Too much could happen and he had no intention of risking anything going wrong – not with his Vegas. *When did she become his Vegas?* He wasn't sure when she became *his* Vegas; he just knew that she was.

The longer he remained in her company, the more his admiration for her rose. She was a woman that he could spend the rest of his life with. Of course, considering her temper and the way he riled her, the rest of his life might be unnaturally short but it'd be good.

The ride back should've been a lot more relaxed but the closer he got back to Discovery Bay, the more demanding his libido became. It wanted Vegas; it demanded Vegas, and it wasn't quiet about it. He rode to his house instead of going to the shop so that he could drive Vegas back to her hotel in his truck. Vegas was a skilled rider but there was no way in hell that he was going to allow her to make the twenty mile trek on her bike ... in the dark ... for any damn reason.

Shutting off the engine he paused and watched Vegas dismount. Damn, he was jealous of that bike. He couldn't watch her get off of that bike without thinking of her dismounting him. Then again, he probably wouldn't let her dismount that easily.

"Thanks for the ride, Sean," she said all temptation without even trying to be.

"Thank you, Vegas," he said as he hit the mechanism that closed the garage door.

"I had a good time," she admitted.

"You sound surprised," he said.

"I guess I am. You seem so uptight in every other area of your life."

"I like the way you spare my ego."

"I like the way you thought that such a thing would've even entered my mind," she said with a lift of one of her beautifully-arched brows and a hand on her curvy hip.

It was that stance that did him in. Swallowing a groan, he stalked her swiftly closing the distance between them.

"Hey," she protested when he got up into her personal space.

"Hey, back," he said as he kissed the protest from her lips and lifted her into his arms.

Walking into the house he headed straight for his room. He didn't know where his brothers were and he didn't care. He was simply glad that his brothers had made themselves scarce because right now he needed Vegas like he'd never needed anything before in his life. Entering his room, he kicked the door shut and locked it. Setting Vegas on his California king-sized bed he unlaced his boots, took them off and tossed them, for once not caring where they went. His shirt was the next thing to go and then his t-shirt. They too went the way of his boots and again he didn't care.

His hand went to his fly. Unbuttoning his jeans he made his way over to Vegas. Pulling her up he leaned down and took her lips in a kiss that

created shockwaves throughout his body. Kneading her glorious ass he reveled in the feel of her breasts against his chest, the taste of her on his lips, and the presence of her in his life. They could've kissed for hours or for minutes. He didn't know; he didn't care. He simply was glad that Vegas was here.

Vegas had enjoyed some damn good times in her life but she couldn't recall enjoying a day as much as she'd enjoyed this one. Sean Lodi was amazing when he stopped being an asshole. He was the perfect riding partner knowing when she wanted to open it up and when she was ready to slow it down although admittedly everything under triple digits was slow to her.

She'd enjoyed lunch, she'd enjoyed the conversation, and she could say without deceit or prejudice that she'd enjoyed Sean Lodi. What red-blooded woman wouldn't though? If there was one thing that she was it was a woman.

When he'd taken her to his house instead of the shop she'd been a bit surprised. Still, what had surprised her more was the fact that she didn't have anything but praise for him. This was the longest that they'd gone without her having to call him an asshole or having to search around for something with which to beat him. *Damn.*

Before she could chew more on that revelation Sean stepped all up in her personal space and kissed her. Oh fuck. The next thing she knew she was in his room, on his bed and being treated to an eye-gasm. Sean fully dressed was temptation. Sean wearing nothing but some unbuttoned stonewashed jeans, desire in his eyes and a smirk on his lips was a couple of sins just waiting to happen. When Sean gathered her in his arms and

kissed her all she could do was burrow closer and kiss him back. She didn't think about breathing; she only thought about the pleasure coursing through her body at Sean's possession of her mouth.

Somewhere in the mix her jacket came off as did her shirt. If she'd been thinking clearly she would've stopped and considered what a kickass picture she made in jeans, chaps and her badass black lace bra, but she didn't have the wherewithal to consider much of anything when Sean was plundering her mouth with such skill and handling her person with such precision. It was a good thing that Sunday was close because she was going to need some absolution.

She didn't know how long they were on the bed before her senses returned but by the time they did Sean was stripped down to his boxer briefs and she was down to nothing but her boy short panties. Pushing on his chest, she forced herself to scoot away from him. She was grateful that Sean didn't need anything further than that to back off; then again Sean was a gentleman under the asshole. He'd never force her to do anything that she didn't want to do – *not that she didn't want to do him* - it was just that she couldn't. Closing her eyes, she attempted to gather herself as she caught her breath.

"Sean, I can't. I want to but I can't. In fact, I shouldn't have done everything I already did. My job. Oh, damn. I'm sorry, Sean. Please don't be mad but if you are, I understand because right now I'm mad at my damn self."

Though Sean was a gentleman, she expected to be called a cock tease at the minimum. She didn't expect what he did next. Grabbing his shirt he slid it over her head and pulled him against his chest. *Da hell?*

Sean felt the change in Vegas a split second before she pushed at his chest. Though he wanted nothing more than to slide his hard cock into her, no meant no. Full stop, no excuses. It didn't matter how deep into it he was or how bad he wanted it. He might be all kinds of asshole but he wasn't an asshole who'd condone hurting a woman.

Backing off, he waited as she gathered herself. He felt her hesitation and her apprehension. When she came to know him better she'd know that she never needed to fear him ... unless she did something to endanger herself. Even then, he'd tell her off gently as he held her so tight her body left imprints on his.

He listened as Vegas spoke and his heart melted upon hearing her apology. *Ah, Vegas baby, don't you think I know that you aren't anything but honorable?* Vegas might think that she was being a cock tease but the last few minutes didn't make her a cock tease. He was always hard around her and the last few minutes weren't a mistake. The last few minutes were inevitable. She wasn't being a cock tease. She was being Vegas and Vegas was honest even in the midst of her anger, her passion, and her craziness.

They might not be able to make love but that didn't stop him from loving her. And being that he loved her, it was his duty to protect her. Picking up his t-shirt from the floor, he settled it over her head and pulled her to him and switched on the TV. He could love her without making love to her. Kissing the top of her head he settled the comforter over them and enjoyed Vegas' company.

Vegas couldn't recall having a better time being semi-naked in the arms of an almost-naked man. Though she'd felt his hard cock in her back he did nothing more tempting than pull her deeper into his embrace and

kiss the top of her head. Feeling his strength surround her she felt protected, cherished, and turned on by the respect that he showed her. Sean Lodi was a gentleman under the asshole and she found herself liking both the asshole and gentleman. More than that, she found herself trusting him. She didn't trust easily, yet she trusted him so much that she did something she rarely did in the presence of someone she knew less than a year: she went to sleep.

Vegas was an armful of feisty woman and Sean enjoyed holding every bit of her lushness. Though she'd drifted off to sleep about twenty minutes ago, he'd remained awake. Despite the late hour Sean didn't feel sleepy; he felt invigorated. It felt good to have his woman in his arms, in his bed, in his life. Make no mistake about it, every inch of the beauty in his arms belonged to him. Vegas was his he thought as he finally drifted off.

An active sleeper, Vegas' constant moving took some getting used to but he finally got her rhythm down. It wasn't her moving that alerted him to the fact that his sleeping beauty was no longer in slumber land but, but rather her change in breathing that stirred him. Automatically, he moved to tighten his embrace around her but was left surprised when she used a deft move to wriggle out of his arms. Keeping his eyes closed he waited to see what she was about. It took everything in him to remain still but he did – even when he heard her skulking about the darkened room. Without looking he knew that she was gathering her discarded clothes. He forced himself not to jump to conclusions. When she went to the adjoining bath he relaxed but when she emerged fully-dressed – in his coat of all things – and walked out of his bedroom he got up to confront conclusion and let it and Vegas know that she wasn't going any damn where at two in the

fucking morning unless it was to the hospital to deliver the baby that he hadn't made yet.

Waking from one of the best naps that she'd ever indulged in, Vegas reluctantly slid out of Sean's embrace, which was the most comfortable place she'd been in ... ever. Sliding from the bed, she grabbed as many of her clothes as she could find before making her way to the adjoining bathroom. Sean Lodi was as anal as he was an asshole and the condition of his bathroom confirmed that. His bathroom was immaculate – impressive with marble and glass and imported tiles, but even better than that it was hospital surgery clean. Setting the clothes she'd gathered on the marble counter, she took care of her needs. Finishing with that she looked at what she'd gathered and groaned softly in dismay. She managed to gather Sean's jeans instead of her own, her chaps (*which wouldn't do her a damn bit of good without her jeans underneath them*), her bra and panties, and her boots. *You're firing on all cylinders, Vegas, she said with sarcasm.* Yeah, but at least she had her own boots instead of Sean's or worse – having one of each.

Slipping into her bra and panties she weighed her options and quickly concluded there were none with the selection of clothes she had available. Looking around the bathroom she smiled noting that Sean's master suite was designed with access to the master closet being in the master bath. That was a weird thing for her but right now that little bit of weirdness gave her options that she didn't know that she had five seconds ago. Trekking to the closet Vegas took a moment to gawk at the fucking neatness. Rows upon rows of neatly-folded t-shirts, racks upon racks of jeans pressed so hard that they could give a person paper cuts, and a handful of custom-

made suits filled the space. Sean was a basic man but it wasn't the simplicity of the items that caught her eye. It was the one item in the far left corner that did: the leather trench coat.

Vegas ventured to it like a tourist at Graceland. Taking the hanger off of the rack, she held up the trench coat and silently oohed. Carefully taking it off of the hanger, she slid it on and looked at herself in the mirror.

Though the coat probably only fell to Sean's calves it was about an inch from the floor on her. That wouldn't be a problem though once she put on her boots being that they had a rubber outsole that was about an inch thick. Deciding that she needed to put the boots on now in order to get the total effect, she shrugged out of the coat and stepped into her boots. Pausing to strike a pose, she winked at her reflection. Her black lace bra and boy short-styled panties looked pretty damn good with those boots. The straps around the ankle area and the calf really set the boots off and her bootyliciousness really set off the outfit. Well, that's what she thought before sliding back into that coat.

The coat was now about two inches above the floor. This was working. A split ran from the hem to the waistline of the beautiful garment. The sleeves were a bit too long but she could work with that. Feeling the silk lining against her skin she shivered at the sensation. Inhaling, she got wet at the smell of the leather and what she now knew was Sean's personal scent. Oh damn, she thought as she bit her lip to keep herself from groaning aloud. Later, she would ask Sean where he scored such a supreme piece of tailoring but right now she was on a mission. She was hungry and not simply hungry for any damn thing but hungry for some chili cheese fries.

Taking a few more seconds to admire her reflection some more, she reluctantly stepped away from her admiration of herself. Cutting off the light, she tip-toed out of the bathroom and through Sean's bedroom. It only took her about thirty seconds to get to the garage but it felt much longer – probably because she was holding her breath the whole way. Entering the garage through the kitchen, she made her way over to the bikes. Though all five bikes in the garage were beautiful - and she knew that Sean had crafted four of them – she zeroed in on Sean's.

The man made beautiful bikes. *I wonder what kind of babies he'd make her subconscious threw in.* Where in the fuck did that come from? Dammit, can you not throw that at me before I've had some fries she scolded it. Of course it paid her no attention whatsoever.

Without realizing that what she thought was her stealthy trip to the garage was anything but, Vegas took time to admire the silver and black work of motorcycle art that was Sean's chopper. Running her fingertips over the chrome finish she felt her nipples get hard. Never having wanted a chopper herself Vegas was nonetheless completely bowled over by the craftsmanship of the custom made bike. When her body took over where her mind left off and made her throw her leg over the bike and straddle the beast, she had no idea how good it was going to feel. As soon as her boy shorts-covered ass made contact with the supple leather seat, Vegas gasped. Holding onto the handlebars, she closed her eyes, threw her head back and moaned in pure pleasure. Perhaps if she'd known that the garage was hooked up to a monitor she would've been more reserved in her actions but she doubted it. Sean's bike felt good and if ethics prevented her from straddling the man himself; she'd have to settle for his bike.

Patience was not a virtue that Sean had been blessed with but stealth was, unlike Vegas who wasn't blessed with either just as his brother's weren't blessed with the minding their own fucking business gene. Having heard Vegas' 'quiet' trip to their garage, all of them had turned on the monitors, which meant that all of them had the privilege of watching Vegas feel up his bike and get herself off on it. Not even bothering to dress, he ran downstairs the moment he saw Vegas throw one of her muscled, limber legs over his bike then sit her perfect ass on it. Seeing such an erotic image, virtually all of the blood in his body raced to his cock. When he heard that blissful sigh from her parted lips, his cock nearly exploded from his boxer briefs. That sound was his undoing. Grabbing the phone up he threw a warning down the hall at his brothers and hit the stairs at full speed.

Dialing as he ran, he didn't consider that it was damn near two in the morning. He didn't consider that Vegas might take offense at what he was about to do. He didn't consider that his *way to interested in his love life* brothers might be listening. He didn't even consider his next fucking breath. All he could consider was being inside of Vegas. It took less than a whole ring before the phone was picked up.

"Michael Schaefer," the cultured voice greeted him.

"You're fired," he said without preamble.

"May I ask why being that it's not every day that a client calls at two in the morning to deliver anything much less such startling news? Did something happen between you and Vegas?"

"Yeah, she's mine. Now get the hell off of the line unless you want to hear something that you're not prepared to," he said before disconnecting and tossing the phone goodness only knows where.

Having heard the conversation between their eldest brother and Vegas' boss three identical grins crossed the visages of the faces of Rodeo, Tracy and Byron Lodi. Their brother was claiming his woman the good ol' Lodi way. Vegas may've thought she had the lock on Sean, but she was fixin' to find out just how surly the eldest Lodi brother was. They might be the little brothers and therefore subject to being harassed by Sean but in this case an ass whipping would be worth it. This was better than cable.

Michael Schaefer couldn't help the look of confusion that spread over his face. When he'd given Sean Lodi his personal number he never expected him to use it. He'd given it to him as a means of assurance. But not only had Mr. Lodi used it, he'd used it to fire Cutting Edge Consultants. He'd take losing the contract, but he wasn't going to stand for losing his best ad executive. Deep in his plans to retain Vegas, he didn't notice Corinna until he heard her tinkling laughter.

"Score: Corinna 2; CEOs 0," she said before lapsing into evil laughter. "What are you going to do without Vegas?"

"That's something that I don't plan to find out."

"Vegas might like LA but once she gets a taste for towns in the San Francisco Bay area she's going to want to stay."

"If she wants to stay than she can stay. They have high-speed internet, tele-conferencing and such," he countered.

"Yeah and the Bay area has miles of roads and trail that would entice a motorcycle enthusiast and hiker such as her herself."

"I gave her a big pay raise and I'll give her more."

"And I'm guessing Sean Lodi gave her the one thing money can't buy: good loving. Vegas is good people, don't begrudge her such happiness."

“I love that girl like she was my own. You know I want nothing more than for her to be happy but I’m going to do everything in my power to show her that she can have her cake and eat it too. She’s a star, Corinna.”

“Of course she is. You picked her. Now find out what kind of cake she likes and give it to her.”

“You always have to be right, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t have to be right. It just turns out that way most of the time,” she said as she kissed him on the cheek and patted his head like he was five years old. *What the hell?* How did Corinna always manage to make him feel like he was in kindergarten?

As Sean ran to the garage after his twenty-eight second conversation with Michael Schaefer - which was twenty-five seconds too long - he was thinking of how long it would take for him to get Vegas’ fine ass to a church and married. He was banking on a week at the most and by then they should both be delirious from sleep deprivation and an overload of pleasure. Growling, he thought of how beautiful she’d look walking down the aisle to him. Then he thought about how many ways he’d make love to her. Opening the door that led to the garage all he could do was stare at the sight of Vegas, which wasn’t hard being that she was standing in the doorway getting ready to engage the garage door opener on the wall. Before she could even move her hand away from the mechanism, he caught it in his and re-activated the opener prompting it to close.

“What are you doing, Vegas?” he growled in her ear as he pulled her into his arms and flush against his chest.

“Opening the garage,” she answered.

“And after you opened it, how did you plan to put it down as there’s no outside opener other than the one in our trucks.

“I wasn’t going to jack your bike,” she breathed.

“Inhaling, he took her scent deep into his nostrils before responding. “I don’t care about you making off with my bike but I do care about you making off with my woman.”

“When did I become your woman?”

“When were you born?”

“Can you be serious?” she asked as he continued his leisurely exploration of her mouth.

“I *am* serious. You’ve been naughty, Vegas.”

Vegas was listening to the electronic drone of the garage door opening when she came face-to-face with Sean. Shit. This did not look good she thought as Sean materialized in front of her and pulled her into his arms. Dressed only in his boxer briefs there was little to prevent her from feeling his strength, his muscle, and his need. The feel of his powerful thighs and his bare, muscled chest warmed her. When Sean’s big hands skimmed her waist before parting the leather of the coat and lightly dancing his fingers up her back she leaned into him. When he bent his head and buried his face in her cleavage she couldn’t contain her sounds of pleasure. His breath against her ear gave her goose bumps and when his teeth gripped her earlobe and tugged it before drawing the delicate flesh into his mouth and suckling, Vegas leaned her head on Sean’s chest and whimpered.

When he whispered that she’d been naughty in that dark, raspy voice, Vegas’ pussy throbbed in time to her need. *Was it possible for someone’s voice to give you an orgasm?* Everything about Sean Lodi turned her on –

even his assholishness – as long as it wasn't directed at her. She'd almost done his bike a few moments ago and she was yay close to doing him right now. Her body and his body were colluding against her. There were laws against that sort of thing dammit. Oh, damn. Sean was too much temptation.

Ripping her mouth from his she panted. "Sean, I can't."

"Do you want to?" he asked.

"Yes, you bastard!" she moaned as he bit her nipple through her bra.

"Good, because I fired Cutting Edge Consultants."

"What?!" she scream-moaned when he snaked his hand in her panties and strummed his finger against her clit to a melody that had her on the verge of an all-out krump walk.

"I fired Cutting Edge," he said.

"Why? Did I do something wrong?" she said as she raked her fingernails over his nipples.

"Besides having the unmitigated gall to be walking temptation, look so beautiful, and call to me on every level?"

"Oh goodness," she sighed as he walked her backwards to his bike and sat her on it.

"Other than that you did nothing wrong. I had to fire Cutting Edge Consultants because you did everything too right, which is what I told Schaeffer."

"When did you tell him that?" she breathed as he laid her back over his bike and stepped between her thighs.

"Right after I saw you have an orgasm on my bike," he said as he ripped her panties off, grabbed her ankles and set them upon his shoulder opening her to his view.

“Shh, I don’t like interruptions when I’m praying he said,” as he said grace at the apex of her thighs.

“It’s two a.m.! You called my boss at two a.m.?! Are you craz-,” she started before choking on pleasure at the feel of his tongue on her pussy.

“Sean!” she pleaded as she dug her fingers into his shoulders.

“Sean!” she moaned as she arched into his mouth to make his dining experience more enjoyable.

“Sean!” she screamed when her pussy clamped down hard on the finger that he’d inserted in her needy pussy.

“Sean! Sean! Sean!” she screamed when he worked her pussy with his fingers and began humming her anthem against her clit.

“Sean!” she choked out when she climaxed to the chorus.

“Sean, oh Sean,” she prayed when he finished. She wanted to do more but she was lost in her pleasure. It wasn’t every white boy who knew hip hop like she did. And it wasn’t everyday that a girl got her pussy eaten to the rhythm of *Pistol Grip Pump*.

Sean watched Vegas and knew two things. First, his jacket had never looked so good. Second, he’d never seen anything so fucking beautiful in the whole of his life as Vegas climaxing on his chopper. He said that having seen the Pacific Ocean at sunset, Northern California by cycle, Bethlehem at Christmas, and a village liberated by American troops. Those were all beautiful sights and they all paled in comparison to his Vegas. All he could do was look at her in awe and hope that she loved him as he loved her.

Cradling her in his arms, he stuck the remnants of her panties in the waistband of his boxer briefs and made his way back to his bedroom. Setting her on his bed he removed his boxer briefs and stood before her

without artifice hoping that she'd want him, take him as he was, and love him in spite of his flaws. Warmed by the fire in her eyes, he kneeled at her feet and paid homage to her with his touch before removing her boots. Pulling her to her feet he removed his jacket from the beauty that it concealed. Finally, he removed her bra. Laying her out on the bed he spent long moments simply looking at her. He could look at her forever and never cease being amazed.

Crawling between her thighs, he realized how small she was compared to him before marveling at how easily she ruled him even being eight inches shorter, sixty five pounds lighter, and so much softer. She felled him and he wasn't too ashamed to admit it. He wanted to join his body with hers and lose himself in her femininity. He wanted to be consumed by her love and be reborn again – fashioned into a new man, a better man, a whole man. He wanted ... he wanted ... he wanted everything with her, everything for her.

Overwhelmed by her presence yet too afraid even to blink lest he miss something, he asked her permission to enter her temple. “May I?”

When she smiled her acceptance and breathed out a yes, he thanked her the only way that he knew how. Gently, honestly, and with everything. Pushing into her he savored the pleasure of the intimacy just as he reveled in her tightness, and basked in her heat. She pleased him from her presence alone; she slayed him with her trust.

Take me, take me, take me, he whispered as he surged forward.

Keep me, keep me, keep me, he rasped as he pulled out.

Over and over he repeated his movements. Again and again he repeated his mantra. Deeper and deeper she entrenched herself in his heart.

Holding onto her he rolled to his back without breaking contact. Blanketing himself with her love he gave her time to adjust to being astride before pumping his hips up as he brought her down. Clutching her hips he held them as if they were lifelines. Using his strength he battled gravity for control of the depth of his penetration.

Pulling her down to him he caught a hard nipple in his teeth and tugged. Opening his mouth to taste more of his breath he halted his thrusts altogether. Palming one of her heavy breasts he worked her breast and alternated between pleasuring the left and the right with his tongue and teeth.

When she wanted more he gave her less. When she wanted a little bit less he stopped altogether and basked in her mewls. The sound of her desire kicked his into overdrive. Wanting her as far gone as he'd been since he first laid eyes on her he kept her in an artificial state of need by setting small fires all over her body. Instead of extinguishing the fires he fanned the flames of her desire by withholding the orgasm that she so badly wanted, that her body so desperately craved. Ah, his beauty would have to ride out this exquisite need that burned through her. She'd have to grow accustomed to a being loved by him. While he was concerned about fast, hard rides when he was riding his chopper, he'd only love her with a southern boy languor that rivaled the pace of Sunday afternoons. His foreplay would last longer than Clarence Carter's *Stroking* and her climax would ripple over her in slow motion.

Though he never broke eye contact he knew that they were the very portrait of love. Their contrasting skin tones a tapestry of browns and bronzes. Their contrasting textures were a mesh of silk and suede. The

passion that coursed through them created a collage of strength and healing.

Slowly he loved her. Back and forth they battled, pitting their wills against each other until they realized the futility of fighting. And then they surrendered to each other and when they did the orgasm that washed over them rocked them both to sleep.

Chapter 7: Ding, Ding MF!

Instead of killing Sean like she wanted to for being so, so, so ... for being so. Fuck it, she was sure he'd done something and if he didn't do something he would. And that was all of the justification she needed for leaving.

Waiting for Sean to leave (*and he left early being that he was an early riser*), she showered, dressed and sped to her hotel. Arranging for her luggage to be sent via delivery service, she checked out of Renaissance Clubsport Walnut Creek ten minutes after she rocked up. She was on her bike headed to the I-5S and LA ... and retribution by 5:00 am – before she could change her mind. She was going to have to resign from Cutting Edge Consultants. *Are you going to apologize to Leticia too her conscience asked.* Fuck no, she responded. She might've broken the rules with Sean but she didn't feel bad about that. *What do you feel then her busybody conscience parried?* Scared. For the first time in her life Vegas was scared shitless ... and this is why she ran.

Knowing that Sean hated pretty much everything south of the San Francisco Bay area she rode hard and fast to LA. If she was running from anyone other than Sean Lodi she simply would've went to her home and been like, *yeah what*. Though she'd only known Sean for a hot minute, she knew that Sean Lodi wasn't the type of man who gave up shit without a fight. She liked that about him. She liked too many things about him and she needed time to sort them out. That's why she ran to Basil's house. In hindsight that might not have been the best idea. Hell, in hindsight leaving Sean's bed wasn't the best idea. But right now she didn't have hindsight. What she had was an assload of traffic moving slower than six slugs stapled

together and a cockamamie plan that her pride made her see through to the bitter end.

Basil was a nice man ... until you fucked with something that belonged to him. Vegas might be the toughest person he knew but for all of her strength, and in spite of those big, brass balls that she possessed, Vegas was first and foremost a woman. More than that, she was one of his women. In fact, outside of his mother and little sister, Vegas was the only woman he claimed thusly.

When she'd texted him that frantic, choppy message, he'd texted back two words. *Come home*. He didn't need to say more; he knew that she'd understand his response. Leaving work, he stopped by the grocery store to get her favorite comfort foods. And then he called Walker and apprised him of the situation right before alerting him that if he was ever blessed with a daughter that he was going to be her godfather. He liked the fact that Walker didn't ask any questions when it came to anything that might cause his sister harm – even though he'd ended up with three broken ribs behind it – three broken ribs that he didn't deserve he might add. After those preliminaries were out of the way he stopped by church and prayed that God gave him the strength to refrain from ending whatever had made Vegas scared.

Sean hadn't wanted to leave that bedroom ... ever. He could've gladly spent the rest of his life in Vegas' arms but he'd worked Vegas (*and himself*) pretty good last night and he needed to let her rest. Reluctantly, he dragged his ass from bed and headed to his shop. It wasn't that he needed to go. Cannon ran the shop just as well, if not better, than he did. He went in

because he needed to burn off excess energy so he'd be too tired to jump on her the moment he laid eyes on her.

Walking into the shop he was unaware of the smile that illuminated his eyes and turned his rugged good looks into something more. He was unaware that he hummed the lyrics to Lonestar's *Amazing* the entire time he worked on his latest project. More importantly, he was unaware that Vegas wasn't where he'd left her.

He loved bikes. He loved working on them but what he really loved was building them from scratch. This latest project was the feather in his mechanical cap. Of course he said that about every single one of his projects but this time he meant it. It'd been done - all he needed to do was to name it.

Taking it out on the road for one more road test, he smiled at the smooth ride and precision handling that the bike offered. This wasn't just a bike; it was *the* bike. This was the bike that would launch his new line; the bike that would mark the beginning of his and Vegas' life together; the bike that he was going to ride when he asked that woman to marry him. He was going to have to build another one with the quickness for Vegas. Sure she had a bike of her own but it offended him to have her astride something that wasn't him or something that he created.

Vegas had burst into his life and made it whole. She was Bear Bryant to his Alabama; the halftime show to his Black College Football; the oil to his engine. Vegas was his California. She was the adventure that his staid, orderly life needed and that is why he was naming the bike Vegas Adventure ... and changing the name of his shop to Sean's Vegas Adventure.

After getting the story out of Vegas Basil smiled (*on the inside because he didn't need three more broken ribs*). Vegas had fallen ... and hard. On the outside, he made all the appropriate responses and kept feeding her bacon. He'd never met a woman who liked bacon so much that she found any flimsy excuse to wrap something in bacon. He wasn't even surprised the first time he'd seen her wrap bacon in bacon. Putting her to bed in the room that she'd never before this day used, he closed the door.

Grabbing his PDA he called his investigator to check up on Mr. Sean Lodi. Next he called Walker to let her know she was fine ... just in love. And then he called Mr. Sean Lodi. He'd want to know where his woman was – that is if he had a woman. And he also wanted to know how much man Sean was. Sure his investigators would tell him the basics like whether he'd spent any time in Alcatraz but what they couldn't tell him was if he was a man in name only or if his deeds matched up to the title. Discovery Bay was about 345 miles away. Every minute over seven hours he'd deduct points and anything over eight hours barring a natural disaster was just adding on to the asswhipping Sean Lodi was going to get for making Vegas cry.

Cannon was going to smash that fucking phone if it rang one more time. What the hell was wrong with people who let a phone ring more than twice? Picking up the phone he used his best voice to alert the caller that this was Sean's Cycles. Despite using his best phone voice he still sounded rough. That was the problem with phones; he couldn't use his flip cards with the callers. Still, he picked up the phone being that the caller was so persistent.

After hearing what the caller said, all trace of politeness left his voice.

“I don’t know who you are but I’ll tell you this. You better not have hurt Vegas and if you have, I’d get gone if I were you,” he said right before hanging up.

It had taken everything in him not to tell Mr. whatever-the-fuck his name was that he was going to kill him. Make no mistake about it, he would, if he’d hurt Vegas. He simply refrained being that Ms. Silana had told him in no uncertain terms that she didn’t expect any more mess out of him. Being that she’d put her money and reputation on the line, he wasn’t going to do anything to disappoint her. Of course if that man had hurt Vegas, he was going to kill him. Then again, that wouldn’t disappoint Ms. Silana. She had a thing about men hitting women ... and so did he.

Taking the information that Basil (*what kind of pussy ass name was that anyway?*) had left him with, he picked up the phone and called Reign. Reign was the procurer of all information that was supposed to be down low. She was the best at whatever it was that she did. He didn’t know how she did it and he wasn’t asking any questions. There were some things a body just didn’t need to know so he played the army when it came to Reign: *don’t ask/don’t tell*.

If it had been anybody else doing the procuring he would’ve thought about the potential fallout, but this was Reign. Besides smarts and stealth, Reign had Destiny Mann in her hip pocket. Those two were as thick as thieves and crazy as the day was long. And if Destiny couldn’t get her out of trouble, well then Reign had a mama and a daddy that won’t nobody trying to mess with ... and that included the law.

Having procured more information than he’d ever needed in a minimum amount of time, he called Sean. “Lodi, get your ass here with the quickness.”

Sean was just rolling up when his phone rang. Normally, he wouldn't have heard it over the roar of the engine but he had it set on vibrate and placed it in his shirt pocket where he could feel it. Hearing Cannon on the other end of the line, he opened the throttle and headed back to his garage. Whatever it was had to be big if it had prompted Cannon to use the phone.

The first thing that Sean noticed when he pulled up was that Cannon had closed the shop and was waiting for him on his bike.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"Vegas is gone. Apparently she went back to LA sometime after you left. She's at some guy's house who saw fit to call and tell me that so I could tell you. Being that you've been smiling all damn day I'm guessing you didn't do nothing to her untowards but if I find out you, did you're going to go missing, Lodi."

"What the hell do you mean she's in LA? At some guy's house? She's my woman!"

"Well does she know that?"

"She will," I said as I got back on my bike.

"When are we leaving?" Cannon asked.

"Right now. You ready?"

"I'm always ready," Cannon replied.

Sean seethed all fucking four hours and forty-three minutes that it took him to get to LA. He'd broken all kinds of laws of the road to get there in that time but he had a woman to get to. By 4:15 pm he was pulling up into the driveway of one Mr. Basil something or other. He was sure that any man named Basil would leave his last name but Cannon either didn't

catch it or didn't care what it was. Still, he'd had all of the information he needed including his phone number, home address, work number, work address, his mother's contact information, and his SAT scores. He wasn't sure how Cannon had procured all of that information so quickly; he was simply thankful that he had.

Shutting off his bike, he shook his head at the foreign luxury SUV that was parked outside. A pussy probably drives that, he thought as he waited for Cannon before walking to the door. He wanted his woman but that didn't mean that he was trying to walk into an ambush. Before he got off of the bike good the door opened and out stepped some dude that looked like he just finished doing a photo shoot for GQ magazine. That had to be Basil, which meant that this was the dude fixing to get his ass handed to him.

Stalking to the man he noticed that the man wasn't simply waiting for him to come to him, but rather doing some stalking of his own. Good to know that Basil wasn't just a pretty face. Still, it was too bad that he wasn't going to have it much longer. Hauling back to smash said pretty face in Pretty Boy was pulled back by the African-American man that came out of nowhere before his fist could connect.

"Don't want no trouble, Alabama."

"Un-ask my woman and won't be none," I said with all of the Bama coming out strong in my voice.

"If she's your woman than what is she doing here?" Pretty Boy asked with a smirk.

"Saying goodbye because she's coming with me," I countered with a smirk of my own. I might not win every fight but one thing was certain I definitely wasn't about to let Pretty Boy whip my ass.

“And she better be unharmed,” Cannon chimed in with that rough, menace-laced voice of his.

“Like I’d harm a woman,” Pretty Boy said all offended-like.

“Yeah, being a woman yourself I can see why you wouldn’t harm Vegas. Then again, knowing Vegas, she’d probably kick your ass all over LA if you tried some shit like that,” I said. And then because I was still good and pissed I added a rejoinder. “You’re probably holding her hostage for beauty tips and though I understand why you’d pick her to get beauty tips from; I’m going to need her out here now.”

“And I’m going to need you to give me a reason why I should do shit especially since it’s not like you can whip my ass. You can’t even hold onto one 5’7” woman. What makes you think you can take me?” Pretty Boy taunted.

“What makes me sure that I can take you is that there simply isn’t any other choice. Vegas is mine and I’ll tear LA a whole new ass if I have to but I ain’t leaving here without her,” I said getting closer.

Again the African-American male stopped my pending violence by pulling Pretty Boy back.

“Not that we don’t have a lot to talk about but I suggest we take this ‘discussion’ inside being that it’s the weekend, Delores Ware still lives next door, and I don’t relish a trip to County.”

“While I don’t know who Delores is I’m going to have to agree with the last bit,” Cannon said with a firm hand on my shoulder, “however the garage might be a better place for this ‘discussion.’”

Like dutiful soldiers, Pretty Boy and I marched into the house and onto the garage. We waited for the door to close before the name-calling began.

“Where is my woman?” I asked for the last time.

“In my bed,” he smirked.

And this time his friend didn’t try and stop me so when I swung my fist, it connected with his jaw ... and so did his with mine. Perhaps if either of us had more sense and more mature tempers we could’ve avoided the fight. Truth be told though I didn’t want to avoid shit. I was looking for a fight and Pretty Boy here was willing to give me one. I don’t know how long we beat the shit out of each other but at some point we were both bent over double, breathing hard and looking like we were extras in the movie *Fight Club*. The odds were increasing that we were going to have to go to the ER at some point. My ears hadn’t stopped ringing and Pretty Boy’s eye looked swelled pretty good – all six of them that swam before me. *Dammit, why did so many things that had to do with Vegas end up with me going to the ER?* Fuck that, I’d make the ER my permanent residence as long as I had her. Speaking of which, I needed her ... like yesterday.

“Where is Vegas?” I asked. “And don’t tell me that she’s in your bed again because she’s not that type of woman. She’s my woman and the only man’s bed she’s going to be in is mine.”

Maybe if either of us had been in better shape we would’ve heard the door between the kitchen and garage open but we were too far gone to hear shit but the pounding in our heads. We didn’t even have time to force ourselves to stand upright before Vegas came hurtling in there. Her cusses reached us moments before she did.

Vegas felt better after having a long soak (*which she’d needed because Sean had worked a sister out*), a good nap (*which she’d also needed because of Sean – not that she was complaining*) and some bacon (*which*

she needed just because). Bacon always made her feel better and the nap gave her a clearer head. And her head screamed at her to stop being a pussy and call Sean. She never should've left Discovery Bay. For that matter she never should've left his bed. She was all kinds of fools for doing so. But Sean was the bigger fool for leaving her alone in bed in the first place. Technically, this whole thing was all his fault. *Yeah, it was*. But she'd forgive him (*this once*) considering how good he'd held her, how thoroughly he'd loved her, and how beautifully he'd completed her.

She should call him and tell him. She wondered if he even realized that she was gone. Getting up, she dressed in the black hoodie set that Basil had purchased to replace the one she'd had to burn because of him getting her arrested. Slipping on some black Keds to go with it she'd just brushed out her weave when she felt the house shudder. They better not be having an earthquake not when she had to fuck Sean a few more thousand times – this year. Waiting for another shudder and not getting it, she left the room and went in search of whatever had caused that. If it was God she was just going to have to let that go because like the old peeps said, her arms were too short to box with God.

Feeling another shudder and hearing some muffled groans going along with it, she grabbed the phone before reaching in the freezer and pulling out a pack of frozen pork chops. Following the noise to the garage she wondered what in the hell Basil was doing out there. Twisting the knob, she opened the door just in time to hear Sean's statement to Basil. *Da hell?*

"You motherfuckers. Basil, I can't believe that you would tell him something like that and Sean I can't believe that you would tell people I was in your bed. And I can't believe that you left me this morning. And why are

you two out here beating the shit out of each other?” she asked as she smacked each of them with the pack of chops. “I’m telling my brother on both of you,” she said as she dialed Walker’s number.

She was surprised when she heard the sound of his ringtone in the garage. Looking around she gasped upon seeing her brother and Cannon seated in the chairs along side the side wall.

“Walker! Cannon!” she smiled as she ran over and hugged them both. “Tell me you guys weren’t simply sitting here while these two beat each other.”

“Yep,” they both without a lick of remorse in their voices.

“What’s going on? Why are they fighting and what are they doing here? Cannon, I can’t believe that you finally let me beat Sean. By the way, who’s taking them to the ER?”

“We’re here because of you,” Sean said as he gently turned her to him. “Are you okay, baby?”

“Yeah, but you and Basil look like shit,” she said. “In the words of my girl Lisa y’all in here looking like *‘who done it and why.’*”

And that was just the beginning of a laundry list of things she said as she dragged both of them to the kitchen and gave them icepacks.

Later that night, she lay in her own bed watching Sean sleep. Oh, her poor baby had been through it. She never would’ve suspected that either he or Basil could be such fools. Basil was all laid back and nice but apparently her resident pretty boy was more like Walker than she’d realized, which meant that he was fucking nuts. Yep, he was going to be perfect for Nautica who was also fucking nuts albeit in a whole different kind of way. Their kids might be crazy as hell but they’d have some damn good hair.

She hadn't known what to say to any of them when she'd finally gone all dentist on them and pulled the story out of them. Oh my damn all of them were nuts. They were also the best and she loved all of them, which was a good thing because they were all going to be family.

She smiled recalling how all three men had insisted that Sean was going to marry her or die. Cannon was already on her favorite person list but after hearing him defend her so thoroughly she moved him right next to Uncle Firefighter and Basil in her hierarchy of men who spoiled her. She especially loved Sean Lodi who was completely unapologetic for causing such a ruckus.

"You can't fight everybody," she'd said.

"I can't lose you, Vegas. If I have to fight to keep you by my side, I will and I don't care who it is that I have to fight."

Well, damn. That had been the best proposal she'd ever received. How could she say no to that? And unlike that morning, she wasn't scared of how Sean Lodi made her feel. She was simply thankful for the fact that he made her feel. And she did feel. She felt passion so hard it zinged through her decimating the rocks in her soul that she'd been dragging around for so long that she didn't even realize how heavy they'd become until she'd been liberated from them. Oh, she loved her some Sean Lodi and she couldn't wait to make him Mr. Vegas Knightsen.

Chapter 8: Starting Some New Ish

“You're not listening,” Vegas accused even as she smacked Sean's hand.

Of course it didn't do any good as he continued to slide one of his big hands up over her person. Currently, he was busy coaxing an orgasm out of her by stroking the area between her thighs. Somehow, she managed to continue their conversation despite his distracting fingers, the naughty words he whispered in her ear, and the way he crowded her, ignoring everyone and everything but her. On one hand she was pleased with his attentions; on the other hand ... dammit, there was no other hand. Okay, being that they both had two hands (*at least for the moment both of them but Sean was in serious danger of losing one of his if he kept touching her*). He was also in danger of losing a hand if he stopped touching her. You know what? Sean was just in danger period. It would've been totally different if they were at home but no, they were sitting in the upscale office of the wedding planner that Dr. Sebastian – her second bridesmaid whether she wanted to be or not - had recommended.

From the looks of things the wedding planner wasn't in the least offended but that wasn't the point. The point was that Sean was way over his asshole quota today and it wasn't even nine a.m. They had a laundry list of things to do and not only was he fucking around and wasting time by not listening to a damn thing; he had no remorse about it.

“Yes, I am listening,” he grunted.

Vegas slapped his wrist again, which earned her another grunt in response but not the physical action that she wanted to accompany it. Apparently, her slaps were interfering with his ability to have his way with

her person because he lifted her bodily and settled her on his lap. Catching her hand in one of his, he spread her thighs and snuck his talented, talented fingers beneath the elastic leg band of her panties. Of course her pussy sided with him and damn near gripped his digits to death as it tried to suck them deeper into her body.

In that moment when she was on the brink of orgasm, she found herself caught between pleasure and fury. Making her come in public would not be Sean's greatest sin; his greatest sin would be in making her miss the half-price hair sell at the weave shop. If they ran out of her hair before she got there it was so over between them. And she was going to tell him that ... right after he finished making her come.

Sean realized that his life was probably forfeit when Vegas stormed out of the hair place. Anger was written all over her face yet she wore it like she wore everything else – beautifully. His appreciation was interrupted by Cannon's understatement.

"You're in trouble," he said a moment before Vegas stormed over.

Stomping over to him he suspected that she was going to hit something and when she eyed his chopper and him he tensed for the blow knowing that she liked bikes too much to harm one. It wasn't long in coming. Hauling back, she landed a short roundhouse kick to his gut. Jumping on her bike, she hastily pulled her helmet on. Starting the bike she threw an *'I hate you, it's over,'* over her shoulder before taking off.

Did she just intimate that it was over? Oh that was out? That was very, very, very out. It hadn't even begun good. They could've been two millennia into their romance and it still wouldn't have begun good enough

for him. Vegas was his - not simply for this moment, but for all of eternity ... and a little extra if he could arrange that with the Big Guy.

Once again, Cannon's words pulled him out of his musings. "If that little girl hurts herself behind your foolishness, there won't be enough dirt on this earth to bury your ass under."

If Vegas hurt herself being foolish there wouldn't be dirt because he'd use it all burying any and everything that hurt her. Revving the engine he took off after her. Luckily, LA traffic didn't allow her to get too far ahead of him and her purple leather jacket and custom paint job made it easy to spot her. Between him and Cannon they kept her within their sights. For a moment they'd both lost sight of her when she turned onto the 405 freeway, but being that traffic was its usual bumper-to-bumper he quickly found her again.

At first, he wore a smile. Her passion always turned him on, but that was before he watched her come too close to eating pavement one too many times. Vegas was a great rider but she wasn't indestructible. Breaking all kinds of laws of nature he caught up with her. Side-by-side with her he indicated she should pull over onto the shoulder and she indicated her hell no by flipping him the bird. To add insult to injury she opened the throttle and went faster. They played chase for long minutes - minutes that turned his blond hair snow white and made his voice box sore from all of the prayers that he prayed for her safety. After what seemed an eternity, with the help of Cannon he forced her to the side of the road.

As soon as Vegas got off of her bike Sean was all over her like Alabama on Auburn during the SEC Championship. He didn't know what he said; hell he didn't know what she said. All he knew was that he might need to be hit with a defibrillator a couple of times as he was sure that his

heart had beat out of his chest and was hitch-hiking down the 405 – and he didn't blame it.

Even though Vegas was safe (*for the moment until he turned her over his knee and spanked her ass*) the prayers hadn't stopped falling from his lips. *Lord, he prayed. Help me. Help me. Oh Lord, help me*, he prayed. Though he didn't take his eyes off of Cannon he was sure that he'd heard him utter an *Amen* or two. Right now he didn't know a lot of things except for this. Vegas sure as shit wasn't praying. An *Amen* didn't have a hope in hell of squeezing in between the fuck you's, sons of bitches, assholes, and round house kicks she slung.

Dr. Silas Carlton could not believe what he was seeing. If he'd been a cussing man he would've said '*da hell?*' but those days were behind him – mostly. Sometimes life warranted a couple of '*da hells*' and this was one of them. A minister himself, he proudly attended John Will-I-Am Coltrane African Orthodox Church known mostly by its nickname St. John Coltrane Church of San Francisco.

He wasn't African Orthodox; he was Baptist – but then weren't all Southern boys at least one time in their lives? In his opinion whatever religion led you to Jesus was alright with him. He'd simply attended the church because it had John Coltrane's name in the title. Back then he'd been an impressionable young kid needing Jesus and deliverance from drugs and drink. He'd gotten all the Jesus he needed at St. John Coltrane's Church and in time he'd gotten his deliverance. Praise God.

He'd seen a lot during his almost seventy years including Jim Crow (*too much of it in his opinion*), desegregation, Henry Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's homerun record, Muddy Waters performing *Got My Mojo Working*,

and an African-American female chancellor at his alma mater. And right now the spectacle before him was challenging all of those events for supremacy. Maneuvering his Ford F150 truck to the shoulder of the 405, he got out and marched over to the arguing couple.

Normally, he'd introduce himself and ask a question or two before intervening. Something like, *'Hi, I'm Reverend Carlton, can I be of assistance?'* but not today, not in this moment. It was the start of rush hour; onlookers were on the verge of running off the road at the spectacle the trio created. True, the large man merely stood sentinel in front of the small woman but he wasn't doing anything to put a stop to the hell she was dishing out to that blond kid. And she was dishing it out like she had a double doctorate degree in it. The kid looked like he was trying to stop a pending heart attack, yet the medley of fear and anger that crossed his visage couldn't conceal the fact that he was deeply in love with the spitfire.

Realizing that he probably wouldn't be getting much of anything useful out of the two of them, he turned his attention to the big guy.

"Reverend Carlton," he introduced himself.

"Cannon Cascade."

"What's going on, Cannon?"

"Lover's quarrel. They just came from the wedding planner."

"And?" he asked. There had to be an *'and'*. There always was.

"And from what I gather they ran out of hair at the weave place because he was fooling around which made them late."

"Ah." So that was it. Obviously the young buck didn't realize how important a black woman's hair was to her – even when she was buying it.

Well if they'd been at the wedding planners, and this boy had chased this little spitfire down the 405 like storm chaser's chasing F-4s in the Tornado Alley, then they were no doubt in love.

Going to his truck, he pulled out his stole and his Bible and marched back to the quarrelling couple. Turning to the couple he started the marriage ceremony. It took a moment for them to realize that they were getting married and another few minutes of her complaining to Cannon that she didn't want to marry the blond because he was an a-hole (*she censored herself due to his presence*).

Being the older black man Baptist preacher that he was, he amped up the authority in his voice and they immediately settled down. The blond kid said his '*I do's*' immediately; the woman took some prodding but she eventually said '*I do*' or rather '*I guess*' but he'd take what he could get. Turning to Matthew 19, he rattled off the sixth verse before pronouncing them man and wife. Giving Cannon his card, he gave him instructions.

"Have them come by to sign the paperwork."

And with that he shook his hand and got back into his truck. Damn kids were crazy as hell nowadays. He couldn't wait to get back to San Francisco. He had a meeting with Ms. Supernova Jones for an interview to divinity school. Strange name, but she had an impressive, if somewhat colorful résumé.

Y&R and J&J

This concludes Book 1 in the UNEXPECTED ENCOUNTERS series.

Thank you for reading. We hope that you enjoyed the adventure.

Yazmin, Reid, Jeanie, and Jayha

If you enjoyed the prose, hit us up and let us know:

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Yazmin Taylor and Reid Randolph

Yazmin Taylor is a southern-bred girl. Though she lives in a sprawling metropolis she still has a lot of country in her - just ask her friends who're often amused with her colorful country colloquialisms. She's a lover of books and when she has free time you'll find her attached to her laptop reading the latest romance or erotica e-book. She has a daughter that she'd do anything for including riding a roller coaster with a headscarf on in order to protect her enhanced hair! This may be her first foray into writing but it's not her first time weaving a story. A born storyteller, she's now sharing her talents ... after a little prodding from friends.

Reid Randolph is an urban, modern day version of Jackie O who considers shopping to be a basic right for all womankind. Her posh fashion sense almost tricks you into forgetting that she is totally bananas. When she isn't spoiling her diva dog, Reid can be found trying to relax in front of the boob tube, chatting with friends, exercising, or indulging her favorite addiction - **READING**. The worlds she finds herself in while reading is a perfect place for her to hide her cape, and pretend to be the sane one in her clique of friends who cherish her words of wisdom and easy going swagger.

Jeanie Johnson and Jayha Leigh

Besides being intelligent divas who pen kickass prose, Jeanie (the shagacious wordslinger) and her momma, Jayha (the ninja master of prose), are dessert-eating, take-no-shit, tell-it-like-they-feel instead of tell-it-like-people-want-to-hear-it women. They are women who have brains and aren't afraid to use them; feelings and aren't afraid to express them; and, middle fingers which they'll happily use to salute out of line peeps. Independently, both are forces of nature that leave you begging for mercy or begging for more.

A kickass tag team duo bound together by the pen, they plan on ruling the world side-by-side. Jeanie will be ruling in her favorite hoodie and her Chuck Taylors; Jayha will be wearing her Crocs, a blue t-shirt along with her halo. Of course, all ruling will be done swiftly as Jeanie is always out getting into sh*t and Jayha is busy indulging in her torrid affair with ESPN.

See people, this is the kind of publicity bio you get when your friends are freaking nuts.