



You Better Believe It's on Now

*I*t's crazy how passion can drive you to do things you never thought you could, Meena thought to herself, gazing out of the window. Although several years have passed, she thought of it all like she was still involved, as if, after she laid Simone down to sleep she would drive to one of the regular meetings. She glanced over at the girl, fast asleep in her tiny bed. Justin would be home soon, and she needed to shower and dress before the baby-sitter arrived.

Before she could make it up the entire staircase, the doorbell rang. She returned downstairs, and as she reached the bottom and extended her hand to the doorknob, she could feel herself slightly out of breath. *You used to run like a track star, look at you now, ready to have a heart attack* the overbearing voice inside her head chided. Blocking it out, she opened the door to the teenage girl who watched her child on occasion.

"Natasha, you're here already."

"Hi Mrs. Waters, sorry I'm so early, my mom dropped me off on the way to her city planning meeting."

"That's fine, I just need to prepare for my date. Justin is taking me to dinner and a movie and I don't want to keep him waiting. Make yourself at home, there's food in the refrigerator. Simone just went to sleep so you'll

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have some peace and quiet.” Without waiting for an answer she took the stairs two at a time, just to let the smartass voice in her head know she could still hang.

The moment she disrobed and stepped into the shower, the phone rang. The caller could be Justin, she thought as she reluctantly slipped across the tile, attempting to contact her as he often did when even five minutes late.

“Yes?”

“Meena.”

“Yes, who’s calling?”

Silence.

“Can you meet me tomorrow afternoon? I can’t tell you anything right now.”

“Who is this?”

She knew.

“Meet me on campus at the coffee shop.”

Meena released a painfully long sigh.

“I’ll see you at one.”

Dial tone.

Now, she could have said good-bye, shit. Wanna drag me all the way out to Berkeley for some coffee. I think I need to make this the last time this happens.

Meena made every attempt to put the brief conversation out of her head as she threw her towel on the floor and returned to the streaming water, but the thought of the woman’s troubled voice caused her hair to stand on the back of her neck. Her head began to ache, and Meena decided right then and there to make reservations in an Oakland motel. She would tell Justin that an unexpected business trip required her attention, and take care of this whiny, pathetic character she wished she had never met.

Justin should be here any minute, and he’ll know something’s up.

She could tell him anything to justify her current mood, and he would give her the space she needed to work it out. Some things -- Justin truly didn’t need to know. To buy herself additional time in the sanctuary of the bathroom, she poured a handful of shampoo into her hand and scrubbed her scalp as if to rid herself of the irritating voice from the telephone. It seemed to work as she started looking forward to watching a movie with her husband. The couple went out on dates regularly, particularly to view action movies. Jackie Chan and Jet Li were two of her favorites, while Justin still held old Bruce Lee flicks in the highest regard. He collected action movies as a hobby and Meena actually practiced martial arts. Watching the action on the big screen reminded her fondly of her training.

Kenya slammed the phone down as hard as she could and added yet another small crack to the phone base, then grabbed her kitten who began to relieve himself out of fear.

“Meena still acts like she doesn’t know who I am when I call. Well, it’s time for some things to change around here for real. I can’t wait to stick it to her tomorrow. We’ll be in public, so I’ll be safe.” She dropped the small animal immediately onto the carpet.

Part of her feared Meena deeply, but an even larger portion of her psyche wanted to control, dominate, and seek revenge. Kenya stared back at herself through the dusty mirror in her dim bedroom as she removed her soiled shirt. The reflection stared back at her with too much sadness for her to keep looking, so she turned away.

The anger quickly resurfaced as she wondered how everything turned out so right for Meena, while she found herself as lonely and confused as the day they met in class. For all appearances, Kenya was a beautiful woman. The dreadlocks she had lovingly grown since college were long and thick like black ropes, evidence of how well she cared for herself physically. She wasn’t a tall woman, but slender and toned enough to appear so. Kenya held her head high, almost too high, wherever she went and drew the attention of virtually every man with her slanted eyes and medium brown skin.

Most of the sane and well-adjusted brothers that became attracted to her beauty knew to look but not get too close. Each one could sense that something wasn’t quite clicking as she chattered away aimlessly from one subject to another in their company, or remained perfectly silent at all the wrong times. Kenya’s alternating melancholy and hostility arrived long before she did on most days in the form of a bad attitude that caught almost all that encountered it by surprise with its intensity. Even potential stalkers decided that tangling with her could become more trouble than it was worth and disappeared into thin air after spending the night once or twice. She dismissed them all as being no good, but it came down to the simple fact that, despite all her intentions, she was too needy for even the neediest man.

“If we do it right this time, I can get everything I need in my life, finally.” Kenya said to the kitty, who maintained a healthy distance in a dusty corner of the kitchen as Kenya flopped down onto her couch. She recalled what worked in their initial plan ten years ago, and assessed how things would need to change, with her taking charge this time. She finally rose as she felt frustration mounting, stretched, and sauntered to the refrigerator and pulled out tofu, eggplant and rice to prepare for dinner.

Kenya finished her meal, watched reruns in bed, and lazily slipped under the covers. Instead of sleep, her thoughts kept her awake. Her life was about to undergo metamorphosis — she could feel it, yet the risk involved made her extremely uneasy. She was putting a great deal at stake to get what she

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wanted, but sensed that it was critical in order to secure the love, a family of her own, and children she always wanted. It seemed after all those years that it would have just happened, should have been easy. Kenya had the looks, the education, the financial stability, but what she desired most seemed to be the most out of reach. This was the last year that she would be alone, she decided. As she drifted off to sleep, she saw an image of Meena with her back turned, walking away.

Kenya awoke feeling disturbed at about 2:30 AM and decided to call in sick, knowing that sleep would elude her for the rest of the night. She stumbled to the living room and poured a tall glass of vodka, eventually abandoning the glass for the bottle, which she chugged down to drown her anxiety. A couple of hours later she regretted drinking so heavily and spent a few unwelcome minutes in the bathroom paying for it. She forced some cereal down, dozed for several hours, and jumped up in a frenzy when she realized she was scheduled to meet Meena in only an hour's time.

Kenya peered into the bathroom mirror and stared back at what looked like a used up crack whore. She crumpled up on the bathroom floor and released several long, pitiful sobs. Her stomach lurched and she had only enough time to land a belly full of smelly cereal into the toilet bowl. *You idiot. You know if you show up looking like yesterday's trash Meena is going to take one look straight down her nose at you and walk away. Pull it together-a sis-ta. It's time to go.* The lukewarm shower only made her woozy, but she pulled on the clothes left on the chair next to the bed, applied lipstick and grabbed her car keys.

The morning sun made her believe momentarily that she was a vampire as the rays shot straight through her skull and burned a hole into the pit of her stomach. *You really, really are a mess.* She tried for what seemed like an hour to unlock the car door. Once inside, she laid her head on the steering wheel to steady herself and searched in the glove compartment for breath mints in case Oakland police stopped her and smelled her rotten vodka and cereal breath. Somehow, after a long while, she made it to Telegraph Avenue and took the right lane all the way to campus.

Justin remembered the flowers after he pulled onto Highway 29. He quickly made a U-turn and pulled out his cell phone.

"Ann, can you have a dozen long-stemmed roses ready? I'm a mile away."

"I was wondering if I was going to see you today. They'll be at the front counter. Your wife will love them."

Justin smiled to himself as he disconnected and drove the tree-shaded road to the florist. After paying for the flowers, he carefully placed them in the back seat and headed home. Complete adoration was what Justin felt for

Meena, and he made it his primary duty to keep her happy. It was odd, considering the fact that his wife could be almost completely void of feeling or emotion, but he loved her, nonetheless. Her warm brown tone was in stark contrast to his pale skin, and her eyes as brown as his own were blue. Occasionally, strangers would stare at their extreme difference in appearance. Although he was as handsome as she was beautiful, he was also as white as she was black. Perhaps it was Justin's upbringing that allowed him to look past her iciness and feel love. In many ways, personality wise, she was just like his mother for all of her many and varied faults. Strangely enough, she and Meena had grown to respect each other over the years. Neither woman liked the other, but the respect remained intact because they recognized that they were women who ruled their domains very similarly.

Before reaching the main highway, Justin took advantage of the moment and removed the top on his two-seater. The warm late summer air was still, and he enjoyed the heat as he cruised toward I-780 to Benicia. He and his wife owned a winery just inside Napa, and it provided work he simply loved. Meena rarely became involved with their customers directly, but he made it a point to mingle with guests who came for tours and made himself available at dinnertime for families who stayed over in the valley.

Deep in thought, Justin passed his own exit. He sped to an adjacent one, doubled back a couple of miles, and zoomed into his driveway. The baby-sitter saw him coming and opened the door.

"Hi Mr. Waters." Natasha said with a big smile and eyes that examined every inch of his lean body.

"Hi, uh, Natasha, right? Where's Meena, I hope I'm not too late."

"She's upstairs. Those flowers are beautiful."

"Thank you. Say, could you put them in water for me? I'll be back down to get them in a minute or two."

"I'd be happy to, let me know if I can do anything else for you."

Justin didn't notice the young green eyes taking him in, nor did he hear the suggestive tone in the girl's voice because he was already running upstairs and thinking of getting to Meena.

"Baby? I'm home." Justin assumed Meena would already be dressed and waiting. As soon as he stepped inside the bedroom, he heard the water running, and realized that he wasn't as late as he thought.

"Justin, you're home already? I'm dragging my feet today, I'll be out in a minute."

Normally he would have gone into the bathroom to get a kiss, but something in her tone of voice told him to leave her alone. She usually didn't address him by his name unless she had withdrawn deep into her own mental shell.

"Okay honey, I'm going downstairs."

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He removed his sports coat, strolled into the living room to peek in the bassinet at his baby girl. After kissing her forehead, he went to the kitchen, where he found Natasha and the flowers. She had already placed them in a vase and parked herself on the phone, talking about an upcoming party with her girlfriend. As soon as she heard footsteps, she rushed off the phone and faced Justin.

“I took care of the flowers, Mr. Waters. Your wife is a very lucky woman.”

With a blushed smile, Justin thanked her, picked up the vase, and exited the kitchen as quickly as possible. He noticed her peculiar gaze and finally recognized it, as her mother had behaved the same way, yet had been far more aggressive. One day the older woman had cornered him at the supermarket.

“Justin, I’d like to taste your wine.” She stood in the fruit section, never taking her eyes away from the two peaches she caressed and squeezed to test their ripeness.

“Why don’t you come up to the winery on Wednesday, Helen? I’m sure we won’t be too busy and I can spend some time with you.” Justin said while filling up his basket with strawberries and honeydew melon.

“Allow me to make myself more clear. I want a personal wine-tasting, so why don’t you bring a bottle over to my place and we can see what happens.” She managed to stroke his arm and block his path all at the same time.

“Look, I’m happily married, you seem like an attractive enough lady and I’m sure you could find someone more available than me.” Justin said in a hushed tone, trying to look as if he was examining the contents of his shopping cart.

The conversational mood shifted. “I don’t know what you see in that stuck up black bitch. She’s not the type of woman you should be with, surely you miss women like me. Anyway, suit yourself. It won’t last, and you will have missed out on all of this, you jerk.”

Natasha’s mother promptly jumped on her broomstick and rode to the checkout counter, then swooshed out of the store and into the sky with her cape flowing behind. At least that’s what Justin thought as he tried to get refocused on his shopping list and out of the supermarket.

He pushed those memories out of his head as he reentered his bedroom. This time, Meena was drying herself off and had assembled her outfit on the edge of their king bed. Justin presented her with the roses and a kiss. Her mood seemed to have improved, and she hugged him and asked about his day. After some small talk and a few more kisses and hugs they headed out for their date.

After dining at their favorite restaurant in Oakland they walked to Jack London Square for a movie, which Meena couldn’t devote her attention to

because she was still pissed off about the phone call. She'd managed to fake it for Justin, and even pulled off a couple of I'm-laughin'-so-hard-I-need-to-toss-my-head-backs at dinner to let him know that she was alright. She realized on the drive home that she needed to get prepared for the next day's affairs.

"Sweetie, I received a phone call from my brother and he wants me to handle some business for him. I'm leaving in the morning and should be back the following day."

"Sounds pretty sudden, but I understand. I can actually stay at home and take care of Simone. I'll call the baby-sitter in the morning."

Justin rarely pried and knew that when she mentioned a 'business trip' it meant that she was going somewhere that was ultimately none of his business.

Only she hadn't anticipated his offer to stay at home. She needed to pack items for her meeting and figured that she would have to steal the opportunity while Justin slept.

The couple pulled into the driveway and opened the door to Natasha sprawled across their couch with her feet up and the phone pressed to her head, laughing uncontrollably. One look from Meena intimidated the girl, who cut off the amusing conversation and struggled immediately to her feet. Simone was now awake, playing with her toys, and had been laughing with the baby-sitter as she carried on. Meena reached into her purse, paid Natasha, and bid her good-bye. Justin almost felt sorry for the girl, knowing how condescending his wife could be at times, until the teenager winked at him on her way out the door as she pulled her sweater on. He hurriedly closed the door behind her, walked over to scoop up Simone, and followed Meena upstairs.

By the time Justin ensured that Simone was comfortable and on her way to sleep, Meena was already under the covers and breathing deeply as she settled into slumber. He quietly undressed and slipped into bed beside her, wrapped his arm around her waist and fell asleep with his head resting against the back of her neck.

Meena tried to move quietly from under Justin's arm at about 4:00 AM. She determined the best decoy was to get out of bed, go to the bathroom, and return to bed until she could hear him snoring soundly. She itched to spring into action, and after about fifteen minutes, she rose and crept into their walk-in closet to pull her suitcase down from the shelf. Meena retrieved her silver .44 Magnum from its hiding place, checked to see that it was loaded, and packed several rounds of bullets into the interior pocket of the suitcase. She pulled her bulletproof vest out of its box, tried it on for fit, pleased that it still fit comfortably. Meena searched for her nun chucks and felt exasperated that she hid them so well that she couldn't locate them herself. Last, but most

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important, she placed her meditation mat and candles into her suitcase and locked it. She slipped back under Justin's arm and managed to sleep until the alarm sounded off at 7:00 AM. An hour later she smelled the aroma of coffee and pastry and jumped out of bed as she viewed the time on the bedside alarm clock. Perturbed that Justin let her sleep so long after the alarm sounded, she quickly bathed, donned a black turtleneck, black pants, and black boots and pulled her hair into a ponytail.

"I should have been on the road about half an hour ago, why did you let me sleep so late?" Meena poured coffee into a mug.

"I didn't want to disturb you. I heard you get up a couple of times last night and you kept tossing and turning, and I wanted you to rest before you got out on the road."

Meena loved Justin as much as she was capable of loving anyone, which, unfortunately, wasn't much. He was a nice man and she respected him. She promised herself that she would avoid doing anything to hurt him if she could, especially since he was the father of her child. He served a purpose, which was to provide for her and her child. She did her part to make sure everything ran smoothly, even if she had to lie to him to keep things together.

"Thanks for looking out for me, but I'm going to be in more trouble than ever if I'm late meeting Dexter. I better go. I'll check in with you once I get settled." She pecked him on the forehead, dashed upstairs, grabbed her belongings, and headed for the front door, hearing Justin mumble something about fainting in her black getup in the summer heat. Meena realized as she finished placing her belongings in the car trunk that she neglected to say good-bye to her daughter and let herself back into the house. She found herself watching Simone play in her bed when the phone rang. As she reached over to pick up the cordless in her baby's room, Justin simultaneously answered the call. The caller on the other end remained silent for a few seconds before hanging up. Meena kissed Simone good-bye and realized that it was time to begin her journey.

She knew for certain that she would avoid staying in a Berkeley hotel and feel forced to face the student traffic. Those on foot walked out in front of cars as if their behinds were insured for millions, and the drivers didn't care one way or another about traffic rules providing they arrived to class on time. Not that she didn't enjoy the city — the time she spent away made her realize how chaotic the place could be and she presently needed to focus.

Meena took the University Avenue exit and drove the streets to Oakland, which allowed her to first drive by the college and start getting comfortable with her surroundings. Even though she only lived twenty miles away, Berkeley seemed a completely different world entirely. Benicia was beautiful and she lived well, but Berkeley, in fact, the entire east bay, had its own flavor and she missed the diversity of the area. She drove past the massive

campus, continuing down Telegraph Avenue until she arrived at a motel. Meena asked for their largest room, ignoring another patron as he tried to smile and make conversation at the front desk. By the time she settled in, the bedside clock read 9:30 AM, and in the few hours before her rendezvous, she took the time to unpack her bags and put on her gun holster. Her original plan included hours of meditation and yoga, but she wasn't quite in the mood after all, feeling incredibly annoyed that she was going through with the meeting in the first place. Meena knew that she held the opportunity to put everything behind her, however, and the best way to accomplish that was to face the problem head on.

After daydreaming about driving directly to the spa to relax after she set Kenya straight and on her way, she reluctantly lit her candles and placed the mat on the floor. She sat perfectly still while clearing her mind, focusing on nothing, taking in everything. An hour passed before she brought herself back slowly. Meena wanted to remain in her blissful state, but knew the reward of moving forward would be much greater.

I should have rented a car. She picked up the phone and twenty-five minutes later a rental car agent met her in the lobby. They drove to the nearby office, where the man helped her fill out her paperwork and presented her with the keys to a black Grand Am. Once the seat and mirrors were adjusted to her liking, she pulled out into traffic, and drove toward her old stomping ground.

Meena arrived with ten minutes to spare, so she avoided the elevator and walked to the parking deck staircase and down three flights. The corner cafe where she used to study had changed names, and she peered through the window to look inside. She saw no one that resembled Kenya, but proceeded to enter and wait in line for a cup of tea. Once she seated herself, she stirred the beverage, then pushed it away, noticing its scalding heat. It could cool off until Kenya arrived.

Thirty-five more minutes passed and still no sight of Kenya. Meena began to believe that she had been stood up, so she opened her purse to search for her car keys. She glanced upward for a second and was shocked to see a disheveled black woman walking in her direction. As Kenya drew close she removed her sunglasses to expose a tired and bloated face. A lipstick smear at the left corner of her mouth appeared as caked blood and liquor reeked as it seeped from her pores and offended the senses. Meena wanted to run away from the sickening smell and moved back in her chair. Something inside of her almost made her want to laugh at this disgusting display. Strangely enough, though, the sight only made her feel enormous pity.

"So, I see you finally made it," Meena said, afraid that she might disturb whatever storm was brewing behind those puffy, bloodshot eyes.

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“You’re very observant,” Kenya’s sarcasm was getting the best of her, but she immediately retreated. She knew she could not piss Meena off within the first five minutes of their reunion if she intended to gain her trust. “I’m sorry. I’m a little irritable and I woke up not feeling my best. Do you mind if I quickly get some coffee? It should help straighten me out and then we can get down to business.”

“Help yourself. I can wait.” Meena began tapping lightly on the stained wood table, *tap, tap, tick, tap, tap, tick, tick, tap, tap, tick, tick...*

“I’ll be right back then.” The infuriating tapping sound made Kenya want to explode onto the table as she struggled to rise from her chair. She turned in the opposite direction of the counter and walked until she realized she was going in the wrong direction, then clumsily turned around and stumbled to the cashier. *Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.*

As she returned to the table with her hot brew she thought she noticed a smirk form on Meena’s face, but it disappeared into a thin, benign smile as quickly as it appeared. After a few quick sips and no complaints from her stomach, the acidity in her voice returned, only more controlled.

“I know it’s been a while since we’ve seen each other, and I’m so glad that you decided to meet me today. Being here with you reminds me of the day we met and became friends.”

Meena stared.

Perspiration beads on Kenya’s forehead became small pools that splashed and dived down the sides of her face.

“I had some ideas I wanted to, to share with you. You know, you remember when we were in school, we really, we really made some changes. We did a lot of good things for sisters, you and me. You had the ideas, I carried them out, it worked so well, we worked so well together,” Kenya said and observed Meena, who finally looked away and gazed into her teacup.

“Meena, you know, I was think, thinking, maybe we could start over, you know, pick up where things left off? Now, I know, I know, things didn’t end on such a good note and it got a little messy, but I know where we went wrong and I think it could work this time. See, all we need to do is...”

“Kenya,” Meena said.

She continued to ramble before she realized that her name had been called. Kenya was not at all prepared for Meena’s indifference.

“Meena would you just hear me out.”

“I’ve been listening to you go on and on about the life we had in college and how wonderful and exciting it was but I think it’s time that we both move on.”

“So easy for you to say. You know *sistah*, I’ve been putting up with your high and mighty attitude since I met you, so why don’t you hush up and let

me do the talking for once. I've been through a lot since the day you disappeared. You were my best friend, we were a team. I had no one after you left and the others scattered. I know why you left so abruptly, I do, I understand. But it didn't make it right. You left the rest of us holding the bags while you ran to hide. Well, I've got news — we have unfinished business that is about to get finished. Only this time, I'll be running things, and if you know what is good for you, you will do what I tell you from here on out." By the time Kenya finished her speech, her face dripped with perspiration.

Meena's agitation became apparent. "I suppose I need to understand better why you think you need my assistance."

"You know what I need help with. We'll need to train people and we'll need money."

"I can't help you with that. I have other responsibilities now."

"Oh, you can, and you will. If you don't I'll see to it that your little happy family life is destroyed." Kenya's bloodshot eyes were on fire and her head repeatedly bounced to one side as she sprayed saliva in every direction.

Meena had been waiting to hear the direct threat against her family's welfare. "Alright, Kenya, just calm down. Maybe we can work something out. We apparently need to talk about this in some detail. I'll tell you what, why don't we go to a more secluded place where you can tell me more about your plans."

It worked. Kenya could not believe her ears. Now she was speechless. She had put herself through so much that whole morning and felt terribly exhausted. Her stomach was growling and she wanted to return to her warm bed, but was well aware that she could not miss out on this turn of fortune. Kenya cleared her throat and sat straight up in her chair. "That's more like it, I always knew you were smart and could catch on fast."

"My car is close, we can take it and head up to Tilden park and walk the trail as we talk. You can rest on the way up." Meena stood and headed toward the door. She slowed her pace as she looked back and saw Kenya dragging behind out of the corner of her eye. Rolling her eyes up into her head, she tried her best to place her mind elsewhere as Kenya began chatting away about how it seemed like old times. The noise continued until they were seated in the car, at which time Kenya began to snore and lean whichever way the car turned on the road. Meena wanted to speed up, open the door, unlock sleeping beauty's seat belt and shove her out while the car was moving but resisted the urge. Instead, she cruised Grizzly Peak Boulevard until a parking space opened up close to the park entrance. Kenya awoke as the engine stopped purring.

"I hope you can handle a good long hike." Meena said as she emerged from the rental car.

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Kenya was in no shape to hike, or walk for that matter, in the hot sun. The afternoon temperature had reached its peak at 95 degrees Fahrenheit for the day, and she felt the effects in her dry mouth. Still, she owned the spotlight. With that knowledge, she silently issued orders to her legs and arms to get her out of the automobile and commands to her head, throat, and stomach to shut up.

Once again Meena had to struggle to allow Kenya to keep the pace, particularly since she wanted her in close proximity in order to accomplish her task. She also couldn't have the wretch fainting in the dust because she had no intentions of carrying her anywhere. Meena finally slowed to a stop, suddenly annoyed with herself for wearing black clothing in the almost unbearable heat. She recalled hearing Justin mention her attire before she left home, but she ignored him as she often did. She made a mental note to consider more of his suggestions and input from that point on.

After about a mile on the trail Kenya began to see spots before her eyes. Her face was drenched, but she felt cold and achy. In order to talk she knew she would have to ask Meena to stop and sit with her.

"We can't stop here, you know snakes are all over this trail. If you can keep going about a hundred yards, there's a clearing with some tables and benches." Meena could hear the heavy breathing and groans escape the lips of her companion, but did not slow her pace. Twenty-five yards later she spotted an area dense with trees and allowed Kenya to catch up. Once she drew close, Meena grabbed her arm, shoved her into the shaded area and twisted her arm behind her back until she fell to her knees. Meena grabbed her dreadlocks at the crown and pulled her head back to enable Kenya to view the gun pointed at her temple. Releasing the safety, she dug the tip of the gun into Kenya's flesh. Kenya cried out. In a deadeningly tranquil monotone Meena gave her own long awaited speech.

"I want you to stay away from me and forget that you ever knew me. I know that we were comrades long ago and shared many experiences. That's all behind me now and I intend to keep it that way, and anyone who attempts to interfere with that will pay for it. You seem to have forgotten that I don't respond to threats. I suggest you sign up for some mental help, you are even more confused and lost than when we were younger and didn't know any better. Lose my telephone number and mention to no one that you talked with me today. If I ever hear from you again I will hunt you down like an animal and no one will ever discover what happened to you when I am finished. I hope I've made myself clear."

Before Kenya could even make a sound Meena struck her on the back of the head with her gun. Once she became unconscious, Meena left her lying on her side to keep her from choking. Killing her was not in the plan but she wanted to leave the park alone without incident. She walked a few feet away

and glanced back to make certain that Kenya could not be seen easily from the trail. Satisfied with her deed, Meena half-walked and half-jogged back to her car and drove away after observing her surroundings for police or security vehicles, hoping to appear relaxed and unhurried.

Kenya awakened slowly, believing at first that she was at home in bed. Then, her memory began to offer shades of the recent past as something tickled her arm. She managed to raise her head enough to notice the uninterrupted trail of ants that continued their march over her arm, and if that wasn't enough, her head dropped back down to the ground like a fifty-pound dumbbell. What seemed like a few minutes later she awakened, startled by men's voices and the sound of radio static, and the darkness kept her from seeing the officer's face. "I have a black female in her late twenties to early thirties who appears to have either collapsed or been attacked here on one of the trails. Send some paramedics and I'll try to keep her conscious." The officer searched for identification without moving her body but none could be found. Once the paramedics arrived and moved her onto a cot, they were able to determine by examination that she had sustained a concussion and remained unconscious due to dehydration. After asking questions that she did not answer, they wheeled her into the ambulance and took her to Alta Bates hospital for treatment and overnight observation.

Meena made it back to her motel and was glad that she rented a room after what just took place in the park clearing. She had labored for years to keep her former exploits and her new life with Justin separate. Something told her that the effort to keep the two disjoined would become increasingly difficult from that point on.

She changed into lighter clothing, stretched across the bed, and turned on the television. While channel flipping she reflected on how she abused and abandoned her old classmate and felt guilt settle into the lining of her stomach. Nevertheless, she wanted to get her point across, crystal clear, and she felt that she had accomplished the task. Her actions, depending on how vindictive Kenya decided to be, could easily wage a civil war with countless others.

A couple of hours passed with her staring at the television but lost in thought. Meena concentrated on the importance of staying two steps ahead of Kenya. She retrieved her cell phone from her purse and dialed, spoke a few words, grabbed her coat and headed for the motel parking lot. Within minutes she was driving through North Berkeley, oblivious to her surroundings, heading for Gilman Street. She parked in front of an old familiar Spanish-style home, walked up the stairs, knocked on the door, and disappeared inside.