

M.J.Kane Media

Crossroads

A Butterfly Memoirs Novella

By M.J. Kane
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Chapter 1

Ebony

“Brian? Hello, can you hear me?” My hand went to the volume switch on my earpiece before I dug into the bowels of my purse, retrieved my cell phone, and checked how many bars were on the screen. Crap.

“Ebony, baby, I can barely hear you.” My husband sounded as frustrated as I felt.

I moved away from the baggage claim carousel and closer to the enormous glass windows in the airport, praying for a better signal. “How about now?”

“Better. Wherever you are, don’t move. I’ve only got a few minutes left.” Melodic sounds of various instruments being played in a state of chaotic warm-ups warred with Brian’s voice.

I glanced at the time on my phone and calculated the time zone difference between Los Angeles and Atlanta. While it was nine p.m. here, it was just six back home. Brian was just getting ready to record.

“Have you called Trevon yet?” The background noise lowered; he must have left the recording booth and stepped outside.

“No, I wanted to talk to you first. Besides, it’s not like my brother is picking me up. The rental car will have GPS and the hotel is only a few miles from here. I’ll be fine.”

Brian sighed. “I know, it’s just—”

I smiled. “I miss you, too.”

Brian chuckled. “Can’t say worried, I remember. Take care of yourself, baby. Watch your surroundings at all times, and text me the minute you get your rental car.”

“And when I get to the hotel, and when I’m in my room, and the door is locked behind me. Funny, I don’t remember asking you to do this much when you were on the road for three months.”

“That’s because I’m a guy and was with a ton of people. You’re alone in another state for your job and—”

“I like the way you left out female.” I couldn’t hide the hint of annoyance in my voice.

Brian's chuckle was brief. "I was going to say my wife."

"Sure." The annoyed feeling left as I listened to the way the word rolled off his tongue. We'd been married for more than a year, it was still hard to believe I was his wife.

"I never thought I would say this, but I'm jealous of your boss. He's going to have you to himself for two months."

My laugh was so loud I had to cover my mouth as people in my vicinity turned to see who was making the noise. "I'm sure his wife feels the same way. Maybe you guys can hook up there, while we hook up here. You can have your cougar fling while I enjoy my sugar daddy."

Brian's response was music to my ears. "And that's why I love you, that crazy sense of humor." He paused, then sighed. "Damn, they're calling me. I gotta go, baby. Be careful, text me and let me know what's going on. I'll reply when I can and call if it's not too late when we're done."

"I will. Don't worry, Brian, I'm a big girl. I'll be fine. I love you."

"I know. I love you, too."

I pushed a button on the console of my rental car and heard a beep as the Bluetooth feature connected. "Travon, I think I got my phone connected."

"I'm here. Where are you now?" My twin brother's voice filled the car.

It was embarrassing having to call my brother because I got lost. Driving down an unfamiliar highway at night and the fact a tractor trailer caused me to miss my exit was frustrating. The GPS had recalculated my route, but I was wary of getting off the highway at any random point and trusting its new instructions.

"I think I'm still on I-75. I was supposed to get off at I-20 East. Right now I'm looking at downtown Atlanta." The lights on the bridge overhead and glare from the lights of the tall buildings lining the side of the highway illuminated the car. "I just passed a building that said 'Grady'. Was that a hospital?"

"Damn, Eb, you did miss the exit. You should have let me pick you up at the airport."

I cringed, but had to agree.

“From the sound of it, you’re about five minutes from the exit to my condo. You passed the baseball stadium, right?”

“Yes, I think so. My hotel is supposed to be near there.” My grip on the steering wheel tightened as another eighteen wheeler barreled past me.

“Okay, this is what you need to do. Get off at the nearest exit, and I’ll guide you through the backstreets.”

Before long, I pulled into the parking lot of my hotel. After thanking my brother, we made plans to meet in the hotel lobby for breakfast tomorrow morning. Dr. Tucker wasn’t scheduled to arrive until that evening. Travon and I would have an entire day to hang out before the real reason I was in Atlanta came to fruition.

Safe and sound behind the locked door of my hotel room, I texted Brian, but didn’t expect to hear from him until the wee hours of the morning. I took a shower, dug into my bag of snacks, then turned on the TV.

Since becoming a married woman, this was the first night away from my husband.

I missed him...my home...our bed.

Unable to settle, I gathered the pillows on the bed, piled them in the middle, and snuggled against one, imagining Brian’s arms were wrapped around me. I left the volume of the TV down low to drown out the voices in the hallway and the sound of the ice machine that was a few feet away from my door. The illumination kept me from feeling alone.

My thoughts went to the reason why I was here.

A new job opportunity. A chance to do exactly what Brian had done when he left me. Follow my dream.

While I knew for a fact Brian supported my desire to advance in my career, I also knew that deep down, he wanted me home. His reasoning wasn’t due to feeling insecure about our relationship, nor was he trying to control what I did with my life. He knew just as well as I did that making this change now would delay our life goals as a couple.

As it was, I’d already left him in a position to make a major decision without me. Taking this new job meant we would have to relocate from Los Angeles to San Diego. Once I accepted the new position, everything had moved so fast that neither of us were able to schedule time to do any house hunting together before I had to leave for Atlanta. Now that I would be gone for eight weeks, it was all up to him. When I returned, it would be packing, then moving, then starting a new chapter in our lives.

And if I was reading my husband correctly, it wasn’t the chapter he wanted.

For the hundredth time, I hoped my decision to take this new job would be worth everything I left behind.

After eight weeks of on the job training at Zoo Atlanta, I would be home again.

Hopefully my marriage would still be in tack.

Chapter 2

Travon

“Baby brother!”

My twin sister leapt, toward me, wrapping her arms around me in a fierce hug.

“Baby, yeah, right. Then why do you have to jump like Jordan to hug me, shorty?”

Ebony laughed and kissed my cheek. “Don’t be mad, Trevon. You know that being born five minutes after me makes you the youngest.”

I lowered her to her feet, then stepped back to appraise her. It had been a year since I saw her face-to-face, the last time had been at her wedding in California. And now she’d found her way to Georgia.

She appeared to be happy, tanned, if that was even possible for black folks, and with newly braided hair, a bit younger.

I pointed to her braids. “Nice natural facelift you got there.”

As expected, my comment was rewarded with a punch in the ribs. Just like old times.

“Don’t knock the hairdo. Unlike California, Atlanta is too humid. I have no intention of having my natural hair look like a huge ball of twine while at work.” She ran a hand over it. “And the fact that these tight braids pull on my skin a bit to give me a ‘youthful look’ is just a happy side effect.”

I chuckled. “What did my brother-in-law have to say about it?”

“Brian loved it. He said it made him feel like he was sleeping with another woman.” She rolled her eyes. “You men are crazy.” She locked her arm in the crook of mine. “So, where are we going for brunch?”

I guided my sister out of the hotel lobby and into the parking lot. “Depends on what you’re in the mood for. Hotlanta’s got a bit of everything. I say we hit up an all you can eat Chinese buffet. You’ll find Chinese food and soul food at the same time.”

Ebony’s eyes shot to me in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

I nodded, then hit the key fob for my car. She stopped dead in her tracks and stared at my ride. I smiled with pride. My Dodge Charger was jet black, with tinted out windows, and had yellow rims that set off the yellow racing stripes on the hood and doors. The interior was even sexier, carrying the black and yellow theme with black seats and a yellow trimmed dashboard.

Her brow shot up as she walked around taking it in from all sides. “Um...compensating for something?”

“Hell, no. I’ve got a phone book full of women eager to attest to the fact that I’m not lacking in any department.”

Ebony burst out laughing. “Damn, I was just kidding. You men are way too sensitive when it comes to that. Honestly, women don’t care so much about size. It’s the technique that matters most.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but she held up a finger that made me pause.

“My man ain’t lackin’ so don’t even go there.”

I threw my head back and howled. “So how is old Mr. Ed anyway? I’m surprised he let you out of his sight. How long are you supposed to be here?”

“Eight weeks.”

I snuck a peek at her before pulling out of the parking lot. Though she appeared excited, I caught a brief glimpse of uncertainty. “Can you handle it? The time apart?”

She released a long breath. “It’s not the first time we’ve been apart, and it won’t be the last. At least it won’t be as long this time. Besides, training in Atlanta is a requirement of my new position.” She dug her phone out of her purse, fingers gliding quickly over the keyboard, no doubt letting her husband know that she was with me. “Brian understands that. If he didn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“I don’t understand. You’ve got a good job now. Why do you have to come here for a promotion?”

Beside me, Ebony adjusted her seat belt. “It’s not really a promotion, it’s an opportunity.”

I glanced her way. “For?”

“For the past few years I’ve worked with orangutans at the Los Angeles Zoo. I’ve made a name for myself. I’ve also let it be known that I want to work with different animals, large ones to be

exact. The San Diego Zoo had an open spot for a veterinarian in their Panda habitat, I applied and got the job. Now I'm going through training for the Panda breeding program. It just so happens that Zoo Atlanta has a panda nearing her mating cycle. So, we're here to learn from the staff on what we need to do with our pandas."

"For two months."

"Yes, for two months."

"Y'all are better than me. I'd never be able to let my woman leave for that amount of time."

Her phone vibrated, and she typed again before slipping it into her purse. "And that is why you're single."

I accelerated as we merged with highway traffic. The purr of the engine and kick of speed fueled my high. Damn, I love my car.

"I'm single by choice, Ebony."

"Why? Because you're having a tough time finding the right woman? I could have sworn you were ready to settle down a few years ago."

The right woman? Try finding a *real* woman. I want a woman who is caring and supportive; a woman who can put others before herself and isn't materialistic. I want a woman who has beauty and intelligence. Someone who can keep me engaged when our clothes were on, and fulfill my needs when they were off.

My ex-girlfriend Trina was smart and funny. We had the potential for our relationship to turn into a real commitment, but the minute she started talking about marriage, I freaked and screwed up. She retaliated and did the same. In the end, the damage was done and we parted ways. I haven't seen or heard from her in two years. It's as though she's dropped off the face of the earth.

"Things change," I mumbled.

"You can say that again. So, that's enough about each other's love life. You ready to be an uncle again?"

My attention shot to the passenger side of the vehicle. "You're pregnant?"

An expression of horror crossed her face. "Not me, LaShana. She's on baby number two."

"She can have it. I'm not ready for all of that just yet."

I was happy with my life, despite what happened between Trina and me. For two years we were together, and for two years I'd been faithful. Since our breakup, I'd been enjoying the player status, and sitting back watching my friend Andre enjoy the benefits of marriage and being a family man.

Andre had been married to Sharice for over five years, and they were about to welcome their first child into the world. Well, her first, his second. The whole ex-girlfriend/baby momma situation was too much for me. For years, the mother of his child held it over Sharice's head that while she may have married him, it was her who bore his first born.

Caught between two equally strong women with claims to his heart and wallet, Andre somehow managed to stay sane.

If there was one thing I could be proud of as a man, it was the fact that as many women who'd crossed my mattress over the years, never once had there been an issue of sexually transmitted diseases, nor one near miss of baby momma blues.

Yet, deep down I knew if I ever found Mrs. Right, I wanted it all, the entire package. Brick house, picket fence, 2.5 kids, and a dog.

Did I have a prototype? Not really. Why bother? Women changed their appearance so much it was like mixing and matching.

Big boobs or little ones? Small ass or fat ass? Short hair or waist length extensions? Eye color was just a matter of spinning the color wheel. And style of dress? It was damn near impossible to tell what woman was dressed to attract or who was out to make money.

The only thing I knew for sure was if I ran into a woman meant for me, she'd knock me off my feet before I realized it.

Until then, I was a free agent.

"I'll cross that bridge when it's time. Right now, I'll keep having fun being single. You and Shana can enjoy married life."

Ebony laughed. "Mom's been hinting at the fact she'd like to see me and Brian pop out a grandchild soon."

I cringed. "She knows not to ask me that question. I have no intention of having kids until I settle down. My seed is too special to land anywhere."

“Eww. Not an image I want to have.” Ebony made a face and shook her head.

I chuckled. “I take it you guys aren’t making plans yet.” I shot a glance in her direction as laughter ceased.

I may not have been around my sister for a while, but I know when something bothered her.

“I honestly don’t know, Tre. I’ve watched my friends have kids, and I love babysitting. Sometimes Brian and I watch them together. It feels like we’re playing house. Brian will get this glow in his eyes when holding Yasmine’s son, like he wants one of his own.” Her gaze went to her hands. “Did I ever tell you I could have been pregnant once?”

I started to make a smart remark about need to know, but her voice indicated there was something serious about to be shared. “No. When?”

She took a deep breath, her eyes never leaving her fingers. “Before I was raped.”

My grip on the steering wheel tightened so hard that my knuckles turned white. Hearing those words pissed me off all over again. If I’d known what had happened to her, I would have been on the first flight to Los Angeles to kick the ass of the man who hurt my sister. Knowing Brian had done it in my place made me feel a little bit better, but it didn’t keep me from fantasizing about it.

“Was it Brian’s baby?”

Her reply came as a shrug in my peripheral. “Ebony, what do you mean you don’t know?”

“It’s complicated.” She paused, cleared her throat. “I had to make a decision that I’ve lived with for the past year and I can’t help thinking I took something from us...from Brian.”

I risked a peek at Ebony as I slowed to turn into the parking lot of our destination. “Has he mentioned having kids?”

“No, and he won’t because he knows how I feel about my career.”

“And now you’re in Georgia for two months following that career, and you suspect he really wants to be doing something else with your future.”

She nodded.

“Hate to tell you this, Eb, but you’re here now, it’s too late to go back.”

My sister blew out a long breath. “I know.”

Chapter 3

Ebony

How in the world did I end up running late? If Brian saw me now, he'd be laughing his butt off.

Me, the queen of getting to work on time. A second night in a row of sleeping alone left me tossing and turning for most of the night. And of course, by the time I got some sleep, it was nearly time to get up. If it wasn't for Dr. Tucker calling me to meet for breakfast, I'd still be in bed dreaming.

Swimming pools filled with fish and blue-eyed babies with golden brown hair.

In the bathroom, I splashed water in my face.

Babies. The dream was nothing but the manifestations of conversations with my mother and the fact my sister was pregnant. What else could it be? I had too much going on to even think about going down that life path.

Brian and I wanted to have kids one day. We'd been married for a year and a half but had not set a timeline on when to reach our goal. We lived our lives and enjoyed the benefits of hard work. With our hectic schedules, it often felt as though we spent more time passing each other on the way to and from work. That didn't stop us from spending quality time together, not by a long shot. When Brian had recording sessions at the studio that worked late into the night, I set the clock in order to wake up and greet him when he returned, even if I had to get up early the next morning. On the evenings he had off, he planned special dates and greeted me when I returned home after a long day at work.

Our schedules, while as crazy as it seemed, worked because we supported each other's goals.

Now, after eight long years of hard work, I'd graduated from college and earned my veterinarian degree.

Dr. Ebony M. Young, DVM.

For years I imagined the degree ending with my maiden name of Campbell, but I liked seeing my married name on the license. I ignored my sister's suggestion of hyphenating my last name, though. As independent as I was, I believed in the age old tradition of taking my husband's last name and leaving my maiden name behind.

Besides, when we did have kids, how would it read on the birth certificate?

Wait a minute, why was I thinking about babies again?

I brushed my teeth, threw on my clothes, thankful for the fact that I'd taken a shower before climbing into bed, and headed downstairs to meet Dr. Tucker. No more thinking of babies or starting a family. Right now, my time was all about me.

“And this is the break room,” the tour guide said.

Dr. Tucker and I were being given the grand tour of Zoo Atlanta, behind the scenes. Everyone here seemed cordial. That was one thing I loved about the South. Smiles and hellos were hard to come by in L.A. Everyone seemed content with not speaking and minding their own business. I had gotten used to it after residing there for nearly nine years.

“Next stop, the Panda Exhibit.”

My attention perked up.

We walked down a narrow path until we came upon a sign on a door labeled with a cartoon drawing of a panda. Excited, my heart raced. The minute we stepped inside, I inhaled the scent of the animals and the bamboo.

We were directed to a set of large observation panels that looked into a room where the animals were housed at night.

Our guide, Felicity, went to the window and held out her arms, Vanna White style. “Let me introduce you to Mei Lun and Mei Huan!”

“They are gorgeous!” I managed to keep my voice a whisper as I squatted down next to the window and placed my hand on the glass.

The twins lay on their backs, but when they realized there were new people in the facility, they lazily rolled over on their sides. It appeared they were waking from a nap.

One of the more curious pandas made its way over to the window, observing us with large dark eyes. The wide, black, nose sniffed before licking the glass as if trying to catch our scent.

“Let me share some little known facts about our panda family...”

I listened with enthusiasm as our guide shared details about the Pandas inhabiting their zoo. Though I'd researched the care of the animal for the past few weeks, there was nothing like getting information from the source.

Next, we followed her to another holding pen where the mother and father pandas were kept.

"Now, let's go to where the fun really happens." We followed Felicity through a door that led to a room where several workers were wheeling barrels of bamboo toward the Panda's holding pens. "It's feeding time!"

I kept my girlish giggle inside and watched as bamboo was distributed to each animal. Observing the activities was an amazing experience. Without thinking, I was making mental notes of the steps being taken by the staff and imagining what it would be like to do this for the pandas in San Diego.

"You seem to really be into it." A deep chuckle came from behind me.

"I can't help it. They are beautiful!" The joy I felt inside kept my cheeks spread in a goofy grin. I looked up to see who had spoken to me.

My eyes traveled to a man who stood with both hands in his pockets, and a soft smile on his face. He appeared to be a few years older than me, and had dark skin and dark brown eyes. His shirt was different from the others which meant he must be the man in charge.

"Welcome to our facility. My name is Kenneth. And you are?" He held out a hand to my boss, his attention leaving me.

"Dr. Tucker, but you can call me Barry." They shook hands before Kenneth's gaze turned in my direction.

"Ebony." I smiled and accepted the handshake he offered.

"Ebony, it's nice to meet you." Kenneth didn't rush to let go of my hand, and instead looked me up and down.

My smile faltered ever so slightly. It had been a long time since I ran into a man that made me pause.

Not since the night that I meet my husband.

Kenneth stepped away and went to the aid of his workers. But when he had a moment, his attention came back to me.

Oh boy, this was going to be trouble.

Chapter 4

Trevon

“Alex, throw the ball!”

I forced myself to groan instead of curse. The last thing I needed was for any of the parents of the kids I worked with to hear that Coach Campbell cursed them out during practice.

I gestured for the young man to come to the sideline.

“Alex,” I put a hand on his shoulder to get his full attention. “Teamwork is all about the team.”

“But coach—”

I put up a finger. “Listen,”

His mouth shut as he rolled his eyes.

“You can grandstand on your own time. We have plays to run through before the next game. This play needs you to *pass* the ball to Geoffrey—”

“Coach, Geoffrey dunno know how to—”

I clamped my teeth together and inhaled, praying for patience. “This isn’t the NBA, Alex. How is Geoffrey going to learn if you don’t show him? You’re the team’s leader...so lead.”

Alex hung his head and sighed. “Fine. I’ll pass da—”

I shot him a look.

He grimaced. “...*the* ball,” he finished.

“Better. You’ll learn proper English if it’s the last thing I do. Now, get back in there and show your team how it’s done!”

I shook my head as Alex rejoined the guys on the floor. He reminded me of myself at his age. Talented with big dreams and arrogant as hell.

Coaching youth basketball in my spare time was the closest I would ever get to the NBA. But, man, I’d been close. I’d gone to college on a basketball scholarship and had the eye of scouts during my career. That is until I got injured.

“Yo, Tre, what up?”

“Andre!” I acknowledged my friend as he walked towards the the bench. “We’ll be done in ten minutes.”

“No problem.” He set his gym bag down and joined me on the bleachers.

“Is your brother meeting us today?”

Andre pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I don’t know. He hit me up yesterday, saying he was having problems with his girl.”

I snorted. “Which one?”

Andre shook his head. “His main one. I keep telling him he needs to stop yanking that woman’s chain. She’s too good to be treated like that. Hard working, smart, sexy...that woman’s got a job with benefits, too.”

My attention went to the boys as they worked out the moves for the play. They were getting better. “Watch it, Andre. Sharice is a bit touchy about that wandering eye thing.”

He chuckled. “I know. Even though I tell her she’s sexy all the time.” A wry smile spread across his face.

“Still sexy while carrying your baby, huh?”

“Oh yeah.”

I shook my head. “I’m guessing this is because you weren’t with Kim when she had Ashanti.”

“Maybe. Mostly it’s because I’m in love with my wife. Besides being there every day, watching her tummy grow because of me...” He stopped talking. “What?”

My hand was on my face, rubbing my eyelids in an effort to destroy the unwanted image of his wife’s exposed and very pregnant belly. “TMI, man, TMI.”

Andre chuckled. “Whatever, man. Get married, start a family and you’ll understand.”

“Not about to happen. I’m in no rush to join that club.”

Andre shrugged. “Suit yourself, but believe me, that player action is going to get old one day. Mark my words.”

I pursed my lips. “Not for me.”

Andre’s phone chimed an incoming text. He read, then replied. “Looks like it’s just you and me. Malik says he’s got to live up to his promise so he can get out of the dog house.”

I acknowledged Andre’s comment before blowing my whistle. “Run that play again. Good work Alex!” I clapped my hands. My attention went back to my friend. “Is Malik still engaged?”

“Yep, has been for over a year now.”

“Damn. If he’s into this woman, what’s the holdup?”

“The hell if I know. I try to stay out of his mess. He’s my brother and all, but that doesn’t mean I support his shit. It’s worse, though, because his woman is a friend of Sharice. Women talk, which means, whether I like it or not, I get dragged into the chaos of his relationship issues.”

“Ouch. Sucks to be you.”

“Tell me about it.”

“How the hell did Malik get mixed up with a family friend?”

“They met at our wedding. Long story short, she’s too close to the family to be getting screwed. If he doesn’t get his shit together soon, we’re all going to be pulled into this mess.”

I laughed and put my hands up. “Not me, I don’t even know who she is.”

“Well, be glad, because I don’t have an out. I’m a blood relative to the asshole.”

“Yep, really sucks to be you.” The alarm on my phone signaled the end of practice. I blew the whistle again and gestured for the guys to bring it in. “Alright, not bad. Good job working together as a team. You’re getting better and better every week. Everyone, work on those plays in your spare time. I expect you to be able to run it without an issue next week.” I clapped my hands and stood. “Go hydrate, hit the showers, and don’t drag this time. A lot of your mommas called me last week, complaining about you taking too long to get outside after practice.” Beside me, Andre snorted. I waited until the guys disappeared into the dressing room. “Hey, you laugh, but I’m serious. A lot of these women are single and looking for a male role model. I’ve been invited over for dinner one too many times.”

Andre continued to laugh as he jogged across the gymnasium to retrieve a basketball, dribbled, then shot from where he stood at the half court line. All net.

“So, three games to twenty-one? Winner pays for drinks?”

“You’re on.” I pulled my whistle over my head and set it on my gym bag. Coaching time was over, now it was all about me.

I may not have been able to make it to the NBA, but that didn’t mean I had lost my skills.

An hour later we were on game three when Andre’s phone rang. “Time out, that’s Sharice.” He jogged over to where it sat.

I walked over to my bag and pulled out a towel, wiped the sweat off my face. “You have a special ringtone for her?” I chuckled. “Since when?”

“Since she’s gotten closer to her due date.” He snatched the phone up and answered. His eyes widened. “Are you sure?” His movements became frantic as he grabbed his water bottle and fumbled with the zipper of his gym bag before dropping the phone. “Shit! Baby, I’m sorry, I dropped my phone. Okay, how far apart are they?”

My brow went up as I watched my friend lose all sense of coordination.

“I’m on the way!” He disconnected and stared at me.

“Everything alright?”

“No...yes. I’m going to be a dad! Again! Sharice is going into labor. I’ve got to go!”

“Ah man, congratulations!” I patted Andre on the back and laughed at his expression. A mixture of excitement and worry was on his face.

Even though he had one child already, he was not there to witness the birth of his daughter. Back then, he’d been a kid, really, a senior in high school. The grandmother of his baby didn’t want him anywhere near the hospital. It pained him that he’d been unable to witness his daughter’s birth.

He swore to me that this time he would be there, one hundred percent.

“Be careful, Dre. Don’t get a speeding ticket or else you’re going to piss off Sharice.”

“By the time she goes into full blown labor she’s already going to be pissed off. Here,” he dug into his wallet, retrieved some bills, and shoved them into my hands, “I was losing anyway. Have a few rounds on me. I’ll call you later and let you know how she is.”

I laughed and shoved the money in my pocket. "I'll be listening out for the phone. Good luck, man."

Andre ran out of the gym, which left me alone with no plans.

Then again, now that I had a pocket of free cash, I might as well go get that drink.

I shot a few more hoops, then grabbed the remaining balls left over after practice from around the gym, and settled them back on the ball cart.

Home, hot shower, clean clothes, and quick shave, then hit a bar that was close to my condo. Midtown was a hot spot for art and bars. In fact, there was one I liked to frequent within walking distance from where I lived.

A few drinks would be a great way to unwind for the night. And if I was lucky, I wouldn't spend the evening alone.

Chapter 5

Ebony

“Oh, my God, they are so cute!” Dr. Tucker and I were in the back office of the zoo, watching a stream of photos taken of the baby pandas. The image of the pink-skinned, hairless newborns that lay against their mother’s fur attached to nipples, suckling, was huge on the computer screen. Their eyes were sealed shut. “Twins, how amazing!”

My boss chuckled. “Having a flashback?”

I giggled. “Maybe. Being a twin has been pretty cool. Though I’m sure if Trevon was a girl instead of a guy it would have been way cooler.”

“You have a twin?”

I glanced over at Kenneth, our go to person since the day Dr. Tucker and I started training at Zoo Atlanta. He watched me intently with chocolate eyes, waiting for a response.

I realized that in my enthusiasm to learn more about the pandas through the video slide presentation he shared with us, I’d slid my chair over too close; our shoulders were nearly touching. I inched back.

Without thinking, I inhaled, taking in the musk of his cologne. It was different from what Brian wore. His sent was sexy, male and held a hint of sweetness. Kenneth’s was...

Oh god, why did I care what his cologne reminded me of?

“Yes.” I kept my response short and turned my attention back to the screen.

Kenneth had been flirting with me since the day we arrived. I made it known from the beginning that I was a happily married woman and had no intention of having a fling while away. He didn’t seem to care and used every opportunity he could to try and get to know me outside of work.

And by the look he had in his eye right now, another invitation to dinner was in the works.

“Alright, guys, that’s all for this evening. As you see, we like to leave on time and it’s already after five. What do you two have planned for your days off?” Though his question was to both of us, it was obvious my answer was the only one he cared about.

“Sightseeing,” Dr. Tucker replied while closing up his binder full of notes. “What about you, Ebony?”

“Spending the weekend with Brian. He’s flying in tonight.” I forced myself to mean it, making sure the lie was hidden in my eyes and voice.

It seemed to work; Kenneth’s shoulders slumped.

Soon, I was in my rental car and headed back to the hotel for a weekend that consisted of food from the hotel’s kitchen, and going over the compiled research notes provided to us from the Zoo Atlanta staff. While I did have a scheduled date with my husband, the only way I would see Brian would be through our Skype session.

At the hotel, I took a shower and ordered room service. My fluffy robe was my only source of comfort. I snuggled between pillows on my bed and pulled the lapels up. The TV was on for background noise while I was in the shower, but now I flipped through the channels to find some form of entertainment. I stopped when the show my best friend Kaitlyn, worked on as Head Costume Designer came on.

Before I knew it, I was wiping a tear from the corner of my eyes. Though I missed my husband like crazy, I missed my friends as well.

Kaitlyn and her chubby baby girl and new man, Antonio, who made her the happiest I’d seen in a long time. After a rough patch, it was good for her to have happiness in her life.

Then there was Yasmine and her bouncing twins. At six months, they were a handful. Listening to her share the adventures she and Zack had as parents was very entertaining.

As satisfied as I was with my life, why did I feel like something was missing?

Deciding not to focus on anything negative, I retrieved my backpack out of the closet and pulled out the research papers on the Panda breeding program.

The binders supplied to us the first day of our training at the zoo were jam packed full of information about the joint breeding program. Years of research was being conducted at Zoo Atlanta and the Chengdu Zoo and Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding in China. There was a lot to learn.

After flipping through the Table of Contents, I selected the chapter on Captive Giant Panda Maternal Behavior.

And there it was, babies again. Why did it feel as if this was a theme I could not run away from?

The beep on my laptop shown the incoming connection from Brian. I forced the irritation out of my mind and off my face so he didn't get the wrong impression, then clicked the accept button.

"Ebony, baby, God, I miss you." I watched my husband's blue-eyed gaze travel across the screen as if taking in as much of me as the screen could allow; his visual confirmation that I was okay.

"Hey, baby, you're early tonight. I thought you had to work for a few more hours."

"I forced the guys to get done early so I could see my wife. You look tired. Are you sleeping okay?"

"I'm fine." I chuckled as Brian's eyebrows creased in disbelief. "Physically, I'm fine. Work is great, but I really miss you."

Brian's sly grin spread. "You know, you can always quit and come home."

"Uh, no, and stop trying to be slick." I shook my head, but my smile was genuine.

Brian chuckled, too, before becoming serious. "I'd never ask you to quit. You know that, right?"

I nodded. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't have your support. I'm still sorry things had to be this way in order for my career to advance."

"Hey, my job was the same way and you supported me. I'd be a jerk if I didn't give you what you wanted."

The words coming from my husband were sincere, of that I had no doubt. Yet, there was something in his eyes that said something different.

We were on the same page...yet we weren't.

My stomach tightened. Although Brian had been supportive in my coming to Georgia for two months, there were still some things I felt hadn't been addressed before I left. It wasn't as if we had a lot of time to thoroughly talk the situation through.

When the job offer was made, I had a limited amount of time to accept it. Once I did, time was of the essence. The San Diego Zoo was looking to start its own Panda Breeding Program, and the two people who would be in charge of it, Dr. Tucker and I, needed to be trained. Zoo Atlanta was one of the few zoos in the country who had an ongoing breeding success rate.

The one female panda at the zoo that had given birth to several cubs was due to be fertile in a few weeks. A panda's fertility cycle was amazingly short, only thirty-six hours. There was a lot of work and timing needed to make sure that brief window of time was not missed.

I was on a plane to Atlanta within two weeks.

To make matters worse, my job was now hours away from where we lived.

Between the crazy L.A. traffic and early hours, I would spend more time away from home than he would. The only way we could balance things out would be for us to move closer to my job. Unfortunately, that would put more distance between Brian and the studio he worked out of.

Not to mention his family.

Unlike me, Brian had spent his entire life living near his family. While I had left home and moved over three thousand miles away at a young age, Brian had never been more than twenty minutes away from his childhood home.

And now, he was left to search for our new home, alone.

Brian was not happy about it.

"I managed to do some scouting today." His eyes left the screen and went off camera as he started to type. "Check your email. I just sent pictures of three properties I thought you may like."

I forced the lump of uneasiness in my stomach away, shrunk his image to half the size of my computer's screen, and signed in to my email.

"You know what I like, baby. I'm sure you'll find something for us." His delayed response had me glancing back at his image.

His brow was creased as if he were formulating the correct way to word what he wanted to say.

"I've been thinking about it, Ebony, and while we both agreed it would be simpler for us to rent another house, I think we should explore the option of buying. What's going on with your job is not something that's temporary. I have a feeling your time at the San Diego Zoo is going to be for some years. Why rent if we can buy? I don't like the idea of moving at all, but if it's what we have to do, I want it to be one move, not something we do for a year and then do again, you know?"

I studied my husband's face. He was serious. "What do you have in mind?"

“Planning for the future and not just the present.” He paused before looking directly at the camera. “We talked about finding something that had two bedrooms; I think we should look at a three, maybe four-bedroom place instead. The difference in prices in the neighborhoods we’re interested in are higher, but think about it. If...when we decide to expand our family, we won’t have to move again.”

And there it was; he was thinking about having a baby.

“Did you get my email?”

I swallowed hard. “Yeah, it just popped up. Give me a second.” I clicked on the file.

“Look at the second link.”

I did as instructed; my breath caught. The home Brian selected was a two-story traditional styled home. It had the same type of stucco finish and Spanish tiled roof as his childhood home. I cycled through the photos that showed pictures of what had to be every room in the house. The floors were a mix of tile and carpet. The rooms seemed to be huge. There was a simple manicured backyard that was fenced, and a sparkling pool was the centerpiece.

I imagined family cookouts and children running around the manicured lawn. So did the worry of someone falling into the pool and getting hurt.

I forced the images out of my head. Despite the crazy dreams I’d been having about fish and children, it wasn’t something I saw in my immediate future. Yet, Brian seemed to be planning that far ahead.

“It’s beautiful, Brian. It looks like your parents’ house.” His laugh drew my attention to the screen.

“I thought the same thing. The minute I saw the place, I had flashbacks to growing up with my sisters in a house full of warmth and love. I want those types of memories for us, too.”

My attention went to Brian as he scratched his shoulder. He wore a short sleeve t-shirt that left his tattooed biceps exposed. I studied the images that represented the family he’d grown up with and the one he wanted to have of his own.

Though he hadn’t exactly said it, it was obvious what Brian wanted.

I’d been religious with my use of birth control...ever since the incident. The one where a night of passion before he left town for his three-month tour led to unprotected sex. Instead of being

scared of getting pregnant, it was the night we confirmed our desire to become a permanent couple.

It was the night Brian let it be known he wanted to marry me...pregnant or not pregnant.

And then my world went to hell after I was raped.

Instead of telling Brian what happened, I took matters into my own hands and took a morning-after pill to reduce the chances of getting pregnant by the man who forced himself on me.

Was I pregnant at all? That's an answer no one but God would know.

But one thing I did know was that when the truth had come out, Brian was angry. About the attack. About the unknown possibility of a child that may or may not have been.

Once he completed his court ordered anger management counseling sessions, pregnancy was the one topic we tended to stray away from.

Until now.

His mention of buying a house big enough to fulfil any future changes in our family was him putting what he wanted on the table.

And despite the dreams I'd been having, I wasn't ready.

I just couldn't tell him that.

Not yet.

Chapter 6

Trevon

“Celine, Bud Ice, please.”

“Sure thing.” The bartender winked, then sashayed her nearly naked bottom behind the bar.

I angled my head to get a look at what she obviously wanted me to see and shook my head. Wearing clothes that tight demanded a man’s attention, and in that shade of cream, you didn’t have to imagine too hard about what she looked like naked.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks. Keep the change.”

She looked down at the amount of money I gave her and smiled. “Let me know what else I can do to service you.” Celine gave me a once over, licked her lips, then went to help another customer.

My attention went to the other patrons lining the bar railing as I savored my beer.

A flash of deep purple caught my eye at the opposite end of the long counter.

A woman took a set at the end nearest the wall. From what I could see in the dim light, she was very attractive.

Long tendrils of jet black hair framed a face that was perfect, while the rest was piled high on her head. Sharp cheekbones accentuated pouty lips. When she looked my way, eyes shaped like those of a cat took my breath away. The contact lasted for a second, but felt like hours.

Her eyes diverted in annoyance as she dug into her purse and retrieved her phone. Her brow knitted into what appeared to be anger as her fingers flew across the keys. She shoved the phone into her purse, then slammed it onto the bar. She closed her eyes, nostrils flaring as if taking a deep breath.

When they opened again, they connected with mine, but this time, the contact was longer.

I inclined my head to acknowledge the connection. She looked away.

Not sure how to take the response, I distracted myself with my phone, checking for new emails or text messages. Seeing no update from Andre about Sharice's condition, I flipped over to the Facebook app. It too was dead for a Saturday night.

I slid the phone back in my pocket. When I glanced up again, my gaze went to the opposite side of the bar. Her seat was no longer occupied. Not that I had plans to talk to her, but I couldn't help but feel disappointed.

My bottle empty, I signaled Celine for a second.

"Excuse me, is this seat taken?"

I looked to my left and what do you know? The missing woman was now next to me.

"I went to the bathroom and when I came back, my seat was taken."

I looked across the bar; someone else occupied her chair.

"Please do." I hopped off my stool and pulled the seat out for her.

She eyed me, as if my gesture was the craziest thing in the world for a man to do. "Thank you."

I appraised the body of this woman as she settled in her seat, and man, she was breathtaking. Her bare shoulder brushed mine as she got comfortable. A hint of perfume hit my nose. Her scent was intoxicating. I had to compose myself while standing behind her.

"Bartender," she called.

I took the opportunity to check out her attire as she spoke to Celine. The deep plum fabric of her dress was seductively wrapped around her neck, leaving her shoulders and back bare. Large earrings dangled, drawing my attention to a slender throat. A dangling pendent lay flush between cleavage begging for attention in the peek-a-boo, crisscrossed opening.

My imagination went in the gutter.

Her head angled slightly, studying me, a slight smile spread on her face. She opened her mouth as if she were about to say something, but her purse vibrated. The smile on her lips, that were the color of her dress, dropped into a thin line.

She retrieved the phone, read what was on the screen, then cursed under her breath. "That no good son-of-a—," Instead of responding to the text, she hit a button, then shoved it into her purse. The second her drink arrived, she gulped.

My eyebrows rose. “Bad night?”

Instead of a reply, my barstool companion shot me a look of hatred as if I were the one who’d sent her the message.

I put my hands up. “Hey, I didn’t do it.”

Those catlike eyes narrowed slightly as she shook her head. “But you are a man. All men are—”

“Hold on...” I pointed to her purse. “Whatever *he* did had nothing to do with me. All I did was pull out your chair. I mean, I could have been saving that seat for some other unbelievably fine woman in the bar tonight. I saw you when you came in. It was obvious you were angry. I’m all ears if you want to talk about it. Just don’t blame me for some other guy’s issues. Deal?”

Those sexy eyes looked me up and down. “No deal.”

I shrugged and turned back to my drink.

The silence lasted for all of two minutes.

“Why do men lie?”

I chuckled. “Sure you want me to answer that? I’m a man and could be lying.”

The woman next to me kept her face straight for a moment before letting a light laugh pass her lips. “This is true.” She sipped her fruity drink, then sighed. “Look, I’m sorry for acting that way, but my...ex is a pain in the ass. We were supposed to meet tonight and talk things out, but I guess that will never happen. I’m done.” She made a show of wiping her hands.

Interesting.

“With men, or just him?”

She looked me up and down again, this time taking her time. “With him.”

I smiled, my confidence boosted.

Her attention went back to her drink. “I’d rather be at home than here.”

“At home, huh, doing what, I wonder?” I slid a glance over, waiting for her to take the bait.

She laughed. “Sorry, probably not what you’re thinking.”

I faced her directly. “Try me.”

She sat back in her seat, sliding the straw up and down in her drink. “Bubble bath, wine, and a good book.”

“Ah, so you love to read. Let me guess, some sappy romance novel where the hero whisks the lady off for a hot night of passion while promising forever?”

She laughed and shook her head. “Uh, no, not my speed. I gave up those when I graduated high school and discovered that kind of love is all make believe. These days, I’m all about action and adventure.”

My brow rose, interest peaked. “A woman after my own heart. I’m a Sci-Fi man.”

“Me, too, well, girl that is.”

Her smile was mesmerizing, so was her laugh.

She sipped her drink. “What are you reading?”

“A Star Wars novel.”

Dark brown eyes lit up in excitement. “Me, too! Which one?”

I feigned a heart attack. “Be still my beating heart. You know about the Expanded Universe?”

She scoffed. “Every Star Wars’ fan knows! I’ve read like eighty of them.”

I named the book and held my breath.

A manicured hand swatted the air. “Finished reading that one a week ago.” She chuckled when my mouth fell open. “And no, I’m won’t spoil it for you by telling you what happened. Just know this, the next book in the series is going to be an eye-opener for sure.”

I leaned forward and rested my elbow on the bar, pointing a finger in her direction. “Ok, see... That right there is not right.” I lifted my bottle to my lips and discovered it was empty. I signaled for Celine to come our way.

The bartender walked over, a look of irritation on her face. Apparently the sight of me giving another woman my attention instead of her hit a few buttons.

I ignored her, entranced with my new found friend. “Let me get another beer. Would you like another drink? My treat.”

“Sure.”

“And another one of whatever she’s drinking.” I gave her a twenty. “Keep the change.” The large tip put the smile back on her face. My attention went back to the woman beside me who was now looking at me with a seductive gleam in her eye.

If I played my cards right, I wouldn’t be going home alone tonight.

Chapter 7

Trevon

“Wow, the view from here is amazing!”

I locked the door behind me as my date for the evening walked towards the sliding glass doors leading out to the balcony of my condo.

“The view is one of the reasons I bought the place. I love living in Midtown with a view of downtown Atlanta...especially on nights like this.”

She looked over her shoulder. “Clear skies? Yes, the city lights at night are amazing.”

“I was thinking more of having a beautiful woman standing against the backdrop of the city.”

She laughed again, and it dawned on me, after all our chatter at the bar, we never exchanged names. We’d conversed without introducing ourselves. It felt as if we had known each other for years. I wanted to know her name, but asking outright after having her come home with me felt odd.

I dropped my keys on the coffee table and slid my hands into my pockets. “Want to play a game?”

“Sure...” Curiosity shown in her eyes. “Let me guess. You want to play Strip Poker.”

I chuckled. “I’m thinking more like Five Questions. Since we’re about to sleep with each other, there’s a few things I’d like to know about you first.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Didn’t you learn enough at the bar? That’s why you asked me here, right? Besides, since when did one-night stands come with questioners?”

I shrugged. “I like doing things differently. Up for the challenge, or are you scared something else could come from a one-time fling?”

A slight look of uneasiness crossed her face before it was replaced with resolve. “No. Are you?”

“No.” I waited for a moment, watching her. “You can ask the first question...anything you want to know, there are no rules.”

She glanced over her shoulder, then bit her bottom lip in thought. “How many times have you brought a woman home? Be honest.”

I took a few steps in her direction while deciding how to answer the question “I like having flings, but I don’t go overboard. I’m not a sex addict, if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t do this every week.”

She turned to face me. “Good to know.”

“What about you? When was the last time you did something like this?”

“A few years ago.” Her comment was followed by nervous laughter.

I stopped next to my beautiful companion and took a moment to read her body language. She gripped her purse a little tighter, her attention going back to the scene beyond the glass doors. She was nervous, yet she didn’t give off the vibe of wanting to leave.

“What makes tonight break your ‘good girl’ streak?”

Her attention left the cityscape and found me again. Catlike eyes lost the appearance of momentary innocence as they took a lazy stroll over my body. “You.”

Talk about an ego boost.

“Well then, I promise not to disappoint. Now it’s my turn.” I appraised her body, contemplating our discussion earlier in the evening and on our way here. I lived within walking distance of the place and the conversation had been pleasant enough. “What do you do for a living?”

There was a pause before her eyes cut to the side. “I’m a florist.”

“As in ‘buy-my-girlfriend-flowers-because-I’m-in-the-dog-house’ florist?” I gawked in surprise.

She nodded.

Nothing about her physique said florist. All evening I’d been stealing side glances at the muscular definition of her shoulders and back in the strapless dress she wore. The fabric stopped above her knees and the set of shapely calf muscles that appeared to be as smooth as silk. She obviously worked out.

“What do you do?”

“I’m an assistant manager at an Applebee’s.”

She smiled and those sexy lips drew my attention. “Ah, big money, huh?”

I licked my lips in anticipation of feeling them on mine. “It pays the bills. Your turn.”

She walked around my living room, leaving me next to the balcony, and stopped to look at the photographs displayed on the bookshelf. “Do you have any kids?”

“No. Do I want some one day, yes. How about you?”

Once again, an odd look crossed her face. “I’d love to have kids one day.”

The mention of babies had me reaching for my wallet to do a quick condom check.

“Are you in a relationship?” Though she’d made it clear at the bar she was done with her ex, I wanted to be sure. Sleeping with another man’s woman, married or unmarried, was a deal breaker. Some lines shouldn’t be crossed.

This time she looked me in the eye. “No.”

“Neither am I.”

She looked away again, visibly uncomfortable about something. I walked over to where she stood, using my index finger to raise her chin up to meet my eyes.

The connection was strong. The moment our eyes met, it became hard to breathe slowly. I was losing control of something, but didn’t feel inclined to stop it.

It was impossible to miss the increased breathing of the woman in front of me. Her breasts heaved up and down a little faster as we stared into each other’s eyes.

As much as I wanted to kiss her, there was something else I valued more.

“Let’s get something straight...I like you. To be honest, I want to know more about you. If having sex now will ruin my chance to get your number and take you out on a date, I’d rather we not go through with it. We can sit on the sofa and just...talk.”

Her head inclined to the side, a bit of fascination and disbelief on her face. “You’re sweet, you know that?”

I groaned, forcing myself to ignore the growing need to possess this unknown woman. “Not really. I just know what I want, and if I need to sacrifice something to get it, I will.”

“Good to know.” She didn’t move away from me and instead, reached out and placed her hand upon mine.

She knew what she wanted, too.

“Last question; what is your name?”

Her eyes widened. “Does it matter?”

“We may not know each other that well, but wouldn’t you like to know who you’re sleeping with? My name is Trevon.”

“Trevon,” she repeated. “That’s a strong name; it suits you.” A playful look crossed her face. “Tell you what...Trevon...if you can make me say your name three times; you’ll earn the right to know mine.”

I laughed my disbelief. “Earn the right? Are you issuing a sexual challenge?”

My nameless beauty pulled away from my fingers, putting distance between, and walked back towards the sliding glass door, all the while shooting a look over her shoulder that had me, literally, rising to the challenge.

Saying nothing, I walked up to her and took possession of her mouth. A squeal of surprise came before she melted into the full blown heat that came from the kiss. I pulled back to catch my breath.

From the expression on her face, the chemistry between us was more than she expected, too.

Without a word, she tossed her purse somewhere in the vicinity of my sofa, then placed her hands on my chest.

My hands went to her hips as I backed her up against the sliding glass door, then fused our mouths once again.

Her hands slipped up my shoulders, then around the back of my head, as she opened up to me. Our tongues touched and I went in deeper, kissing her as if my life depended on her response.

She wanted a challenge? She had no idea what she asked for.

I explored the side of her throat while sliding my hands down to her waist. I gripped the edge of her dress, gathered it in the palm of my hands, and slid it up her hips. Her skin was as soft as I imagined it to be beneath my fingertips. Without stopping, I hooked the edge of her panties with my thumbs, went down on my knees, tugged them over the heels she wore, and tossed them over my shoulder.

She enthusiastically aided me in the process.

When I stood, I gripped her butt and lifted her up; her legs wrapped around my waist. I used the glass door to support her weight.

As our eyes met and held, my fingers found what they were searching for.

And that was the first time she said my name.

Chapter 8

Trevon

“Trevon, are you sure you’re okay?” Ebony’s voice cut through my thoughts. “You’re not your jovial self. I just made the second crack about you and your car, and you’ve barely acknowledged the fact I was speaking, much less in the car.”

“Sorry, Ebony. What were you saying?”

Her eyebrows pulled together. “The wisecrack was to see if you were listening. What I said was I think Brian wants to have a baby.”

That got my attention. “Really? How long have you guys been married?”

“Nearly a year and a half.”

I looked away from the road as we stopped at a red light. “You don’t sound that excited.”

Ebony looked out the window. “I have mixed feelings. Part of me wants to have a baby; another part feels like it’s too soon. My career is starting to take off, so is Brian’s.” She sighed heavily. “Am I selfish for not wanting to have the same thing as my husband?”

I huffed. “Eb, I’m the wrong person to be asking. Call LaShana if you want that type of feedback.” My attention went back to the road.

“I thought about it, but since she’s already pregnant, she’ll be pretty biased on the subject. So will mom.”

“And I’m the one you thought was your best choice to play sounding board? Don’t you have some female friends? What happened to them?” I pulled off when the light turned green.

“Both of them have kids, too.” She sighed. “Anyway, back to you. You’ve got something on your mind. Want to talk about it?”

“Not really.”

“Look, Tre, you’re taking me to a party to meet some of your friends. The last thing I want to do is walk in with a brother who has an obvious chip on his shoulder.”

I blew out my breath. “Ebony...”

“Tre.”

I glimpsed over to see raised eyebrows. Once she started questioning me, there was no way to get her to back down.

My attention went back to the road. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“So.”

“So...,” I blew my horn in frustration at the idiot who pulled in front of me. “Women are complicated. Let’s leave it at that, okay?”

I could feel my sister’s stare, but refused to look her way again. Then I felt her hand on my bicep.

“Yes, we can be...complicated. If there’s something you need to talk to me about, you know I’m here.”

“I know. Thanks, but I’m good for now.”

“Okay, then let’s lighten the mood. Tell me about these friends of yours.”

I took Ebony’s cue and dismissed the irritation that had been building for the past few days.

Ever since the night I had the best sex of my life.

With Devon.

The woman who challenged me mentally and physically.

And left me alone in bed the next morning.

The only evidence of the night of passion was my sheets strewn across the floor and the light red marks left on my skin from her nails.

And a note with two words...

Thank you.

And the lipstick kiss left on the corner of the paper. Can’t forget about that little detail.

It was hard to tell what disappointed me more. The fact she left or the feeling that I had been used.

There was an obvious attraction between us. The way we connected at the bar and the conversation that lasted for hours...

And the kiss that rocked my world. She'd felt it too.

Everything after that had been mind-blowing.

Where did I screw up?

Maybe the idea of getting to know each other, as I had so eloquently put it between the hot rounds of sex, had scared her off.

Maybe I should have ignored my libido and the flirty look in her eyes and kept our conversation going at the bar. The evening could have ended with an exchange of numbers and promise of a date.

Damn. Hindsight sucked.

"Uh...hello?"

"Sorry," I mumbled. "Andre and Sharice, right. I've known Andre since college. He's a good friend. His wife, Sharice, just had a baby a week ago and is dying to show him off, thus the reason for the dinner invitation."

"She wants to have people over after a week?"

I nodded. "Sharice is rather possessive, but not in a bad way. Andre's already got a daughter by another woman, some girl he dated back in high school. She's still trying to get with him even though he's been married for nearly four years. He's a good father and takes care of his daughter. Though I wouldn't want to be in his shoes. There's a fine line between having two women with your baby on their list of claim to rights." I chuckled. "I don't know how he manages."

Ebony laughed, too. "You're lucky. All these years and the crazy women you've hooked up with, you have no kids."

Suddenly, confiding in my sister about my past relationships seemed like a bad idea, twin or not.

"Why couldn't you have been a boy?"

Ebony reached over and punched my shoulder.

I laughed.

When we arrived at Andre's house, several cars sat in the driveway.

"Packed house. Come on so you can meet the gang."

Andre greeted us at the door with an unlit cigar wrapped in blue cellophane. 'It's a Boy!' was printed in big letters.

"Congratulations!" I gave him a brotherly hug, then introduced my sister.

"Come on in. Sharice and everyone else are in the living room."

We entered and found the room packed with family.

Andre introduced Ebony, and I leaned over to see the baby and kiss Sharice on the cheek.

"Food is in the kitchen. That's the great thing about having a baby, all the women in the family show up with all kinds of free food." Andre rubbed his stomach.

Sharice rolled her eyes.

"That's my cue to leave the women in here." I followed Andre to the kitchen and left Ebony to admire the newborn.

I was filling my plate from the generous spread when the front door opened. Andre's brother's booming voice announced his presence.

"Malik brought his fiancée, so you'll finally get a chance to meet her," Andre supplied as he plopped a generous helping of potato salad on his plate.

I smirked. "I'd love to see what kind of woman in her right mind would stick around for his foolishness."

Andre chuckled. "You'd be surprised."

Then, I heard her. That laugh. My attention went to the doorway.

"I'm grabbing a plate," Malik said as he entered the kitchen. "Kai, are you coming?"

"Sure, I'll put this dessert in the kitchen."

I knew that voice. My mouth went dry as my attention went to the woman walking in behind him.

And there she was, the woman who rocked my world and left me without leaving a number or email address. The woman I'd been searching for, for days...

The woman who told me her name was Devon.

"Kai?" I blurted out.

The woman froze, her eyes widening in recognition.

Malik's attention was trained on the table and was oblivious to me or his fiancée's facial expressions.

Andre, on the other hand, was taking it all in.

"Trevon, right?" She recovered faster than I did.

I was about to open my mouth when Malik looked up. "You know him?" His eyes shot from me, to her, then back at me.

The woman with two names laughed. "Not really. We met once before. I didn't realize you were friends."

Try as she might to hide it, I still saw the shock in her eyes.

I forced my mouth shut. *'Not really?'*

"Where did you meet?" Malik pressed.

In my peripherals, I saw Andre put his plate down on the table, no doubt in response to my balled up fist.

Devon replied, "It was at Barnes and Noble, I think. We were on the same aisle, looking for the same book. He was nice enough to let me get the last copy."

"Is that right?" Malik looked my way.

I forced my eyes to look at anything but her. "Something like that," I mumbled.

Malik laughed. "Yeah, well, don't be making moves on my woman. I'd hate to kick your ass and end a friendship." His attention went back to the food on the table.

When I looked back, Devon was avoiding my gaze.

Andre, on the other hand, starred at me. The look in his eyes read as though he had an epiphany and needed an answer.

“Yo, Tre, I’m about to go to the store and get some ice. Wanna roll?” He gestured towards the door with thumb.

“Yeah,” I slipped my plate in the microwave. “Let’s do that. I need some air.”

Chapter 9

Trevon

“Don’t say a word,” Andre said as he backed out of the driveway.

It was easy to comply because I didn’t know what to say.

Scratch that, yes I did, and it was colored with a ton of expletives.

We’d pulled out of his subdivision and turned on to the main street when he spoke again. “That’s not how you know her.”

I felt his glare, but stared ahead.

“I know you, and I know her. Either Malik doesn’t give a damn or missed it completely. What aren’t you telling me?”

My jaw clenched, I chose my words carefully. “Is her name really Kai?”

“Yeah, so?”

I exhaled and shook my head. “When we met, she told me her name was Devon.”

“Okay...”

“She also told me she’d broken up with her fiancé.”

“O-kay...and when was this?”

I closed my eyes and rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Last Saturday.”

Andre was silent for all of thirty seconds. “Saturday? The night we played basketball and Malik was supposed to meet us?”

I nodded.

“That’s impossible. Malik ditched us to spend the evening with her.”

I huffed. “Apparently he lied to somebody. I was at the bar near my house when she showed up, dressed to impress. She was pissed off, Andre. She kept sending text messages before slamming her phone in her purse. When she sat down next to me, she asked me why men lie. The conversation went from there.”

“The conversation?” He sucked his teeth. “From the look you guys had, it must have been more than conversation.”

I didn’t respond.

“Hold up, you didn’t...”

I cleared my throat and looked out the passenger side window.

“You *hit* that?” he asked in disbelief.

I faced him. “I didn’t know she was Malik’s girl, I swear, Dre. If I’d known, I would have walked away.”

“Damn!” Andre’s hand went to his mouth as his eyes grew wide. “Mother—”

“Hey, it was consensual, believe me. In fact, she’s the one who instigated it. We connected, for real, man. I would have been happy getting her number and taking her out on a date. She wanted...insisted that we have sex.”

Andre squirmed in the driver’s seat. “That’s all I need to know, man. I refuse to get caught up in this shit.”

“Wish I wasn’t in it, either.” My attention went back to the landscape as we drove down the street.

We rode in silence for a few minutes. “How are you going to handle it?”

“I have no idea.”

Back at the house, I found an excuse to keep my distance from Devon.

Or was it Kai?

How in the hell had I managed to sleep with the one woman in Atlanta who was connected to a friend? The messed up part was I didn’t feel guilty.

It wasn’t like he was one of my boys. His younger brother, Andre, just happened to be a really good friend. Malik and I hung out from time to time through association. Shooting hoops and sport parties were the extent of our time dealing with each other.

Though we often compared notes on the women we were with, I was a player. He was a straight dog.

The day he told us he was engaged and within two weeks he told us about this hot number from work he'd screwed, I'd felt bad for his fiancée, even though we'd never met.

And when we met, I unknowingly slept with her.

And connected with her on a level that made me contemplate being involved in a real relationship again.

And it all was a lie.

Damn.

I walked down the short hall to the guest bathroom to wash BBQ sauce off my hands. The door was closed, so I knocked.

"I'm in here!" My sister yelled through the door.

"Oh, sorry, Ebony. You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good! You've got some great friends, Tre!"

"Glad you're enjoying yourself. I'll use bathroom upstairs."

"Okay!"

I jogged up the steps to the hallway bathroom, washed my hands, and took care of business. I washed again, dried my hands on my pants, then opened the door.

Devon/Kai stood on the other side.

"We need to talk." Her voice was low as she backed me into the confines of the restroom, closing us in. The door clicked.

My eyes trailed over her as an instant memory of our night spent together hit me in the chest. The passion. The conversation.

The disappointment.

"Let me explain," she said as I opened my mouth to speak.

“Yeah, I think you owe me.” I shook my head. “This is fucked up, Devon...or is it Kai?”

She sighed. “Both. My middle name is Devon.”

“Finally, something that’s not a lie. Or is it?” I stared her down and forced the frustration aside.

“I didn’t lie to you that night, Trevon.”

My eyes narrowed. “You didn’t tell me your real name.”

“Devon is—”

“I get it,” I huffed. “You lied about your relationship, though. You are engaged, for crying out loud!”

Kai held up a finger. “That wasn’t a lie, either. I’d broken things off with Malik. We were supposed to meet that night to work it out, but he blew me off. I was pissed, remember?”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the sink. “But you’re not now.”

She sighed again. “After the night we...met, Malik caught up with me again, apologized and yes, we made up.”

I cringed and rubbed my brow. “Are you really a florist?”

Not like it mattered.

“Okay, that one was a lie, but not completely. My family owns a floral shop and I am a trained florist. I just chose to do something else with my life.”

“What?”

God, why did I care?

She leaned against the door, obviously in no hurry to leave. “I’m a firefighter.”

I didn’t see that one coming.

Impressed, my first instinct was to ask her why she chose that field of work. As beautiful as she was, she could have done anything with her life besides risk it.

Damn...this was not good. Regardless of the circumstances of our meeting and the lies told, the attraction felt the night we met was still there, at least on my side of things.

And she was completely inaccessible.

“What do you see in him, Kai? I’ve always wondered what kind of woman would put up with his bullshit. I never imagined it would be someone like you. You’re selling yourself short. You deserve...” I shook my head and looked away.

What was I doing? Telling her to break up with Malik and get with me?

I closed my eyes and massaged the bridge of my nose.

“...better. You deserve much better.”

“Trevon—,”

My cell phone rang, cutting her off. Glad for the distraction, I answered on the second ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, boss, there’s a woman at the restaurant asking for you,” Gary, the bartender at the Applebee’s I managed said.

“You’re kidding me. It’s my day off. Put Tom on it. He’s there, right?”

“Yeah, but the lady says it’s important and will only talk to you.”

I sighed, checked my watch. “It’ll be an hour before I get there. I’m in Decatur.”

“I’ll let her know, but believe me, boss, she’s rooted in with no plans to leave.”

The call ended.

I slipped the phone into my pocket. When I looked up, Kai’s eyes were on mine.

Those dark cat-shaped orbs that had stared down at me as she took me to the heights of pleasure that...I rubbed my eyes, forcing the memory to leave. “I gotta go.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry, Trevon. I didn’t mean to use you.”

I looked at her, dead on. “Yes, you did. Hope it was everything you were looking for.”

Her mouth opened as if to reply, but closed again before she stepped out of the way.

My hand on the knob, I looked over my shoulder. “I’d wish you the best in your relationship, but that wouldn’t be true. You see...all men don’t lie.”

Chapter 10

Trevon

I entered Applebee's through the kitchen door in the back and slipped into the small office shared by all the managers. I reached behind the door and grabbed the dress slacks, shirt, and tie I kept for emergencies.

Changed, I adjusted my tie, then headed toward the dining area and to the bar.

"Gary?"

The bartender looked up, then angled his head in the direction of the booth sitting in the rear of the restaurant. The woman's back was to me as she stared out the window.

I put on my best customer service smile and pushed the thoughts of my conversation with Kai aside.

"Ma'am, were you looking for the manager?"

The woman turned to look at me, a tentative smile on her face.

"Trina?" I stopped in my tracks and stared at my ex-girlfriend.

She pushed short, cropped hair behind her ear as nervous laughter escaped. "Surprise..."

It was hard to tell whether her smile was genuine or fake. We hadn't parted on good terms.

"*You* called me down here?"

"Sorry, there was no other way to get in touch with you. Your cell number has changed. You moved after our lease was up so I had no clue where you live. And...I didn't want to cross paths with your boys." She shrugged. "I knew you'd still be working here."

What in the hell was going on with the women in my life? First Kai, and now Trina.

I forced a calming breath to keep my sanity.

"You found me. What do you want?"

Trina stared at me. I could see the internal struggle on her face. Part of her wanted to come back with a sarcastic response. The other kept her mouth in check.

“Trevon, can you sit down for a minute? This is serious...”

I appraised her, and yes, her body language said she meant what she said.

I slid into the booth across from her, and steeled myself for whatever she had to say. “What’s the problem?”

Trina took a deep breath and placed both hands on the table. “I need you to help me keep a promise.”

“A promise?” I sat back, ran my hand over my face, and sighed. “What promise?”

She sat silent for a moment, which drew my full attention.

“To my son.”

My eyebrows rose. “You have a son?”

She nodded.

I shrugged. “What does that have to do with me?”

Trina’s attention went to her hands. “He’s been diagnosed with Sickle Cell Anemia. The doctors have been managing his care for the past year, but they feel he’s eligible for a bone marrow transplant. If it works the way they think, he’ll be practically cured. But first he has to survive the operation.”

“Damn. Trina, I’m sorry to hear that.” I meant it. “But what does that have to do with me?”

She put up a hand. “For days he’s been talking about his father. Kids at day care talk about their dads all the time. Now I’m afraid he’ll die and never know who his father is.”

My brain went blank. “And what, you want me to play daddy?”

Trina looked me in the eye and shook her head. “No, Trevon. I want him to meet his father. Justin is your son.”

I stared at her.

She stared back.

Somehow I managed to breathe. “Come again?”

Instead of responding, she dug into her purse and retrieved her phone. She pushed a few buttons and slid it across the table.

“Justin was born July twelfth, two years ago.”

“We broke up a long time before—”

“I found out I was pregnant after I left you.”

My brow creased. “And you didn’t tell me?”

“No. I couldn’t...didn’t want to deal with you. I didn’t want you to try and make things work because of the baby.”

Not knowing what else to say, I forced myself to look at the screen.

The bright-eyed kid who stared back at me was a dead-ringer for the pictures my mom had of me.

This wasn’t a joke or a lie.

I forced myself to swallow. “God, Trina...I have a son?”

“Yes, you do.” She smiled a little.

I was a father.

I placed my elbows on the table and stared at the screen again, studying everything about the little boy. Disbelief made my mind blank.

I had a son, a two-year-old son...no, I *have* a two-year-old son.

One I never knew existed. Yet, he asked for me.

Anger rose in my chest.

“How could you keep him from me, Trina?” My voice rose.

Trina glanced over her shoulder as if trying to see who could hear our conversation. “Look, now’s not the time to—”

“The hell it isn’t!” I spat, leaned forward and pointed in her face. “You’ve kept my son from me! You had no intention of telling me so I could be a part of his life because you’re *selfish!*”

Her jaw clenched. “I didn’t tell you because I was hurt and angry, Trevon. You cheated on me! We had something special! I gave you my heart and you’re promised to love me! But then you threw it all away!” Her voice trembled. Trina sat back and glanced around to see if anyone was listening. “So excuse the hell out of me for doing what felt right for my own sanity!”

“But *two years*, Trina? Two years? I don’t give a damn about your personal feelings. I screwed things up, I was an ass, but that does not give you the right to keep my son away from me. A boy needs his father!”

Trina’s hands went up to her face. I could barely hear her muffled voice. “You don’t think I know that?” When she looked up again, tears shown in the corner of her eyes. “I wish I were telling you this and that everything was okay. Instead, I’m telling you because he could die and never know...” She covered her mouth, closed her eyes, and tears rained down.

I sat back in the booth, my chest heavy and mind spinning. The phone was in my hand so I stared at my son.

Justin was two years old.

I’d missed everything.

His birth. Watching him learn how to walk...talk. Hearing him say Da-da. All the things Andre talked about when his first child was born.

Moments I could never get back.

And now, because of his illness, I could miss out on his future.

The only thing I had was now.

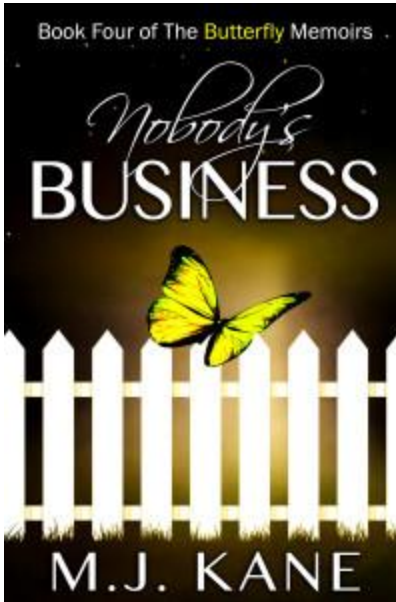
“Take me to my son.”

The End

Or rather,

The Beginning...

Want to know what happens next? Buy [Nobody's Business \(Book 4 of The Butterfly Memoirs\)](#)!
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Trevon Campbell's world changed the moment his ex-girlfriend announced he was a father. Determined to make up for his past mistakes, he gives Trina what she wanted before their breakup, what feels like his soul, which means forgetting the woman he had a one-night stand with, the woman who stole his heart.

Kai Malone doesn't want to play by her family's rules. Instead of working for the family business, she became a firefighter. Being a female of multicultural descent, working in a field dominated by men, Kai focuses on her job to ignore the infidelity of her fiancé. Tired of his deceit, she gave in to a one-night stand with a complete stranger, someone she'd never have to see again...or so she thought.

When tragedy strikes, their worlds collide, leaving them no choice but to deal with each other again. It doesn't take long for them to realize the attraction that brought them together the first time is stronger than ever, forcing Trevon to make the biggest decision of his life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR M.J. Kane stumbled into writing. An avid reader, this once stay-at-home mom never lost the overactive imagination of an only child. As an adult she made up stories, though never shared them, to keep herself entertained. It wasn't until surviving a traumatic medical incident in 2006 that she found a reason to let the characters inhabiting her imagination free. Upon the suggestion of her husband, she commandeered his laptop and allowed the characters to take life. It was that, or

look over her shoulder for men caring a purple strait jacket. And the rest, as they say, is history. No longer a television addict, if M.J. isn't reading a book by one of her favorite authors, she's battling with her creative muse to balance writing and being a wife and mother. She resides in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia with her high school sweetheart, four wonderful children, and four pit bulls. MJ can often be found at the local library where she now works, at Barnes & Noble as the director of a local writer's group, or online connecting with readers and other authors. Other activities she enjoys include: creating custom floral arrangements, assisting her children in their creative pursuits of music and art, and supporting her husband's music production business, 3D Sounds. M.J. is the Newsletter Editor for Romance Novels in Color Reader and Author newsletters and contributes to the CCLS Branching Out Newsletter.

Published Works:

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