

THE EMPTY KAYAK by Jodé Millman

EXCERPT

Chapter One

Detective Ebony Jones felt as though she was toting around a thousand-pound weight, which grew heavier and more torturous with each step. Her cargo, a petite one-year-old, nestled her dark curly head against Ebony's shoulder and wriggled on Ebony's bum left hip, the one with the .38 caliber bullet fragments lodged in it. Even the slightest pressure from the child's body sent relentless jolts of electricity sizzling down her leg. Between the squirmy kid and the merciless pain, Ebony's trek up the sidewalk was a living hell. And the situation was about to get worse. Much, much worse.

The toddler's green eyes locked onto Ebony's, so trusting and innocent that they tugged at her jaded cop's heartstrings. Lily Martin's face was muddy, her fuzzy pink hoodie was soaked from the sudden rainstorm, and she was missing one sneaker. But it wasn't Lily's bedraggled condition that made their journey up the front walk so unbearable; it was the heartbreak that would follow after Ebony rang the doorbell. And Lily's mother answered.

The Tudor-style City of Poughkeepsie home belonged to Jessie Martin, Lily's mom, and Ebony's on-again, off-again best friend. Since kindergarten, over twenty-five years ago, the two women had been BFFs, but once they pursued conflicting careers in the law, Ebony as a cop and Jessie as a criminal defense attorney, their relationship had deteriorated. Around every corner, clients, cases, and the legal system had thrust obstacles in their path, testing their friendship. Sometimes, Ebony wanted to pack it in and move on, but deep in her heart, she yearned to reconcile with Jessie. The present catastrophe wasn't going to help that cause.

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On her trip to Jessie's, Ebony had stewed over the appropriate way to tell Jessie that her ex, Lily's father, Kyle, was missing? There would be so many questions—*how, when, where, why*. How could Ebony

explain the outcome of Kyle's disappearance when she didn't know for sure whether he'd survived the freak accident?

Ebony limped up Jessie's bluestone path, laden with a cauldron of emotions. Sorrow. Guilt. Anger. Disbelief. Fear. And reluctance, to name a few. She still couldn't swallow the reality. Kyle Emory was missing and if she was honest, presumed dead.

Midway down the walk, Ebony glanced over her shoulder at Zander, who had remained curbside with their unmarked black Explorer. He was tall and slender, and leaned against the hood of the car. Zander's brows were drawn together, and he watched her with hawk-like precision. As partners, they were supposed to deliver death notifications in pairs, but he'd made no move to join her on the threshold.

Chicken, she thought. Or was he being uncharacteristically empathetic, given her close relationship with the victim's former partner?

Delivering the news of a loved one's death—or possible death—was the most onerous part of her job, and fortunately, she'd never discharged this duty before. Why did the first time have to be Jessie? This was going to be a day, a moment, that would be branded into Jessie's heart and mind forever.

The need to perform the death notification properly, professionally, prompted Ebony to ask herself how she'd prefer this horrific news disclosed to her.

It wasn't as if she was notifying a stranger. She knew Jessie as intimately as she knew her own kid sister, Carly. And similar to her arguments with Carly, they'd always forgiven each other eventually. Ebony only hoped being the messenger of a suspected death didn't permanently sever their already fragile bond.

But Jessie was a lawyer; a smart, strong, and fierce criminal defense attorney. She'd understand. She'd want honesty. No bullshit.

Straight but gentle, Ebony reminded herself as she scaled the porch stairs, clasping Lily to her side. Upon reaching the landing, she exhaled a deep breath, pressed the doorbell, and waited.

An eternity passed before Jessie answered the door. Jessie's eyes flitted from Ebony to Lily. Jessie's broad smile vanished as a ripple of worry lines surfaced on her forehead, and her ears flushed pink. Hal Samuels, Jessie's fiancé, stood behind her, looking equally surprised. They were dressed for early autumn hiking with scuffed tan boots, plaid flannel shirts, and faded jeans. They radiated happiness.

Every time Ebony saw Hal and Jessie together, she was reminded that a homicide investigation had reunited them and that new beginnings could grow from despair.

“Eb, what are you doing here? How did you get Lily? Is she okay?” Jessie craned her neck to peek past Ebony’s shoulder toward the street. “What’s going on? Where’s Kyle?”

Ebony cleared her throat. “Jessie, we have a situation.”

Hal dipped his head in recognition. The former District Attorney, and now Dutchess County Court Judge, seemed to acknowledge her gravitas and cupped his hands on Jessie’s shoulders as if propping her up in anticipation of an imminent disaster.

Jessie’s mossy green eyes burned into hers, and she snatched Lily away from Ebony as though protecting her child from a mistress of evil.

“What do you mean? A situation? Tell me what happened to Lily. Is she hurt?” Jessie peeled off Lily’s wet hoodie, socks, and muddy sneaker, and ran her trembling hands over her daughter’s plump body, checking for bumps, bruises, and cuts. Finding none, she continued, “Has Kyle been in a car accident? Where is he? Is he okay?” As expected, the questions tumbled out, heavy with worry.

Despite the pain in her leg, there had been something comforting about having the baby’s legs locked around her waist and the soft body cuddled against her. The warmth. The maternal stirrings. The irresistible scent of baby shampoo. The sudden emptiness in Ebony’s arms only exacerbated the burden of her visit and reminded her that the worst was yet to come.

Ebony’s entire vocabulary lodged in the back of her throat like a fishbone. Her mind analyzed the techniques for being sensitive, caring, and supportive, as protocol and friendship required. She stood frozen in time and space, cognizant that the truth would make the tragedy real for the both of them.

“Ebony, please come in,” Hal said, guiding Jessie across the foyer. “Take a seat in the living room.”

She followed them into the living room, where vibrant flowered sheets blanketed the sofa and chairs, protecting them from tiny, sticky hands. Ebony recalled that almost four months ago, she and Zander had barged into this room, attempting to pressure Jessie’s client into testifying in what had proven to be a landmark serial killer case. But Jessie had obstructed them, her customary *modus operandi* when dealing with the police.

The same floral sheets billowed as Ebony occupied an armchair that faced Jessie, who had Lily nestled in her lap upon the couch. Hal settled in beside them and leaned forward with his hands clasped and his elbows resting on his knees.

Ebony coughed at the dust motes floating in the air and cleared her throat. *Straight but gentle.* “Jessie, I have some bad news.” She sucked in a long breath and exhaled slowly to prepare herself. “We believe Kyle may have drowned in a kayaking accident this morning on the Hudson River. We haven’t found him, but we’re out looking for him. I’m so sorry.”

Jessie’s eyebrows shot up as she absorbed the words. *What?* Her dilated pupils seemed to demand. “Jessie, did you hear me? Kyle disappeared this morning.”

“What do you mean, you believe he’s missing? Don’t you know if he’s dead or alive?” Jessie’s face flushed and her grip on Lily tightened. “Kyle had Lily with him. How could he have been kayaking? Who was watching Lily?” Jessie’s voice increased in pitch until it was a squeak.

Hal slid close to Jessie and slipped his arm around her shoulders, shoring her up against the blow. “Let’s take it step by step, Jess. You must be in shock. Ebony, can you please start at the beginning? I’m sure that will answer some of our questions.”

“Before I get into the details, do you want me to call your mom and dad? They can help with Lily while I fill you in. I can send Zander over to retrieve them.”

Jessie balked at the suggestion and clutched the fidgety baby tightly to her breast. Hal tilted his head backward and jutted his chin toward the door, signaling his consent.

Taking the hint, Ebony shot off a text to Zander. *Please pick up Ed and Lena Martin and bring them here.* She gave him their address, and he texted back. *10-4. On the way.*

Although she owed Jessie an explanation, she wanted to delay getting into the details until Ed and Lena arrived to take care of Lily. The poor tot had been through enough at the scene.

“When did you last see Kyle?” Ebony asked.

“This morning. He came by around nine to pick up Lily. It was his Saturday with her.”

“Did he mention where he was headed?”

“No. I didn’t ask. We’re supposed to sign the custody papers this week, and since we were getting along, I figured I’d cut him some slack.” Jessie paused. “I’m working on my trust issues with him.”

“So, he didn’t tell you he was going kayaking at Kaal Rock?”

“No. He was there by himself? He had Lily with him?” A sense of disbelief colored her voice.

“Did he indicate he was meeting... friends?” Ebony asked. She needed to proceed step-by-step. *Straight but gentle.*

“No, what friends?”

“Does the name Olivia Vargas mean anything to you?” Ebony kept her tone calm, although her stomach clenched into a knot.

“Ebony, you’re scaring me. Who is this person, and what is happening?”

“Apparently, Kyle was engaged to Olivia. They became engaged three weeks ago on Labor Day. They were supposed to be getting married on Valentine’s Day next year.”

“What the hell? You’re telling me Kyle’s missing, and he was engaged?” Jessie shouted. Lily startled and bawled as though she understood the significance of Ebony’s announcement. Jessie rose and paced across the living room carpet, shushing her daughter and planting kisses on her curly head. “It’s okay, Lilybean. Hush, hush.”

Hal narrowed his eyes and made a time-out sign. “You’re asking a lot of questions and not revealing any facts about what happened to Emory.” He paused. “Stop beating around the bush and start at the beginning like I asked.” Hal’s demeanor had pivoted from being a supportive partner into a cool and controlled prosecutor ready to cross-examine an adverse witness. “What does this Vargas woman have to do with the kayak? And Kyle’s disappearance?”

“I’ll explain after the Martin’s arrive,” Ebony said.

As they waited, an uncomfortable silence filled the room. Ebony shifted in her chair as the hinge of the front door squeaked, followed by the shuffling of feet. Jessie’s parents, Lena and Ed Martin, accompanied Zander into the living room, and Jessie’s anxious expression greeted them. Then, in one swift movement, Hal gently pried Lily from Jessie’s embrace and deposited the toddler into her grandmother’s waiting arms. Ed opened his mouth to speak, but Hal interrupted him by whispering into his ear. Ed sighed and disappeared with Lena and their granddaughter in tow.

With the arrival of Jessie’s parents, Ebony could quit procrastinating and get down to business.

Zander perched on the arm of Ebony’s chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Okay. Here’s what we know,” Ebony said.