

Truly, Madly, Deeply

Nia Imani

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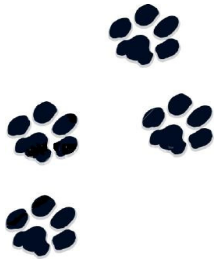
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Cover Design: ©2009 by *Nia Imani*

This book is specially dedicated to Bobby Kerley. I love you with all my heart and I'm counting the days until I can be with you again!

This book is also in remembrance of my babies Candy, Bogie, Rollie, Chance and Sir Lancelot of Arlington. I love you, I miss you and I'll never forget you!!!

A special thank you to my mother, Claudia, for proofreading this book. Again, I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you!



Chapter 1



“How bad is it?”
Julia closed the door firmly behind her, shutting out the cool September draft, before turning disturbed eyes on her assistant who was sitting anxiously behind the counter. They had been hoping desperately that the plumber would be able to evaluate the damage and come up with a lower estimate for the repairs than the other two men who had already come, but this price wasn't much better. In fact, this quote really wasn't any better at all.

She dropped the paper with the estimate on it in front of Faith and heard her gasp. “Eleven thousand dollars!”

“The plumbing's shot everywhere. Most of the pipes have to be replaced. We're lucky it's not worse than that with the building being as old as it is.” Julia sank into one of the chairs in the reception area, lowering her head into her hands. “This is something we definitely didn't need.”

“What if we try someone else? Get another estimate?”

Julia shook her head. “So far, that's the lowest and we really don't have any other choice but to go with this guy. If we don't get this done soon, we'll have a much bigger problem on our hands. I know what you're thinking, Faith,” she said, when she saw her friend lower her eyes. “Where is the money going to come from? I wish I knew. The bank isn't going to let me delay my payments any longer and the money we're making barely covers the bills and the salaries.”

“You could withhold my salary for a couple of months.”

“Don't be absurd. You have to pay for nursing school.” Julia stood up and crossed the room to pick up the estimate again, wincing at the large, red numbers written on the bottom. “Besides, your salary wouldn't exactly make a big dent in the amount of debt that I've gotten myself into.” Sighing, she turned towards her office. “I better go and call Mrs. Zeele and confirm that she is still bringing Reba for the weekend. We need whatever business we can get.”

Opening the door, Julia stepped into the small room she had turned into an office. It was kept amazingly tidy considering there was so much stuff squeezed into such a small amount of space, but she couldn't stand it when things were disorganized and so, she made a point of keeping it clean. Most of the time, anyway, she thought, sidestepping her trash can and stepping over a box to reach the old swivel chair behind her desk. Today's chaos hadn't left her much time to breathe, much less pick up after herself.

As soon as she came downstairs from her makeshift apartment this morning, trouble had started. The front gate was on the fritz again and wouldn't open for the delivery truck to bring in the supplies. They ended up having to make trips back and forth on foot and on the tractors to get

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everything inside. Of course, while they were doing that, it had begun to rain, making the driveway soften and eventually turn into mud, which the tractors got stuck in numerous times and they had to stop everything to get them out. When they finally finished, they were all cold, wet, and very tired and they hadn't even begun their regular chores.

To help them get back on schedule, she went outside to help when and wherever she could. It was very important to keep on a strict timeline for their days or else it would have a domino-effect and destroy their schedule for the rest of the week. At least she thought it would. They had really domino effected themselves into the middle of next year, they had messed up their schedule so many times, but every day she attempted to get them back where they were supposed to be no matter how futile it was with crisis after crisis rearing its ugly head. And the latest one was the plumber with his outrageously expensive estimate.

She dropped herself into her chair, closing her eyes as it noisily contested her weight with a high-pitched squeak. If she ever had the money, she would buy herself a new chair, a black one with nice, smooth material. And a lot of cushion, too, enough to bounce slightly whenever she sat down.

But right now even oil for her old chair was a luxury she couldn't afford. She owed money to the bank, the electric company and the water company. Not to mention taxes. She had to pay her employees. And now she needed to hire a plumber. Sometimes, she really did find herself wishing she had heeded people's warnings when they told her how difficult it would be to own and run a kennel. Maybe, then, she would have thought a little longer and harder before she spent her life savings in an attempt to fulfill her childhood dream.

A boarding and grooming business that provided for the community, while at the same time, saving the lives of dogs and cats by getting them off the streets and into good, loving homes had seemed like such an easy, straightforward plan when she was a little girl. Unfortunately, in the real, grown-up world, things weren't quite that simple.

If they were, she wouldn't be sitting here with her nerves twisting into knots as she thought about the grooming half of her business which was put on hold because, every time they turned the water on, the washroom floor started flooding. And she wouldn't have to be concerned about the significant chunk of revenue she was and would continue to lose every week until she could get the pipes fixed. None of which would matter if she could figure out a way to consistently fill up her kennel with boarders every week, but since that hadn't happened and wasn't likely to in the near future, she didn't know what she was going to do.

This month, she would just barely be able to squeak by. But next month...she didn't even want to think about that.

She touched her mouse and her computer screen brightened. She closed her e-mail and opened up her appointment ledger to find Mrs. Zeele's phone number.

A few minutes later, she put down the phone, relieved that Mrs. Zeele was still bringing her cat and would arrive later that afternoon. Now, if she could just get about ten or fifteen more pets to stay it might buy her another week.

There was a tap on her door and she looked up to see Faith step into her office.

"There is a man here who is interested in adopting a dog," Faith announced, a touch more enthusiasm in her voice than usual for her composed and very able assistant. "Would you like me to show him out to the kennel?"

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“No, that's all right. I'll do it.” Anything to put off having to give that plumber a call and tell him she was giving him the job. He wasn't the most pleasant of men and being around him set her teeth on edge, but he had the best deal, the only deal she could manage, so she would have to use him. She stood up and her chair squeaked again.

“He's looking for a small dog, one that can stay indoors. I was thinking maybe he would like Lulu.”

“I hope so. We've been looking for a home for her for way too long.”

Julia's eyes wandered to her bulletin board where the pictures of her dogs that needed to be adopted were pinned. The picture of the dog they called Lulu was in the middle. She was special, one of Julia's favorites. She had been with them the longest and for the life of her, Julia couldn't figure out why. Lulu was such a sweet dog. She would make a great companion for anyone.

It was just a matter of finding that right person. With some luck, that person had just walked into their office today.

She and Faith stepped into the reception area and found that it was empty. “Where is he?”

Faith looked around, perplexed. “I left him right here. Maybe he stepped outside.” She stepped over to the window and looked out. When she turned around, she shrugged.

“Hopefully, he didn't pick up on all of the bad vibes in the air and decide to leave,” Julia mumbled, zipping her jacket up to her throat. The rain had stopped, but the temperature had dropped about another ten degrees. It was only forty-four degrees outside and this was going to be the warmest part of the day.

Opening the front door, she stepped out onto the concrete slab that was their front stoop. Immediately, the breeze whipped up and she had to tighten her hold on the doorknob, so the door wouldn't fly into the wall. Not that it

would make any difference if there was yet another hole in the place.

The gravel crunched under her boots as she walked down the driveway, her hands stuffed deep in her pockets. She really hoped this man hadn't left. He was the first person they had had come this month who was interested in adoption. With the money troubles, she had been forced to cancel the ads she had been running in the local newspaper about her kennel. So there weren't as many people who knew about her now as there used to be and that was something else that was hurting business.

For goodness' sake. Did all of her thoughts revolve around money? The answer to that was yes. They had to. Everywhere she looked there was a harsh reminder that she didn't have it.

But somebody certainly did! Her footsteps stopped, her eyes widened. In front of her, parked in front of the building that housed the dogs, was a shiny, black Mercedes. And a very expensive one at that! She had seen one like this in a magazine once and she remembered it because it had cost between eighty and a hundred thousand dollars—and that one was used!

What in the world was a car like that doing here? And who in the world could have been driving it?

She walked the rest of the way to the building quickly, her curiosity higher than she could remember it ever being. Something had to be going on. There had to be some reason someone who could afford that car was here and it certainly was not to adopt a homeless animal.

What she saw was not at all what she was expecting. Well, it was, but it didn't affect her the way she expected it to. It made her heart jump up into her throat, so that, for a moment, she literally stopped breathing.

At the end of the corridor, faced towards one of the kennels where one of the dogs was sleeping, stood a man dressed in all black. He was in a shadow, so it was hard to

see his face, but something about him looked intimidating. Not in a way that was physically threatening, but in some other way. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was. There was just some kind of awareness of him, an uncomfortably close one, even though he was still standing so far away.

There was a gust of wind and it swept coldness up her back, causing her to shiver. She released the door to pull her collar up around her throat and it slammed closed with a loud thud, making her jump.

The man's head whipped around, his brows raised slightly in surprise at her presence. Their gazes locked and held, each of them doing a quick study of the other. Julia's heartbeat quickened even more as she stared into a pair of sharp dark eyes. She watched them travel to her still muddy boots, up her faded blue jeans to her dark blue windbreaker, and back up to her small windblown face. Again, the dark eyes met hers and with an utmost willpower, she stared defiantly back.

It was that same defiance that had her taking the needed steps forward to close the distance between them. "Can I help you?" she asked, her voice giving away nothing of the turmoil that was having its way with her stomach.

"I was just looking at your dogs," the man replied, turning his attention back to the kennel where the dog was sprawled out on its side, not at all concerned by the stranger who was regarding him so closely. "Are these the only ones you have? I don't see any that look like purebreds." His glance included some of the other dogs in the kennels and then returned to her.

"We don't have purebreds in as often," she said, her voice stiff. "People tend to prefer them and when we do get them, they go faster."

"You sound as if you don't like purebreds," he noted, detecting the distaste in her voice.

“I have nothing against them. They're good dogs in their own right. They have known characteristics that make it so you can know what to expect from them, unlike mixed breeds.” She looked at him steadily. “But that doesn't make purebreds any better than dogs that are mixed.”

“I didn't say that they were.” He turned so that he was no longer standing sideways, but straight towards her.

“Oh.” She lowered her head, her teeth nipping at her lower lip. Great job, Julia. You just forced your strong views of pedigree misinterpretations on this poor gentleman who had only expressed his observations with you. And you wonder why your business is going south along with every penny you ever saved? Clearing her throat, she summoned every fragment of dignity she could muster, and looked back up at the man. “Well, then, how can I help you?”

He took a moment before answering, another very awkward moment for her to endure with his eyes assessing her. “I'm looking for a dog for my secretary,” he said finally. “She will have been with me for ten years on Monday and I want to surprise her.”

“Your secretary?” she repeated skeptically.

“Yes. I think a little dog would be best, something lightweight and low maintenance. But I don't see any smaller dogs here either.”

“They're over in the next room,” she said, taking her cue and stepping back into the role she knew as the competent proprietor of the establishment. “These are actually my borders. If you'll follow me, please?”

They turned and she opened the door connecting this room to the next. She stepped back for him to go through, but he insisted that she precede him and so she went forward. The room was dim here also and she flipped on the overhead light. The dogs were instantly on their feet, their barks lifting excitedly into the air.

There were twelve dogs in total, ranging in size, age and personality. As she stated before, they didn't get many purebreds, and when they did, they were adopted almost instantly. All of the dogs they had here were of some kind of mix and she loved them all dearly and hoped one day there would be families who would, too.

"I think I already have a dog in mind," she said, already heading to a specific kennel. "Her name is Lulu. She's small and very manageable. I think your secretary will like her. She's charmed all of us here."

Julia stopped and crouched down to her knees, sticking her hand into through the chain-link fence and wiggled her fingers. Immediately, the small dog came up to greet her, her little tail bobbing quickly back and forth. "This is Lulu. We believe that she's part Yorkshire terrier, but we're not sure what else." Pulling her hand out, she released the latch for the door and clapped her hands together. "Come here, Lulu. Come on, sweetie!"

Lulu leapt forward and Julia pulled her up into her chest, giggling when a tiny pink tongue repeatedly lashed out and tickled her face. She became so wrapped up in the enthusiastic greeting that she nearly forgot about the dark stranger standing at her side.

"She already has a collar and tags."

"Yes." Julia rose to her feet, Lulu still lovingly coddled in her arms. "She was abandoned a few months back by her owners. Someone found her in a box on the side of the road and brought her here. She's been with us ever since."

Unexpectedly and a bit tentatively, the man reached out and stroked Lulu's head, his large fingers very gentle as they massaged behind the dog's ears. Lulu tilted her head into his hand and her eyes drowsily began to close. "Not a very happy story," he murmured.

"I'm afraid they usually aren't, Mr...uh..." She smiled sheepishly. "I'm sorry. I didn't get your name."

“Travis. Travis Chandler.”

He extended his hand and she shook it. “Julia Dane.”

“You're Ms. Dane?” he asked, surprised. “The one who owns the kennel?”

“That's right. I'm the one.” She slipped her hand from his and returned it to Lulu's back, ignoring the strange tingling sensation that tickled her skin.

“Excuse me for staring,” he apologized, after a long drawn out moment of his eyes perusing her now blushing face. “I just expected—”

“Someone older,” she finished for him knowingly. “Well, don't feel bad. The mistake is often made.” She angled her head to the side, a frown marring her brow. “How did you hear about me, by the way? You'll excuse me for saying so, but you don't exactly look like you're in your usual hemisphere.” She directed a look pointedly at his expensively tailored business suit, which could be seen under his open coat, another very expensive article of clothing.

He grimaced. “I came straight from the office. I'm going straight back after this stop. I heard about you from a friend and I wanted to check you out while I was in the area.”

And just what kind of “checking her out” was that, she wondered, her mind ticking through the numerous possibilities.

“So there isn't really a secretary?” she asked slowly, and then frowned, even more confused, when she got his answer.

“Oh, no. There really is a secretary and I really do need a present for her.”

Suddenly, things became clear and Julia couldn't help it when her lips parted and her breath escaped. Of course! He was getting a gift for his secretary, a woman he not only had a working relationship with, but also a

personal one. She could have kicked herself for not realizing before, especially since it should have been so obvious from the very beginning.

He was a man, an exceptionally attractive one, she could see now that she had turned on the light. He had nice dark brown hair, high cheekbones, a straight nose, and a mouth that looked like it was carved from granite. His eyes were not really as dark as she had originally believed, but a light brown. They were golden eyes. She had never seen anything quite like them before. Mesmerizing in their intensity and incredibly watchful, hinting at the knowledge they had observed from the little twinkle they gave every now and then. And, then, there was his stance, with his great height, that spoke of the great power he possessed which also hinted at a touch of arrogance.

All of these things were recognized in the small space of five minutes and she was sure there were still many more dimensions yet to be discovered about this man, ones she would never see.

“That's why I'm here,” he said, causing her to abruptly refocus her attention.

She hadn't been paying attention and didn't know what it was he was saying. Quickly, her mind replayed their conversation. Oh, yes, he needed a present for someone—his secretary—and that's why he was here. To get a present.

“Are you interested in adopting Lulu. If not, we have other dogs you could look at, but I just want to say that Lulu would make a very nice dog for your secretary. She's the perfect little companion and she really does need a home. I don't understand why it's taken so long to find her one, but I like to think that everything happens for a reason and maybe you're the reason.”

“Lulu seems like she will be just fine,” he said, leaning down to put his face in front of Lulu's. “In fact, she seems perfect.”

The strangest little fluttery feeling filled Julia's stomach as she watched the little dog's nose appraise the face in front of hers and then give it a kiss right on the long, straight nose. She swallowed hard to clear her throat, telling herself all of these feelings were because of the excitement of Lulu finally getting a home.

Quickly she bent down and closed the door to Lulu's kennel and fastened it shut. "That's wonderful. We can do the paperwork in my office."

"Um...there's something I need to ask you," Travis Chandler said, a small hesitation in his voice. "You see, the anniversary isn't until Monday and I really don't have any place to keep Lulu in the meantime. My apartment really isn't the place because I'm hardly ever there and wouldn't be able to give her the attention she needs and deserves. So, I was wondering if she could stay here through the weekend?"

"That would be fine." Whatever she could do to get Lulu into a home.

They left and followed the driveway back to the front building where her office was. The whole time, Julia was very conscious of the tall man at her side, his great height making her feel even smaller than usual. And just why these insecurities were showing themselves now, she didn't want to think about. But they were there.

Since the moment she had seen him, she had been fighting the feelings of inadequacy she felt when it came to her looks. She knew the facts. She wasn't what people would call beautiful, but she wouldn't go so far as to say that she didn't possess any attractive features either. She was just somewhere in between. Barefoot, she was five feet four inches tall. Not really short, but by no means tall. She had dark brown hair that reached just below her shoulders when it wasn't in a ponytail, which wasn't often. And she had green eyes, a deep color, the shade of emeralds. She liked her eyes, thought they were her best

feature. But, on an overall basis, she was just very simply a plain-looking person.

“Lulu is being adopted, Faith,” she announced proudly, as soon as they stepped into the reception area.

“Terrific.”

“We're going to go and do the paperwork right now. Please, come with me, Mr. Chandler?” Holding the door open, she let him precede her into her office, smiling at Faith's thumbs up sign. She returned it and then went inside, too. For the first time today, things were looking a little brighter and she was going to enjoy it before the sky turned gray again.

Even the sound of her chair squeaking as she sat down didn't cause her to cringe like it normally did. Although, she did feel a small tinge of discomfort as she watched Travis Chandler take the seat on the other side of her desk. The chair's wear wasn't quite as bad as her own, but with this man sitting on it, it looked ten times worse.

Opening up her desk drawer, she pulled out the necessary forms and grabbed a pen—the nicest one she had—from the old coffee cup she kept her writing utensils in. There was one more form she needed and had run out of, so she touched her computer mouse and opened up the needed document. While waiting for the form to print, she snuggled Lulu into the crook of her arm like she was a baby and gently rocked her until her eyes closed.

“You're very good with dogs,” he said softly.

She smiled up at him. “Thank you. Do you have any pets?”

“Unfortunately, I don't really have the time.” He lowered his face, so she could no longer look into his eyes.

She shifted uncomfortably, aware that a veil of sadness had fallen across the room. It was this man's sadness, from a heartbreak of some kind, and it was kept deep down inside of him where no one could see it.

But she could. She had seen it with other people too many times not to recognize it. The lowered eyes, the quietness, the politeness, but deliberate distance put between themselves and others. Yes, every single one of the symptoms was there, although, she was sure she could never get this man to admit to it. Not to her, a complete stranger.

“All right,” she said, pressing forward before she went against her own advice and asked the futile question that was so eagerly trying to leap off her tongue. Instead, she spun the papers around on the desk and slid them across to him. “I just need some information from you.”

A ringing sounded suddenly and Lulu's eyes flew open, her head up and looking around with full alertness. Travis Chandler reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. “I'm sorry. Would you excuse me, please?”

“Of course.” She turned to her computer screen, pretending to be doing something instead of rudely eavesdropping on his conversation, which would have been much easier if he had left the room, gotten up and moved to the corner even, but he just sat there.

The conversation was about business, that much she could tell. He was discussing some figures. Nothing that made much sense to her and her attention soon wandered. Instead, she found herself watching him with the paperwork.

While talking, he had perused over the reading material and then pulled an expensive looking gold pen from his pocket before answering the questions and placing his signature on the necessary lines. And she was sure that, at the same time, he was answering every question correctly over the phone, too. With a small smile, he flipped the papers back around and slid them back to her. She pulled them forward and looked them over.

Everything was in order. Now, it was just a matter of getting him to make out a check. Or maybe he had some

spare cash that he would whip out from his back pocket. The amount that was her adoption fee was probably chump change to him anyway. She was in the action of stapling the papers together, when her eyes caught something scribbled in the middle of the second page.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

She looked up and found he had finished talking on the phone and was looking at her with something akin to a smirk. The whole situation had just become very disconcerting for a number of reasons. One, because of what she had just read on this paper. And, two, because she had never seen him come this close to actually smiling before. That was most disconcerting of all.

Answering right away just wasn't possible as she was struggling for coherent thought. Flicking out her tongue, she moistened her suddenly dry lips, vaguely noticing his eyes following the action. They were now taking the signal up to his brain for a quick analysis and determining that she was, in the simplest of terms, flustered.

“Uh, no,” she stuttered. “Everything's fine. I was just reading over the paperwork and it says here that you are the owner of Chandler Enterprises.”

“That's right.”

“The same Chandler Enterprises that makes all of the pet products, like the invisible leashes that came out a couple of years ago?”

He nodded. “We're working on heated pet beds now. They should be out in a couple of months. If you would like, I could send you a few.”

She held up her hand and shook her head vigorously. “Oh, no. I wasn't trying to get you to—”

“I know. Your interest wasn't made from a business standpoint, but mine was.” He sat back in his seat, looking decidedly comfortable in a chair that was exactly the opposite. “I thought, perhaps, if you had some of my

products here it would be some extra advertising for me. You must have a lot of people who come here. You have quite a reputation. I figure it will be an easy and inexpensive way to get my newer products known. And when I say inexpensive," he added quickly, "I don't mean that I won't pay you for it because I will."

"You don't have to pay me," she said, her mind racing to keep up with everything he was saying and trying to make sure she was understanding correctly. Because she couldn't for the life of her figure out why the head of one of the top pet product companies in the country would want to advertise in her small out of the way business.

Yes, it was true that she did have a good reputation, but what he was speaking of was one she had in a town that had a population of a little less than eight hundred people. That kind of notoriety was hardly worth bragging about.

And the part about him being sure that she had a lot of people coming to her facility! Come now! She was certain that someone as successful and business savvy as he was well aware that her clientele couldn't be large enough to financially support this facility. She was also fairly certain that it hadn't taken the observance of her outdated computer monitor, her bulky stained-with-coffee desk or yellowing paint peeling walls for him to come to that conclusion. He would have known just as soon as his expensively clad foot had touched her skimpily covered gravel driveway.

So it brought her back to her original question. What was a man like Travis Chandler doing here?

Was it like he said? Could this visit truly have been brought on by an act of kindness towards his secretary? Could it be possible that his generous mood was spilling over onto Lulu and now herself and her kennel?

Not personally knowing any businessmen herself who were as prestigiously wealthy as Travis Chandler, she was forced to rely upon hearsay as to what kind of work

ethic a man of such caliber might exercise. At this moment, she couldn't recall hearing the word "charitable" on any part of the list. So that was why, even though she realized that by adding Chandler Enterprise's elite pet products to her inventory would undoubtedly raise her status in the industry, her stomach twisted into a nervous knot.

"But I want to," he said, and she blinked, again having to draw herself away from her thoughts to listen to what he saying. He was sitting further up in his seat now, his elbows propped up on his knees as he leaned forward to make, what turned out to be, perilously persuasive eye contact. "I see opportunity, Ms. Dane, and when it knocks, I open the door." He leaned back in his seat again. "Of course, if you would prefer not to, I would also be happy donating a couple of items anyway. I'm always open to giving to good causes."

What was this man, a mind reader? Or was he able to read the skepticism in her eyes? Why else would he have effortlessly contradicted the very condemning thought she had just had about him? Because, she realized warily, he was that good at what he did.

Well, she was good too. Right now, she might outwardly look inept when it came to business, but her resilience and perseverance had gotten her this far and would continue to carry her until she reached her goals.

It was that strong-minded will that wouldn't let her pass up what could be—if she played her cards right—an invaluable affiliation. That was definitely worth whatever risks might be involved by stepping into the arena with Travis Chandler. At least there, she could keep a better eye on him, just in case he did have some ulterior motive hiding up his sleeve.

With a deep, steady breath, she held out her hand. "That's very generous of you. We would like to accept

your offer—the first one. You may put anything here that you would like for your advertising.”

“Perfect.” The word rolled off his tongue with the ease of someone who was used to getting his own way. He lightly grasped her hand, shook it and then he stood up. “I will see you later, then. Lulu.” He nodded down at the dog again sleeping soundly in Julia's arms. He was at the door and just getting ready to open it, when he paused. “Could you drop her off Monday morning at my office?” He at least had the decency to grimace when he saw the look of surprise on her face. “I'm sorry. I forgot to mention that, didn't I? The phone call interrupted me. I sometimes have trouble dealing with more than one thing at a time.”

She arched her eyebrows. It looked like he had been doing a fine job of multi-tasking to her.

“Is that too inconvenient?” he asked. “I'll pay extra for the trip over.”

She was quick to shake her head. “You don't have to do that. If it's for Lulu, we'll gladly make the trip for free.”

He smiled, displaying many perfectly white teeth. “Thank you, Ms. Dane. It was a pleasure meeting you and I look forward to our next meeting on Monday.” And with a small bow of his head, he left.

Her gaze lingered on the door several minutes after he had gone. Her original thought had been to have one of her employees drop Lulu off, not for her to do it herself. So, why did she let him leave here with the impression that he would be seeing her Monday?

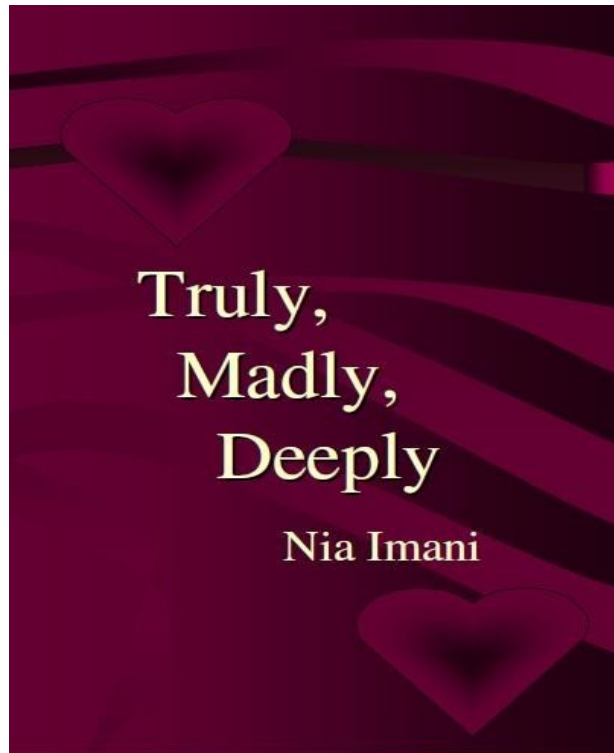
Even though she had already decided that it would be advantageous to get close to this man in the business sense, she knew it would not be wise to make these face-to-face encounters a habit. That conclusion had been drawn by something strictly personal, which she had no intention of exploring now or any time in the future.

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She was just going to have to send her apologies with whoever dropped Lulu off at the office. It shouldn't be any big deal. After all, he was a businessman and he had people running his errands all the time.

Lulu raised her head and looked up at Julia with big brown sleepy eyes. Julia lifted her up and planted a warm, loving kiss on the top of her head. "Congratulations, Lulu. You now have a permanent home."

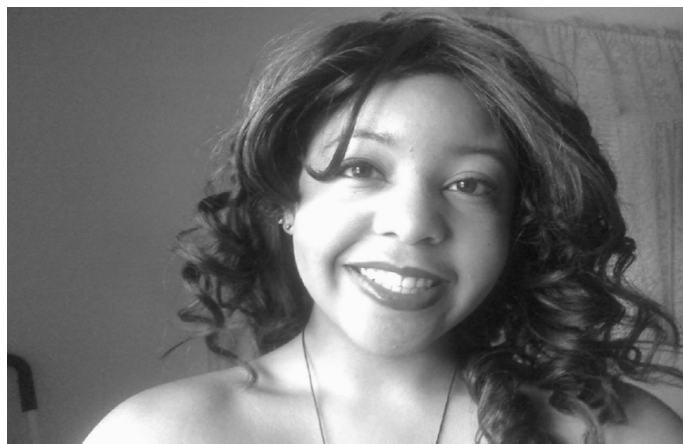
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Nia Imani currently resides in Tampa, Florida. Besides writing, she enjoys reading, listening to music, cooking and spending time with her four-legged babies, Muriel, Dewey and Teddy and her parakeets, Kiki and Rome.



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