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*Dana Littlejohn*

*Newsletter Gift Read*

*With Excerpts from*

*Conquering the Sun*

*Angel*

*Asian Spruce*

*Eros' First Fix*

*Home with The Jones'*

*Seven Year Switch*

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## Conquering the Sun

Can a man with the patience of a priest and skill of a warrior that purrs like a kitten when he sleeps be the perfect mate for the goddess of the sun?

### Blurb:

Takasa, goddess of the sun, left her mountain home consumed with bitterness caused by her long endured loneliness. The elders in her tribe fed her a potion to put her to sleep for a thousand years to wait for the one who would be able to save them from her wrath. Will the goddess have met her match at that time or will the descendent of a neighboring sun god be conquered by her fury as well?

## Prologue

Long, long ago in Hebra, Egypt, the tribe of Takasa, goddess of the sun, lived in harmony with their ruler and the land. The people called themselves Takasians in homage to the goddess. Takasa was good to her followers, encouraging their love and helping them thrive. She raised the sun daily, letting it shine on them without clouds to block its brightness. Takasa's sister, Luneria, was goddess of the night. The goddess of the sun communed with her sister daily to ensure the moon would rise and the Takasians could see by its radiant glow at night. The Takasians were grateful for Takasa's efforts. In order to show their devotion and appreciation, they danced and sang her praises every morning as the eastern sky brightened. The goddess who ruled the day was a beautiful woman. Takasa's eyes sparkled like precious black diamonds and her smooth skin was burned brown by the sun. The voluptuous body of the goddess had no equal, and her long ebony hair glittered like the night sky. They were gifts bestowed by and reminiscent of her mother, Dunia, the supreme mother of all Earth. Takasa was an even-tempered goddess, but the Takasians preferred nurturing her sweet demeanor lest she use her abilities to plunge their world into everlasting gloom, without the sun's light and heat, in a blink of an eye.

They worshipped her with their heart and soul, nevertheless, because they loved her and feared her awesome power. Takasa chose the tallest mountain in the land for her home. The villagers called it "Goddess Peak." She descended each night to rest in a cave at its foot so the goddess of the moon could reign. For many thousands of years it was so. One day, as the Takasians danced and sang their praises to the supreme being of warmth and light, Takasa came down the mountain to greet them. Surprised, but elated by her

unusual presence among them, they called out for more dancers to entertain her.

The people assembled at the base of her home before her. She watched them with a raised brow.

“What do you think you’re doing?” They stopped, stunned by her reaction.

“We...we are honoring your greatness by singing and dancing, goddess,” one of the dancers replied.

“We are exalting you for all the wonderful things you do for us,” another said.

“You call this praise?” she yelled, walking among them. “All that I do for you and that is all you can do for me?”

The dancers fell to their knees, quaking before her. “Forgive us, goddess!” they cried. “We only meant to please you!”

Standing in front of a dancer who was about her own height, Takasa pointed a finger at her like a chastising parent.

“I raise the sun every morning. I put it to sleep every night. I make the rain you need for your crops, and this is what you have for me? I tell you it is not enough!” Takasa ranted.

“We did not mean to offend.”

“What must we do to honor you properly?”

“Tell us what we must do to please you and it will be done.”

“There is nothing you can do that can please me now. I am angry.”

Before their eyes, Takasa grew to the size of the mountain she called home, and her head changed into that of a lioness.

“Now you will be punished for enraging me,” the lion’s head said.

Takasa reached down and gobbled up the nearby dancers. Horrified, the Takasians scattered, screaming a warning. It was to no avail. Before they could flee, Takasa caught them one by one, and ate them whole. Yet, unbeknownst to the changed goddess, one woman did escape Takasa’s reign of terror. She rushed back to the village to warn the rest of the inhabitants.

“Tempest! Tempest!” the woman shouted running into the elder’s hut. “The goddess is infuriated. She has given herself the head of a lion and is eating the people in the heat of her anger!”

“That is awful!”

“What can we do?”

“Come. We must go to see old Oling. He will know what to do.”

Tempest and the woman entered a joining room where an ancient-looking old man sat wrapped in a blanket by a fire pit. They sat across from him and Tempest nudged the woman, encouraging her to speak. She bowed her head before Oling in respect.

“Ancient One, we have somehow angered our goddess. She is eating the people in her wrath. We seek your knowledge to make amends with her,” the woman said, still trying to catch her breath. “Tell us what we must do.”

“It is written that a thousand years ago, Dunia, the supreme mother of all Earth, prophesied this day would come. Takasa would raise the sun one morning and before the day was done, she would descend upon her people, fiercely angry, consuming them in her wrath.”

His voice was soft and shaky, yet filled with a confident and knowing tone.

“The source of her fury does not come from her worshippers, but from within. It is loneliness that eats at the peace in her heart and is what causes her rage. The Takasains are just paying the price for it. We may not have caused our goddess’s fury, but it is our duty to ease it.”

“Oling, what can we do to help her?” Tempest asked.

“Elder, the goddess is extremely angry. Getting close to her means our death. She is beyond reproach,” the woman chimed in.

“We must give Takasa her deepest desire,” he suggested simply. “She is in need of a mate.”

“A mate! Of course you do not mean one of us. We are but simple humans. Surely there is none among us who is worthy to be the companion of a goddess?”

“No, Tempest, you are correct,” Oling agreed. “No one among us is equal to our goddess or worthy of her physical love.”

“Then how are we to find one for her?” the woman asked.

“The supreme mother’s prophesy says that a thousand years from the day Takasa attacks her village, a male child will be born in the distant land of Uganda. It is written that their sun god, Olcolm, comes to Earth often to dally with his people, many times leaving children behind. The babe we seek will be a descendant of those children, albeit many generations later. He is the chosen one and the only one who will be able to...” he searched for the correct word, and then offered them a soft smile, “...shall we say handle Takasa, as a goddess and as a woman. Only he will be able to deal with her temper, calm her wrath, and ease her loneliness. He is special and only for her.”

Tempest groaned and the other woman scoffed at Oling’s words.

“How will we survive for a thousand years waiting on the child to be born?” the woman asked. “When she is done with the people outside of the

village, she will come for the rest of us. No one will be left if we can't calm her wrath now!"

The woman sounded panicked.

"Peace, my daughter." Oling's tone was soft as he extended his hand then he turned his attention back to Tempest. "You must make the potion of the gods for her to drink. It is an old remedy whose ingredients are listed among the ancient scrolls. It will cause her to slumber while the years pass. Use pomegranate juice in the mixture, for it will sweeten the drink and hide the telltale taste of the herbs. She will not suspect a thing. Afterward, we must pray to Dunia and ask for her help on what to do next."

With a slight bow of acknowledgement, Tempest left Oling's chamber, followed by the woman. After consulting the scrolls Oling referred to, they gathered enough ingredients to make the elixir in a large enough portion to accommodate Takasa's current enormous size. When it was complete, they transferred it into a barrel and put it on a cart to pull out to the mountain. The goddess had eaten the last dancer and stood by her home with an angry expression. When she spied Tempest and her accomplice, she walked toward them.

"Goddess Takasa, where are you going?" Tempest yelled.

"I am going to the village to devour the rest of you unworthy people. I have no more need of you. Since you are here, I will begin with you," she said, and reached for them.

"If that is your desire, goddess, I am but a lowly human and cannot stop you."

Takasa hesitated, retracting her lion's paw, as she seemed to be taken aback by Tempest's graciousness. "Yes, you are a mere human and I am a goddess. My will shall be done."

"Yes, my goddess. It is very hot today and although you are still angry with your children, we do know our duty toward you. Oh great and powerful goddess, would you accept this barrel of pomegranate juice to quench your thirst before you take the short walk to our community?"

Tempest bowed low. Takasa did not shrink in size, but she did change her lion's head back into that of her beautiful face.

"It is true my anger remains, but I will accept your offering, for I find that you are correct. I am also thirsty."

She reached down to the cart, grasped the container, and drank the juice. The effect of the drugged liquid took hold on her last swallow. Takasa dropped the empty drum, which splintered upon impact. The women jumped back out of the way of the flying debris. As the goddess held her head with her massive lion's paws, they changed back to her normal dainty hands. Her colossal height decreased until she was proportioned to Tempest and the other



woman. Takasa stumbled back and forth until her knees buckled, and she fell into Tempest's arms. Together she and the woman put Takasa on the cart and pulled her to her cave.

The sun lowered fast as the goddess lost her ability to keep it aloft. Taking great care, they laid her on a silk-covered sleeping place. They lit torches, for outside the cavern it was pitch black because, without communication with Takasa, the goddess of the moon did not raise the orb to light the night sky. Tempest and the woman went about doing the tedious work of sealing the cave entrance to ensure no one could disturb their goddess for the next thousand years. The job took several days, but when it was complete, the women returned to their community exhausted, but pleased with their efforts.

"It is done, Oling."

"The goddess sleeps the sleep of a thousand years," Tempest added.

"You have done well, my daughters. Go in peace," Oling told the other woman, who then left. He turned to Tempest. "Come, the rest of the elders are assembled in the town's center. We must join in the prayer to call the supreme mother to us."

Tempest followed Oling to the heart of the sacred sphere where the others were praying to the heavens. She added her voice, and as their requests were made, a shooting star crashed in the circle's center. When the smoke faded, a beautiful woman stood in its place. The goddess's long dark hair was an ebony cloak about her shoulders. Her skin was pale and luminescent, and her eyes dark as the night.

"Why do Takasa's children pray to me, Dunia, the supreme mother and goddess of all Earth?"

Tempest stood up at Oling's nudging. "Goddess, the prophecy has come to pass. Takasa woke this morning and, consumed by her loneliness, has eaten many of her people. We have given her the potion of the gods, and she now sleeps in her cave of rest to await the birth of the descendant of Olcolm."

Dunia smiled. "Ahh, so the time has finally come. The goddess of the sun has worthy worshipers, indeed. You have done well following the instructions laid long before your births."

"We prayed to you, the supreme mother, for your help. Goddess, please, we are in need of your wisdom," Tempest continued. "We do not wish to have a thousand years of darkness while we wait for our goddess to rise."

"I see. What is your need?"

"We Takasians realize it is Takasa's duty alone to raise the sun, but humbly ask that you intercede. We would like you to raise the sun each day in our goddess's place until she awakens." Tempest bowed low and the others followed suit.

“Ahh, and what will Takasa’s children do for me during this time?”

Tempest looked to the other assembled elders. They looked to one another before turning confused looks on her. No one had words for her, but Tempest saw in their eyes they wanted her to answer the goddess. Tempest’s mouth opened, and then closed as she paused to consider her words.

“We will show you the same reverence and adoration we bestow upon our goddess, Takasa. For taking her place, our most gifted singers will present songs of love and gratefulness to you as the sun rises. To thank you for communicating with the moon goddess so we are not left in total darkness each night, our most talented dancers will dance for you at night when you bring it down.”

Dunia smiled and the area around the peoples glowed with sparkling starlight. “Your offered homage pleases me. I accept.”

“Thank you, goddess,” said Tempest and the gathered Takasians in unison. “I will raise the sun in my daughter’s place until she awakens and is able to resume her duties,” the goddess announced, and then disappeared in a dazzling beam of light.

## Angel

Angel spent the last two years Indianapolis enjoying a new life with a good job and a great guy. One text message from Blaze could end everything she had built up. Should she turn down a chance to get back at the man who has caused her nightmares for the last five years?

### Chapter One

She saw him. Tyrone had just turned the corner.

“Damn it!” she cursed under her breath.

Angel looked around growling her fury. She cut down a nearby alley, climbed the short fence to the backyard of an old brownstone and ran through the backdoor. As she descended on the lobby, she could see him bending over with his hands on his knees trying to catch his breath. Adrenaline soared through her veins making her heart pound in her chest. She ran faster screaming her anger aloud.

The man turned at her shout. He let out a yelp of his own, but his shock seemed to freeze his feet in place. Angel took the advantage, landing on top of him.

“Bastard! It’s all your fault. I hate you,” she shouted. “I hate you! Alexis is dead because of you!”

Each taunt was accompanied by a succession of punches. The man tried blocking as many as he could, but most of the hits landed true smashing into his face. His eyes, lips and nose swelled from the impacts. The skin tore at his mouth and over his brow. Angel straddled the large man continuing her assault until he ceased his struggling.

Relief flooded her senses as she looked down at him. Panting heavily, her gaze shifted to her blood covered fists. Stretching her fingers wide, Angel tilted her head to the right as confusion set in. A buzzing sound with a pulsing bright yellow glow emanated from each hand.

\* \* \* \*

Angel sat straight up in bed. Breathing hard, she wiped the sweat from her face and squinted in the dark. A flashing light on the nightstand caught her attention. Rubbing her eyes, she brought the phone closer to her and fell back against her pillows to read the text.

We’ve got a problem. Come home.

The phone fell from her hand as she sighed. The message wasn’t signed, but it didn’t have to be. Concern entered her mind. She had been in

Indianapolis almost two years and hadn't gotten a single text, email or phone call.

"Mmm."

Angel looked down toward the sound. Spencer rolled over and slipped his arm over her lap. She ran her hand over the fuzz on his head. Tomorrow his skull would be smooth again, but she always liked the velvety feel of the new growth.

Another glance to the dark screen of her cell made her groan and her smile disappear. Angel returned the phone, slipped beneath the sheet, then pulled Spencer's arm around her even more. The muscles of his shoulders felt relaxed beneath her fingers. She turned to face him. He squirmed when she moved her hand slowly over the warm skin of his waist and around to his firm backside.

"Mmm," he repeated.

Leaving his butt with a firm squeeze, she naughtily slid her digits around to the front of his body to give other parts the same treatment.

"Angel, baby, are you trying to wake me up?" Spencer asked sleepily.

"Yes," she answered with a squeeze. "Is it working?"

"Uh-huh," Spencer confirmed on a stretch. "In a minute we both will be awake," he added with a chuckle. "I love your methods and I really shouldn't care, but why are you trying to wake me?"

She scooted away from him, hating every minute. "We have to talk, Spencer. I— I have to go. Back home, I mean. Something has come up."

His eyes popped open. "Back to your place?"

Angel hesitated, her mouth opening and closing as she thought on how to answer the simple question.

His head tilted. "No, you mean back to Gary, don't you?"

Closing her eyes, she bit her lip and nodded. "Is everything okay?"

Angel thought for a moment. Although she maintained her own apartment, most of her time was spent at his. She and Spencer had been together the last eighteen months, but she had told him very little of her life before she arrived in Indianapolis.

"I'm sure it's no big deal. Whatever it is I can handle it."

"When do you have to leave?"

"I was—Well, I was thinking like right now."

He rose up on his elbow and rubbed his eyes. "Now? Are you sure? Do you need me to come with you?"

“No, honey, that’s not necessary.”

She pushed him back down on the bed and rolled him over to his back. Throwing her leg over his hips, she leaned down to kiss him.

“I’m just saying the sooner I go the faster I can get back. I’m sure whatever this turns out to be won’t take me but a day or so to work out. I will be back before the weekend is over,” she assured him.

Angel looked down into those soft brown eyes she had come to love over the time they had been together. Concern stared back at her. Spencer’s jaw flinched as he seemingly struggled with the urge to question her further. Hopefully he wouldn’t push the issue. She would leave him anyway, without an explanation, preferring that to lying. The knowledge this would put a strain on their otherwise good relationship distressed her, of course, but the assurance she could smooth wrinkles between them later and keep him safe now made her feel better. Angel remained silent hoping for the best as he scrutinized her. Just as she began to get antsy, the muscles in his face relaxed and his chest deflated with defeat.

“All right, sweetheart. Just be careful and come back to me safe,” he conceded.

She released a breath she didn’t realize she was holding. Angel placed a soft kiss on his full lips.

“Yes, baby, I will.” Angel pushed herself upright letting her hands slide over the hard muscles of his chest, and then she giggled.

“What?” he questioned with a raised brow.

“You were right. You’re not the only one that is *up*.”

Spencer laughed. “That sweet booty of yours is too close to his turf. That’s why he’s tapping you on the butt right now.”

Angel smiled and leaned over again. She brushed her lips over his as her fingers played with his ears.

“So what are we going to do now that *both* of you are awake?” she asked in a teasing tone.

Spencer chuckled low in his throat and pressed his face into the crook of her neck. Angel’s breath caught and she melted onto him. His large, strong hands glided over her back sending erotic tremors through her body heating her skin. A soft moan came from deep inside her. Spencer’s hands explored her backside, then down her legs. The slow, deliberate movements turned everywhere he touched into an erogenous zone. The knowing digits left a trail of electrified flesh in its wake before stopping on her waist.

In one smooth movement, he flipped her over reversing their positions. His strength didn’t surprise her, but it did thrill her every time he displayed it. He caressed her face, then traced her lips before he put a gentle kiss to her

mouth. The loving look he gave her made Angel's heart soar. His hand came to rest on her breasts and bringing one to his mouth, he pressed a soft kiss to her skin.

"Oh, I think the three of us can come up with something," he said finally with a soft grin.

\* \* \* \*

Four hours later, Angel drove past the familiar sights of Twentieth Avenue. She'd thought once she left Gary, Indiana that she wouldn't have to return, but here she was about to turn down Broadway to Blaze's house. Angel wanted a normal life and children one day. After working for Blaze for so long, she began to doubt that would happen. And then she met Chris.

Chris was beautiful, brilliant and settled. She had everything Angel wanted and it gave her new hope. Chris was really Blaze's first widow, even if she wasn't really a part of his current team. She was with Blaze and gone by the time Angel came on the scene. Angel made a silent promise to go back to her life in Indianapolis as soon as this job was done. She would have that normal life. Angel pulled into his driveway, stared at the house and sighed heavily. Perhaps she was jumping the gun. Maybe this wasn't an assignment at all...though she couldn't think of another reason for Blaze to call her back.

Gripping the steering wheel, Angel took a few deep breaths, then grabbed her bag from the backseat and got out. She knocked on the door. It swung open mere seconds later. Blaze stood in the doorway, a large intimidating force. Broad shoulders with chiseled chest muscles pressed against a white tank top. His smooth, chocolate skin was unmarred save a long jagged mark on his shoulder that reached down to his bicep. Blaze's bald head shined in the low lighting provided by the streetlights and his mustache was a thin line framing his full lips. He looked as good as she remembered.

First impression would lock him in as a bruiser or a gangbanger, but Angel was part of a very small group of people that knew differently. Blaze was the sweetest most loving man she knew. He only took on that ominous persona when he had to. Angel put her hand on her hip and twisted her lips. As she looked him over she chuckled to herself. Here it was the wee hours of the morning and Blaze was wide awake, wearing dark sunglasses, puffing a cigar. Same ole Blaze.

He pulled the glasses down to the tip of his nose, took the cigar out of his mouth and scoffed.

"Why you gotta look like that, Angel? Ain't you glad to be home, seeing your boy again?"

"I know you wasn't looking for smiles and cartwheels, Blaze. I'm not all that happy to be back, especially not at four o'clock in the morning."

They stood eyeing each other for a moment, then Angel smiled. Blaze returned the cigar to his mouth, stood upright and opened his arms wide.

“But I did miss you,” she added walking into his embrace.

Blaze laughed and lifted her off the ground. His six foot four height and brawny stature dwarfed Angel’s five foot two frame within the confines of his hug. When they met years ago, it was because of her small size that she was able to save his life.

She was just a kid when she saw his car hit the tree in her backyard, but she didn’t hesitate to crawl in to loosen his seatbelt so he could escape the wreck. Blaze all but adopted her that day as the little sister he never had. She spent most of her time with him and decided to work for him as she got older. He balked at first, not wanting someone he had grown to love like family into his particular lifestyle. Once Angel explained that because she was like a sister to him he could trust her more than most, he agreed.

As time went by, they recruited and trained girls who needed money and protection from street life for one reason or another. He closed the door and they walked arm in arm into his living room. Not much had changed since she was last there. Same blue sofa, coffee table and bar in the corner, but there were a few new additions that stood out. A large flat screen had replaced the huge wall unit against the far wall, loads of games flowed from beneath the cabinet that the television rested on and a few more speakers were lined along the ceiling.

Angel moved a game controller to the neighboring cushion and sat down.

“You still like your Ciroc chilled?” Blaze asked crossing the room to the bar.

“Of course, is there any other way to drink it?” she asked with a laugh. Blaze chuckled.

“True that, true that. I was just making sure that there weren’t too many changes. It’s been a long time, baby girl. You look good.”

“Not too many, not that anyway. Thanks, Blaze,” she said when he passed her the drink. “I see you’ve upgraded a few things since I was last here.”

“Yeah, I picked up a few more things to make life a little more comfortable. Everything is all good,” he confirmed sitting beside her. Angel took a sip from her glass.

“Uh-huh, well, if *everything* was all good I wouldn’t be here, now would I? So why not tell me what’s not good, Blaze.”

He laughed and took the cigar from his mouth. “All right, you got me there. Somebody is getting out of hand. Of course, I have tried to handle it like a man and have a sit down with the brother, but he don’t want that. He’s some

two-bit punk with a small crew who thinks he's all that. I sent two of my people over to set up a meeting and they started shooting."

"Anyone hurt?"

"Not really. Nico, got grazed in the shoulder, but that's all."

Angel nodded and took another sip. "Sounds like this guy needs to be dealt with."

"I agree. That's where you come in."

"Why call me? Any one of your Black Widows can handle this for you. Toni was my number one. She's very good."

He leaned forward and rested on his knees. "Yeah, that's true, but I thought you might want in on this one," he said giving her a nudge.

"Oh yeah, and why is that?" she asked, raising her glass again.

"Because the dude in question is Tyrone."

Blaze's words stopped Angel's glass in midair. Her eyes widened.

*No. It can't be the same Tyrone. I mean, that's a common name, isn't it? Not like but common enough Michael or Joseph, but—*

"You remember Tyrone, don't you, baby girl?" Blaze asked cutting into her thoughts. "That light skinned brother that beat your sister's ass when he felt the urge and she drove her car into a tree running from him."

She squeezed her eyes tight as his words formed the images flashing in her mind's eye. Angel was stunned to see what looked like her sister's car flying down the street when she was visiting a friend. Shortly afterward there was a loud screech, and then what sounded like a small explosion. Her heart fell at the noise knowing instantly that her sister was dead. Angel almost covered her ears again as the memory washed over her. When she arrived, the car was pressed against the tree resembling a pop can after a child had stomped it flat. The sight of Alexis's mangled body had changed Angel's life forever. The anger and pain that had found a place deep in Angel's subconscious for the last five years resurfaced with Blaze's prompt flooding her body again. She opened her eyes and turned to him.

"Are you sure, Blaze?" she asked through gritted teeth.

Blaze finished his drink and reached into his pocket. After pulling out a lighter, he lit the tip of the cigar and took a long drag. He held the smoke in his mouth for a long time before blowing it to the ceiling.

"You know I wouldn't have called you if I wasn't sure." He offered her the cigar. "You wanna hit?"

Angel shook her head. "I can't, they do random drops at my job."



He flicked his ashes into the tray. "For real? That sucks. So what's it like out there in the real world?"

Angel smiled. "It's cool. I go to work every day, come home every night and chill with my man in my free time."

"Uh huh, sounds boring to me, but whatever floats your boat, baby," Blaze said with a shrug, taking another long drag. "So what did you tell him when you left?"

Her smile faded, remembering Spenser's face. "I told him something came up and I had to go home."

"So you broke him off a little somethin' somethn' and came home to handle your business, huh?"

She looked into his laughing grin as the smoke willowed out the sides of his mouth. "Yeah, something like that."

"All right then, so what's it going to be? You want in or what?" he asked tapping the ashes into the tray on the table.

"What's my cut?"

"Same as always, five G's."

Angel shook her head. "I want ten."

Blaze sputtered before he took his next pull. "Oh really? And why would I do that?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Obviously you don't think one of the other girls can handle this job. If you did they would be doing it and you would be telling me how you avenged my sister's death. So it may be true that I want in on this, but it's also clear that you need me," she pointed out.

"Or I could just want to give you the chance to get your revenge on this dude for getting your sister killed," he shot back.

Her eyes narrowed as she challenged him. "So which is it then?"

Blaze took another drag from his cigar holding her gaze for a long while, and then he smiled.

"Don't waste your venom on me, Angel. I'm your boy. Save all that for the job. I'll give you the ten because you're worth it. You may have trained Toni, but I'd rather have you because you're still the best."

Angel stood and took the rest of her drink like a shot. "I'll spend the night with the girls. You can send me what I need over there. I'd like my money as soon as I'm done so I can get back on the highway. Agreed?"

Blaze put out the cigar and stuck it behind his ear. "You got it."

She picked up her bag and walked toward the door.

“Angel.”

She turned at the sound of her name.

“Welcome back, baby girl.”

## **Asian Spice**

Tania is dumped by her boyfriend for being too bold, too aggressive, and too mouthy. Throwing herself into her new job, she travels to China and meets Michael Shen. She convinces him that a fling while she is in his country will be time well spent for them both. Will two weeks of Tania be too much for Michael to handle, or will he leave everything he knows to have a thousand more with her?

### Chapter One

Tania drove her car frantically along the downtown streets of small town Anna, Ohio. Screeching to a stop in front of the Chase One building, she stomped across the lobby and tapped her foot while she waited for the elevator. She reached her floor and stomped down the hall, walking right up to the cowering secretary who sat frozen watching her approach.

“Where is DeMarcus?” she demanded.

“He’s, he’s in a meeting, Ms. Onyx, but—”

She turned on her heel and headed down the hall as the rest of the secretary’s words faded behind her. Tania listened at the different conference room doors as she walked by them, and when she heard voices she pushed the door open with a hard slam.

“DeMarcus Green, who do you think you are?” she yelled.

The stunned men at the table with DeMarcus turned to her and then back to him as he jumped to his feet.

“Tania, what are you doing here? I’m in a meeting.”

“Yes, I can see that you’re in a meeting.” She looked across the table at the men and scoffed. “This isn’t a meeting, this is you and your boys trying to figure out where to go for lunch,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

He smiled. “It’s still a meeting, Tania, and you’re interrupting it.”

She waved her hand to dismiss what he said. “Who do you think you are? You leave a message on my voice mail dumping me? What kind of punk does that?” she asked with her hands on her hips.

DeMarcus looked at the men then back to Tania. “Can we discuss this later, Tania?” he asked in a lower voice.

“No, if I wanted to discuss it later, I would have come later. I want to discuss it now.”

He sent them another look and spoke calmly. “Well, I didn’t want this type of confrontation, Tania. That’s why I left the message.”

“You didn’t want a confrontation? You didn’t think that message would lead to a confrontation? What kind of crap is that?”

He chuckled softly and shook his head. "Okay, you know what, gentlemen, will you excuse me? It seems I have some pressing business to handle before we can continue with our meeting in peace. Go ahead to lunch. I'll catch up with you."

The men nodded and left as Taniae tapped her foot watching them leave, then turned back to him.

"So what's your real problem, DeMarcus? Now that you don't have people to front in front of you can tell me the real deal."

He smiled. "Okay, Taniae, I will. I heard you were up for that expansion project leader position at Honda," he said and sat back down. "Is that true?"

She sat on the table and shrugged. "Yes, it's true. It's between me and Robert Jackson actually, but it's all unofficial. So what."

"I have no doubt that you will get it, Jackson isn't a people person like you are."

She wrapped her arms around her chest. "What's your point, DeMarcus?"

"My point is if you get that job your income will take a major jump going north on the dollar scale. I don't want to be in a relationship with a woman that makes more money than I do."

She dropped her arms and her mouth fell open. "You're not serious, are you?" she asked with a disbelieving chuckle.

"Oh, yes, I'm very serious. I have noticed in my experiences that no man wants a woman whose income is greater than his. A man should always make more money than his woman because he is the man and should be able to handle everything. If your woman makes more than you, she'll think she's wearing the pants in the relationship, and that's not a relationship I would care to be in."

She stared at him for a moment then shook her head and as that disbelieving chuckle escaped her again she held the bridge of her nose.

"Okay, let me get this straight. You dumped me because I'm up for a position that could possibly bring me more money than what you make? Is that about right?" she asked raising her head.

He nodded. "That and you are just too damn demanding."

She blinked wildly.

"I simply don't have time to give you what you want from me."

She rubbed her temple. "So, my wanting you to date one woman at a time and spend some quality time with me so our relationship can grow was *demanding*? It was asking too much from you?"

He thought for a moment. "Yes, that about sums it up." He laughed at the confused look that was apparent on her face.

"So what are you saying, you thought I would stay at my current position forever? You knew I wanted more when we hooked up. Why did you pursue me in the first place if you knew I would eventually seek more money and a better position? Did you think I was so demanding then?"

"Because you're fine, that's why," DeMarcus said throwing his hands up. "You have a pretty face and a banging body. Every man wants a fine woman on his arm when they're out and about, so his boys can give him props. Look, I realize you're probably devastated over losing me, but the bottom line is I don't want you anymore. The ends and outs are irrelevant and so is whether you agree or disagree."

She was stunned. "What?"

He continued as if she hadn't spoken. "But I will give you some helpful advice because I think you'll need it. Back down a little. You're entirely too aggressive for a *woman*. No man wants a woman on the same lines as he is. Even in bed. You're just too damn aggressive. You women say you want to be equal, but you don't. You want your man to dominate over you. Stop trying to be the man and back it down a little."

She didn't think her eyes could widen more, but they did.

"If you backed down, as fine as you are with that fine-ass body of yours, you can have any man you want. I may even consider taking you back." He picked up the phone. "Security, yes, can you send someone up to the main conference room on the eleventh floor? I have an unwelcome guest." He hung up and leaned back in his chair smiling at her. "So, as you can see I'm a very busy man. I don't have time for drama. Security will be here shortly to escort you out to the pavement." He chuckled as he picked up his glass.

She hopped off the table and tapped the bottom of his glass before it touched his lips dumping the contents into his lap.

"Nobody wants a punk ass man who's afraid of a strong, independent woman, anyway," she said crisply and stomped out of the room.

Angry and confused she drove back to the Honda plant, stopped at the bathroom to freshen her tear streaked make up and drop some Visine into her eyes before going to her office with her best smile in place.

"Hi, Tania, Mr. Barkley called to speak with you."

She swallowed her groan. "Really? What did he want?"

"He didn't say, but he did ask that you call him when you returned from lunch."

"That's just great," she muttered. "Thanks, Betty. Can you get him on the phone then transfer it to me?"

“Sure thing.”

She closed the door and sat heavily in her chair with a sputter. “Who needs him? He couldn’t kiss, anyway...slobbering and what not all over my face.”

“Tania, Mr. Barkley is on line one,” Betty’s voice said over the speakerphone.

“Thanks, Betty.” She took a deep breath and picked up the receiver. “Hello, Mr. Barkley. How are you today?” she asked pleasantly then paused. “That’s good, I’m fine, too. So, Betty said you wanted me to give you a call.” She paused again. “Of course, I can. I’ll be there shortly.” She put the phone back in its cradle and sat back.

“Okay, let’s see if this day can be recovered or if it goes down in history as my worst work day ever,” she muttered as she left her office. “Betty, I’m going upstairs to have an impromptu with Mr. Bradley. I don’t know how long it will take so just hold the fort until I return. If it goes badly you’ll see me sailing past the window at ninety miles per hour. I’m having one of those days.”

Betty chuckled nodding as her boss left. Tania took the elevator to the third floor. The employees called it Suit Row because all executives had their offices on the third floor. As she went down the hall to Mr. Bradley’s office, she saw Robert Johnson coming toward her.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Tania Onyx...the competition,” he said with the biggest grin she’d ever seen.

She stopped in front of him and gave him her best practiced smile. “Hello, Robert, how are you? Did you have a meeting with Mr. Bradley, too?”

“As a matter of fact I did. It went very well, too. It seems he’s found the man for the position as manager over the expansion project that he wanted.”

She kept her gaze steady concentrating on keeping her smile in place and not letting her jaw drop, then she realized he was waiting for her to say something and forced the corners of her mouth higher.

“Oh, well, that’s great, Robert. Congratulations.”

His smile seemed to widen too. “Yes, well, thank you, Tania. I guess the best man won after all. So, you’re about to have a meeting with Mr. Bradley, huh?” He wrapped his arms around his chest. “What do you think your meeting will be about?”

Her smile faded and she twisted her lips, but took a deep breath before answering him. “I don’t know, Robert. Why not get out of my way so I can find out.”

“Of course, of course, but you be sure to let me know when you find out,” he said with a flip of his hand and continued down the hall laughing. Tania rolled her eyes.

“Jerk.”

She continued down the hall shaking off Robert’s comments before knocking on Mr. Bradley’s door. “Yes, come in!” Mr. Bradley was an older man, large and intimidating in appearance. He was at his desk with his glasses low on his nose going over a folder when Taniae poked her head in. “Hi, Mr. Bradley, it’s Taniae.”

He smiled. “Yes, yes, please come in, Taniae.” She closed the door behind her and sat in the chair in front of his desk.

“So, what’s this little meeting about, Mr. Bradley?” He removed his glasses and closed the folder. “Taniae, I’ll come right to the point. You probably have heard the rumors that you and Johnson were the lead candidates for the supervisor position on the expansion project.”

“Yes, sir, I heard about that,” she replied shifting in her chair.

“Yes and I’m guessing from your demeanor that you passed Johnson in the hall and he couldn’t wait to tell you that I offered that position to him. Am I right?”

She shifted again. “Yes sir, he did mention that bit of information. So what is this, my official let me down easy session? Sorry you weren’t chosen, but we picked the better man for the job or a man for the job?” She tried to keep her voice neutral but heard the snappy edge to her voice.

Mr. Bradley smiled. “Absolutely not. The reason I gave that job to Johnson is because I didn’t think he could handle the job I’m about to offer you.”

She stopped avoiding his gaze. Her head swung back to him. “Excuse me?”

He chuckled. “Honda has chosen to open a new plant in Greenburg, Indiana. It was announced just recently. This plant has been asked to supply them with a competent person to help open the new site, get the training started and eventually assist the lead trainer train all other employees.”

She listened to him explain the job to her and though she had questions for him, her brain and her mouth seemed to have lost their connection.

“We’re not the only plant supplying personnel, of course. Other plants will be asking their staff if they’d like to relocate, too. Someone from the main plant in China will be relocating over here as well to work at the plant as the other trainer. That’s the position I want you to take, Taniae. You and the person from China will be doing the training for all of the employees together. This way we have someone representing both countries running the plant. You will have to go to China and train for two weeks, at Honda’s expense, of course.”

With minimal connection returning to her brain she could only nod as he spoke.

He chuckled and continued. "With this new position you would be required to relocate to Indiana directly after the training in China is over. Do you understand?"

The partial connection gained potential as what he was saying to her started to sink in, but, uh-huh, was all she could imagine.

"It would mean a promotion to Plant Trainer and a considerable raise, of course. In fact, it pays more money than the expansion supervisor position does because of the relocation," he added with a wink.

Suddenly full cooperation was restored to the connection between her mouth and brain. She sat straight up in her chair.

"Wait a minute. Let me see if I understand what you're asking of me. This position would mean I leave Anna and live in Indiana?"

He nodded.

"Okay, but before I do all that I first have to go to China for two weeks to train and they pay for all that?"

"Yes, but acceptance of this position would also mean several other trips to China during the year, at least four, to keep the plant employees updated on any changes that they may have in their policies."

She eased back in her chair. "Hmm..."

"I'm aware that taking this position would be a life altering decision. I can give you some time to think---"

"I'll take it."

"Excuse me?"

"I'll take the position. I accept your offer."

"Tania, wait, maybe you should take a little time to think it over. Why not sleep on it or perhaps discuss it with your family, significant other or—"

She laughed. "Mr. Bradley, there is no significant other and the only family I have is my parents, and they're in Florida. Flying to them from Indiana won't be any different than flying to them from Ohio."

He chuckled. "Well, that is true."

"Besides Mr. Bradley, I've been here all my life and even though I like my job this is the chance to go for something new and believe me, I'm due for a change."

"Excellent!" He opened his top draw and pulled out a folder sliding it across the desk to her. "Here is some information you will need about the job, some other stuff you will need to know once you're in China and also some



information for you to help you to relocate more quickly. Since you agreed so quickly, I can call them and have the training set up to start next week. You leave in three days.”

“Three days?”

He smiled. “Yes, I was going to give you those three days to think it over, but you sound like you’re ready to start a new life. Three days is enough time for you to get your affairs in order, isn’t it?”

She flipped through the folder and smiled. “Three days is plenty of time.” She stood and extended her hand as her smile expanded. “Thank you, Mr. Bradley, for everything.”

“You’re very welcome, Tania, and good luck. My secretary will contact you at week’s end with everything you’ll need to leave.”

Tania floated back to her office to give Betty the good news and get her to work on relocating her. She sat in her chair heavily for the second time in one day, but this time her mood was the opposite as she spun around in circles laughing.

## **Eros' First Fix**

Juanita Reyes was an elderly woman in her mid 80's. She lived a full life with a good job, many friends and close family members, but she never married or had children of her own. She never thought of herself as lonely—just single. One night, Eros came to her in a dream to tell her she missed her chance at true love because she was afraid to take a leap of faith. He wanted to give her a second chance with her true love, Royce Cole. Will Juanita take the second chance Eros offered her, or chalk up her lost love as one of life's many lessons learned?

### Chapter One

Miami, Florida: 2060

Juanita headed home in the warm night air, pushing a small cart of groceries in front of her. At her age, the little things--like taking a little stroll every day, working in her garden, and taking time with friends--mattered most. They kept her young. She smiled as she thought of her friends. They met every Friday for dinner at each other's houses to talk about the past, and what was going on in their lives now. They hardly ever covered the future. With more of their past behind them than future ahead of them, it just didn't come up in their everyday conversations. She giggled softly and looked at her watch. Time was getting away from her, so she quickened her pace.

She arrived at her beachfront home and set the table for a buffet-style dinner for four. As she finished, she heard a knock at the screen door.

"Juanita, dear, we're here!"

Juanita hugged each of the four women as they walked in.

"Hello, everyone. The food is ready if you would like to eat first."

The ladies nodded, filing into the dining room and filling their plates. When they finished, they took their tea with them into the living room. "So, how was everything?"

"Everything was wonderful as usual, Juanita. You know you're the best cook among us, dear." Juanita smiled.

"Thank you, Tracey. Okay, this is how far I have gotten on my latest needlepoint."

She dug into a large bag next to her chair and pulled out the small tapestry. It was only half stitched, with the words, 'There's a silver lining in every thunder cloud' in sparkling silver thread across the center.

"I thought I'd add a few dark clouds in the top two corners and put a silver trim around it when I am done with the words. Then, once it is complete, I'll make it into a pillow."

"That's a wonderful idea, Juanita. It's beautiful. I'm sure it will sell quickly at the swap meet."

“Thank you, Ricki. What are you working on?”

Ricki dug into the bag she brought with her. “Here’s what I have.” She held up the pale yellow cloth with its bright green stitching. It read, ‘A daughter isn’t just a wonderful gift from GOD, but a best friend, too.’

“That’s lovely. Mine says something similar,” Tracey said, pulling hers out. “A husband is a gift from GOD and a best friend’,” she read off of her brown cloth with bright white letters.

“What a coincidence.”

“Yes, that’s wonderful,” Juanita replied in a monotone voice as she sipped her tea.

“What does yours say, Sally?”

“Well, Juanita, you know I have four sons so my needlepoint always reflects them in some way.” She pulled out her completed piece. “See, ‘All men aren’t dogs, but if they were I would surround myself with a bunch of good looking pedigrees instead of dirty mutts any day of the week’,” she said, reading the red letters from her royal blue cloth.

Everyone laughed.

“You are so bad, Sally. Are you going to see your boys this summer?”

“Of course. My Braden will send for me first. You know he lives in Vermont now. From there it’s off to Boston to see Richard and Scott, then Michael in Tallahassee. I probably won’t be back until early August.”

“Your summer seems to be filled up. Juanita, darling, what are your plans for this summer?” Ricki asked as she started on her stitching.

“What do you mean?”

“What she means, Juanita, is we will all be traveling this year. Ricki is going to spend a month with her children this summer. Isn’t that right, Ricki?”

Ricki nodded her head as she sipped her tea. Sally grinned smugly and nodded before continuing.

“She has a son in Virginia and two daughters in Georgia. She may very well be gone until early September. Tracey will spend the summer in Atlanta with her daughter and, of course, I will be gone all season. You will be all alone here in Miami. Whatever will you do without us, dear?”

Juanita sipped her tea before looking over her cup at Sally. Sally’s smug tone was not lost on her. She put on her best smile before answering.

“Well, I have my garden to tend to, and my needlepoint. That will keep me busy, as well as some everyday errands that still need to be done. I’ll be fine.”

“Hmm. Don’t you ever get lonely? I mean, we all have our children and grandchildren. Now that our husbands are gone, we have the memories of them to keep us company on the lonely nights. But you,” Sally chuckled and sipped her tea before continuing. “You don’t even have that, dear. It wouldn’t surprise me if you cried yourself to sleep every night.”

“Actually, no, I don’t. I never really considered myself *lonely* at all, just single.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say, Sally,” Ricki said, flabbergasted.

“Juanita has family. She wouldn’t be alone here without us. Isn’t that right, Juanita?” Tracey said.

Before Juanita could reply, Tracey continued.

“Her sister lives in Savannah, right, Juanita? What’s her name, again? Cynthia, isn’t it? Yes, Cynthia. She and her husband visit as often as they can and so do their children. Don’t they, Juanita?”

Juanita nodded opening her mouth to reply, but Sally cut her off before she could answer.

“Yes, yes, I know all that. For goodness sake, I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad, Juanita. I just wonder from time to time why you never married, that’s all.”

“I thought we decided that we weren’t going to talk about that subject again. It only upsets her,” Tracey put down her needlepoint.

Ricki nodded in agreement.

“That was before you joined our little needlepoint club, Sally. We managed to function very well before you came,” Tracey added in a huff.

“It’s okay. Sally obviously needs to know what happened. I don’t mind telling it again. Let me bring us some refills first. Would you like some cookies to go with it this time?”

She watched them nod and put her cup down to go into the kitchen. Juanita returned with the teapot and a plate of cookies a few moments later. She refilled everyone’s cup and set the plate on the coffee table before taking her chair.

“Now, let’s see. Well, it’s been almost fifty years now, I believe, but I remember him like it was yesterday,” Juanita started dreamily. “He was the most handsome man I had ever seen—so beautiful and sexy. I could never forget him.”

The other women giggled like schoolgirls.

“Tall and muscular, he had the brightest brown eyes and the sexiest, most kissable lips.”

Sally’s hand went to her chest. “Oh my goodness.”

“You are a mess, Juanita,” Tracey said, trying to muffle more giggles.

“What was this dream man’s name, dear?” Sally asked.

Juanita chuckled. “His name was Royce.”

“Royce?” Sally asked, making a face.

“Yes, like Rolls Royce. His name was Royce Cole.”

“Well, dear, if he was all that wonderful why didn’t you nab him? Didn’t he want you?”

“Sally!” Tracey screeched.

“How rude!” Ricki snapped.

“I’m not trying to be rude, dear. I just want to know what happened.”

“Of course he wanted to marry her. Royce loved Juanita very much, it’s just—” Tracey covered her mouth, ending her explanation with a soft gasp.

Juanita patted her knee then cleared her throat before continuing. “It’s all right. Well, Sally, he was younger than I was at the time and I didn’t think he could be serious about us, so I...well, I dismissed his attentions.”

“Without even giving him a chance?” Sally asked.

Juanita nodded.

“Oh, Juanita, I wish that wouldn’t have happened to you. Obviously he was to be the love of your life, honey,” Tracey said sadly.

“Yes, dear. Remember, I was a few years older than Bernard. We were married for over forty years before he passed on. Age means nothing when you’re in love,” Ricki added.

Juanita chuckled sadly. “Yes, well, I know all this now, ladies, but after fifty years I think it’s a little too late to do anything about the Royce situation.”

“My goodness. Are we talking cradle robbing? How young was he, Juanita?” Sally asked.

“He was twenty-five at the time.”

“At twenty-five he was a grown man. How old were you?”

“I was thirty-four.”

Sally snickered behind her hand. “My goodness, Juanita, you were a cougar.”

“A what?”

“You’ve never heard that term before?”

“No, I don’t think I have.”

“Where did you live back then?”

“I lived in Indianapolis, Indiana.”

“Oh, well, that explains it then. I lived in New York City and it was used quite often. That’s what they called a woman who had a fling with a man several years younger than her. The trend became very popular, even more so than older men with younger women.”

Juanita chuckled. “Well, I never had the chance to be a—what was it, again? Cougar? We went out on a few dates before I called it off. I never saw him again after that.” She picked up her cup and drained it. “I need more milk and sugar. Are you ladies okay?”

Each one nodded in turn. Juanita caught Tracey’s eye and saw sympathy shining there. She tried to reassure her with a look of her own, but sensed she failed. She made sure to change the subject upon her return. After her friends left for the evening, Juanita cleaned up and pondered how her life could have been different had Eros not passed her up. She loved Royce so much, but didn’t think it would work at the time. Perhaps if Royce had been a little older, and she a little younger, they might have had a chance. She had been afraid that he wasn’t ready for the responsibility of settling down with one woman and taking care of a wife because of his tender age. She left all that out of her little reenactment—Sally didn’t need to know everything. She really didn’t want to tell her anything, but knew her friends wanted her to explain why she didn’t have anyone in her life. She put the last dish in the rack and left the kitchen.

Often she wondered what her life would be like if she had kids of her own. Had she married him, she would have given him as many as he wanted. If she had wedded anyone, she’d have a family—even grandchildren by now. Her nieces and nephews were wonderful and she loved them all, but the situation wasn’t the same. Having babies of her own would have been so much better. When she was with Royce she was almost thirty-four and had her own issues with growing older. At the time she pictured him as a child rather than the man he was. Tracey was right. She hadn’t given him the chance to prove that he could be the man she needed him to be. She had written him off the minute she found out his age.

Juanita sat at her vanity and slowly brushed her long, curly hair, turning to and fro to see herself in the mirror. She didn’t think she had aged badly. Sure, she had lines around her bow-shaped lips, too many laugh lines around her eyes, and her hair was silver instead of the rich auburn it was in her youth—but at eighty-five-years-old she was still healthy and wore the same size as at the age of thirty-five. Remaining active and eating healthy helped a lot. She set her brush down and stared at her reflection.

Would she have outlived a husband by now like her friends had? Or would he still be here with her? Would that husband have been Royce or someone else? She chuckled.

“I might as well be contemplating the ways of the universe than trying to figure out the ways of love,” she said out loud as she removed her clothes and slipped her gown on.

“If I were meant to have my true love by my side, he’d be here now. Cupid can’t be everywhere at once. Everyone can’t have a true love, some folks just have to settle or have no one. Obviously, I’m one of those people who just didn’t have one,” she told herself as she slipped between her sheets and shrugged.

“Oh well, there’s nothing that could be done about it now. I’m an old woman and what’s done is done. You live, you learn.”

She yawned and closed her eyes. “There’s no point in worrying about things you can’t change. Not even Cupid can turn back the hands of time,” she said as she faded off to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Aphrodite stood in the warm glowing light at the entrance to the Chamber of the Gods. The radiance in the room emulated from Zeus’s throne, filling the immediate area. In the center of the floor was the portal, an opening in the sky that Zeus used to look down on Earth. Zeus sat on the chair looking majestic in his gold and white robes. A gleaming gold and ruby crown rested on his brow. To his right sat his queen, Hera. Zeus looked upon her with a gentle smile, but the revulsion in Hera’s eyes could not be hidden by the false smile on her lips. Aphrodite kept her eyes on the ruler of the gods and walked to the edge of the portal.

“My lord, you called for me?” she asked giving her bow.

“I did, Aphrodite. It has reached my ears that you would like to leave Mount Olympus for a time to frolic with Poseidon. Is this true?”

“It is, my lord,” she replied, careful not to let her eyes shift to acknowledge Hera’s smug grin.

“Who do you suppose will handle matters of love on Earth during that time?”

“The Erotes are capable, my lord. Eros is a god of love and Himeros is a god of desire. Together their power is almost as strong as my own.”

“Have they been tested?” he questioned.

“No, my lord, not yet.”

“But you are satisfied that they can perform the tasks of the Goddess of Love?”

“I am, my lord.”

Zeus nodded. “Very well then. I will—”

“My lord, if I may...”

“Yes, Hera?”

“Great Zeus, would it not be wise to test the boys’ abilities before setting them free on your precious Earth? They are young and their powers are untried. Shouldn’t such testing take place while the goddess is still on Mount Olympus? It would be tragic if the Erotes were not up to par and the goddess was not around to repair any damage they may have done. Don’t you agree, my lord?” she inquired sweetly.

Zeus stroked his beard and nodded again. “You are wise as you are beautiful, Hera. Aphrodite, I will give the Erotes a task to fulfill to test their power. If they complete their mission with positive results you will be free to go, but if they fail...”

“I understand, great Zeus. I await the task you have for my son Eros to complete.”

\* \* \* \*

Juanita sat on the beach watching someone run toward her. She stood with open arms to welcome the handsome young man as he came closer. He reached out for her, but just before he touched Juanita’s hand, he disappeared.

“What just happened?”

She was no longer on the beach, but at a wooden table where one would have dinner.

“Where am I? How did I get here?”

“I have brought you here. I apologize, Juanita, for interrupting your dream, but we have important matters to discuss. I have a proposition for you.”

She gasped and spun toward the deep voice. Just as quick she turned away again.

“Oh my!”

“What’s wrong?”

“Why, you’re—you’re naked! Why have you come to me with no clothes on? You should be ashamed. Don’t you know you could give an old woman a heart attack like that?” she asked, shielding her face. “Please cover yourself! Who are you?”

“My apologies again, Juanita. I did not wish to offend you. I am one of the few who brings love to the Earth. My name is not important for we are called by many names and have many different looks.”



She raised an eyebrow behind her hand. "You're a bringer of love? What are you saying? You're Cupid?"

"Some cultures have used that name for us. When called by that name you may have seen this figure."

Juanita heard a soft popping sound and turned hesitantly to see that the man was gone. In his place was a large blonde, blue-eyed baby wearing a diaper and holding a bow. The wings of an angel kept him afloat as he spoke to her in the same husky voice.

"Does this look suit you better, Juanita? I can keep this form while we speak if it does."

She chuckled. "Forgive me, but I don't think I can have a serious conversation with a flying baby."

"As you wish. We are capable of several forms. Perhaps this one will be better for you."

With a flash of light the baby disappeared and in his place stood a woman. She was tall and lovely. She wore no clothes except for a sash that wrapped around her body covering her private areas. Her long hair blew backward in a subtle breeze as she stood on top of a large clam shell. Again, the voice was the same when she spoke.

"Is this one satisfactory? She is my mother."

"Umm, no. I'm not really comfortable with that one either."

"Very well."

In another flash of light the woman disappeared and in her place stood a handsome man. He was muscular from his shoulders to his calves with smooth, dark brown skin, piercing ebony eyes and an aura of sensuality exuded from him. She stared at his full lips as they moved.

"How about this one?"

"Royce," she whispered.

"You remember him?"

"Oh, yes."

"I am not Royce, Juanita. I am called Eros. I am here to give you another chance at love."

"Another chance? How is that possible?"

"Love did not pass you by as you believe. It was you who rejected love because you were afraid to take a leap of faith."

"We can't turn back the hands of time. I knew Royce fifty years ago. That's a whole lifetime. He's probably married and has children and grandchildren of his own by now."

Royce's body walked over to her and took her in his arms. He held her close, bringing his face down to hers. His sensual aura engulfed her. The sensations assaulting her body threatened to awaken feelings that had been dormant for decades.

"Let me worry about that. I'm offering you a second chance to feel like this with a man you never stopped loving. Say yes, and the first day of your new life begins right now."

"But—but, surely it is too late. I'm an old woman now."

He smiled and pinched her chin softly, brushing his lips over hers. "Take this chance and that, too, shall change. Just say the word."

Her breath caught and she almost collapsed in his arms from her body's reaction to him.

A second chance with Royce? How could she turn that down?

"Yes," she whispered. Everything went black and the loud crack of thunder rang in her ears.

## Home with The Jones'

After a stressful day at work in the world's most aggravating city, all Reyna Jones could think about was getting home to her darling husband to unwind, but he was not there when she arrived. That was a problem.

### Chapter One

Reyna Jones held the bridge of her nose and sat back against her desk. "Maybe I haven't made myself clear. You do understand English, don't you, Roger?"

The young man stood with his back pressed against the office door, cowering. "Yes, ma'am, I do."

"And the concept of time? You have a firm grasp of that, as well?"

"Yes, ma'am, I do, but—"

"Then explain to me how you managed to be three minutes late."

"Well, the traffic was—"

Reyna looked up. Her sharp gaze stopped his words. "Did I ask you about the traffic, Roger?"

Roger swallowed loudly, his Adam's apple bobbing over his T-shirt. "No, no ma'am, but I was trying to explain—"

Reyna pushed herself from the desk. Roger jumped. She took a few steps toward him. Roger's eyes widened. Sweat glistened on his pale skin above and below the bright blue sweat band he wore around his head. Reyna recognized the fear in his eyes. She almost smiled. Changing course, she returned to her desk, sat down without a word and crossed her legs. She took a deep breath and spoke calmly.

"Roger, what is it that we do here?"

"We—we're a courier service, ma'am. We deliver items for people around the city," Roger answered.

"Are we the only ones in New York City to offer this service?" Roger's brows scrunched as he thought, but his answer came quickly.

"No. Umm, there are a few companies that do what we do."

"That is correct, but we are the *best* at what we do. Do you know why that is?"

The confusion on Roger's face deepened. Reyna continued without waiting for his reply.

“It’s because of wonderful employees like you, Roger,” she replied with a soft smile. “I have dedicated men and women working for me that care about doing their jobs well. I am very grateful to have experienced rider like you braving the dangerous streets of Manhattan on a bike, bobbing and weaving skillfully through traffic to get my packages to their destinations on time. *That* is why we are number one,” she added, pointing at him.

Roger smiled at her praise and the fear melted from his features.

“Three minutes may not seem like a lot of time in the grand scheme of things, but when we promise to be there by two o’clock it matters a great deal. When we promise a *specific time*, five minutes early is on time, the time we specified is acceptable, but late even by one minute gives the competition the opportunity to take the job from us stating they could do better.”

Roger’s eyes darted back and forth as her words sank into his mind and then his eyes lit up as comprehension dawned.

“Now we know that isn’t true because we’re the best for a reason, right?” Reyna asked, gesturing toward him.

Roger nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Of course, so we will have to be a little more diligent with our time management, Roger, so that this doesn’t happen again, right? We don’t want another company taking our place in the top slot, do we, Roger?”

“No, ma’am.”

Reyna left her chair and closed the distance between them. Roger’s apprehension did not return as she approached.

“No, we don’t. You’re one of my best riders, Roger,” she said touching his shoulder. “If we lose our place on top I cannot afford to keep good people like yourself. That would upset me very much. You don’t want that do you, Roger?”

“No, ma’am. I’m sorry for upsetting you.”

“I know, Roger. You’re forgiven. So, what will you do so this doesn’t happen again?”

“I—I can be more careful when I’m making my deliveries, maybe leave earlier in case traffic is a little tighter than usual.”

“Excellent idea! I knew you would come up with a good plan.” Reyna opened the door. “You may clock out now and I will see you in the morning.”

“Yes, Mrs. Jones. Thank you. See you tomorrow.”

Reyna closed the door behind him and groaned. Before she could get to her chair the phone rang. She snatched it from its cradle and leaned on the desktop.

“Yes.” Listening, she rolled her eyes and sighed. “Fine. I will be there in five minutes.” Reyna put the phone down and turned back toward the door. “I swear this day just keeps getting better.”

The meeting took far longer than Reyna expected. She left work fifteen minutes past her usual time, rushing to catch her train. Her building was equipped with an enclosed tunnel to the subway system making it easily accessible in inclement weather. When she arrived on the platform she saw the train disappear into the tunnel. She frowned.

“Don’t worry. I missed it too, but it’s rush hour. Another will be along in about ten minutes.”

Reyna turned to the old man taking a seat on the nearby bench. She knew that, of course, but it wouldn’t be the express she usually took home.

“Thank you,” she replied with a smile.

Reyna walked to the other end of the platform to wait. The man’s prediction was correct. It was just under ten minutes before another train roared into the station. It was filled almost to capacity. People of all shapes and sizes adjusted themselves to allow Reyna to squeeze onboard. The car lunged forward and she reached for an overhead handle to stabilize herself. Falling wasn’t a real concern because of the sardine-like conditions, but she held on anyway. Reyna thought of the express train she missed and blew out a breath. Her ride would have been ten minutes, by-passing most of the stops she now had to endure. The local not only added another half hour to her ride, but, because it was longer, it was too hot with too many smells, none of them pleasant.

When her stop finally came, she shoved people out of her way and burst free onto the platform blowing out a loud frustrated breath. Slowly she took the long staircase and emerged into the bright light of the early evening sun. Blocking the light with her hand, she untangled her shades from her hair and secured them on her face, then wiped the rolling perspiration from her brow.

Having temperatures near ninety degrees in September was uncommon for New York City. Although pleased to be out of the sweltering air of the overcrowded train car, the stifling air offered her no real relief. Commuting from Manhattan to Brooklyn was a daily chore, but along with the meeting that extended past its allotted time and dealing with wearisome employees all day, it was exhausting. Reyna looked forward to the relaxing bath she would soon be in.

Reyna’s pumps clicked rhythmically against the hot concrete as she walked along the street leading to her apartment building. Her purse dangled from one hand and her jacket from the other. The heat rose from the asphalt, warming her legs and making her white linen pants almost unbearable to wear. Even the sheer material of her sleeveless pink blouse did nothing to cool her off. The walk wasn’t as long as her sore feet made it feel. Reyna entered the

building a short time later and slumped against the wall in the coolness of the lobby to wait for the elevator. She counted the lights above the wide metal doors as they lit the descending numbers brightly.

“Hello, Reyna,” a woman greeted her when the doors opened.

“Hi, Mrs. Beck.”

“You poor thing, you look absolutely worn out. Summer just won’t let go. This dreadful heat just sucks the life right out of people,” Mrs. Beck commented with an air of concern.

Reyna smiled at her elderly neighbor. “I’m fine, Mrs. Beck. I just need a hot bath, some food and a hug from Marc and I’ll perk right up.”

Mrs. Beck laid a hand on her chest. “Oh, that is so sweet. Michael and I used to be in love like that. God rest his soul. I will let you go, sweetie. You tell Marc I said hello.”

“I will. Have a good evening.”

Reyna let the woman hug her before she entered the waiting elevator. She pulled her keys from her purse, then hit her desired floor. She walked down the hall to her condo and smiled when the cool breeze caressed her heated skin as she opened the door.

“Ahh,” she said, closing the door behind her.

Letting her head fall back, Reyna let her lids lower as she kicked off her shoes. Suddenly she realized something was off. Confusion took over as she popped her eyes open and scrunched her brows. She crooned her head to the left. The living room furniture was unchanged from that morning except the black leather chair was nowhere to be seen nor was it in the foyer. It should have been front and center when she entered.

“Hmm.”

Reyna pushed herself upright. She angled her head, straining her hearing. The place was silent. No running water. No music. Nothing.

“Hmm.”

She laid her keys and jacket on a table along the wall near the door. “Marc?” she called out, going down the hall.

Passing the kitchen, she noticed it was clean. No cups resting on the counter and the breakfast dishes were neatly stacked in the rack, but the room was empty. Reyna continued down the hall. Their bedroom door was open, but the room was unoccupied. She looked at her watch and her lips twisted with displeasure.

“Hmm, well we’ll just have to correct that,” she murmured. Reyna unbuttoned her blouse and walked into the bathroom next door. Reaching into the shower, she turned on the water and continued to undress.

\* \* \* \*

Marc Jones' knee bounced nervously beneath the briefcase in his lap. He checked his watch for the third time, then peered at the front entrance again. The platform lowered excruciatingly slowly, but finally dropped low enough to allow the wheelchair-bound man to back off onto the side walk. The driver stood at the door to talk to the disembarking passenger for what seemed like forever before he finally waved goodbye and took his seat. Flipping the necessary switches needed to bring the steps back to their original form, the driver waited until they were ready for ambulatory people to use before he strapped himself to his seat.

The bus jerked forward moving again, but it gave Marc little relief. Looking about the bus, he wondered if anyone else noticed how slowly they were moving. He turned to look out the window as they trudged along the crowded streets and let out a frustrated groan as they passed familiar sights. He was close to home, but not near enough to get out and walk. With another glance at his watch, Marc jumped from his seat and made his way to the front of the bus. Willing the vehicle to move faster, he stood in the walkway and stared out the windshield.

"You're going to have to go back to your seat, sir. You're not supposed to be over the white line," the driver told him, indicating the floor with a nod.

"Can't you go any faster? I'm kind of in a hurry."

The driver looked over his shoulder and scoffed. "How would like me to do that? Ride on top of these other cars to get you down the street?" he offered, rolling his eyes.

Marc frowned at the disdain in the man's voice and went back to his seat. A short while later his stop came and he left the coolness of the bus for the humid air outside. Sweat beaded on his forehead almost immediately. He walked quickly down the street toward his building. His tie felt tighter around his neck, but it didn't constrict his breathing as much as his apprehension did.

The last meeting of the day had run on longer than he expected. Although Marc did his best to rush his partners along, he still left his job almost thirty minutes behind schedule. He knew he was going to be late when he left work, but decided to try to take the bus anyway. Now he realized he should have followed his first notion and taken a cab home. It would have been expensive, but much faster than stopping at every other block or waiting for wheelchair-bound folk either. Marc took the few steps to his building two at a time and rushed inside. Removing his keys, he mashed the button until the elevator doors swung open. He tapped his foot and fiddled with his pockets as the elevator rose.

When the doors opened again, he sprinted down the hall and entered the apartment as fast as he could. He spun and a gasp escaped him as he fell back against the door, frozen. She sat in a chair in the foyer waiting for him. Her

hair was brushed neatly with loose curls throughout the shoulder length locks. She eyed him sternly, then stood with her hands on her full hips to giving him a better look at her loveliness. He swallowed loudly to wet his suddenly dry mouth. She was stunning. The black patent leather stilettos on her feet were his favorite. Her long elegant legs were covered in fishnet stockings. The black leather skirt hugged her curves deliciously and rode high on her thick thighs when she crossed her legs. Her breasts swelled above the white corset-inspired tank top. The delicate black lace around the edge drew his eyes toward her impressive cleavage.

His cock pulsed in his pants as he took in her sexiness. He lifted his eyes to take in the beautiful features of her face. Her makeup was always flawless, enhancing her natural beauty. The ruby tint on her full lips made them look supple and inviting. Her high cheek bones, almond-shaped eyes with the soft green and amber shades on her lids complemented her smooth brown complexion perfectly. He loved it all. Her eyes danced with the fire that excited him and scared him to death at the same time when she was angry. That energy blazed back at him now as she looked at him.

“You’re late,” she said.



## **Seven Year Switch**

Sonja Winters enjoyed the good life with a great job and being married to the man of her dreams. As she prepared to celebrate their seven year anniversary she came across a secret her husband had kept from her. It would alter the course of their marriage forever.

### Chapter One

Sonja exited the building with her books clutched to her chest. Today was the day. She was going to take a chance and just say “hi”. Rounding the corner, she saw the construction site ahead and slowed her pace to scan the area. The workers had been here since the end of the official school year to get the project completed before the start of the next semester. A rumor floated around that they were not allowed to fraternize with the few students who remained at school for summer classes. Her heart rate raced at the possibility of blatantly breaking a rule.

Every day Sonja made sure to take the route by the incomplete building in hopes of catching his eye, but no such luck. He was either assisting other members of the team or busy elsewhere so he couldn't see her. There were several laborers on the job, but he stood out from them all to her. The sight of him took her breath away. The image haunting her dreams and urging her into action the most included him wearing a smudged white tank top that stuck to the muscular curves of the damp skin on his back. It was tucked into a pair of dusty jeans that hugged his thick thighs and rounded butt deliciously. His skin was tanned bronze from daily exposure to the midsummer sun.

As Sonja looked around men were scattered about doing different tasks, some carrying supplies to another location, others could be seen running back and forth from behind the hanging tarp and a few stood on the scaffolding working on the second floor, but the one she sought was not among them. With a sigh she turned on her heel to leave and collided with something hard. Her books flew into the air and her feet left the ground. An uncontrolled yelp escaped her. She fell backwards, but never landed. Someone caught her. A strong hand reached out to grip her waist and pull her back to her feet. She was held close to the obvious body of a man. When she looked up to see who, she gasped in surprise.

For the last two months she had seen him in his work clothes, but as they stood intimately close, his appearance was the complete opposite. His face was clean, the light brown hair she always saw sticking out the bottom of his yellow hat was uncovered and combed. The solid biceps she used to regain her balance were half covered by a white polo. It fell loosely over his torso accentuating his broad shoulders. Sonja opened her mouth to thank him, but

the words died in her throat. Enchanting sky blue eyes looked down at her. Their brilliance left her mute.

“Are you all right?” he finally asked.

“I- I- Umm, yeah, I’m fine. Thank you,” she stammered. She backed away from his grasp and looked around her feet. “Sorry about that. I guess I just wasn’t paying attention to where I was going.”

“No, please, it was my fault. Let me get those for you.” He picked up her scattered books and returned them to her.

“Thanks.” She sent a look to the men who seemed enthralled by their conversation. “Aren’t you one of the workers?” she asked with a nod toward them.

“Well, yes and no. I have been working with them, but the company is mine. I was just filling in for a guy so we wouldn’t be short-handed and could finish the project on time.”

“Wow, you’re a good boss.”

He shrugged off the complement. They fell silent staring at one another for what seemed like an eternity. Sonja fidgeted on the balls of her feet gripping the edge of her books.

*That’s it. He’s not interested. Get away while you can,* her brain screamed, entering panic mode.

“Well, it was nice meeting you—” He thrust his hand at her. “Kyle, Kyle Winters.”

She shook his hand and smiled. “Sonja Houston.” He shook her hand for an extra-long time. “Umm...”

He chuckled, but didn’t release her hand. “I’m sorry. I just feel like if I let you go, I may not get to see you again.”

“Do you *want* to see me again?”

“Oh yes, very much so.”

“I think that can be arranged.”

She smiled and Kyle’s smile broadened.

\* \* \* \*

Sonja giggled at the memory of her and Kyle’s first meeting as she drove home from the farmer’s market. She was making his favorite dinner to celebrate their seven wonderful years together. Her wins from the last two years and extra hours she put in over the last year had done their job. Her recent partnership offer at the firm proved it. While she was at work, Kyle kept himself busy at the gym. He understood her ambition and encouraged her to

pursue her dream. Even though he never complained, Sonja still felt pangs of guilt about not spending time with her husband. Now with her workday over, she wanted to show Kyle how much she appreciated him.

Sonja took Friday off and hoped the long relaxing and sexually stimulating weekend she planned for them would serve as a proper thank you. Juggling bags and her briefcase, Sonja made her way from the car and fumbled her way into the house. She entered the kitchen and dumped everything on the counter. Kyle's car wasn't in the driveway so she knew she had a little time to prepare. Sonja went to their bedroom and discarded her clothes before entering the bathroom a few feet away. Just as the shower reached her desired temperature she heard a noise from the other room.

"Kyle?" she called out, stepping under the water.

"Hey honey." Sonja snatched the curtain back and smiled.

"Hi sweetie. Happy anniversary."

Kyle caressed her wet face and kissed her soundly. "Happy anniversary to you. Do you want me to start putting things away while you finish your shower? I'll just take mine when you're done."

"Thank you, baby. That would be great. Leave the meat in the sink and the veggies on the counter so I can cut them up."

He left her with a quick peck and she slipped back under the warm cascading liquid. Sonja stayed longer than usual, welcoming the relaxing feel of the water. Quickly she dried and slipped into the silky pajama set she knew was Kyle's favorite. She sprayed perfume down her back and across her chest before leaving the room.

As she walked into the bedroom, she caught a glimpse of her clothes tossed on the bed. She changed course to retrieve them and went to the laundry room instead, promptly tripping over Kyle's gym bag as she entered.

"Damn it!" she muttered as the clothes flew into the air, landing all over the floor. "He could have put the bag somewhere other than the middle of the floor so I don't kill myself."

Sonja gathered her belongings and dumped them on top of the bag. "Dang, he didn't even unload it this time," she grunted, dragging the bag closer to the baskets. She put her stuff in the designated hampers to be washed and unzipped Kyle's bag to do the same.

"Towel, shorts, tee shirt, sweat band, sweaty drawers..." She continued calling off each item tossing them into the appropriate container. "Sock, sock, sock, tee shirt, geesh, how many weeks does he have in here?" she mumbled shaking her head. Her hand dug into the bag and suddenly stopped. "What the hell is this?"

*Hard...wide...smooth, no wait... rough...a buckle?*

Sonja's fingers assessed the object and then she slowly withdrew her hand letting her eyes confirm the picture building in her mind.

"It's too big for a dog, even a big dog..."

Her voice was soft and confused as she stared at the article in her hand. She flipped the collar over inspecting it further. Her eyes widened and Sonja jumped to her feet. She stomped her way to the kitchen where Kyle stood at the center island on the other side of the dining table chopping peppers. After a few moments, he smiled.

"Mmm, I love that scent on you. I went ahead and used the guest shower so I could get dinner started."

Sonja stood in the door way heaving, not knowing whether to scream or just throw the collar at him. Heat from her boiling blood rose on her skin. If she were not brown, she would be glowing bright red with her anger. Kyle suddenly snapped his head in her direction and the knife fell from his fingers.

"What is it?"

Sonja's hands shook and her heart pounded. Several emotions surfaced to ride along with the adrenaline pumping through her veins like a raging river. It was difficult to tap into one to guide her speech. Kyle shifted from one foot to the other. She could see his bottom lip trembling.

"Sonja, what's happened? What's wrong?"

Unable to find her voice, she held up the object in her hand to answer his question. His eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. She heard the soft gasp come from him and watched his face turn brilliant crimson. Just as fast as the red entered his face it disappeared leaving him pale. His eyes darted about frantically. He held onto the counter as his chest visibly expanded and deflated.

Sonja scoffed. "Don't you dare pass out on me, Kyle! What you better do is tell me what the hell is going on," she yelled, moving past the dining table.

"Sonja, I-I—"

His stammering accelerated her anger. "Spit it out, Kyle! Is this yours?"

She accentuated each word, shaking the offending choker at him. Fear glistened in his bright blue eyes. His mouth shook for a time as his voice failed to come forth before he finally nodded. Tears slid down his cheeks as his knees buckled. His shoulders sagged and he exhaled loudly continuing to nod confirming his silent confession.

"You're somebody's slave?"

Her words spurted out as an astonished whisper. She didn't really expect him to answer again. He looked like he would slide to the floor if she extracted any more information from him too soon. As comprehension dawned she held her head to stop the reeling.

*What the hell am I supposed to do with that? He was someone's... slave? Who? When? Where? Why?*

Sonja stumbled backward onto one of the chairs as questions assaulted her mind. Her breathing quickened as if she had been running. She took obvious deep breaths to calm herself. Suddenly, exhaustion overtook her.

“Sweetheart, please, let me explain.”

Kyle’s plea slipped through the madness and she chuckled disbelievingly, looking up at him.

“You can explain this? Really, Kyle? We have been together for ten years. Today is our seventh wedding anniversary. You can explain how come I don’t know anything about this collar in my hand with *slave* written on it? You’ve got an explanation that will put all this into perspective?” she asked, using the band as a pointer.

“I’m so sorry, honey. I swear I didn’t want you to find out like this. I- I just—”

“Is it another woman? Are you having an affair?”

He turned desperate eyes on her. “No, Sonja, I swear.”

“Are you on the down low?”

Kyle’s eyes expanded. “Huh? What? No!”

“Well then *what*, Kyle? What else could it possibly be?” she screamed.

He turned away to stare at the counter again. “I—I’ve been seeing this woman. I—I wear the collar when I’m with her.”

The room started to spin again and her stomach lurched. “What?” she said in hushed amazement.

“She teaches me to be a better husband,” he confessed in a low voice staring at the floor. The pain in her chest became unbearable as she listened to him.

“Another woman? You— You lied to me?”

“No! I would never lie—”

“I just asked you if—”

“No, Sonja, it’s not like that,” he rushed around to her side of the counter, moving closer. “I’m not having an affair with her. There’s no sex involved.”

Sonja rose to her feet. Sitting was making it difficult to breathe. “You need to go, Kyle,” she said and turned her back on him.

“No, please, Sonja, please. I don’t want to leave. I love you. Please don’t—”

She turned an icy glare on him. “You love me? *You love me?*” she repeated louder. “I find that hard to believe, Kyle, in the light of our current conversation.”

Kyle moved forward to take her hands. “Sweetheart, I *do* love you, with all my heart. It’s just—”

She jerked her hands free and stepped back. “Don’t touch me, Kyle. I can’t think with you in my face. I need a moment to process this whole situation. Just get your stuff and leave.”

Tears filled his eyes as he spoke. “Where would I go? My place is with you, Sonja,” he said in an anguished whisper.

She turned away from him to hide her own tears and threw the collar to the floor. “I don’t care, Kyle. Just go,” she told him and left the room.