



APHRODITE'S DAY OFF

Dana Littlejohn

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By

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About the Publisher

Blurb:

Aphrodite longed for time away from Olympus. In hopes of getting Zeus to offer her a reprieve, Aphrodite suggested that her sons, Eros and Himeros, take her place.

How will Eros and Himeros prove to Zeus that their power over love and desire will be sufficient so their mother can have her much needed day off?

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Dana Littlejohn

authordanalittlejohn@gmail.com

www.DanaLittlejohn.com¹

1. <http://www.DanaLittlejohn.com>



Chapter One

APHRODITE WALKED INTO the warm glowing light illuminating from at the entrance to the Chamber of the Gods. The radiance in the room emulated from Zeus's chair, filling the immediate area. The portal, an opening in the floor that Zeus used to look down on Earth, lay in the center of the room. Zeus sat on the throne looking majestic in his gold and white robes. The gleaming gold and ruby crown resting on his brow tilted some when he gave her a simple nod inviting her closer. Zeus's smile revealed the fondness he had for her. Aphrodite went around the gateway to Earth to stand before closed him and bowed low.

"Greetings my lord. You called for me?"

"Greetings lovely, Aphrodite. You may rise. It has reached my ears that you would like to leave Mount Olympus for a time to frolic with Poseidon in his watery depths. Is this true?"

"It is, my lord," she replied.

"I'm afraid I cannot allow such a thing again."

Her brows lifted. "My lord—"

Zeus held a hand up. "Don't you remember the last time you took time off, Aphrodite? My Earth suffered greatly without your influence. The humans have come to call it the Dark Ages for goodness sake," he added in an exasperated tone.

"Yes, I know, but this time the Earth won't be without love while I'm gone."

Zeus's brow rose skeptically. "Oh? How do you intend to handle matters of love during that time if you are not here?"

"The Erotes are capable, my lord," she told him with a smile. "Eros is a God of Love and Himeros a God of Desire. Together the twin's powers are just as strong as my own."

Zeus thought for a moment then nodded. "Very well then. You are—"

"My lord, if I may..."

Hera reached over taking Zeus's hand gaining his attention. Aphrodite pressed her lips together to silence her frustration.

"Great Zeus, would it not be wise to test the boys' abilities before setting them free upon your precious Earth? Though they are the children of a powerful goddess like Aphrodite..." She paused to send a smile in Aphrodite's direction before continuing. "They are young and their gifts are untried."

Zeus turned wide eyes to Aphrodite. "Their skills have not been tested?"

Aphrodite swallowed. "Well no, my lord, not yet. They haven't really had the chance since I have always handled the duties on my own."

"That is true." Zeus stroked his beard for a moment. "But you are satisfied that they can perform your duties sufficiently?"

"I am, my lord."

"All-powerful, Zeus."

Aphrodite swallowed her groan and clenched her fists at Hera's interjection.

"With all your wisdom I'm sure you would find it prudent to test their abilities first, before allowing them to take on such a daunting task."

"My sons are fully matured," Aphrodite insisted. "They would be able to handle any issues that could possibly arise while I was away."

"I'm sure they could, dear. However, it would be tragic if Eros and Himeros were not up to par." She turned back to Zeus. "Don't you think such testing should take place while the goddess is still on Mount Olympus, just in case there are things that only she can fix, my lord?" she inquired sweetly.

Zeus kissed the top of Hera's hand. "You are as wise as you are beautiful, my darling Hera. Aphrodite, I will give your sons a task to test their power. If they complete their mission with positive results you will be free to go, but if they fall short..."

"I understand. I will send Eros to you for instruction."



Chapter Two

MIAMI, FLORIDA: 2069

“Juanita, dear, we’re here!”

Juanita Reyes opened the screen door and hugged each of the four women as they walked in.

“Hello, everyone. I have tea and sandwiches in the living room.”

The women filed into the living room as Juanita followed. Juanita dug into a large bag next to her chair and pulled out the small tapestry. She laid it across her lap to smooth the fabric before holding up.

“Okay, this is how far I have gotten on my needlepoint. I still need to finish the saying. Since I did the letters in silver, I thought I’d add a few dark clouds near the top two corners and put a silver trim around them,” she explained with a smile.

“That’s a wonderful idea, Juanita. It’s beautiful. I’m sure it will sell quickly at the next swap meet,” another woman said.

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

Ricki removed her project from a bag beside her. She held up a pale-yellow cloth with bright green stitching.

“A daughter isn’t just a wonderful gift from GOD, but a best friend, too,” Juanita read aloud. “That’s lovely.”

“Mine says something similar,” Tracey chimed in, lifting her design from her lap. “A husband is a gift and a best friend,” she read off her brown cloth with bright white letters.

“What a coincidence,” Ricki said.

“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. ‘If all men are dogs, be sure to surround yourself with good-looking pedigrees and not of a

bunch of dirty mutts,” she read aloud. “I think I’ll make it a pillow,” she added with a smile.

Everyone laughed.

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

“Of course. My Brayden will send for me first. You know he lives in Vermont now. From there it’s off to Boston. Richard and Scott live there so I’ll spend time with both of them, and then it’s back to Michael up in Tallahassee. I probably won’t be back until late August.”

“Well, it seems your summer is all filled up. Juanita, darling, what are your plans for the upcoming summer months?” Ricki asked as she started on her stitching.

“What do you mean?”

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

Ricki nodded as she sipped her tea.

Sally turned a grin back to Juanita 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 as well. Whatever will you do without us to keep you company, dear?”

Juanita stared at Sally over her cup as she sipped her then put on her best smile before answering.

“Well, I’ll have plenty to keep me occupied. I have my garden to tend to and needlepoint to complete. I have intentions on joining the swim class at the senior’s center also. That will keep me cool this summer and busy, not to mention the everyday errands that still need to be done. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“Doesn’t being alone all the time bother you?” Sally insisted. “I mean, even though we are widows, we have the memories of our husbands to keep us company on the lonely nights and our children and grandchildren to fill our lives. But you,” a small chuckle escaped her before she continued. “You don’t have any of that, dear. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if you cried yourself to sleep every night.”

Ricki gasped. “What a horrible thing to say, Sally.”

Juanita reached out to pat Ricki's hand. "It's alright, Ricki, really. I don't cry myself to sleep, Sally. In fact, I never really considered myself lonely at all, just single."

"Juanita wouldn't be alone here without us, anyway," Tracey chimed in. "She has family nearby. Isn't that right, Juanita?"

Juanita opened her mouth to reply, but Tracey spoke again.

"Her sister lives just outside of Savannah. Doesn't she, 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?"

Tracey's questions came in rapid succession not giving Juanita a chance to answer. She merely nodded when Tracey looked her way for confirmation.

"Yes, yes, I know all that," Sally said with a flippant wave. "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."

Tracey put her needlepoint down "We decided that we weren't going to talk about that subject again. It only upsets her."

Ricki nodded in agreement.

"That was before you joined our little needlepoint club, Sally. We managed to function just fine before you came," Tracey added in a huff.

"It's all right, Tracey. Sally obviously needs to know what happened. I don't mind telling it again. Let me bring some refills first. Would you like some cookies to go with the tea?"

As each woman nodded, Juanita put her cup down to go into the kitchen. She returned with the teapot and a plate of cookies a few moments later.

"Now, let's see. Well, it's been almost fifty years now, but of course, I remember him as if I saw him yesterday," Juanita started as she refilled their cups. "He was the most handsome man I had ever seen. I could never forget him."

The other women giggled like schoolgirls.

"Tall and muscular with the brightest brown eyes and the sexiest, most kissable lips," Juanita continued.

Sally's hand went to her chest. "Oh, my goodness."

Tracey muffled more giggles. "You are a mess, Juanita,"

"His name was Royce Cole," Juanita said dreamily.

"Royce?" Sally asked, making a face.

"Yes, like Rolls Royce."

"That's...unique," Sally said in a monotone.

"Yes, his parents apparently thought so."

"Well, Juanita, if you thought Royce was all that great, why didn't you nab him? Didn't he want you?"

"Sally! How rude!" Ricki snapped.

Sally waved away Ricki's accusation then turned back to Juanita.

"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, it's just—" Tracey's hand flew to her mouth, ending her explanation with a soft gasp.

Juanita's smile drifted away. She cleared her throat and faced Sally. "Well, he was younger than I was at the time and I didn't think he could be serious about us, so I... well, dismissed his attentions."

"Without even giving him a chance?" Sally asked.

Juanita nodded.

"Oh, Juanita. He could have been the love of your life, honey," Tracey said sadly.

"Yes, dear. 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 told her.

Juanita leaned over to give her friend's hand a squeeze. "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."

"For heaven's sake. Are we talking cradle robbing? How young was he, Juanita?" Sally asked.

"He was twenty-five at the time."

Sally scoffed. "At twenty-five he was a grown man. How old were you?"

"I was thirty-six."

Sally snickered behind her hand. "My goodness, Juanita. I would have never figured you for a cougar."

Juanita turned a raised brow to her. "A what?"

"You've never heard that term before?"

Juanita's brows furrowed. "No, I don't think I have."

Sally rolled her eyes. "Where did you live back then?"

"I lived in Indianapolis, Indiana."

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

Juanita laughed. “Well, I never had the chance to be a—what was it, again? A cougar? We didn’t go out that long 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. Tracey held Juanita’s eye. Sympathy shined back at her. Juanita tried to reassure her friend with a look but sensed she may have failed as she left the room.



JUANITA SAT HEAVILY at her vanity.

“I know it was a mistake to give up on Royce before giving him a chance. Sally acted I didn’t know that,” she mumbled snatching the top draw open. “I know I could’ve had children— grandchildren! Maybe even great-gran by now, had we married. I didn’t need her to remind me of a mistake I made fifty years ago.”

She looked down at the pictures of her nieces and nephews. As much as she loves them they were not hers.

“I would’ve given him as many children as he wanted.”

Juanita sighed then pulled open the draw at the top of the vanity. Lifting the picture inside, she slid her fingers over the glass. Butterflies turned in her belly and she couldn’t help but smile.

“I wonder what you may look like now, Royce.” She looked into the mirror and her head tilted. “Is your hair silver like mine? Do you have wrinkles around your eyes, too?” She touched her face then gasped abruptly. “I don’t even know if you’re still alive. Would I have outlived you the way my friends did their husbands?” she asked the picture.

Juanita turned back to her reflection for a few moments longer then burst into laughter. “I might as well be contemplating the ways of the universe than trying to figure out the ways of love.” She undressed quickly, slipped into a

nightgown, and returned to the vanity. "If I were meant to have my true love by my side, he'd be here now."

Brushing her hair vigorously she pulled the locks into two sections to braid them. When the braids were complete, she pointed the brush at her image.

"Everyone can't have true love in their life, Juanita. Cupid cannot be everywhere at once, you know."

She dropped the brush, slipped the photo back into the drawer, and returned to her bed.

"Obviously, I'm one of those people he just couldn't get to," she said softly as she slipped between her sheets.

"Oh well, there's nothing that could be done about it now. I'm an old woman and what's done is done. No one can turn back the hands of time to fix a fifty-year-old mistake," she mumbled as she faded off to sleep.



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.

"Wha— What just happened?"

She was no longer on the beach, but alone at a table. "Where am I? How did I get here?" she asked looking around.

"I have brought you here."

Juanita gasped spinning toward the voice.

"I apologize, Juanita, for interrupting your dream, but we have important matters to discuss. I have—"

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What's wrong?"

She covered her eyes. "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 like me a heart attack like that?" she chastised. "Cover yourself! Where is your decency?"

"My apologies again, Juanita. It was not my intention to offend you."

"Who are you?"

"I am one of the few who bring love to the Earth. We have been called many names and have had many different looks."

Her eyebrow rose behind her hand. "You're a bringer of love? What are you saying? You're Cupid?"

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

A loud pop made her jump. Slowly she lowered her hand to find the man gone. In his place, a large diapered baby with blond hair and blue eyes hovered before her. He carried a bow and arrow as white feathery wings kept him afloat.

"Does this look suit you better, Juanita?" he asked in the same husky voice. "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. I am 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. Her long limbs and shapely figure were uncovered save a golden sash that wrapped around her body to cover her breasts and private areas. A soft breeze blew her long hair backward as stood inside of a large open clam.

"Is this one satisfactory? It is the form of my mother," the woman said with a male voice.

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

"Very well."

The brilliant burst returned and the woman disappeared. In her place stood a man. His smooth, dark brown skin, piercing ebony eyes, and aura of sensuality stopped Juanita's train of thought. She stared blankly at his full lips as they moved.

"How about this one?"

Juanita swallowed to wet her suddenly dry mouth.

"Royce," she whispered.

"You remember him?"

She nodded. "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."

"I know that. I came to terms with that years ago. That one bad decision ruined my life. I couldn't date another man without comparing them to you. I mean to Royce. No one could compare to him and I ended up with no one," she confessed with lowered eyes.

"I can change that."

"No one can change that," she disagreed shaking her head. "We can't turn back the hands of time, Eros. 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."

Eros walked over to her and took her in his arms. He held her close, bringing his face down to hers. The tidal wave of sensations assaulted her very core awakening feelings inside her 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."

Juanita's pulse raced. Her heart pounded and her breathing quickened within his embrace. His touch made her dizzy with excitement. She almost collapsed as her knees weakened, but his grasp remained firm.

"Yes," she whispered and everything went black.



Chapter Three

INDIANAPOLIS, IN. 2019

A hand snaked out from under the sheet and pounded on top of the alarm until it stopped. Reaching across the nightstand, the hand reached a cell phone and pulled it under the sheet.

“What?”

“What the hell, Juanita? Are you still in bed? Wake up, girl. I know your alarm went off.”

“I’m up.”

“I know you’re tired, but this is the last day of our ER rotation. We still have to be on top of our game. The good news is, once we get through today, we’re off for the next five days.”

“Okay, okay, I’m awake.” She pushed the sheet back and sat up.

“Okay see you in a few...and have some coffee made.”

“Alright. Wait, who is this?”

The friendly voice chuckled. “Come on, girl, you ain’t that tired. I’ll be there in an hour.”

Juanita returned the phone to the nightstand and moved toward the bathroom with a groan. Exiting the shower, a short time later, she wrapped a towel around herself then wrung the water from her hair. Soon as she turned toward the mirror, she let out a loud scream.

Wide-eyed, she stared at her reflection. Staring back at her was a woman she hadn’t seen in over fifty years. Gingerly she touched the smooth skin on her neck then raked through the rich auburn curls resting on her shoulders.

“He did it,” she exclaimed. “He sent me back. I have another chance!”

Juanita leaned on the counter for a closer look at the sparkle of youth in her dark eyes. Abruptly she stood up then snatched her towel away. With an ear-to-ear grin, she spun around to view herself from every angle.

“Yes!”

She looked at the clock over the toilet and ran to her room to get dressed. Just as she tied her hair into a ponytail there was a knock at the door. She bounded happily to it and swung it open.

"Okay, Juanita, I'm here. Did you make some coffee, girl? I'm sleepwalking over here."

"Deanna!"

Juanita slammed the door behind her friend then pulled her into a bear hug.

"It's been so long since I've seen you. You look wonderful."

"Uh, thanks, Juanita, but you just saw me yesterday," Deanna said with a laugh. "Are you alright?"

Juanita released her friend and tried to laugh away her embarrassment.

"Oh, yes, whatever was I thinking? Surely, I wasn't thinking it had been over twenty years or something silly like that."

Deanna raised an eyebrow and put a hand on her hip. "Uh-huh. Well, anyway, do you have some coffee made or what?"

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I don't."

"That's fine. Now I have a reason to stop at Double the Caffeine and speak to the cute guy at the register. You're ready, right? Let's go."

Juanita followed her friend out the door. "Double the Caffeine? Oh, no, Deanna, don't drink their coffee."

"Why not? I love Double the Caffeine, you know that."

"Their coffee has some kind of steroid-induced caffeine in it. A study showed it was stronger than nicotine. That's why so many people drink it. They're addicted."

"Uh-huh, and you know this because...?" Deanna asked on the way out of the building.

"Oh! Umm, well, I just, uh—"

"So now you're a psychic, too?" Deanna laughed as they got in her car. "You've been acting really strange since you hooked up with that young stud muffin of yours," she added with a snicker.

Juanita gasped. "You mean Royce?"

She sucked her teeth. "Well, duh. Yes, I mean Royce. How many stud muffins are you keeping hidden in that closet of yours? Are you still going to break it off with him tonight?"

"Break it off? Tonight?"

Deanna rolled her eyes. "Yes, Juanita. Tonight."

Juanita continued to stare at her.

Deanna shook her head. "This is what lack of sleep does to your brain. Don't you remember? You said something didn't feel right between you and you were going to end it."

Juanita's mind spun. "I did?"

Deanna nodded. "Yup. I haven't even met the man yet and you're dumping him. Well, not officially anyway. I mean, of course, I've seen him around the hospital so I know what he looks like, but that's not really the same thing."

She didn't recall any of what Deanna was telling her.

"Huh?"

"But if you think about it, I guess that makes sense. If you're not going to keep him, there's no point to me meeting him, right?"

"What?"

"Anyway, you said it was going too fast or something lame like."

Juanita stared at her friend as Deanna turned the car around a corner.

"Are you alright? You seem kind of out of it?" Deanna asked.

"Huh? Oh yes. I'm just thinking some things through. In fact, I've been thinking and I have no intention of breaking it off with Royce. I really believe he is the love of my life and we were meant to be together."

Deanna gave her another quizzical look. "Okay. That's kind of a night and day assessment from yesterday, but good. I'm on board with that. I've been saying that you should at least give him a chance. He sounds like he's got a good head on his shoulders from what you have told me." She turned into the hospital's parking lot and turned off the car. "Now, let's get these twelve hours out of the way so we can chill for the next five days," she said with a big grin.



JUANITA WALKED TOWARDS Deanna as she stepped out the elevator.

"I can't tell you how glad I am that this day is over. I know you're ready too, Deanna. Your floor was busy."

"Yeah me too, but you're not riding home with me."

"I beg your pardon? We drove here together. If I'm not riding with you how am I supposed to get home?"

"I'm going to take you, of course."

The soft male voice came from behind her sending a chill up her spine. Her heartbeat immediately sped up. Slowly she turned toward the sound. Royce Cole stood before her unchanged from the last time she had seen him over fifty years ago. He walked with the strength and confidence of a tiger on the prowl as he crossed the lobby. His gaze locked her in place like a deer caught in headlights.

Juanita could feel his raw magnetism burning her from the inside out. Her pulse continued to race as he closed the distance between them.

Juanita barely heard Deanna say goodbye as she left her peripheral. Royce stopped so close to her that she had to look up to keep eye contact with him. The sweet, musky smell of his cologne bombarded her senses and made her smile.

"Hey, baby." He slid his hand around her waist and pressed his body to hers. "I missed you. This place is working us way too hard."

He lifted her face to kiss her. The electric feel of his touch caused instant combustion in her loins.

"Come on, let's get out of here. You said you wanted to talk to me tonight. What's up?"

"Oh, umm, never mind that," she said with a flippant wave. "It wasn't important. I can hardly remember what it was about anyway."

He chuckled. "Well, it's no wonder you can't remember anything with all the overtime you've been doing. Let's go. Maybe after some food and rest, you'll feel better and start to remember. Come on. I'll make us some dinner."

"Juanita!"

Juanita and Royce stopped and turned toward the voice. A short blonde woman wearing green scrubs rushed up to them.

"Hi, Royce," she said sweetly.

"Hello, Megan."

"I was afraid I wouldn't catch you. Can I speak to you for a minute, Juanita?"

Juanita turned to Royce.

"That's fine, sweetheart," he said answering her unasked question. "I'll bring the car around and meet you out front."

He dropped a quick peck on her mouth before walking away. She watched him leave then turned to Megan.

"Yes, dear, what can I do for you?"

Megan made a face. "Why are you talking like that?"

"Huh? Oh! I mean—"

"Whatever, I don't care," she said waving away Juanita's explanation. "What are you doing with Royce, Juanita? I thought you said you were going to break it off."

Juanita gasped. "How do you know that?"

Megan scoffed wrapping her arms around her chest. "Uh, because you told me! Your exact words were, 'the next time I see him I'm going to break it off. He can't be serious about me, Megan. I'm too old for him.' You even went as far as to offer him to me because we are closer in age."

As Juanita searched her mind, the conversation with Megan came back to her.

"Yes, well, I've actually been thinking things over. I may have been a little hasty in my evaluation of our unique situation."

Megan dropped her arms as her eyes widened. "But when I saw you in the locker room you were bawling like a baby." She pointed at her accusingly. "You said you were too old for him and he couldn't really be into you."

"Yes, I realize I said that, but I was wrong. I know now that things can work with me and Royce. So, I won't be ending our relationship after all."

Megan blinked for a few minutes. Her stunned expression disappeared and a smile slowly appeared.

"Oh. Well, that's great. I was just checking on you, girl. Wanted to make sure you weren't making a mistake and all that."

"Thank you for your concern, but I think we're going to be just fine."

"Yeah, well, that's what friends are for, right?"

They both turned toward the front doors of the hospital. Royce waved at her from the car. She gave Megan a quick hug.

"Thanks again, Megan, but we'll be fine. I have to go." She hurried out the front door and gave her a wave over her shoulder.

"Bye!"



Chapter Four

JUANITA SLIPPED INTO the pajama top she spotted on the towel rack then made her way to the kitchen. She stood in the doorway for a few minutes watching Royce cook. The muscles in his back flexed as he moved the pan back and forth over the flame. She quickly closed the distance between them hugging him from behind.

Thank you, Eros, for this second chance.

“Hey! Watch out there, now! Touching me like that will take my mind away from the task at hand. My specialty doesn't taste the same charcoaled, you know,” he told her on a laugh.

Juanita tightened her grip.

He removed the pan from the flame and turned to face her.

“Baby, what’s up? Is there something you’re not telling me?”

She looked up into his sparkling dark eyes and considered telling him everything that had happened to her. That notion lasted for only half a second. Instead she leaned forward to indulge herself in the softness of his lips.

“Nothing’s wrong. I just want to tell you that I love you.”

Royce gasped aloud then he burst into a joyful laugh. Lifting her from the floor, he spun them around until Juanita was dizzy. When her feet touched the floor again, Royce scooped her face into his hands pressing his lips to hers.

“I’ve waited so long to hear you say those words. I was so afraid when you said you wanted to talk to me. You sounded so serious I thought you were going to break up with me.” He pulled her into his embrace. “I love you so much, Juanita.”

“Royce, I—”

Her words were lost on a shallow breath.

“My bad, baby. I have to remember I can't hold you that tight.” He walked her back to the table and sat her down. “Here, you just relax while I finish dinner. Later we can spend the rest of the evening in each other’s arms.”

The soft seduction in his words set her loins on fire.

"I love that plan."

He offered her a glass of wine. Taking a long drink, Juanita smiled to herself as Royce returned to their meal.

"That was wonderful, Royce. You're such a good cook," Juanita said a while later.

Royce shrugged as he took away their empty plates.

"You inspire me."

He took her hand and walked her to his bedroom. They stood in the doorway as he placed soft kisses on her neck and shoulder.

Juanita gasped as she took in her surroundings.

"I was prepared for the worse. If I could get you back to my place, I had every intention of fighting for you if you had broken things off with me tonight," he whispered near her ear.

"Oh, Royce."

When her eyes adjusted to the flickering glow of the room, she inhaled. The sweet smell of jasmine and the soft sounds of soft music made her smile.

Royce pressed his firm body against hers.

An involuntary moan left her.

He wrapped his arms tighter around her waist, bringing her even closer to him.

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the crook of his neck.

"Mmm, you feel so good in my arms, Juanita. Say you'll be with me forever."

"I will never leave you again, Royce."

"Marry me, baby. Make your promise official."

She twisted her body to face him. "What?"

"I promised myself that if you didn't break up with me tonight, I'd ask you to be my wife."

"Royce—"

He silenced any other words she may have spoken with a kiss that burned her from the inside out. She returned his kiss feverishly as he lifted her from her feet, carrying her to the bed.

"So, will you make me the happiest man in the world and be Mrs. Cole?"

"Yes! Of course, I will!"

His happy grin filled her soul with contentment and her loins with heat.

"Tomorrow I'm going to buy you the most beautiful ring you've ever seen," he promised.

Royce undid the buttons of the pajama top exposing her body to him. He sat for a moment looking at her.

She breathed deeply.

The golden glow of the room accentuated his hand as it glided over each of her breasts. She reveled in the touch of his hand as it flowed over the indentation of her waist on its way to her hips. He continued along the curve of her belly pausing just a moment to play with her belly ring.

With a sigh, he locked his gaze into hers.

"You really are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

Juanita bit her lip stopping the gasp from escaping.

"I love every inch of you."

He turned to sit beside her and leaned down to kiss her forehead. "All your curves, all your edges, from the top of your head," he said as he kissed a sultry trail down her face, neck, across both breasts, back to her belly. "To the spot that will one day bring forth my children..."

Royce paused to push his face into the junction between her legs.

The sensation sent lust-filled shivers along Juanita's spine.

Royce added kisses to her thighs as he continued going down to her feet.

"To the soles of your feet."

Every inch of her wanted him...her mind, body, and soul. She never realized someone could want another person so badly. The teasing licks and the burning kisses on her toes abruptly stopped and the bed shook. Juanita opened her eyes.

Royce kicked his leg free of his pajama pants and now stood naked before her. The sight made Juanita's loins tingle. He was just as she remembered him: her dark Adonis. His lean and chiseled body called to her. She reached up to grip his hand and pulled him on top of her. His laugh sounded happy and genuine as he leaned over her.

"Was I taking too long, baby? I was coming," he teased.

"Not yet you aren't, but you will be soon enough."

Her words surprised her even as she spoke them, but not as much as when she rolled over to reverse their positions. Wide eyes filled with a combination of surprise and excitement looked back at her causing heat to fill her cheeks. She swallowed and her bravado eased as embarrassment set in.

“Royce, I don’t really—”

He shook his head. “No, no, no, you don’t have to explain anything. You are free to do whatever you want. This is all yours now,” he told her opening his arms wide. “You can have your way with me.”

Juanita smiled and settled onto his lap. His erection pressed against her butt. She bit her lip. Carte Blanche was something she didn’t expect to have with a man like Royce. Juanita looked into brown eyes that sparkled with lust. Her fingers moved delicately across the muscles of his chest. His smooth skin had no marks. The tautness of his stomach, seductive under her touch. The many years since she had been with a man were prevalent in her mind. She could not ignore the pulsing from her core any longer. The sensual aura that surrounded the man himself was all-encompassing, and her body longed to have him inside of her. She lifted herself high enough to engulf his impressive erection deep within her. In unison, they released a sigh of pleasure.

Almost immediately she wanted to collapse on top of him. Surely it couldn’t get any better than this—but she hadn’t started moving yet. If she were still an old woman this type of pleasure would have killed her for sure. She smiled to herself and, with a deep breath, pushed up on his firm chest. She began moving up and down. Every movement produced another sensation that seemed better than the last and brought her closer to ecstasy.

“This is your dick, Juanita. Ride it, baby! Work it like you want it!”

His carnal words fueled the fire that burned inside of her. She moved faster, grinding harder against him.

“Yes, baby, yes! Shit! That feels good!” Royce cried.

Royce gripped her hips guiding her into a different rhythm. Each movement brought her closer to completion. Something akin to a lightning strike went off inside her. Juanita screamed her pleasure aloud.

Royce sent up his own noises of enjoyment. His moans mingled with her own creating a symphony of sounds that became an audio aphrodisiac. A maelstrom of sensations and emotions swept over her again. She felt dizzy in her euphoria.

“Juanita, baby, are you there? Are you ready?” he panted.

The husky growls and seductive tone of his lust-filled query sent a shiver up her spine. She tried to speak, but couldn’t form any words.

Dear Lord! Is he promising more? I’m spent.

Royce abruptly grabbed her by the waist and reversed their positions.

Juanita yelped at the turn of events. When she lay firmly on her back, Royce pushed his face between her legs again causing another shocked sound to escape.

Royce licked her slowly at first. Each fiery pass of his tongue on her delicate folds sent her higher.

Moments later her orgasmic screams vibrated the walls. Tears streamed down her face as her body locked in place. Waves of bliss crashed over her body until she melted into the bed exhausted.

Royce slowed his efforts again until her breathing returned to normal. He climbed up her body to lay on the pillow beside her. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled Juanita closer to him.

“I love you, Juanita.”

Her endorphin filled body buzzed with elation as she snuggled up to him.

“And I love you.”

She smiled as the soft beating of his heart and his gentle rocking lulled her to sleep.



Chapter Five

THE SMELL OF BACON pulled Juanita from her sleep. She rose from the pillow stretching like a cat caught napping in the warm sun. A quick glance around the room made her smile.

She slid out of the bed and entered the bathroom to let the water wash away the evidence of Royce's intense lovemaking. She yelped then burst into laughter when the shower curtain abruptly swung open.

"Mmm, water running down the seductive curves of the most beautiful woman in the world. What else could a man ask for to start his day?"

"It's a shame you're already dressed or I'd ask you to join me," she answered in a teasing tone.

Royce stepped over the side of the tub. "As if that would stop me."

Juanita giggled hitting him with her shower puff. "Royce! What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to dirty you up again," he told her with a mischievous grin.

Pressing her against the wall, he tugged at his own clothes. Just as his pants fell around his feet, he let out a frustrated groan.

"I'm gonna let it ring," he said putting another kiss on her neck.

"Royce, it might be the hospital."

"Uhhg! Juanita, why do you have to be the voice of reason right now?" He rolled his eyes with faux anger.

She muffled her titters. "Sorry."

He smiled and left a peck on her cheek as he stepped out the shower.

"Whatever was going through your mind before the phone rang, hold that thought. I'll be back to pick up where we left off," he added rushing from the room.

Juanita slumped to the tub floor with her hand on her chest. "Woo! That man will be the death of me, but what a way to go. It's a good thing I'm young again."

Royce returned a few moments later fully dressed again. "Well, you were right, baby. That was the hospital. Someone just came in for an emergency C-section and they have two more scheduled for this morning. Dr. Lucas is on his way, but he may be too far to make it for the emergency. They've asked me to come help. I have to go."

Nodding she stood and turned the water off.

Royce held out a towel. "You're not upset, are you?"

"No, darling, of course not. Go do your thing. I'll be here when you get back."

He kissed her. "I knew you would understand, but I don't want you to wait for me here. Let's meet at the park so we can have lunch."

"That would be wonderful. When should I meet you?"

"Let's say around twelve-thirty, just in case there are any complications. I love you. See you then."

Quickly she dried and dressed to retrieve her car. To her surprise she found it parked outside Royce's house. She pulled the note from the windshield wiper and smiled.

"Oh Deanna, I owe you more than lunch next week."

Juanita put the paper in her pocket and got in the car. Thoughts of the previous night's escapades went through her mind on the ride home. The song Single Ladies suddenly filled the air making her jump.

"I remember that song." She pulled her phone from her purse. Yes, hello."

"You don't know how hard it was for me to wait to call you, girl. Are you still with Royce?"

Juanita giggled. "Hi, Deanna. No, I'm home. He had to make a run to the hospital to help with a surgery."

"Good. Details, girl. I want the details. How was last night?"

Juanita plopped down on the sofa with a sigh. "Oh, Deanna, it was wonderful! Royce asked me to marry him," she announced.

"Get outta here! That's great! Nothing like a stud muffin to keep you warm during the winter months as you grow old," she added with a hearty laugh. "So, I get to meet him now, right, since he's a keeper? I mean, you did say yes, didn't you?"

"Yes, Deanna. Of course, I said yes, and Royce is not a stud muffin. He's a very brilliant and handsome young doctor with a good future ahead of him. I am very lucky to have this chance to have a future with him."

"Uh huh. All I heard was: blah, blah, blah, I'm marrying a fine ass stud muffin! Don't act like that's not important, too. We've been friends for too long for me to believe that crap, honey!"

Juanita couldn't help but laugh with her friend.

"Yes, I guess that is a plus, too. I'm going to lay down for a little while Deanna. I'm meeting Royce for lunch."

"You need a nap at eight-fifteen in the morning! That man must have been riding you all night long!"

Juanita shook her head. "Shut up girl. I'll call you later."

Juanita hung up on her friend's laughter, nuzzled into the corner of the couch, and quickly drifted to sleep. Abruptly she jumped up knocking the phone from her lap sometime later.

"Yes, hello."

"Hey, Juanita, it's Megan."

She yawned. "Oh, hi. What can I do for you, Megan?"

"Have you left to go meet Royce yet?"

Juanita gasped and looked at the phone. Crap!

"No, I was just about to get dressed to leave."

"Oh, good. I'm so glad I caught you. He just told me to call and tell you he wants you to meet him here at the hospital."

"Oh? He doesn't want me to go to the park?"

"I don't think so. He wanted me to call to see if I could catch you before you left."

"Why didn't he just call me himself?"

"He was on his way to the ER when I saw him. Maybe he's just caught up."

"Oh, well, okay. Thank you, Megan."

"No problem. If you leave now you can catch him as soon as he comes from surgery."

"All right, thanks again."

Juanita hit the end button and slid the phone across the coffee table. After a quick change, she was out the door. She arrived at the hospital and waited in the lobby where they usually met.

Juanita Reyes, please report to the second-floor doctor's lounge! Juanita Reyes to the second-floor doctor's lounge!

Juanita made a face. *Why would someone be calling my name over the PA system on my day off?*

She shrugged and made her way to the second floor. Taking the long hallway to the secluded room and pushed open the door. A movement to her left caught her eye bringing her attention to the far corner of the room. Royce had Megan leaned against the wall locked in a passionate kiss.

Juanita's sharp intake of breath brought her hand to her chest. The intense pain almost made her double over. Royce abruptly pushed Megan away just as their eyes met.

"Juanita? What— Megan, what have you done? What's going on?"

Megan reached for him again, but he knocked her away with a frustrated grunt. Royce moved toward her, but Juanita pulled the door open.

"Juanita! Baby, wait!"

Tears streamed down her face as Juanita bypassed the elevator to push open the staircase door.

"I should have known better! I was right all along!" she cried hysterically chastising herself. "I should have just stayed in my own time. There's a reason for everything. Stupid Cupid! What was I thinking?"



Chapter Six

“MOTHER, MAY I SPEAK to you?”

Aphrodite turned to see her son standing into the opening of her resting quarters.

“Of course, Eros.” She offered her hand to him and he joined her on the chaise. “How is your task going?”

“I think I’ve run into a problem.”

“What would that be?”

“There’s a human, a woman named Megan, who is interfering with my work. She has intentionally come between the two I have put together. Her web of lies and deceit has the potential to keep them apart.”

“I see. What do you plan on doing to alleviate the problem?”

“Well, that’s the problem. I don’t know what to do.”

Aphrodite smiled. “My darling Eros, have you forgotten who you are? You are indeed the God of Love, but first and foremost you are a god.”

“I don’t understand, Mother.”

“It would seem that in order to perform your duties for Juanita and Royce you will also have to show this Megan what happens when you mess with the plans of a god.”

Eros tapped his chin. “Thank you, Mother. I think something has just come to mind to deal with her sufficiently.”



JUANITA DROVE FRANTICALLY, miraculously avoiding any police on her way to Deanna’s house. She ran into the building and down the hall to bang on her door.

“Yes, yes, I’m coming!” The door swung open. “Juanita! Girl, what’s wrong?”

"I just walked in on Royce and Megan making out!" she yelled then threw herself into her friend's arms.

"Oh, no." Deanna closed the door with her foot and walked Juanita to the couch. "No, sweetie, it couldn't have been that simple. Tell me exactly what you saw."

Deanna handed her a tissue and listened attentively as she retold what she saw. When Juanita finished, she sat back with her arms wrapped around her chest.

"Well, you know what we have to do, right?"

Juanita turned a confused look at her and sniffed.

"No, what do we have to do?"

"We have to go up to the hospital and confront that tramp Megan, that's what. None of that sounds right to me."

"What? I can't do that. If Royce wants to be with her, and not me, I love him enough to let him go," Juanita said in a huff.

"Juanita, how the hell did you make it to thirty-four years old and still be so damn naïve?"

Juanita rolled her tear-filled eyes. Deanna gripped her shoulders and spoke slowly.

"Juanita, the girl is a hoe and she is trying to get your man."

Juanita gasped. "What?"

"Can't you see that? I wouldn't doubt that she set that whole scene up just so you could see it."

"No, she couldn't have."

"It sounds way too convenient for it not to be planned out. Her plan was probably to break you guys up so she could be there to comfort Royce afterward," she explained, making quotations in the air. "That's a hoe's M.O. It's what they do. They always want somebody else's man, but not this time. Oh no! We're going back down there to put that tramp in her place. Let's go!"

Deanna dragged Juanita out of her apartment and drove them back to the hospital. They checked the schedule board at the nurse's station then headed to the surgery scrub room to catch up with her. As they entered the room, Juanita turned a raised brow to her friend.

"You hear that, too?" Deanna whispered.

Juanita nodded and pointed to the supply closet. Quietly, they moved toward the door. The moans of sexual pleasure were undeniable as they got closer. Deanna peered through the tiny crack of the makeshift window covering. Abruptly she jumped and clapped her hands over her mouth.

“What?” Juanita asked in an urgent whisper.

Deanna pointed at the door as she moved away unable to contain her laughter.

Juanita leaned toward the opening and gasped. Wearing only her scrub top, Megan rode a young man frantically oblivious that she was being watched. She followed her friend from the room. When they were back in the hall, they released their laughter.

“Wasn’t that the new guy that came from the children’s hospital last week?” Juanita asked pointing a thumb at the door.

“Okay, you see now what I was talking about? Megan is a hoe, Juanita, and only out for herself. She doesn’t really want Royce. She just wants another conquest under her belt.”

“That’s horrible! How can people be like that?”

Deanna shrugged. “Well, you can’t really hate on a hoe for being a hoe. That’s what hoes do.”

Juanita’s brows knitted. “What?”

“It would be like being mad at a cat for meowing.”

Juanita’s head tilted.

“Never mind, honey. What’s important is now that we know what’s happening in there, we have to tell someone.”

“Oh, no, Deanna, we—”

She put her hand up. “Stop it right there. I don’t want to hear any of your good intentions, nice words, or turn the other cheek speeches. This time we do what I say. When the opportunity rises to stick it to someone who is out to get you, you just have to take it! She’s going to get everything she deserves this time.”

Deanna took Juanita by the hand and pulled her back to the nurse’s station.

“Hey, Peggy, what’s up?”

“Hi, guys. I thought you were on vacation.”

“Yeah, Peggy, we are, we just dropped by for a hot minute.”

“Juanita, did Megan find you? She had me page you earlier today.”

Juanita felt heat fill her cheeks when Deanna turned narrowed eyes and twisted lips her way.

"Yeah, Megan found her, Peggy. In fact, we just left Megan. She wanted us to ask you to page Dr. Stephens to the second-floor surgery scrub room for us."

Peggy picked up the phone. "Sure, which Dr. Stephens—the head of surgery, or the orthopedic doctor?"

Deanna smiled. "The Head of Surgery, please."

"Are you sure it's the second-floor scrub room? I thought it was closed so they could renovate it."

"It is but there's something there she wants to show him."

"Okay. I'll send him right there."

"Thanks, Peggy. Oh, and Megan said it was important, so you'd better make it stat."

Peggy nodded as she dialed up the number.

"Let's go, Juanita."

"I don't think that was very nice of us," Juanita said, getting in the car.

"Yeah, well, sometimes even best friends disagree. Them's the breaks, right? Anyway, here's what's going to happen now. You're going to go home and wait for Royce to come by. I'm pretty damn sure he's on his way. He'll want to let you know what really happened between him and Megan."

"I don't want to talk to him."

"Stop being so stubborn, Juanita. You saw what she wanted you to see. Didn't you hear Peggy say Megan had her page you?"

Juanita didn't reply. Anger and hurt still raged within her. She stared straight ahead as she drove Deanna home and then back to her own apartment.

Just as she turned the key to her door, There goes my Baby filled the air. She removed her phone and frowned at Royce's picture on the screen. Juanita dropped the phone onto the couch with such force that it bounced into the air then landed on the floor with a loud thump.

"Uhhg! Figures."

The song continued to play. Not bothering to retrieve it, she laid on the couch and pulled one of the cushions over her head. Banging on the door made her jump. Rising to get elbows she looked at the door.

"Juanita! Baby, open the door. It's me."

She rolled her eyes and lay back down. "Go away!" she yelled from under the cushion.

"Juanita, I don't want to discuss this with you in the hallway. Please open the door."

She pushed the cushion off her and moved to the foyer.

"There's nothing to talk about, Royce. I hope you and Megan are very happy together," she yelled at the door.

"Juanita, will you let me in so we can discuss this? It's not what you think."

She turned her back to his comments and wrapped her arms around her chest defiantly.

"You and Megan are much closer in age, you know. You two looked perfect together—young, beautiful, and successful. It's clear she will do anything to be with you. Go back to her and have fun!"

Even though her anger remained the pain of saying those words out loud hurt her even more. The last thing she wanted was for any of that to happen. She walked over and gripped the back of the couch as tears spilled down her cheeks.

"Just go away, Royce. It just wasn't meant to be," she said, choking on the words.

"I can't do that, baby. I love you too much," he said from behind her.

She jumped with a gasp and spun around, right into his arms.

"Royce, how did you—"

He held up a set of keys and smiled. "You gave me an emergency key last week, baby. Did you forget? This is the first time I've had a chance to use it."

"I did? Oh, well—"

He silenced her with a kiss, holding her tight around the waist. She slid her arms around his neck following her body's lead before abruptly pushing him away.

"No, Royce. I saw you and Megan together!"

"I know what you think you saw, but I can assure you, you are wrong. Megan walked up to me saying some unkind things about you and our relationship and then made me a proposition that I quickly turned down."

Juanita's brow rose. "Oh really? What kind of proposition?"

Royce chuckled. "She foolishly thought that because she and I were closer in age that we were made for each other. That I could have more fun with

her—in and out of bed. That's when she kissed me. Next thing I knew you walked in.”

Juanita nodded silently and turned her back to him. Royce wrapped his arms around her waist and spoke softly into her ear.

“I pushed her away and told her something that you obviously have forgotten.”

She let her head fall to his chest so she could listen more intently and he continued.

“I told her there wasn't anything she could do for me and nothing she could give me that I don't have with you already.”

He turned her around and lifted her face so their eyes could meet.

“I love you, Juanita Reyes. You may be older than me, but that doesn't make you old. I may be younger than you, but that doesn't make me a kid. I'm a grown-ass man and I know what I want.”

“What do you want, Royce?”

“I want a mature woman with her head on straight. I want someone who knows what she wants in life and is oozing with passion, sexuality and sensuality,” he told her without hesitation. “Someone that's done with the games and will have my back no matter what. That, my sweet Juanita, is what I have with you.”

The tears started to fall again.

“Royce, are you sure? Forever is a long time to live with a mistake. Believe me, I know.”

He used his thumb to dry her cheek. “I'm positive, sweetheart. When I chose to pursue you and make you mine, I knew exactly what I was doing. You are the love of my life. I know that from my balls to my bones,” he added with a chuckle. “If I can't have you, then I don't want to be with anyone. I would rather grow old by myself.”

She hugged him fiercely. “No, my love, not this time. This time we'll be together and we will live happily ever after.”



“I DID IT, MOTHER!” Eros announced triumphantly as he landed in Aphrodite's chamber. “Juanita and Royce will spend their lives together.”

"I knew you could. What, may I ask, happened with your adversary?"

Eros laughed. "Let's just say I made sure she got a taste of her own medicine. She will not be bothering them again."

Aphrodite gave him a knowing smile. "So, tell me of Juanita and Royce's future together."

"Juanita will give Royce four strong and healthy children, many grandchildren and they will live a long and happy life together."

"Well done, my son. Let's go tell Zeus the good news," she said leading him from the room.

"Yes, but there is one other thing, Mother."

She stopped and turned to him. "Yes?"

"Well, since Juanita was happy with the friends she had as an older woman, I didn't want her to miss out on them. I made it so she would still cross paths with Tracey, Ricki, and even Deanna."

"I think that is a wonderful idea." Aphrodite scrutinized the look on her son's face. "But that's not all, is it?"

"No, Mother. Well, I don't know if it was in my jurisdiction to do, but I just couldn't bring myself to burden Juanita with the likes of that Sally woman again. She was a hindrance to her peace of mind as an old woman. I decided to send Sally on a different path. Do you think Zeus will disapprove of my actions?"

Aphrodite continued across the dais, muffling her laughter. "I think it will be alright. Let's go and tell the Father of your success."

Together they went to the Chamber of the Gods and waited at the doorway.

"Ahh, lovely Aphrodite. Come, come," Zeus called out.

She entered the room and kneeled low before him with Eros by her side.

"My lord, Eros has completed his task. The couple you gave to him are together and will be happy for many years."

"I trust there were no issues?"

Aphrodite exchanged a look with her son then shook her head.

"No, my Lord, none to speak of."

"Well done, Eros. If your brother can handle his task just as well your mother will be free to go visit Poseidon."

"Thank you, my Lord. I'm sure he will do even better than I."

“We shall see. Aphrodite, you may send Himeros to me for instructions.”

“Of course, my Lord.”



Chapter Seven

OIL SPRINGS RESERVATION, 1869

The young women of the Seneca tribe were up with the sun. The cloudless sky warmed them as they decorated an altar in the village center and nearby huts. Their leader stood outside of his hut watching.

“You are doing well, my daughters. The princess will be pleased with your beautiful decorations,” he called out to them.

“Thank you, my chief. One day we hope to be in her position and the women of the village would come out to decorate for our joining ceremony,” one of them said.

The chief nodded. “Your marriage day will come soon, young one. Perhaps this union with the Tioga tribe will bring it about. Be mindful to cover the dais where their chief and I will sit. The rain may return tonight during the festivities.”

He turned away from the giggling group of girls to follow a trail of flowers leading to another hut. The elderly leader carefully stepped around them to stand before strings of daisies and lilacs covering the heavy leather flap blocking the entrance.

“Daughter, are you decent?”

“Yes, Father. You may enter,” came the reply.

He smiled and pushed inside. A fire burned in the center of the dwelling. Sitting on cushions by the small blaze were two women. The head of the village sat next to them on an available cushion. As he did, the older female turned her gaze to the floor, but the younger one sat erect, looking directly at him.

“We must speak, Icie.”

“Father, we have spoken of this matter many times. I see no need to go over it again.”

“Leave us, Brook. I wish to speak with my daughter alone.”

Brook stood, gave a small bow to her chief, and then to the princess before leaving her with an intriguing look. The chief sighed and addressed his daughter.

"Icie, this union is necessary. We must form an alliance with the Tioga tribe. They have skills that our people need."

"I know, Father."

"You know, but you are still not happy."

"No, Father, I am not. I do not wish to join with their chief."

"Icie, I hear he would make a good mate. He's a strong warrior and a man of honor."

She wrapped her arms around her chest. "I have heard the same."

"He has been joined before, and knows his duty as a mate."

Icie nodded. "I know of that, too, Father."

"He has proven his seed can make strong sons and beautiful daughters. I have heard he is a skilled lover and maintains his vigor according to the young women in the village."

"Uh-huh."

"What else is needed in a good mate?"

Icie sighed. "Father, I agree, all of those things are good, but there is a good reason for all those accomplishments. I have also heard he is a man of many years...more years than even you have had. If I cannot choose my own mate, I at least wanted to grow old with the one given to me. That would have at least give me time to learn him, and maybe love him. With Chief Dyami, I will watch him grow older before my eyes and die long before I do. That does not make me happy. Can't you understand that?"

"Yes, Icie, I do, but as the princess of this tribe you must take your place in the arms of a chief or a chief's son."

"Then why can't I join with his son? The union between our tribes will still be complete."

The chief shook his head. "The chief's son is not of age to join with anyone. He has daughters ready to marry but the boy is still under the age of assertion."

"I would rather wait for the son," she muttered.

"Icie..." the chief started sternly.

She sighed. "Forgive me, Father. You are right. I know my duty. I will join with the Tioga chief as planned. Although I cannot show joy I do not feel, I

will not dishonor the Seneca people by walking to the Tioga chief with tears in my eyes."

He patted her hand. "Perhaps he will surprise you, and you will grow to love him during your time together."

"He will have my respect because he will be my husband, Father. That much I can offer him, but I cannot offer love that I do not feel. If the spirits are listening and they agree with you, then they will make it so."

He nodded silently and stood. "Very well, daughter. I am proud of you for carrying out your duty, and I know your mother would be as well. She is with the great spirits watching over you as always."

Icie stood and hugged her father. "I know, Father. I feel her spirit with me at all times."

"The warriors are going to meet the Tioga tribe and escort the chief and his people into the village. They should return by sundown and the celebration will begin."

"Yes, Father."

The chief of the Seneca tribe left his child's hut with slumped shoulders, hoping her anger would not last long.



ICIE WATCHED HER FATHER leave and returned to her seat. A short while later Brook returned to her side.

"Is everything alright?"

Icie released her frustration in tears against Brook's shoulder. "Brook, why couldn't I have been born someone else? It is so unfair. Everyone else gets to pick their own mates."

Brook rubbed her back and held her until the tears ceased. "You are not like everyone else, Icie. You are the chief's only daughter, a Seneca Princess. It is your responsibility to join with a chief to bring our tribes together."

Icie let out a grunt and folded her arms across her chest. "Yes, I know, I know, but does the law say he has to be an old chief?" she asked insolently.

"A chief is a chief, my princess," she answered with a chuckle.

"What if I don't grow to love him, Brook? I will be in the bed of an old man. In his arms, I will feel nothing. It will be a double curse."

"Do you wish to continue with your lessons?"

Icie rolled her eyes. "Will the things I've been taught even work on him?" she asked cynically. "Or they may kill him. He is an elder after all."

"The women of his village say his passion in the art of love has not wavered since the death of his mate. I have no doubt he will be able to release the passion that lies dormant inside you."

"Yes, but doesn't love play a part in awakening one's passion?"

"Yes, princess, it does, but a skillful lover can do that even without love in his heart."

Icie sucked her teeth. "What's the point of that?"

Brook chuckled into her hand. "He may surprise you with his prowess."

Icie rolled her eyes.

"So, would you like to continue?"

"No, I think I know all there is to know about bringing my mate pleasure. Knowledge can only take you so far. I believe I have reached the stage where I must put the things I have learned into practice and make them my own and unique to him. Although I fear I feel nothing with my chief and will receive no enjoyment from him, I will do what I can to fulfill my duty as his mate and chieftess."

Brook tapped her chin in thought. "I heard that the Tioga chief treated his last mate very well. She wanted for nothing under his care. Her death was not due to his negligence. The sickness came upon their tribe during the time of the frost. She was one of fifteen that never recovered."

Icie sighed. "I know. I have heard that story as well. Sometimes I just wish I could wake up and be someone else. I could choose my own mate. I'd have love and passion to look forward to in my future...like everyone else," she added sadly.

"If you could, would you choose a man like Chief Dyami?"

"Yes, he would be much like they say the Tioga chief is. He would be handsome, strong, and honorable. I would feel safe in his arms as well as passion and love," she explained hugging herself. "The only real difference would be we would be of similar age."

Brook nodded. "Come, my princess, I have something for you."

Brook led her outside. They passed all the ladies working on the decorations in the center of the village on their way down a narrow path. Brook took

her to a dwelling not as large as her own. She guided Icie to a small stool and motioned for her to sit. Brook sifted through many blankets to remove a small burlap sack hidden beneath them and brought it to her.

"This is for you. I've been keeping it for you since your mother died. I know you probably wish it was she that was here to give it to you, but I kept it safe to make sure you got it when your Union Day came."

Icie reached inside and pulled the soft leather cloth from the sack. Inside the cloth were a beautiful bracelet and a matching necklace. Several pink shells were polished to a brilliant shine, separated by knots in the leather string that held it all together. Laced along with the pink shells were several pieces of coal that had been chipped and shaped into small hearts.

"Oh, Brook, it's my mother's joining jewelry. I remember her telling me when I was little, she would save it for me when I took a mate."

"Yes, I made sure to remove them when the women took her body away to be sent to the spirits. All her jewelry is in the sack. I'm sure she would want you to have those as well."

Tears fell freely down Icie's cheeks. She pulled Brook into a fierce hug.

"If I could have chosen a mother, besides my own, it would have been you. Thank you."

Brook held her close for a moment then pushed her back to smile at her with glistening eyes.

"Come, my princess. Let's get you back to your hut. You will want your jewelry near when you dress for the ceremony."

They returned to her hut where several of the older women in the village met them to help prepare Icie for the night's festivities. A blaring horn made them jump. Hearing it the women filed from her dwelling, one by one. When only Brook was left, she stood in front of Icie and smiled.

"I wish your mother was here to see how beautiful you look today."

"I have been blessed with two mothers. I'm very glad one of them is here to share this day with me."

Brook held her cheeks. "Oh, my darling. I know this union makes you unhappy. It breaks my heart that you must go through this. If you really were my daughter you could join with a mate of your own choosing, but..."

Brook pulled her into a fierce hug and they both cried. A second horn sounded several moments later and they separated. Brook picked up a towel and gently wiped away Icie's tears.

"It is time to meet your mate-to-be."

Icie nodded as she pressed her lips together a few times, straightened her dress, and lifted her chin before leaving her home one last time. She walked past many lit torches. Festive music filled the air and the dancing had already begun. Sitting on the decorated altar, the two chiefs stood watching her approach. Icie walked directly to them without faltering. Stopping before them, she lowered her head.

"Chief Dyami this is my daughter Icie, princess of the Seneca tribe."

"A pleasure to meet you, great chief."

"Lakota, your daughter shows the chiefs before her great honor and respect. That is a good quality in a mate. Rise princess."

Chief Dyami's voice sent a ripple up her spine that surprised her. Icie opened her eyes and stood upright. Thick silver hair pulled into a neat ponytail showed off his face. Though weather-beaten and aged, his features remained handsome. The power and authority he wielded seem to elude from the very center of his great height and girth. Undeniable confidence shined in his eyes as he assessed her with a pleasurable grin. The chief held her gaze as he left the dais to approach her.

"Your daughter is a rare beauty, great chief," the Tioga chief stated, turning her face side to side.

"I am glad you are pleased," the Seneca chief replied.

"I am to be your mate, young Icie, you may speak to me."

"I am honored that our joining will bring our tribes together, Chief Dyami. This union will be good for both our people."

He smiled down at her, and then took her hand and turned her to the crowd. "Let the celebration begin," he announced. "The princess and I will have words then return for the union ceremony," he added to her father.

Chief Dyami's grip tightened on her arm as he pulled her away. Icie looked over her shoulder. Chief Lakota and Brook looked as bewildered as she felt.

"Take me to your domicile. We need to talk," he commanded near her ear.

The change in his tone was not lost on her. She nodded and honored his request. He opened the flap and gently pushed her inside.

"I will return shortly, prepare yourself," he told her before leaving her alone. She watched him leave as her confusion deepened. She yelped when the flap to her hut abruptly opened again.

"Brook! What is going on?"

Brook ran to embrace her. "I don't know, my princess. He sent me here to help prepare you. What did he say?"

"He only said we would talk, and then he pushed me in here and said for me to prepare myself."

"I don't know what he would want to tell you, Icie, but I guess we must obey and prepare you for the union." Brook reached for the pouch that contained the jewelry, but Icie stopped her before she could open the bag.

"No, Brook. I have decided this union is unworthy of my mother's jewelry. Perhaps when I have a daughter, she will be able to wear them."

Brook nodded. "What do you want me to do with them?"

Icie pushed the bag against Brook's chest. "Hide them for me. Take my other jewelry too. You know the large oak I like near the stream?"

Brook nodded.

"If you dig a deep hole on the east side of the tree, right in front of the brook, about an arm's length down, you will find one of the sacks that we use to carry water in. Inside is all the other jewelry I made for my future daughters. One day they will have several pieces to choose from on their union days. Now they will have these to choose from as well."

"Yes, princess."

Brook rummaged through Icie's things for a moment before leaving. Icie quickly removed her dress then reached for her ceremony gown just as the flap opened again.

"That was quick, Brook. Could you help—Oh!" she yelped bringing the garment to her chest.

"Do not shy away from me, princess. There's no need to cover what is soon to be mine."

Icie pulled the dress closer to her neck. "Yes, my chief, but I am not yours yet."

He stepped closer and grabbed her hand. "It is our custom to sample what will be ours before we lay claim to it."

"With all due respect, my chief, that is not part of my custom. Our custom is we enter our mate's bed pure. Will we not join our customs when we join our bodies and our tribes?"

He pretended to think for a moment but answered quickly. "I think that we will not be honoring any Seneca customs starting now."

Her eyes opened wide. "How can that be? You cannot expect me to dishonor my people by forgetting who I am. My father is under the impression that we would have a merging of customs. We are joining for that very purpose so that both tribes can benefit from the other's resources," she explained.

"Once our union is complete, Seneca ways and customs will be no more to you," he clarified. "You will be a Tioga woman from this day forward. Our women are cared for and loved physically so that they may bring forth strong sons, which is their primary function. It will also be yours. As long as you make me happy you will have a satisfactory life," he told her.

She gasped taking a step back. "You— You would force me to do this?"

"You have aroused me greatly. I will have you now and several more times before the night is over. I know that I am a man of many years, but I will do what I can between those smooth brown thighs of yours. I think you will be pleased, now that I know you have not had another to compare me to."

Before she could comment, he jerked her into his arms. Terror gripped her heart as the chief yanked the covering away from her body. His large, rough hand silenced her scream as pushed her backward.

Dyami's full weight landed on top of her knocking the wind from her lungs. Dazed momentarily by the pain, Icie could do nothing when her legs were pushed apart. The chief fumbled with the ties that closed the front of his pants. Panic set into her very soul. Frantically, she looked around for help. Spying the stick she used to stoke the fire pit in her hut, Icie twisted to and fro to reach it.

Dyami finally pulled the knots loose and shimmied out of his clothes. When he turned a triumphant smile to her, Icie whacked him with all the strength she had on the side of the head. She pushed him onto the bedding and sat up hitting him two more times. Without pausing to put it on, she grabbed her dress and ran outside.

Crying Icie hid beside the hut to catch her breath. As she attempted to put her dress on, but Chief Dyami's angry words inside her domicile made her run instead.

Your father will not approve of what you've done, Icie. Nor will he approve of you running away like this.

Her run slowed to a stop. She looked over her shoulder and sighed.

"And my actions show dishonor to him and my people," she said aloud. "But Chief Dyami is a dishonorable man. Surely Father didn't know that, or he wouldn't have arranged our joining," she told herself as she paced. "To be with this man would not only be disrespectful to my father but to my people as well!" she rationalized. "Wouldn't it?"

She bit her lip in thought. "This was no love match to start. As a chief, his words and behavior should be honorable. They represent his tribe also."

Lightning suddenly lit up the sky. She shrieked and crouched at the base of a tree covering her ears at the loud roar of thunder that followed. The rain immediately started to fall. The sky brightened again. Icie screamed at the next thunderclap. Fear accelerated her walk into a flat outrun.



"YOU SUMMONED ME, MOTHER?"

"Yes, Himeros, I did." Aphrodite patted the spot beside her on the chaise. "Surely by now you have seen Zeus and have been given your task."

Himeros put a kiss on her cheek. "Yes Mother, he has."

Aphrodite nodded. "As you know I tire of Mount Olympus and wish to spend time with Poseidon. However, I cannot do so until Zeus is satisfied that you and your brother can handle my duties."

"Yes, Mother, I know. Eros and I have spoken. I know of his success and I am ready to do my part."

"Excellent. What task has he given you?"

"He has found a situation on Earth regarding a young princess. He has charged me with bringing two star-crossed lovers together so that they burn with desire for one another. From that desire, love will grow, and the chance for them to live happily ever after."

"Star-crossed? Are they in different time periods?"

Himeros nodded. "Yes."

Aphrodite nodded tapping her temple. "Very clever. I'm sure Hera had a hand in the details of your task as well. Eros was given a similar task."

“What do you mean, Mother?”

“As god of love, it is your brother’s task to show those who are already in love that they *are* in love. Most people fight it and become confused. Humans have the tendency to lose passion over time. Situations and circumstances change them and they ignore what is right in their faces. You are the god of desire. You must make your couple burn by either returning lost passion or igniting it for the first time so that they want more than anything to be together. Love has no choice but to grow from such a flame.”

Himeros nodded. “I understand, Mother.”

“Your task may prove to be a bit more challenging.”

“How so, Mother?”

“Your lovers are in different time periods. Traditions and cultures change over time for humans. Remember my words, Himeros. You are ready for the challenge. Now go to your princess, and put her where she belongs for you to do your job,” Aphrodite said, dismissing him.

Himeros stood and opened his wings. With one last nod to his mother, he departed her chamber.



Chapter Eight

SENECA COUNTY, NY, 2019

Icie had no idea how long she had been running. No real coherent thoughts were going through her mind. Pain and fear seemed to be the only things her brain could comprehend. The rain continued to pelt her naked shoulders. Her legs burned, her feet were sore, and her chest hurt from breathing hard. She pushed past her exhaustion and continued moving.

Another flash of lightning lit up her surroundings. Icie caught sight of a fire burning inside of a hut somewhere in the distance. She ran for it.

This has to be the start of the Cayuga village. They don't know me. Only my brother has gone to their village with Father. I just won't tell them who I am. I will find a man on my own. He wouldn't be a chief, but he'd be a good man.

She focused on where she saw the light and continued to run.

I could have a normal life. I will use everything the women in my tribe taught me to make him love me.

As Icie closed the distance between her and the light she frowned and stopped moving.

Oh no. It's one of the homes father had described that the traders lived in. What if they won't help me.

A bright bolt of lightning struck a nearby tree. The branch crashed to the ground accompanied by a thunderous boom. She screamed and took off running again.

If I am lucky, I could plead with them and they can take me away to another tribe.

She ran across the field separating the forest from the house. At the top of the hill, she slipped in the wet grass. Screaming all the way, Icie rolled uncontrollably landing with a painful thud splashing muddy water into the air.



THE ATMOSPHERE WAS set for a relaxing evening— soft jazz, a blazing fire, rich brandy—and it usually did the trick for Hawk, but none of it helped to ease his mind tonight. He sat in his favorite black wingback chair not really listening as he swirled the liquid in an oversized glass. Taking another sip, he continued to stare at the letter in his lap knowing nothing had changed. Abruptly he looked over his shoulder with a raised brow. A quick glance at the clock over the mantle made him frown.

“Now what nut is out after ten o’clock on a stormy night like this?” he wondered aloud putting his glass and letter down on the small end table beside his chair.

He swung the door open, and a woman fell into his arms. Somehow, he managed to catch her before she hit the floor.

“Whoa!”

“Please...help...me,” she whispered.

Hawk looked into the rain. The storm continued in its fury and no one else was there. He lifted the woman into his arms, pushed the door closed with his foot, and carried her to his bedroom. He laid her on the bed and rushed out of the room. When he re-entered, the towel fell from his hand. The woman was naked. The dress he thought she wore merely clung to her wet body. It strategically covered one breast as it went down her stomach and bunched up across her pelvis, leaving her legs completely uncovered. Even though her long black hair was mussed and stuck to half her face, he could see she was lovely.

Her beauty was exotic and seductive. Hawk had never seen such a beautiful woman. His eyes fell across her body again. Her long legs were shapely and her hips rounded, but slender. The one breast that was visible to him was full and lush. He stared at her nakedness for a while before turning away abruptly and tossing the towel to the foot of his bed. Going back to his seat, he picked up his glass and drank the contents down in one gulp.

“All right, Hawk. What have you gotten yourself into?” he muttered refilling his glass. “Why the hell would a beautiful woman be out on a night like this naked?”

He sprang to his feet and walked to the window then checked several other windows throughout the house.

“Aww, man,” he said, running his hand over his head. “I don’t have time for this. The last thing I need is to get involved with this woman if she’s got some-

one chasing her. I don't need that kind of drama on top of everything else I got going on."

He took a deep breath, and took another drink, and then he chuckled.

"Damn. Was she really naked when I took her to the room? How the hell did I miss that? I didn't think I was that tired," he added with another disbelieving laugh.

He took another drink from his glass and relaxed into his chair, allowing the music's soothing tones to wash over him. After a while Hawk took a deep breath and picked up the letter again and his melancholy returned.

"What am I going to do? I can't lose this place." As he lifted his glass to take another sip a soft voice stopped his hand midway.

"Excuse me."

He put his glass down and stood. His mystery woman stood in the foyer. She had wrapped herself in the towel he left in the room. It hung loosely around her body, giving his imagination nothing to work with, but he didn't need it. He had already seen the treasures hidden beneath. She ran her fingers through her hair as she spoke.

"I would like to thank you, Mr.—"

Hawk swallowed to wet his suddenly dry mouth. "Uh, Hawk. It's Hawk Rivers," he supplied on cue.

"Well, thank you, Hawk Rivers, for helping me. I know I shouldn't have run, but I didn't know what else to do."

"No problem, but just call me Hawk."

She moved closer to him. "I expected a white man from a village that we may have traded with to be here, but you are not a white man. What tribe are you from?"

Hawk's brows knitted in confusion. "*Tribe?* I'm not from any tribe. This is my house."

"You live here and not in one of the villages? I don't understand."

"Neither do I. What are you talking about?"

"You live in one of these," she said, gesturing around the room, "like white men do and not a village like the rest of your people."

"*Village?* Okay, let's start over because I have no clue what you are talking about." His head tilted as he watched her. "Are you still cold?"

She nodded. "Yes, a little."

"I'm sorry. Please, come sit by the fire so you can warm up." He pulled her to the couch and left her for a moment. He returned quickly with a mug. "All right, here you go. Now let's back up, and start from the beginning."

She accepted the cup and took a drink. "This is very good. What is it?"

"What is it?" he repeated with a scoff. "Where are you from that you don't know what hot chocolate is?" he asked on a laugh.

"Mmm," she said, sipping again.

"Okay, lady, let's hear it. What's your story? Start with your name and continue from there."

"My name is Icie. I am the daughter of Chief Lakota of the Seneca tribe."

Hawk laughed. "Seneca tribe? As in the Seneca Indian tribe?"

Icie nodded as she drank.

"Really? You're serious? Chief Lakota's daughter, huh? Yeah, okay."

She put the cup down and straightened her back. "Yes. Why is that funny to you?"

"Look, lady, I don't have time for this. I have enough problems of my own. If you're running from some lunatic boyfriend or husband, I can't be involved in any of that."

"I am running, that is true, but he is not my husband. Not yet, anyway. It is customary for the princess of one tribe to join with a chief of another, but Chief Dyami of the Tioga tribe was not the man of honor he led us to believe," she explained sadly.

Hawk leaned against the arm of the chair. "Chief Dyami? Why? What did he do?"

"He wanted to join our bodies before our union ceremony."

The vision of her in his bed came and went in his mind's eye. "And that'sss...bad?"

"It is not bad to do or even want to do, but it is against our custom for the princess to do so before she is joined."

Hawk nodded. "Oh, okay. Against yours, but obviously not against his?"

"No."

"So, he wanted to have sex before the wedding, you weren't feeling it so you ran. Okay, I'm caught up."

She turned a blank look to him.

He chuckled. "Nevermind. Why didn't you guys just join your customs? This from your tribe, that from his, a compromise."

"I was not against that idea, but he tried to force me to mate with him. That showed me how dishonorable he really is. How could I join with such a man?"

Hawk felt a rush of jealousy but shook it off. "Yeah, that ain't right on no level. Look, Icie, I can let you stay the night since the weather is acting crazy, but we're going to have to talk about getting you back to where you belong in the morning."

She jumped to her feet. "No, Hawk, I cannot go back to him. I must find another mate, one strong enough to protect me from him. He is not an honorable man, and I cannot give myself to him."

He barely took in the panic in her words for when she stood her towel fell from her body. Fighting the urge to stare at her naked form again, Hawk rose to bring the towel up to cover her.

"All right, calm down."

She fixed the towel to stay in place. "You don't understand, Hawk. I am of joining age, and the Tioga have skills that we need to grow as a people. If I go back, I will have to join with the chief to bring our tribes together."

"But this guy is obviously no good. He was going to force you into bed with him. Why would your father make you marry a guy like that?"

She sighed. "It is my duty as the chief's daughter to marry another chief. Now I have disobeyed my father and dishonored my people. My father will not accept me back into the tribe if I do not honor my duty. If I cannot find another mate from another tribe to protect me, I will have no choice but to return to Chief Dyami," she answered.

He let out a disbelieving chuckle.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "What is funny now, Hawk?"

The stern look she sent him was so cute he almost laughed again.

"I'm sorry, Icie. I'm not trying to make fun of you. I'm just a little surprised to hear that people are still doing arranged marriages in two thousand nineteen."

She sank to the couch with wide eyes. "What do you mean by two thousand nineteen?"

"That's the year. It's two thousand nineteen."

She gasped. "That can't be true."

He sat beside her. "Why? Don't you know what year it is?"

"I do know it. The year is eighteen sixty-nine."

"What? You think this is eighteen sixty-nine?"

She nodded. "Of course."

"What makes you think that? Oh, man, don't tell me you're one of those crazies that have more than one personality?"

"Crazies..." she muttered almost to herself. Suddenly she was on her feet again. "Are you trying to say I am not fully aware of my mind!" she snapped.

"Whoa! Okay, okay! I'm sorry," he said, failing at trying to muffle his laughter. "Let's take a deep breath and start this conversation all over. Let me get another drink."

Hawk hurried off to refill his glass from earlier, and then returned quietly to Icie's side.

"Okay, now take it from top and tell me everything from the beginning."

Icie eased back to her seat. With a deep breath, she told him what transpired throughout her whole day until she ended up at his door. Hawk slid his hand over his head and down his face when her story was complete. He swallowed his drink and groaned aloud.

"This is a little too much for me to handle right now. I've got a lot going on at the moment, Icie. It sounds like you've got a lot too. With your lot and my lot, that's just too much to think about now. Let's just call it a night and worry about all this tomorrow. All right?"

Icie nodded and let out a sigh. "Yes, you are right, Hawk. I am very tired."

"I'll sleep out here, and you can have my room tonight. Come on, I'll find you something to sleep in."

Hawk watched her walk back to his room as the towel swished across the roundness of her buttocks. He couldn't help but wish she would pull it up just a little higher. Shaking his head, he forced the thought from his mind and walked past her to his room. Digging in his drawer, he found a pair of pajamas and tossed them on the bed then left her alone. As he lay on the sofa, he took another quick look at the letter and didn't bother to push the tears away.



Chapter Nine

“MR. RIVERS, I CAN APPRECIATE your problem, but you have to understand ours. The development of this land is at hand. The reservations have gone the way of the dodo. The last of the Indians claiming their land have left. Everyone is selling to make a little profit for themselves so they can move on.”

“I know that, Mr. Watson.”

“We are not mean people, Mr. Rivers. We are but humble workers of the government doing what we are told.”

“I get that, Mr. Watson, but my grandfather would never have left his land.”

“Your grandfather is not here.”

“Mr. Watson, this land once belonged to the Seneca and Cayuga Indian tribes. My great-grandfather was a product of the joining of those two tribes. My grandfather was raised here when it was a fully active reservation and so was my father. I spent every summer of my life up here learning about my heritage. My grandfather and I were very close. He promised this land to me so I could raise my own children here. I am the last descendant of my Cayuga Indian family. I have no intention of selling this land.”

“But you don’t have the papers to prove that, do you, Mr. Rivers?”

“No, Mr. Watson, but that doesn’t change the fact that this is my grandfather’s land. That is common knowledge. I can’t let it be turned into an outlet mall or another coffee chain.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Rivers. It’s nothing personal, really. It’s just the way the business works.”

“Please, just give me the time I need to continue searching through my family’s papers to find the deed. I haven’t had time to go through everything since their death.”

Mr. Watson shook his head. “If you don’t have your grandfather’s deed, or come up with the money to cover the last payments for this land in twenty-four hours, it will revert to government property. I’m sorry.”

Hawk shut the door then tapped his forehead against it. With a sigh, he turned and spotted Icie standing in the doorway of his bedroom wearing just his pajama top.

"Oh! Good morning, Icie. I didn't realize you were up."

"Yes, I didn't mean to listen, Hawk, but your voices woke me. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No, Icie, but thanks," he said, walking to the kitchen.

"But that man said he's going to take your home."

He paused. "Oh, you heard that. Well, I apologize for waking you. Are you hungry? I'll make us some breakfast," he said pushing the door open.

She followed him. "I knew you were Seneca. I could tell when I first saw you."

"Well, mostly, anyway. My father was."

"Was his name Hawk, too?"

"No, I was named after my great grandfather. His name was Hawk. When he was a young man, they started industrializing this land and he took the name Rivers. Eventually, he moved to the city in hopes of educating himself. It wasn't easy in those days, so he returned here and stayed on his land. He was here when Indians started trading with white men, and they helped him build this house."

Hawk took down a frying pan and used it to point to a chair. Moving toward the refrigerator, he continued.

"My great grandfather married a woman from the Cayuga tribe and raised my grandfather on this land. When my grandfather was of age, he tried to go down to New York City to be educated, but he couldn't so he came back to marry a woman from his tribe also."

"They had your father and raised him here, too?"

Hawk nodded. "Yup and when he was old enough he went to the city to go to school. Times had changed by then so my dad was able to stay and get an education. He had every intention of coming back here, but when he met my mother he stayed there."

"How did you get back here then?"

"I grew up down in the city, but I came here every summer of my life to visit my grandfather. He wanted to make sure that I learned my heritage. He didn't want me to not know where I came from just because I lived in the city. I knew since I was a little boy that I would inherit this house. Hawk looked around the

room. "I could walk around this place blindfolded and know where everything was."

"It sounds like you and your grandfather were very close."

Hawk smiled. "Yeah, we were very close. He insisted I have a tribe name when I was born." He gathered a few more items. "This is my house, Icie. It represents my family and my heritage. I can't let them take it."

"You bring honor to your family to want to preserve their home. I'd like to help you if I can."

He chuckled. "There's nothing you can do, but thanks anyway."

"What is this deed that Mr. Watson was talking about? It sounds very important."

"A deed is a document that says the land belongs to you. I know my parents stored it somewhere. I just need more time to go through all of their things to find it." He cracked several eggs into a bowl and picked up the whisk.

"Why not just ask your parents where they put it?"

Hawk sighed. "I would, Icie, but they're dead."

Icie let out a shocked gasp. "I'm sorry, Hawk."

Hawk put the bowl to the side to add a package of hash browns to another frying pan.

"Yeah, it was all very sudden. My parents came out here to pick up my grandfather to visit me in the city. After a week my parents headed back here to drop my grandfather off, but they never made it. On the way, they were in a car accident that killed them all."

The sadness in Icie's eyes made the pain he had been suppressing return. When she reached out to touch his hand, he turned away from her lest she see the tears that threatened to fall.

"I buried my parents up here with my grandfather so they would be near me. I went back home a few days later to sell my condo. I've only been here for about three weeks, after being gone for a few months. Now they're telling me a developer is trying to get all this land to make it into something."

He slid the cooked eggs and hash browns onto a plate and handed it to her. Icie accepted the plate.

"You haven't really had a chance to process everything that has happened. All of this is still new."

"No, and that Mr. Watson has been at my door almost every day for the last two weeks. My condo sold quickly, but even with that money and what I have in the bank, it's nowhere near enough to buy the land. There is so much stuff between my parents and my grandfather that I just shoved most of it into the backyard storage. No more would fit into the garage."

Hawk slid his food onto a plate and joined her at the table. "I've gone through everything of my parents since Mr. Watson's first visit and didn't find the deed. The last of my grandfather's things are out in the back, but I haven't found the papers I need yet." He shook his head and put on his best smile. "So, that's my story. Now eat up so we can talk about what's really going on with you."

Icie looked down at her plate then back at him. "This is good, Hawk. What is it?" she asked, surprised.

He looked up from his empty plate with a raised eyebrow. "All right, for real, spit it out, Icie. What's really going on?"

He pushed his plate back and wrapped his arms around his chest. She finished her food before she mimicked his movements.

"I have no reason to lie to you, Hawk. All I know is when I ran away from my joining ceremony last night it was April third eighteen sixty-nine."

"What you're saying is impossible, Icie. It isn't eighteen sixty-nine, it is two thousand nineteen."

She continued to stare at him, her expression unchanged.

"Fine, you know what, I have an idea. If you say you're from the past, eighteen sixty-nine to be exact, then you should be in the history books, right? My grandfather has lots of history books that go back for years on the Seneca Indian tribe. Why don't we see if we can look you up, Miss Time Traveler?"

Hawk jumped up, making his way to the attic. She followed close behind him. He sifted through many dusty books on an even dustier bookshelf before he found what he was looking for. "Here's one that's dated eighteen hundred to nineteen hundred. So, you should be in here somewhere." He dropped the tomb-like book on the floor before her and sat down, turning pages when the dust cleared. "Here's something. It says the chief of the Seneca Indians from eighteen fifteen to eighteen seventy-five name was Lakota."

"Yes, that was my father."

Hawk slid his finger down the page. "It says his son, Pallaton, took over for the aged chief in July eighteen seventy-five."

"Pallaton is my elder brother. It doesn't say anything about me? Look for something about Lakota's daughter."

Hawk flipped through a few more pages scanning for information. "Here's something. It says here that in eighteen sixty-nine Chief Dyami of the Tioga tribe was supposed to marry Lakota's daughter, but right before the ceremony, she went to her hut and never returned. Later they discovered she was attacked and killed by an animal."

He looked at her with a raised brow then continued reading.

"In eighteen eighty-one, Chief Pallaton married Chief Dyami's daughter when she became of age and joined the two tribes." He closed the book and stared at her for a time before speaking. "The book says the chief's daughter died."

"I'm not dead, Hawk, but they had to say something. How else would they explain my disappearance?"

"If you're really the chief's daughter how the hell did you get here, hundred and fifty years into the future in one night?"

"I don't know, Hawk, but I am here."

Hawk led the way back downstairs where they sat on the couch in silence. Icie sat across from him seemingly in deep thought. The pajama shirt he lent her rose seductively high on her thighs. He was hard-pressed not to stare but mentally push the shirt higher and tilted his head for a better look.

"Hawk, why don't you have a mate?"

Icie's soft voice burst his daydream bubble. He quickly brought himself to an upright position.

"What?"

"I asked why you didn't have a mate. I see no female influences in your home at all. Why are you alone here?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. A wife just doesn't top my *things-to-do list* right now. I'm more concerned with trying to figure out how I am going to save my home."

"Are you worthy of a mate? No. What was the word you used? A wife?"

He scoffed. "Worthy? Of course, I'm worthy. I'm not a bad looking guy. I have a job, a car, and a house. I'll have you know that by today's standards I'm a catch," he added with a huff.

She giggled. "I did not mean to offend you, Hawk. I agree you are very handsome, in both face and body. I was just wondering why you were alone. I would rather join with a man like you than Chief Dyami."

He sat back. "Oh, thanks."

"Though I don't know how I got here, I am here now and must make the best of my situation. I am of age to be joined with a mate, to be a wife."

"Oh yeah? Well, how old are you?"

"I am twenty-five. How old are you?"

"I'm thirty-one."

"We are close in age and have the same problem, Hawk. I am alone now with no family, and you are alone without yours. If you would have me, we can find our way together."

"What? Icie, look, I'm not looking for a wife. I'm just trying to find a way to save my home," he repeated.

"We are not always looking for what we need, Hawk. Sometimes these things are taken out of our hands. They are given to us because we think we have other things that need to get done first."

"Yeah, but—"

"By wanting to obey your grandfather's wishes and how you treated me when I arrived at your door last night tell me that you are an honorable man. I also find that the more I look at you, the more I like what I see," she added, leaning toward him.

Hawk jumped to his feet. "Whoa. Pump your brakes, girl."

"I don't understand. You speak so strangely, Hawk."

"Okay, all I'm saying is I don't have time for this or any relationship. I've got a lot on my plate at the moment. Besides, we don't even know each other."

"I didn't know Chief Dyami, either, but I was to join with him. Isn't that how all relationships are? People get to know each other more and more as they spend more time together."

"Yeah, I guess, but—"

"As your wife, I will do whatever I can to please you as we get to know each other."

He raised his eyebrow. "Please me? What do you mean? No! Wait a minute," he said, quickly waving his hands. "Thanks and I'm very flattered, really, but the only thing I need right now is my grandfather's deed or enough money to buy this land. No offense, Icie, but until I can take care of that, I don't want anything else. You came to me last night soaking wet with nothing...unless you were hiding some diamond jewelry or something under that wet dress of yours," he added with a flick of his hand and a chuckle.

"I don't know what diamond jewelry is, but I do have some jewelry. Would that help you?"

"Jewelry from your time? Yeah, that would be extremely valuable now and very helpful if it were still intact, that is." He returned to his seat. "But I don't see any jewelry on you, just my pajama top."

She leaned closer to him. "I can tell that you like what you see when you look at me as well, Hawk. I can make you happy if you let me. I have been taught how to pleasure a man by my elders."

His eyes widened. "Your elders taught you wha—"

She moved slowly, closing the distance between them again. "I didn't know Chief Dyami in the way a man knows a woman. Is it your custom to join before the ceremony like Chief Dyami's?"

"Uh..."

"We could merge our customs as you suggested earlier. I was willing to do so with Chief Dyami, and I find I am not only willing but looking forward to doing so with you."

"Yeah, but—"

Icie crawled across the sofa toward him with the grace of a prowling cat. Hawk's mouth went dry and his heart accelerated.

"The difference is I choose to give myself to you."

Hawk's eyes locked onto her sensual lips as she spoke. He leaned back allowing her to crawl on top of him. The shirt hung low exposing the roundness of her breast as she moved. He could hear her speaking, but her body language spoke louder than her voice. His pants tightened by the moment as the pressure of his body grew. His eyes were locked onto hers as she approached, caught in her sensual web.

Hawk's brain and body were at certain war. It had been a long time since he let himself get close to a woman like this. He wasn't one of those men that

hopped into bed with just anyone who would let him pounce on them. The last woman he gave his heart to dropped it into a blender and hit frappe after a four-year committed relationship. He promised himself after that he would do better at protecting his heart.

"Could you see yourself with me, Hawk?" she asked breaking through his mental dilemma.

Surprising himself he grabbed her wrists to stop her. "Icie, I'm sorry, but I'm in no hurry to jump into a relationship." He looked into her innocent-looking eyes and spoke carefully. "I simply don't have time for any of Cupid's stupid games right now."

"I don't understand. Don't you find me pleasing to look at?"

He swallowed hard. "Yes, oh yes, you are extremely beautiful and you seem intelligent, but I need to concentrate on my first priority." Gently he pushed her back to a sitting position. "If you really want to help you could help me look through the stuff in the shed outside."

Icie nodded and her shoulders sank in defeat. "Very well, Hawk, we will speak on it another time. I will do as you ask and help you look for your deed."

Hawk exhaled in relief. Had she pushed the issue further he didn't think he could reject her again. His brain told him it was the right thing to do, but his body was on her side and mad as hell at the turn of events.

"Thank you. I'll find you something to wear."

Hawk gave her a pair of sweatpants and one of his T-shirts. When she returned in his outfit, he groaned to himself,

How can someone look so sexy in clothes that completely engulfed them?

He led the way to the garage where they sifted through box after box of paperwork.

"I'm so sorry we couldn't find anything," Icie mention coming into the kitchen sometime later. "Perhaps if we could return to the place in New York City where you used to live and—"

"No, Icie, there is nothing back there. Everything is here," he snapped. "We spent all day out there looking, and we didn't find anything. If we didn't find it by now there is nothing to be found!" His voice rose in crescendo with his frustration.

Icie jumped on her seat.

He slammed the frying pan down on the burner then grabbed both sides of the stove and shook it hard. From the corner of his eye, he saw Icie's stunned expression. He let out an exasperated breath and stood up.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be taking anything out on you. You're just trying to help me. Forgive me."

"I understand, Hawk, and thank you for your apology."

He continued cooking then put the food on a plate for her. After loading the dishwasher, he headed for the door.

"Hawk, where are you going? You are not eating?"

"No, I don't feel like it. Go ahead and eat. I'm going to lie down for a while."

Hawk flopped onto his bed and pulled the pillow over his face. After a while, the pillow was lifted from his face. He looked around, but when his eyes adjusted to the moonlight that lit the room Icie's lovely body came into view. She no longer wore the pajamas he gave her. He devoured her luscious brown skin and sensual curves as she played with her hair.

Icie moved closer pressing her soft breast against his chest as she sat beside. Pleasurable heat seeped through his shirt. He licked his lips preparing to protest, but a delicate finger silenced him. Hawk's body immediately responded to her closeness. He quenched the urge to suck that finger as his brain screamed in protest.

"Your mouth wants to say one thing, Hawk Rivers, but your eyes and your body say another. I am very eager to use the techniques I have been taught. May I practice on you?"

He couldn't think straight. The southern head on his body was now in control and all coherent thought was lost to him. The only response he could muster up was a slow nod.

Icie smiled and quickly straddled his pelvis. She tugged on his T-shirt and he wiggled his torso to help her get it over his head. Slowly she slid her hand over his chest.

"I think I would enjoy being in your bed on a daily basis, Hawk. Your body is pleasing to me and very inviting."

Hawk was immobilized. Her gentle, exploratory touch set his skin ablaze. His erection was immediate in response to her position the velvety touch moving back and forth across his nipples.

"I do not know what took place in your past that makes you fear even considering me as your wife, but I would like a chance to change your mind."

She leaned forward, pressing her full breasts against his chest, and kissed him softly. "Mm, that was my first kiss, Hawk. I enjoyed it very much. Oh!"

Icie rose off him and looked back at his throbbing erection. Her hand went to her mouth and she giggled like a little girl.

"It would seem that you enjoyed it too."

Hawk chuckled. "Yes, I did."

She eased back to his body and leaned forward. "I would like to share many more firsts with you. Will you guide me through my second kiss?"

"Absolutely."

Hawk held her cheeks between his palms to bring her face down to his. He captured her lips. The heat from the connection burned him to his core.

Icie returned his kisses wholeheartedly, moaning her passion into his mouth.

The sound turned him on immensely. He slipped his arm around her waist and reversed their positions in one smooth movement.

Icie yelped when she found herself on the bed. She looked up at him with wide eyes for a moment then burst into giggles when she found herself on the bed.

"You are strong, Hawk. I like that, but I thought I was to practice what I was taught on you."

He let out a small laugh. "Oh, you will have your chance, but first I want to touch you. Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, it is your first time and all. I ask because we are dangerously close to the point of no return."

She chuckled and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I am sure. I would rather give myself to you than to anyone else. Teach me what you want me to know."

Hawk was amazed at how his body responded to the simple request. Finally, he gave in to the urge that plagued him from the moment he saw her. He leaned over and took as much of her breast as he could into his mouth, circling her nipple with his tongue. Her back arched as she moaned her pleasure aloud.

"Oh, Hawk." Amazement tinged her words she spoke his name. "That feels wonderful. Don't stop."



ICIE HAD NO IDEA WHAT would come next. Hawk's touch was amazing. Hawk grasped her other breast and sucked it into his mouth. Suddenly, her body ignited with sensations she had never experienced before. Hawk repositioned himself above her so that his bulge fit perfectly between her legs. She opened her legs wanting more. He licked and sucked her breasts eagerly and ground his hardness against the sensitive area between her legs, driving her into a frenzy. She tried to speak, but only puffs of air came from her mouth.

What's happening?

"Oh!"

A sudden rush of heat consumed her. Goosebumps rose on her skin as her body combusted with the best sensation she ever experienced followed by a long soulful moan. Her body shook uncontrollably. Hawk released her breast moments later. Icie grabbed his head in an intense hug.

"Oh, Hawk! What just happened to me? It was incredible!" She kissed his face all over. "Will it happen again? Can you do it again? Can I do that to you?" She could hardly catch her breath as her questions came rapidly, one after the other.

He chuckled, trying to return the kisses. "Icie, wait, slow down, that's too many questions for me to answer at once."

"Hawk, it was an amazing feeling. Tell me what happened."

He shrugged. "I don't know. I think you may have had your first orgasm. I was only trying to make you feel good."

Her joyful smile widened. "Well, you succeeded. It was better than good! I was— Well, what's better than good? *Good* just doesn't seem to fit the sensation."

"Uh, well—"

She pressed her body to his and trying to rub against him the way he did hers. "When you join your body with mine will it feel as good as it just did?"

"I hear the first time is uncomfortable for women at first, but it doesn't last long, and then, yes, it will feel really good."

Her body tingled with anticipation, and she let herself fall back onto his pillow.

"I trust you, Hawk. Let's become one."



HER SIMPLE STATEMENT pierced his very soul and demolished any resistance he had left. No longer did the protests of his brain harass him to be cautious. The awestruck innocence in her eyes made him want to protect her from the world. She looked up at him with a small grin and he smiled back. Something about this woman was different. Icie would be there for him. She would love him, but best of all, she would give herself to him alone. She would be his. His whole being told him so. He dropped a kiss to her mouth and pushed himself up. Hawk removed his pants and stood before her. Her stunned gasped stopped his approach.

"Wha—"

Icie sat up so quickly he jumped. She reached out expectantly. He moved closer. Her hesitant exploring fingers glided over the taut skin of his stomach. The sensation sent a chill down his back-leaving goosebumps in its wake. He closed his eyes to enjoy the experience.

She took in a breath when her fingertips moved over his nipples.

"Mm, this is very nice. I've never seen hair on a man's chest before. It's very attractive," she mentioned as her fingers pulled at the hairs on his chest.

Hawk didn't know if she was actually talking to him or herself. Either way, he couldn't find his voice to respond. He turned his concentration to Icie's lowering hand. When she reached his erection, Icie let out a loud yelp. His eyes popped open at the sound.

She looked up at him with wide eyes. "It moved away from me when I touched it. Is it afraid of me?"

He laughed. "No, I can honestly say he isn't."

"*He*? You address it as he? How strange."

"Well, I think almost all men think of their personal parts as he. Some even have names for them."

She reached out to stroke him gently as it bobbed. "Really? What name have you given yours?"

"I— Uh, well..."

She looked up waiting.

"I call mine...Bosco," he answered with a shrug.

"Why Bosco?" she asked innocently, still sliding her hand over his shaft and balls.

Hawk hesitated and licked his lips. "It's very difficult to answer questions when you touch him like that."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I'll stop then."

She moved her hand away, but Hawk grabbed her wrist to hold her in place.

"No! I didn't mean for you to stop."

"I thought you didn't like it."

"No, I like it... A lot! It feels good when you touch me."

Icie's brows furrowed as her head tilted. "But you said—"

"I'll try to answer quickly," he said with a smile. "Please continue."

Icie let out a light laugh. "All right."

She resumed her exploratory fondling. Her caressing fingers strengthened his hard-on even more.

"What was the question again?" he said after a while.

Her laugh was soft. "Why do you call him Bosco?"

"Oh, yeah, right, right. Well, it was the name of the chocolate syrup I used to like when I was a kid. I figured I'm dark, he's dark, the syrup was dark so..." He chuckled and shrugged. "I know it's crazy."

"No, actually I think it suits him. I will call him Bosco, too. Touching Bosco like this seems to bring you great pleasure."

"Mm, hmm," he said with a nod.

"I will remember that for future reference. I would like to take Bosco into my mouth the way you did my breasts earlier. Would that be all right?"

Before he could actually answer, Icie's grip tightened around Bosco as she pulled him closer. Delicious wet heat engulfed his cock entirely. Hawk's moan rang off the walls, and his knees almost buckled under the blissful pleasure. His head rolled. When he looked down Icie's head back and forth to swallow his erection. She slowed only to swirl her tongue over Bosco's swollen head. Hawk's enjoyment increased tenfold. She sped up then slowed down. Her technique brought him to a dizzied frenzy with each pass. He rocked him on his heels and moaned again. Suddenly, he grabbed the top of her head stopping her.

"Wait, wait," he commanded breathlessly.

She looked up at him with worried eyes. "Have I done something wrong, Hawk?"

"No, no, not at all. You've done everything right, but I can't take anymore. If you keep doing that I'm gonna lose it."

Her concerned look turned to confusion.

He chuckled. "It felt so good I thought my head was about to explode." Hawk paused to rub his temple. "I just couldn't tell which one it was going to be."

Hawk crawled into bed, laying her back. He kissed her with all the passion she had just built up within him.

"This is your first time. I want you to feel as good as you made me feel."

He moved smoothly to the crook of her neck. Laying butterfly kisses across her breast, Hawk slid his hand over her torso and pinched her nipple. A stuttered moan reached his ears. He continued stimulating the hardened bud as he moved down toward her belly. The muscles jumped beneath his tender kisses and hot breath as he moved even lower.

The pleasurable memories of being with a woman came rushing back to his mind and body. The details of Icie's most private area, softness, the smell, the delicateness, locked itself into his mind. His hands glided over as much of her heated skin as they could while he tasted her. She panted wildly. Her hands gripped Hawk's head guiding him to where she needed him most. Her legs wrapped around his shoulders to bring him even closer. It wasn't long before she shuddered beneath him. Icie let out an uninhibited roar of joy as her inner core drenched his mouth with her sweet honey.

Hawk drank in her essence hungrily moaning his own delight. The thought of sharing his life with this woman sounded better and better. Icie responded to his touch with soft moans, whimpers, and soft gasps of surprise. It was like nothing he had experienced with anyone before. Hawk couldn't see himself ever tiring of her lusciousness. When the throbbing in her center subsided and her grip eased on his head, Hawk slid up her body, planting a sensual wet kiss on her parted lips.

"Man, you taste good. A man could get used to tasting you," he whispered against her lips.

“That was the most wonderful sensation I ever had, Hawk.” She kissed both his cheeks and then his mouth. “I want to be your wife. I want you to get used to me.”

His head tilted. “Icie, do you realize that you just asked me to marry you?” he asked with a smile.

“Is that against your custom?”

He actually had to think about it. “I don’t think so. It’s just not as common as men asking women.”

“Will you join your body to mine now?” she touching his cheek.

Hawk needed no further encouragement. Her soft words and unique mix of innocence and lust in her lovely brown eyes captured his heart. His need to have her skyrocketed. Without another word, he positioned himself over her and guided his hardness into her soft, wet sweetness. Carefully he eased his erection into her. With each incredible movement, he dipped more of himself to open her even more. He moved intentionally slow. His pleasure intensified by the sleek tightness of her virginal core.

Sweet pleasurable whimpers reached his ears. Icie’s legs opened wider and her knees gripped his hips. With the next thrust, Hawk buried himself to the hilt deep inside her. Icie’s eyes popped open and her jaw dropped. Quickly he covered her mouth with his silencing her scream.

She pushed against his shoulders, trying to break their connection, but he refused to release her lips or her body, and then she dropped her hands to her sides.

“Icie, I’m so sorry,” Hawk said, finally releasing her mouth. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I had to push past—”

Icie cut off his apology with a kiss. “Oh, Hawk! There was pain at first, but just as quickly as it came, it disappeared. But in its place came incredible joy! It’s everything they told me it would be! Joy beyond joy! Keep going, please.”

Hawk’s surprise lasted only a brief moment. He slid his hand beneath her buttocks to help her meet each of his insistent thrusts. His smooth and calculated rhythm brought them both maximum pleasure. Erratic noises of pleasure filled the room for a time. When Hawk looked down, her lovely features were twisted in obvious enjoyment.

Abruptly her eyes popped open. In them, he saw raw lust, self-abandon, and tears. Just as quickly as they flew open her eyes closed again and she let out

a shriek that pierced his soul. Unexpectedly Icie's orgasmic scream took him down the road of ecstasy with her. With his limbs locked in place, he held as much of himself inside her as he could and sent his own blissful sounds up to mingle with hers. As he collapsed on top of her, gasping for air, his mind became clear.

This woman had to have been sent here to be with him. But how? None of this makes sense.

He rolled off her and pulled Icie into his arms. She snuggled against his chest.

"You are an amazing man, Hawk. I am so glad that whatever happened to bring me to you happened."

Her sleepy words warmed his spirit. Hawk kissed the top of her head. She was a gift. What other explanation was there? How could he not accept her? He had to. She was already his. Hawk drifted off to sleep with a laugh on his lips.

"Maybe Cupid isn't as stupid as I once thought," he muttered on a yawn.



Chapter Ten

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR startled Hawk from his sleep the next morning. He reached out for Icie only to find her gone. Sitting up, he looked around to confirm that he was alone, and the knocking continued. He leaped from the bed, dressed quickly, and rushed to the door.

“Mr. Watson! What time is it? You’re early,” he said, looking into the house trying to spot the clock.

“I saw no point in waiting for twelve o’clock, Mr. Rivers. Either you have the money or the deed, or you don’t. You showed no signs of having either when we last spoke.”

“I understand your line of thinking, Mr. Watson, but you have no right to come here now. The fact remains that my time isn’t up until twelve o’clock and it’s—”

Mr. Watson held his hand up, stopping Hawk’s words.

“Mr. Rivers, let’s just cut to the chase, shall we? Do you have it or not?”

Hawk took a slow deep breath to help keep his anger in check. “I still have until twelve o’clock, Mr. Watson, so until then, get off my land.”

“Fine, but at twelve o’clock I will be at the courthouse, signing this property off to the first person who wants to buy it. I suggest you be there or the next time you see me will be back here with the sheriff to remove you,” he threatened before turning on his heels.

Hawk slammed the door. He walked through the whole house then returned to the living room where he sat on the couch with a thud.

“Damn it! I should have known better than to think she would stay with me. She probably wasn’t even real...some kind of delusional dream induced by the sexually frustrated mind of a fool who’s about to lose his home.”

He slid his hands down his face and let out a disbelieving laugh. “What else could possibly go wrong?”

As if on cue the front door flew open.

“Icie!”

Hawk jumped to his feet and ran to her. Lifting her from the floor, he spun her around and kissed all over her face when her feet were back on the ground. "I thought I dreamed of you or something. Are you alright? Where were you? Why did you leave? You scared me to death. What's that?"

She pulled him back to the couch next to her. "Now who has too many questions to answer at one time?" she asked in a teasing tone.

He smiled. "Okay, you're right. So answer this one, where did you go?"

"I went to get my jewelry for you. It was still there in the buried bag."

He fell back against the cushion and sighed. "Icie, baby, thank you, really, but your jewelry is probably dust or broken shells and crumbled stuff by now. It's been in the dirt for over- what?- like one hundred fifty years."

Icie all but bounced in her seat as she pulled out a necklace and dropped it on his lap. He didn't want to hurt her feelings. She was only trying to help him. Swallowing a sigh, he looked into his lap and fingered the jewelry.

"Thank you, Icie, these are really—" He paused lifting a piece for closer inspection. "Icie, what was this necklace made from when you got it?"

"That one was my mother's joining jewelry. My father made it from coal and pink shells. She loved those colors together. He carved the coal into thin black hearts."

The gem gleamed as he rotated it. "This necklace isn't made from heart-shaped coal anymore. I think these are diamonds," he explained excitedly. "What else do you have in that bag?"

She took the bag and emptied the rest of the contents into his lap. A bracelet that matched the necklace in his hand appeared in his lap as well as a necklace made from silver and turquoise, a bracelet made from red coral and pearls with a matching necklace, and another necklace with silver beads and large red coral pieces. Hawk picked them all up and scrutinized them, in the same way, shaking his head in disbelief.

"I don't get it. How can this be? Where did you keep them all this time that they're still intact?"

"In these water bags," she answered, holding it out to him. "I buried them as deep as I could by a big oak tree near the stream. I put some stones on top of the bags and covered it with dirt and layered it like that so no one would find my hiding place. I wanted to save these pieces to give to my daughter one day

so I had to make sure it would be protected from thieves, water damage, and time.”

He dumped both bags into his lap and continued looking over the jewelry. “I’m not a jeweler, but I really think these are real diamonds, and if it is then it will be more than enough to save my house,” he said as his excitement grew. “I mean, if it’s okay for me to have one,” he added quickly.

“Of course! I went to retrieve them for you, Hawk. They are yours to use as you see fit. If I am to be your mate, I mean your wife, it is my duty to stand by you and do what I can to help you.”

He put the necklace back in his lap with the others and caressed her face. “I don’t know how I got so lucky to have you sent to me, but who am I to question Fate? Before this day is over you will be my wife,” he promised and leaned over to kiss her.

She pushed him back and lay on top of him. “I’m glad. Now can we join again? I have so much more I want to show you, and I want you to teach me more.”

He laughed. “Oh man! As much as I’d love to stay on this couch and have my way with you, we have to take care of this first.” He grabbed her by the hands pushing her back to sit on the couch. “We have to go into town and see how much these are worth before noon.”

A short time later Hawk and Icie parked in front of the jewelry store.

“Mr. Johansson, are you here?” Hawk called out walking into the store.

A man appeared from a door behind the counter. “Hawk, is that you?”

Hawk extended his hand. “Yes, sir, how are you?”

“I’m doing well, Hawk, very well. It’s been a long time. I heard about your parents and grandfather, of course. Sad business, that. You have my condolences, of course.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“What can I do for you today?”

“I have some jewelry I’d like you to check out, Mr. Johansson. Can you have a look and tell me what they’re worth?”

The old jeweler pulled his rectangle glasses from a top pocket on his shirt. “Certainly. Let’s see what you have here.”

Icie handed Hawk the bag. Mr. Johansson emptied the contents gently side-by-side onto a cloth on the counter. He picked up a bracelet and brought it close to his face, inspecting it.

"These are unique pieces, Hawk. Yes, very unique."

Mr. Johansson reached beneath the counter for a pair of spectacles with magnifying capabilities.

"Umm, Mr. Johansson, I don't mean to rush you, but I need to be at the courthouse by twelve o'clock. Is this stuff worth anything? I need to know so I can buy my grandfather's land back."

Mr. Johansson nodded and continued to examine the jewelry for a few more minutes before he removed the glasses, carefully setting them on the counter.

"Hawk, where did you get these pieces?"

"Umm," he looked at Icie, and then back to Mr. Johansson and took her hand. "We found them among my grandfather's things," he answered, hoping Icie would not correct him. "Are they worth anything?"

The older man smiled. "Oh yes, they're worth something all right! In fact, I would say they are at least a hundred years old." He picked up the bracelet that once belonged to Icie's mother. "This piece right here is most incredible," he said with exhilaration. "I believe it was actually handcrafted! That makes it very rare."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Today we have machines to cut diamonds and other precious jewels into shapes for different pieces. Look here," he said bringing the piece closer to him. "There are no machine marks!" he confirmed rotating the jewel. "You should see some kind of mark, but this heart is entirely too smooth. The shape had to be made when the jewel was created. This piece had to be made of coal first and created over time into a diamond. Amazing! I have only seen pieces like this in museums."

"What are you saying, Mr. Johansson?"

"I would say that these stones are at least five carats and with my loupe, I see no flaws. If that is the case we are talking about a considerable sum for each stone and that is just for the bracelet."

Hawk's grip tightened around Icie's hand.

"We need to be sure, of course. Let me make a call, Hawk."

"All right, Mr. Johansson, but please make it quick. We're running against time."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"Hawk, why did you lie to Mr. Johansson? The jewelry was mine, not your grandfather's," Icie asked when the jeweler left them alone.

He pulled her into his arms. "I know honey, but I'm still trying to wrap my mind around how you came to me. I don't think we should mention to anyone else how you got here. It would be hard for them to understand. We still don't really understand it. Let's just keep that our little secret for now. All right?"

Icie nodded with a smile. "All right, Hawk."

"Hawk, my boy, good news," Mr. Johansson said coming back into the room.

"Really? What?"

"I called a friend of mine out in Manhattan. He's an appraiser at the Museum of Natural History. I told him about the pieces and send him a picture," he explained waving his cell in the air.

"And?"

"And you are going to be a very rich man, Hawk. I told him you were willing to part with them because you needed the money. He very excitedly asked me to tell you the bracelet alone is worth over a three hundred thousand dollars," he concluded with a hand on Hawk's shoulder.

Hawk sank into a nearby chair. "Mr. Johansson, you're not playing with me, are you?"

Mr. Johansson laughed. "Of course not. He is actually on his way up here to appraise the piece himself."

"That's great, but I need the money now, Mr. Johansson."

The older man held his hands up. "Not to worry, Hawk. I told him about your situation. Since he on his way, he has made you an offer on the first piece for his museum under the condition that you give him first look at the rest of the pieces."

"Of course, I will!"

"Excellent! He said he'd fax over paperwork for the offer. I'll check to see if they're on there now. Once you've signed the agreement, he can wire the money to your bank."

Mr. Johansson left them again as Hawk and Icie jumped up and down. When the older man returned Hawk signed the paperwork.

"I'm sending him a picture of the signature page. Write your bank information down," he said sliding a piece of paper toward him. "I'll send him that, too. You should have your money in about an hour. Congratulations, my boy."

Hawk shook the old man's outstretched hand. "Thank you, Mr. Johansson. Just call me when your friend gets here."

Hawk hurried out the door with Icie. They rushed down the street and pushed the doors to the courthouse open. Mr. Watson stood in front of the judge, shaking hands with another man.

"Ahh, Mr. Rivers, welcome," Mr. Watson said with a Cheshire cat grin. "You're just in time to meet the man who has bought the property that formerly belonged to your grandfather. Mr. Dyson, this is Mr. Rivers, the previous owner."

Hawk's eyes went wide. When he looked at the clock his heart dropped. Gripping Icie's hand, he swallowed the scream that climbed inside his spirit and walked over to Mr. Dyson with slumped shoulders.

"It's nice to meet you, Mr. Dyson," he forced out shaking the man's hand.

"Now, Rivers, I don't want any hard feelings. It was nothing personal toward you. Just business."

Hawk sent a glare to Mr. Watson then rolled his eyes.

"Mr. Rivers, if it makes any difference to you, I won't even be living on the land. I buy and sell land all the time."

Hawk glared at Mr. Watson as his chin lifted smugly before turning back to Mr. Dyson.

"I understand, Mr. Dyson."

"Mr. Dyson, if you don't mind me asking, how much did you pay for Hawk's land?" Icie inquired.

"Not at all. He charged me—"

"That is an undisclosed amount and frankly, Madam, none of your business," Mr. Watson interjected.

"I think since the property now belongs to Mr. Dyson the choice should be his whether he wants to disclose that information, not yours, Mr. Watson," Icie told him. "Besides Mr. Dyson seems like a wise man. I'm sure he is capable

of thinking and speaking for himself," she added sending a smile toward Mr. Dyson.

Mr. Dyson beamed. "Indeed, I am, my dear." He sent a quick look to Mr. Watson. "Actually, it wasn't much at all for the amount of land provided. I got the impression he was just ready to get rid of it. It only cost me one hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

"Didn't the appraiser offer us more than that in the fax?" Icie whispered to Hawk.

Hawk chuckled. "Oh yes, a whole lot more."

"Perhaps you could offer Mr. Dyson more for your land."

Hawk kissed her cheek. "Mr. Dyson, we'd like to offer you two hundred thousand dollars for the land you just purchased."

"No!" Mr. Watson yelled.

Mr. Dyson looked at Mr. Watson with a raised brow then he turned his gaze to Icie and Hawk.

"Sold! A fifty-thousand-dollar profit on my purchase in less than fifteen minutes is what I call a good day's work," he added with a hearty laugh.

"Judge, when can we sign the papers to transfer the land to Mr. Rivers and seal the deal? I'd like to be on my way."

"It will just take a day to draw up new paperwork."

"That works for me, Mr. Dyson. Just to show you I'm good for it..." Hawk handed Mr. Dyson the fax from the jeweler.

Mr. Dyson scanned the page and smiled. "Yes, I see you are good for it. I will return tomorrow to complete our transaction, Mr. Rivers. How about two o'clock?" he said to the judge.

The judge nodded. "That will suffice."

"Until tomorrow then," Mr. Dyson said with a nod to the judge and then Hawk.

"Yes!" Hawk picked Icie up and spun her around laughing. "Hey, Judge, do you have time to marry us?"

He looked at his watch. "I think I can squeeze that in if I take a late lunch," he told them with a teasing grin.

"Sorry that things didn't go your way, Mr. Watson. Nothing personal, just business you know," Hawk said with a laughing grin.

Mr. Watson's face turned beet red at Hawk's statement. He turned to stomp out the courtroom, leaving Hawk and Icie behind to start their new life together.



HIMEROS GLIDED INTO Zeus' chamber and landed softly next to his mother. He took her hand and bowed low.

"I have completed my task, my lord. The princess and Hawk are together and will live long and prosper lives."

Aphrodite hugged her son. "You have done well, my son. I am proud of you."

"Thank you, Mother."

"Himeros, you and your brother have done well indeed. Better than some had expected," he mentioned, sending a disapproving look at Hera.

"Do humans always interfere with the plan of the gods, great Zeus?" Himeros asked.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. It is part of their nature. Most of them are under the impression that they are in control of all that happens around them."

"I had to make a few last-minute changes to ensure that the princess and Hawk would be able to be together."

Zeus smiled. "Yes, the jewelry. I approve of what you did. Very clever. It not only ensures their survival but that of their children."

"Great Zeus, you honor me with your praise," he said with another bow.

Aphrodite squeezed Himeros' hand and smiled at him.

"If I may ask, great Zeus..."

"Ask what you will, Himeros," he granted with a wave of his hand.

"What happens to the princess now?"

"Have no fear, Himeros. That lovely Seneca princess will have a good life with Hawk and be happy. He may not be a prince, but is truly a prince at heart and worthy of her love. They will make beautiful children and live like royalty because of the jewelry you left them."

Himeros smiled.

"You may go, Himeros, until you are needed again."

Himeros nodded to Zeus and Hera then kissed his mother's cheek and spread his wings to exit the chamber. Aphrodite watched him leave then turned her attention to Zeus.

"Great Zeus—"

Zeus held a hand up. "No need, beautiful goddess. You are free to frolic with Poseidon in his watery domain when you are ready. I am satisfied with the abilities of the Erotes and will seek them out in matters of love in your absence."

"Thank you, Zeus." Aphrodite turned to leave, but not before she sent a smug smile to Hera.



Chapter Eleven

APHRODITE SMILED AS she lounged by the pool in her private quarters. After decades with Poseidon in his watery depths, it was good to be back among the splendor of Mount Olympus. Aphrodite rolled onto her side to pluck another grape from a bowl on the nearby table. A fluttering sound caught her attention. She angled her head toward the noise.

“Greetings, Goddess.”

“Hermes! How wonderful to see you again.”

“I’m happy to see you as well. Poseidon’s murky depths haven’t changed you a bit. You look lovely as always.”

Aphrodite stretched to her full length on the chaise with her arms above her head. The pale-yellow dress she wore rose higher on her long legs. Her fingers dragged leisurely across her exposed shoulders, cleavage, and then her thighs. She smiled as Hermes’s eyes appreciatively followed their progression.

“Why thank you, Hermes,” she said sweetly.

“Did you enjoy your time with Poseidon?” he asked, hovering near her seat.

“Indeed, I did.”

“Do you think you will be able to share some of yourself with me next?” he asked.

Aphrodite recognized the lustful gleam in Hermes’s eye. She had spent many nights in his bed in the past. The experiences thoroughly satisfied her. Her smile grew as she contemplated repeating the endeavor.

“Perhaps,” she teased then rotated to a sitting position. “To what do I owe this visit, Hermes, or is it completely a social occasion?”

“My lord Zeus seeks an audience with you,” he informed her with a small bow then lowered himself, eye level to her. “I shall return later to discuss the terms of us spending some time together,” he added before flying out of the room.

Aphrodite’s smile faded as she left her chair. Slowly, she made her way to the great hall of the gods. In her heart, she knew what Zeus wanted. The daughter

she had during her time with Poseidon was in trouble again. Herophile did not call the power over love and desire to her as Eros and Himeros did. She inherited her father's abilities to control the tides. As her power grew and she began to tests her abilities, Herophile became more reckless. She indulged much too often in uncontrolled behavior and making unauthorized uses of Zeus's gateway to Earth. Her misconduct had finally caught the attention of Zeus.

Seven golden chairs formed a semi-circle around the portal in the center of the floor that commanded attention upon entrance. All the seats were the same size, bejeweled in deep purple and bright green stones with the exception of the center one. Larger than the rest with a wider back and intricate designs around the arms and legs, the leader of all the god's chair outshined them all.

The ruler of Olympus sat in that middle seat of prominence. Radiant beams of light extended from behind him and exuded his power. He looked strong and regal upon his platform wearing a glittering white robe. A crown of golden stars sat low on his furrowed brow.

Aphrodite took a deep breath as she padded across the sparkling tiled floor. Blue sky and fluffy clouds were easily visible through the portal as she passed the threshold to Earth.

"I answer the call of my lord Zeus, king of the gods," Aphrodite announced, stopping before him, and bowing low.

"Aphrodite, I know of your daughter's unconscionable deeds. It disturbs my peace and can no longer be tolerated."

"My lord, they are but shenanigans of a willful child," she mentioned dismissively.

His glare landed on her as he leaned forward in his chair. Her heart rate sped up as she recoiled.

"*Shenanigans?* The humans do not share that sentiment. They cry out to me!" he shouted waving his hand toward the opening. "They are devastated by her actions! The beasts that she has conjured have ravaged the coastal cities of Dastan, my lovely Japorah, and even Nistera. Beautiful cities, all of them, filled with humans that worship the gods. Now they sit in ruin or close to it because of fun and games!" He scoffed and righted himself. "I agree with my humans and do not share your nonchalance or your sentiment, Goddess."

Aphrodite took a deep breath to calm her pounding heart. "I— I will admit that Herophile's transgressions are a bit challenging to bear at times, my lord,

but she is young in the eyes of the gods. Such mischief is a part of her immaturity. These wild childish antics will fade as she matures. I have no doubt that her wisdom will come in time.”

Zeus stroked his beard. “Yes, I once thought that as well, but the people haven’t just started to ask me for aid, Goddess. Herophile’s monsters have plagued them for some time now. If it were not for Poseidon’s timely interference, I would have done something sooner. He has managed to keep her creations at bay for a while, but no more.”

“My lord—”

“I have even encouraged Adonis’s infatuation of her in hopes that a relationship would temper such irresponsible acts, but that was not the case,” he said pointing at her, emphasizing his last four words.

“Yes, I know, my lord, but—”

“The more her power grows the more she experiments and my humans are paying the price,” he added with a frustrated edge. He shook his head and sighed wearily. “Even you...”

Zeus stepped down and crossed the dais to caress her face. The area dimmed somewhat when he left his throne. His tone grew softer as he looked fondly at her.

“Beautiful Goddess of Love, I can tell that even you have reached the end of your tolerance with her. Something must be done. I can no longer turn a deaf ear to their pleas.”

He turned on his heels. Aphrodite stiffened at his tone of regret. She had heard it only once before when Zeus punished the human Themis for killing his precious winged horses. Aphrodite remembered the anguish on Hera’s face when Zeus rebuked the boy. Despair gripped her heart.

If he could strike down the son of his wife what chance does—

“My lord, surely you have more patience than—”

“Silence! I have made my decision.”

Sudden tears stung her eyes and she dropped to her knees. “Great Zeus, have mercy on the child of a goddess.”

Zeus paused to look over his shoulder at her. “Herophile’s bloodline was not enough to curb her terrible deeds, thus it will not be enough for her to escape punishment for them,” he mentioned, then continued to his seat.

Stellar illumination was restored to the room when he sat. He wrapped his cloak about him and his features turned stern.

"Herophile will be stripped of her goddess powers. No longer will she have control over the sea and its environs. She will be mortal," he pronounced.

No!

Aphrodite's breath caught. The words struck her like a blow to her body.

"Because Herophile is easily recognized by humans, her name and appearance will be altered. I do not wish her to be mutilated as a result of their anger. My reprimand is enough."

Herophile's unique beauty, flowing emerald hair, luminescent, pearly skin, and eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea, was a gift only the God of the Sea could bestow. With physical attributes equal to the Goddess of Love herself, there was no other like her on Olympus or Earth. Aphrodite clutched her chest and turned tear-filled eyes up to the ruler of the gods.

"I beg you, my lord, have mercy," she pleaded.

Aphrodite's anguish-filled words and free-falling tears had done their job. The hard lines of Zeus's face softened as he looked down at the disheartened goddess and he sighed.

"It pains me to see you so distraught. Because of my love for you, Aphrodite, I will allow you to be with her one last time. You may give her a new name, but you will not be allowed to interfere once she is human," he added with finality. "Perhaps in time my ire will ease and I will be able to give you more, but for now you may go to her," he told her with a dismissive wave.

Aphrodite rushed from Zeus's presence down the long corridor, a plan already forming in her mind. She went in search of her sons and was relieved to find them together.

"Eros, Himeros come with me, please," she called, barely managing to keep her hysteria in check.

The winged gods flew from the room immediately landing at their mother's side. Aphrodite led the way to her rooms. From a small bowl, she removed a miniature black pearl.

"Take my hands and each other's," she instructed.

When they did so, Aphrodite threw the pearl down in the center of the small circle they created. The jewel exploded producing a small dark cloud. When the smoke disappeared, they were treading water in the ocean.

"Mother, what's happened?" Eros finally asked.

"Zeus has punished your sister," she explained, gliding forward.

"Oh no."

"What did he do to her, Mother?" Himeros inquired on her left.

"She is to be banished. We only have one chance to help her."

Quietly the gods nodded and followed their mother until they came to the underwater caves Herophile called home. They entered finding her inside eating fruit. The cavern was dry and furnished prettily with chairs, a table, and a bed made of coral and pearl. Phosphorescence on the walls bathed the chamber in stunning green light. A waterfall made soft splashing noises and glistened beautifully as it filled a tiny pool behind her.

"Daughter, we must speak to you."

"Mother, Eros, Himeros, what are you all doing here? You have never come to visit me all at once," she asked leaving her chair.

"The humans have cried out to Zeus, Herophile. He tires of their complaints and has decided to punish you."

"Punish me? But why? I didn't mean any real harm, Mother. When my monsters grew beyond my control and caused destruction Father always locked them away. I just wanted to—"

Aphrodite took her hands and shook them to silence her. "Nevertheless, darling, the fact remains. Zeus has spoken it into existence."

"What was his decision?"

Aphrodite looked over to her sons then back to Herophile. "Zeus is very protective of his humans, my children. When they cry out to him, he takes action. I'm afraid his chastising is terribly cruel this time and one I do not think fits the crime." She paused for a moment with a deep breath. "You are to be cast out of the sea, my darling. Your goddess powers will be taken away from you and your uniqueness removed," she concluded, running her fingers through Herophile's long tresses.

A collective gasp escaped the siblings when their mother's explanation concluded, but none more profound than Herophile's.

"Oh, Mother, he can't!" she cried horrified. "None of it was intentional. Had I known—"

"Hush, daughter. What's done is done. I only have a moment to make sure you will not suffer further as a mortal. Eros, Himeros, wrap your arms around your sister."

The young gods did as they were told. Aphrodite took their hands stepping closer to Herophile. Brilliant light immediately formed around them. The room glowed brighter as the illumination contained itself into a condensed bubble around the young woman. When the brightness finally faded Aphrodite lifted her daughter's face to her.

"No longer will you use your goddess name. You will be called Desiree from this day forth so that I may find you." Aphrodite gave a soft smile and caressed her cheek. "Be good, Desiree. Do not anger Zeus further. I have no doubt he will be watching you."

Tears formed in the former goddess's eyes as she nodded. "Yes, Mother."

"Do not be afraid. You will not be alone. We have—"

Aphrodite's words faded into a stunned gasp. Desiree's skin darkened to a smooth rich brown complexion and her eyes changed hue. Hair dark as onyx grew from her head pushing the green locks to the ground in clumps. A flabbergasted expression crossed Desiree's face as she looked down at her hands fading with the rest of her body. Aphrodite reached out to her daughter once more but Desiree vanished. Aphrodite turned her tear-streaked face into Eros's shoulder.

"Will she be all right, Mother?" Himeros asked.

"I hope so. Zeus has forbidden me to interfere once she is human, but he said nothing about doing something for her before she was cast out. Together we have awakened the dormant gifts she has from me and I have allowed you two to leave her with something special. It is more than enough to attract the man who needs her the most, but it will still be up to her to accept him."



Chapter Twelve

ENGLAND: 1889

Only the soft sound of the night wind blowing snowflakes against the windows filled the house. One man stood with his forehead resting on the glass staring out into the darkness. Cold air seeped through, chilling his face. The sudden sound of someone clearing their throat behind him made him jump.

“Your mother will see you now, sir.”

Charles DeWitt turned away from the flurries he had fixated on, his poignant thoughts broken by the man's soft voice. With a sigh, he closed the distance between them then clapped the man on the shoulder before entering the bedroom.

“Thank you, doctor.”

A fire burned in its grey and red brick hearth on the far end of the room. It filled the area with comfortable heat warding off the bitter cold of the wintery night. He stood at the foot of his mother's canopy bed. The gossamer drapes were opened and tied to the front and back posts giving him an un-marred view of her. The firelight revealed how much Antonia Navarro DeWitt changed over the last few months.

As a boy, he occasionally heard men speak of his mother as lush and lovely. There were tales of how she caught the eye of saintly men, gents, and kings alike. His father was envied for being her husband. Now, frail, and weak, much of her beauty had faded under the sickness that incapacitated her. Antonia's hair, once black as ink, now lay splayed over the pillow streaked with silver and void of its youthful luster. Charles had often been accused of looking much like his mother since he was like her in coloring and hair and his father was fair in both.

The coverlet moves in an unsteady, erratic pattern as she breathed. Charles settled down to the edge of the bed to take his place by her side then intertwined their fingers bringing her dainty hand to his lap. Her skin felt clammy and warmer than normal. She turned her head toward him at the contact and

managed a soft smile. Her rich brown eyes still held the spark of life, but only just.

“Charles...” she breathed.

Her voice, slightly above a whisper, showed the happiness she seems to feel at seeing him. Charles scooted closer to her, rocking the bed some.

“Yes, Mother, I am here.”

She gripped his hand feebly. “My sweet, beautiful son. You look so much like your father. I loved him so very much.”

Charles sighed and kissed his mother's fragile fingers.

The fever has taken her mind.

“I fear I have a confession to make that is long overdue, my darling. I should have told you long ago who you were, but you moved from a boy to a man so quickly that I—”

A violent coughing spell cut off her words. The strength of it shook her entire body turning her pale complexion bright red with the strain. A grimace on her face told Charles it had been a painful attack and his heart ached for her. When the fit ceased it took her a moment to compose herself.

“It is time for you to claim your birthright, Charles,” she finally said.

“My birthright? What do you mean, Mother?”

“You are not Thomas DeWitt's son, Charles. You are the son of King Francis.”

Charles's jaw dropped. A monsoon of questions crashed over his mind, but he was flabbergasted into silence. His mother spoke again before he could sort out the chaos in his head and express them.

“In my youth, the king chose me for a time to be his mistress,” his mother explained. “It was just after the birth of the prince. I think he may have even loved me, but when I became with child, he had no choice but to dismiss me. Thomas was chosen for me to marry because he too had the king's favor. The king afforded us this land as a wedding gift. He sent us a monthly stipend to help take care of you. When King Francis heard of Thomas's untimely death, he increased my allowance.”

Charles blinked wildly, completely staggered by her words. His father was a good man. Charles had loved him dearly. Thomas exuded unwavering affection toward Charles's mother and to him. When Charles was just a boy of twelve Thomas was thrown from a horse while riding through their lands and died

from his injury. Charles's fondest memories were of the times he and his father spent together. It did not surprise him that his mother decided not to remarry. His head slowly shook refusing to comprehend her words.

"Mother, are you sure I am the king's son?"

"Yes, dear. As sure as your name is Charles Francis DeWitt. Your middle name is the same as the kings for that reason. Thomas insisted on it."

Charles gasped. He had never made that connection until she just spoke his full name aloud. Slowly, he nodded as unasked questions from his youth were finally answered. Although his parents had land, respect, and wealth, he often wondered how they could afford to have him educated at the best schools and spend summers abroad to be cultured with children of much wealthier and titled parents. At the time Charles's young brain rationalized that since he was their only child, they must have simply saved up for him after his birth. His mother's confession now negated that assumption.

"Does the king know of me now?" he asked almost hesitantly.

"Yes. I have kept him updated on the events in your life. He even wanted to know you publicly and acknowledge you at the time of your birth."

His brows rose. "Why didn't he?"

"I asked him not to. I wanted to raise you out here in the country away from the commotion of London."

Events from his life flashed through his mind. Joyful, sad, heartbreaking, moments of triumph...all of which his father was by his side sharing it with him either cheering him on or consoling him, being the perfect father in his eyes. Charles wanted to know the answer to the question swirling through his consciousness, although his heart was afraid of the answer. He took a deep breath and pushed the words out.

"Did Father know I was not his son?" he finally asked.

His mother smiled again. "Yes, sweetheart, he did. I was already filled with a child when he agreed to our marriage. He was such a loving and charming man that I fell for him almost instantly. After you were born, the moment he saw you tears formed in his eyes. His first words when he held you were, *I have a son.*"

Charles exhaled. He loved his father above all men and missed him. At his mother's words, his spirit filled with a new fondness for him and he grieved all over again at his loss.

"Charles, darling, please, I'm so very tired. You must listen. There is a cameo in William's possession that you must have. I thought to pass it onto a girl child of mine to ensure her happiness, but it now falls to you."

Charles shook his head in confusion. "A cameo? Mother, what would I do with—"

"It has been blessed, Charles. A woman who visited from another land gave it to me when I was a child. She grew fond of me and had no children of her own to hand it to. She claimed the cameo had the power to bring me my perfect match when I was ready. And she was right, dear. I prayed with it in my hands and I was given to Thomas."

"Mother, I—"

His mother continued cutting him off. "I know it will be the same for you, son. She will be everything you need and come when you need her the most. You will never grow weary of her. Her beauty will never fade in your eyes and she will love you with all the passion you deserve."

He didn't want to think ill of his mother, but what she said seemed ludicrous and hard to believe. His expression must have shown that concern.

Antonia rose from the bed on her elbows. "Please, darling, do as I ask. Promise me you will go to the king and you will make use of the cameo," she pleaded, her voice strained, laced with an edge of desperation.

Charles let a small smile touch his lips. Gently he pushed her back to her pillows and rubbed the top of her chilled hand soothingly.

"Of course, Mother. You know I can deny you nothing. I promise."

She sank further into her pillows seemingly relieved. "Has the fire died down, Charles?" she asked suddenly, turning her head slightly. "I feel so cold."

Charles sent a look to the blaze burning on the other side of the bed and sighed.

"Have Mary stoke it for me, sweetheart. We will speak further on the matter later. I need to rest."

"Of course, Mother." He pulled the satiny quilt higher over her chest then placed a tender kiss to her forehead. "I love you." She turned her cheek against the pillow.

"I love you, too, Darling."

Charles moved toward the doorway, but as he gripped the knob, he looked over his shoulder. His mother's chest struggled as it rose and fell. He knew in

his soul it would not continue its rhythm for much longer. Exiting the room, he passed the doctor hovering nearby. The man pulled the door closed as Charles returned to the window taking the chair beside it.

"Is there nothing else you can do for her?" he asked.

The doctor shook his head. "No, sir. This winter has been especially harsh for those that are older. It has taken many lives. I fear she may not see another morning."

Tears pricked Charles's eyes at the confirming words. "Very well." He pushed himself from the seat. "Will you stay with her?"

"Of course, sir."

Charles remained in deep thought as the doctor re-entered the bedroom. He was astonished at the news his mother presented to him. He had never met them, but from what he had heard during his travels, the royal family were good people and worthy rulers. The king was just and fair. When the queen had died three years prior, the prince was then crowned as the next ruler. Charles wanted to honor his mother's wish, but it needed further investigation. He sat for a few moments longer then finally exited the antechamber. A few steps outside his mother's private residence his servant seemed to appear from thin air startling him.

"Sir?"

Charles met the man's distressed gaze and shook his head. "There's nothing more the physician can do, William. He doesn't think she will make it through the night," he explained in a pained voice.

William looked stricken. Tears filled his eyes, but he blinked them back managing to maintain his composure. He tugged on his waistcoat and cleared his throat.

"Very well, sir," he said softly.

"William, my mother was very adamant that I have a specific cameo of hers that may be in your possession. Do you know the one she speaks of?"

"Indeed, I do, sir."

William led him across the house to the servants' quarters. Entering his separate rooms, he retrieved a small black box from a top dresser drawer and handed it to Charles. Removing the top revealed a small cameo attached to a black velvet ribbon. It was not so different from the ones he had given as gifts. Slowly, Charles removed it, laying the necklace in his hand for examination. The intri-

cate detail of a mountain carved from the coral in the center and what looked like tiny pearl clouds above it was like nothing he'd seen before. Truly unique, but that was the only real difference he noticed. He shook his head and returned it to its container.

"What do you know of this necklace, William? Why is it in your care?"

"Your mother asked me to hold on to it just after you were born. In case anything happened to her and the master while they were out together or you were away. She wanted to make sure someone other than the two of them knew of it so you would learn of it when the time was right."

"I don't understand, William. My mother thinks this cameo is blessed." He let out a disbelieving chuckle. "She said it will bring me the woman who will make me happy."

"Those were her words to me as well, sir," he confirmed.

Charles handed the box back to William. He sat heavily in a chair near the dresser resting his elbows on his knees. A sudden sense of weariness claimed him. Raking his fingers through his ebony locks, Charles heaved a sigh then looked up at the elderly servant.

"William, my mother just told me I was the king's son and not the son of Thomas DeWitt."

The butler's eyes widened. "Bless my soul," he said on an astonished whisper.

"Do you know if it's true?"

"This house was indeed the property of the king before the master and his wife came to live here. It was empty for many years before they came. There was a tale that our good Master DeWitt was given the house along with the lands and a woman because he had the king favored him. According to the rumors, the king loved the woman dearly, but of course, could not claim her as his own because she was not of noble blood." William paused for a moment. "If you don't mind me saying so, sir, I have always thought you held a striking resemblance to his majesty, King Francis."

Charles slumped back against the chair. "So, my mother wasn't delusional?"

William shook his head. "Not if the stories are to be believed, sir."

"My mother wants me to go and claim my birthright. She has no doubt that the king will acknowledge me as his son. But how can I do that? How can a man just appear before his king and say he is his son? My mother could very

well be fantasizing because of her fever.” Charles jumped to his feet to pace the floor. “Surely the king has had plenty of mistresses. He may have several children out there, but no mistress would dare accuse him openly. He has not publicly claimed anyone but the crowned prince.”

Charles returned to his seat and sat with a frustrated grunt. He dragged his hands down his face. William remained silent. After a series of deep breaths, Charles looked at the other man expectantly.

“You have always given me wise counsel, William. I am in need of such advice now.”

William answered without hesitation. “Your mother was always an astute woman, young sir. If you have never doubted the validity of her words to you, I see no reason to do so now...no matter how strange they may seem to you.”

Charles nodded.

“Charles,” another voice said from the entryway.

He and William turned to see the doctor standing there.

“Your mother is dead,” he announced.

Charles let out a soft sigh. He stood and brought his attention back to William. “Have the stablemen prepare the carriage in the morning to take me into the city. I go to see the king.”



Chapter Thirteen

CHARLES'S COUNTRY HOME was just over an hour outside of London. The slow travel over the snow-covered roads gave him plenty of time to think. He arrived at St James Palace and still had no idea what to say to his king. A house servant directed him to an elaborate sitting room. Charles discarded his outer coat, gloves, and hat before and handed them to the man. A short time later the two golden doors opened across the room and another man appeared.

“Good day, sir. How may we help you?”

“Good day. Charles DeWitt seeking an audience with His Highness,” he told him.

“Yes, sir. Please wait here.” The man bowed stiffly and disappeared through the same large doors.

As Charles waited more servants emerged from other entrances with trays of tea and scones. He sipped the tea warming his hands on the cup when the doors parted again sooner than he expected. To his surprise, it was not the houseman in the doorway but the king himself. Charles rattled the delicate china as he returned it onto the small table near his chair and stood. The king scanned the room and when he spotted Charles walked directly to him. Taking a deep breath in an attempt to steady the race in his pulse Charles gave a slight bow.

“Your Majesty.”

The king remained silent as he openly looked him over. Charles once thought he was the product of Antonia and Thomas DeWitt taking on more of her qualities than his, but standing before this king all doubt of where his lineage lie faded. The same ebony eyes, square chin, even the beauty mark near his right eye stared back in the mirror at him all his life. The king's hair had grown more grey than black, but he kept it combed away from his face the same way Charles did. Seeing the man up close was eerily like seeing himself in the future. Obvious signs of age on the king and Charles's skin somewhat darker skin

thanks to his mother's Latin heritage appeared to be the only difference in the two.

A proud smile touched the king's mouth when he finished his assessment, but then it disappeared just before he finally spoke.

"Does your appearance here mean your mother is not well?"

"She— she died last night," Charles confessed.

The king faltered. He took a step back then sat in the closest chair. Making no attempt to cover or wipe away the flowing tears he bawled like a small child. Charles returned to his own seat and waited for the king to compose himself. After a while, his sobs faded and Charles addressed him again.

"Your Majesty—"

"Please, Charles, I know your question. The answer is yes. I am your father." He took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. "I have waited almost thirty years to say those words aloud." The king chuckled sadly then turned miserable eyes to him. "When my queen arrived from Spain, your mother came with the entourage. As soon as my duty to produce an heir was completed I took Antonia as my mistress. I loved your mother very much. She was the *only* woman I ever loved and the only mistress I allowed to have a child with me. It eased my pain somewhat knowing that a part of me would be with her even if I couldn't be." He reached out to touch Charles's chin. "I see her when I look at you," he added before retracting his hand.

"My mother said you chose my father for her to marry," Charles inquired softly.

The king sniffed and bobbed his head. "Indeed, I did. Thomas DeWitt was a fair man that believed in doing what was right. That's very rare in men today. He saved me once from falling down the steps at Buckingham. I could've broken my neck from something as simple as a loose lace. I fell down many steps until Thomas rushed down the stairs and reached out to stop my tumbling. I was almost halfway down when no one else even tried."

Charles's chest swelled with pride.

"I kept him in my service after that. When I was forced to dispel your mother, Thomas was my first choice. A riding accident had taken his ability to have children of his own a few years before. I knew he would love you and treat you both very well."

Charles nodded. “Your Majesty, my mother’s last words were that I come to you so that I—”

“You can claim your birthright,” the king concluded for him. “And rightly so!” He faced Charles again and stood. “Even if you weren’t my son, Charles, the fact that you are Antonia’s child would have been enough for me to gift you. But you are my son—a king’s son—and you deserve to be treated as such. Yes?”

Charles let the king pull him to his feet. Wide-eyed he smiled and then shrugged. “Umm, yes sir. Of course.”

“Tonight, we shall have a ball to announce you to the province.” The king paused to look him over again. “So many years...so much time gone,” he muttered gripping his shoulders. “Come! We have much to catch up on,” the king said, offering his arm. “But first it is time to meet your older brother. He has been waiting for years to meet you.”



THE CELEBRATION TOOK place quickly. Invitations went out, feasts prepared and the palace decorated in a matter of hours. So much had happened so fast that his head still whirled. Charles sipped his champagne trying to absorb it all. It was his first official royal function but he immediately recognized many of the notable men and women of wealth from functions he was privy to around London. They fluttered about socializing and laughing freely with the dukes, duchesses, earls in attendance. He nodded a greeting to various men that caught his eye as he moved through the crowd.

Chatter roared at high levels over the music from a small orchestra playing nearby. He picked up bits of conversation as he moved through the crowd. Men gossiped about what went on at the gaming house the night before, older women discussed who would be a better match for their daughters when they were of age. Some of the younger women locked eyes with him, seemingly sizing-up him up as a possible prospect, but he avoided them. Their beauty and elegance held an uptight prissy edge that was unappealing to him.

The food went fast and the drinks faster like other parties he’d attended. Charles chuckled to himself and relaxed. The blare of trumpets sounded and the prattle ceased. His focus along with everyone else’s turned toward the dais.

"His royal highnesses, King Frances and the crowned Prince Phillip!" a man declared.

The crowd erupted in applause. The prince sat in his seat and the king stepped forth with his arms wide to address his guests.

"I have gathered you here tonight to make an announcement. My son Phillip is your crowned prince and at his coronation, he will be your next king," he said, extending a hand in the young man's direction.

There was another round of clapping. Phillip smiled and nodded to his father. King Frances raised a hand and the room went silent again.

"What you do not know is that I have another son. He was born to a mistress many years ago. He will never ascend to the throne, but I attest that his bloodline is true. Come forth, Charles."

Heads turned and murmurs rose around him as people in the room looked about for whom the king spoke. Charles straightened the cream silk cravat at his neck and smoothed his black dress coat before stepping forward. The crowd opened, and people watched him with wide eyes and gaped jaws. At first, only the clumping heels of his knee boots could be heard as he walked across the polished marble floor, but then the mutterings grew like a tidal wave following him as he made his way to the stage. Charles walked into the king's embrace before turning to face the hoard.

"Henceforth Charles DeWitt will be known as *Lord* DeWitt, Duke of Arlington. The title, the lands, and all its wealth now belong to him."

Prince Phillip appeared at Charles's left smiling brightly, lending his silent support to King Francis's declaration. An abrupt roar of appraisal started. Charles almost laughed aloud at the sight, but he knew how they felt. When his brother suggested that their father give him the richest lands they possessed, Charles was sure his face matched those of the masses before him when the king not only agreed, but insisted it be done immediately. Within a few hours Charles became Duke of Arlington with all deeds and the money transferred to him.

The king excused himself and the party commenced. Now that everyone in the room knew his kinship, most conversations turned in his favor. Women approached him with eager eyes and outwardly flirtatious glances. The noble men offered hands of friendship inviting him to future parties and to the more pri-

vate gaming clubs about the city. Charles took the change in atmosphere with easy amusement and enjoyed himself for the remainder of the evening.



Chapter Fourteen

CHARLES LEFT ARLINGTON Hall to answer the personal summons of the king. Upon his arrival, he was greeted pleasantly by the staff and led directly to the king's private rooms. Phillip appeared moments later with open arms.

"Charles, so good of you to show."

Charles stood and accepted the hug. "Well, you know Phillip, when the king calls..."

Charles left the sentence unfinished with a light laugh. He genuinely liked Phillip. He was Charles's senior by only two years. The young king had been adamant on the very first day they met that Charles used his given name when they were alone.

Phillip laughed and waved away his comment. He continued across the room to a small bar by the window.

"I have an excellent Scottish whiskey that my queen's father sent to me. You must have some."

"Of course. Is that why you invited me over, then?" he asked, joining him.

Phillip nodded and he filled two glasses with the brown liquor. "Yes, brother, but it wasn't my primary reason."

He handed Charles one of the drinks and tapped his glass to it before swallowing the liquid in one gulp. Charles mimicked his movements. The whiskey tasted smooth and rich. He licked his lips and smiled.

"Very nice. I may have to acquire some of that for myself." He held his glass out for a refill.

"I'm glad you like it. King Oliver says he would bring me a few crates when he comes to visit after the baby is born. I will send over a few crates to Arlington Hall." Phillip filled the glasses again then sat. He angled his head gesturing for Charles to join him. "The second reason I invited you over will no doubt ruffle you a bit."

Charles sat back and crossed his legs. He held his drink out urging him to continue.

"We have decided that it is time you took a wife."

Swirling the whiskey in its glass, Charles glared at his brother with a raised brow. "We?"

"You know, Father has landed that same look on me many times. Uncanny how you can manage it without prior knowledge," Phillip mused. "Father and I have decided," he added with a chuckle.

Charles scoffed. "I don't want a wife, Phillip. I have successfully managed to dodge that institution. Happily, I might add," he said before taking another sip from his glass.

"Nevertheless, the deed must be done. You are a man of wealth, title and prestige."

Charles snorted in his cup.

"You must produce an heir to pass those things down to. You will be thirty-one years old for god's sake."

"Phillip, I have bedded countless women since I became of age. Not one of them gave me an overwhelming desire to be bound by marriage," he grunted.

"My queen tells me there are several women at court who would love to have you as a husband."

Charles's eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yes, I, too, was surprised. Clearly, they know nothing of your sly manner and distasteful wit," the prince mentioned with a laughing grin. "But who am I to contradict anyone's personal preferences."

Charles snickered. "Ahh, but no other than you know of those qualities, my good king. I only display those behaviors in your company," he said, raising his glass, returning his playful banter.

"Lucky me then."

The king's face expressed amusement as he attempted to muffle his titters, then he leaned closer to Charles with a more serious look.

"Your parents were happily married I'm told."

Charles nodded. "Indeed, they were."

"Then why such heartfelt aversion to marriage, brother?"

It was true that his parents were happy during the short time they had together, but he had later found that they were unique in that endeavor. Most arranged marriages were not a blissful union like there's.

"Phillip, I know many married men that continue going to the whore houses just as frequently after their nuptials as they did before."

"Charles..."

"They say once their duty to produce an heir was completed their wives refused to be touched anymore. Visiting a kept mistress or stopping by those houses seemed to be their only option to achieve bedroom satisfaction."

"I realize that every match isn't going to be a well made match. However—"

"Phillip, the fact of the matter is to be saddled with one woman for the rest of my life seems more like torture than pleasure," he explained. "The highborn women at court are beautiful indeed, but they are taught to be prissy, stuck up, passionless arm jewelry for a man. I want a willing participant in my bed, not someone who will allow me in her bed long enough to produce my successor and then cut me off."

Phillip laughed.

Charles shook his head and swallowed a good portion of the alcohol. "I have no desire to put my loins out to pasture so early in my life nor do I want a cold, unimaginative woman lying beside me each night that I have to force myself upon if I decide to remain faithful to her."

Phillip sat back with wide eyes. "My dear Charles, I have agreed that not all have ideal matches, you have been grossly misinformed on the basis for those personal feelings. Marriage is not like that at all!" he exclaimed.

Charles scoffed. "You have been married for a year come next month. Are you willing to disclose the intimate details of the happenings with your queen to disprove my claim?"

The king cleared his throat and shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

Charles chuckled. "That's what I thought," he muttered, tilting his glass to finish its contents.

"All right, obviously the women at court are not to your liking. So, tell me, brother, what is the woman you are looking for like?"

Charles shook his head. "She doesn't exist, Phillip."

"Indulge me."

Charles didn't have to contemplate the idea at all. If he were honest with himself, he knew exactly what he wanted. He peered at his brother from the corner of his eye.

"Do you really want to know, Phillip?"

"Of course."

"Okay. I want a woman who is courtesan and lady, equally combined into one graceful, lovely, intelligent and confident female. She will arouse me like a courtesan in our bed and when we're not there she stimulates my mind as well as others around her with the intelligence, wit and behavior of a lady."

Phillip blinked wildly at his explanation and then laughed. Charles sputtered and shook his head again.

"See, she doesn't exist," Charles repeated.

Phillip pointed at him. "I must agree. It is unlikely that you will find this ideal woman you seek. Nevertheless, Charles, you must marry and have an heir. Your title and lands will go to your first son and DeWitt Manor could go to a daughter when she marries or maybe a second son."

Charles pushed himself from the chair with a grunt. "I need another drink."

"Have as much as you like, brother, but when you sober the issue will still be here," Phillip told him following him to the bar. "Surely you have met a young duchess, some Baron's or maybe an Earl's daughter that has caught your fancy over the last eighteen months since father's announcement," he offered sympathetically.

Charles continued to fill his bed with skilled courtesans for sexual satisfaction, but he was not blind to the knowledge that his options for a wife had improved. He filled his snifter and thought of the women open to him. Not one of them stimulated his mind or body enough to consider a long courtship let alone marriage. Charles swallowed his drink in one gulp. Slumping against the bar he angled his head toward his future king.

"You would saddle me with the burden of tedious sex with a fidget wife for the rest of my life because you have to endure such encounters nightly? That is no way to reinforce the brotherly bond we have built, Phillip," he huffed, pushing his empty glass against Phillip's shoulder.

Phillip laughed again then smiled wickedly. "We all have our crosses to bear, Charles. It goes with the territory."

Charles blew out a frustrated breath and rolled his eyes.

"Oh, come now. Enough of this, Charles. It happens to the best of us. Your birthday is in two weeks, yes?"

Charles grunted a positive reply.

"Very well, then. I will give you that fortnight to decide which one of the— What did you call them? Prissy, stuck-up, passionless arm jewelry?" he repeated with a snicker. "Yes, well be that as it may, you will have to choose one of them. There has to be a lady out there unique enough to capture your heart and your loins. I would love to meet such a woman. Present her to me at your birthday ball. We will have it at Arlington Hall."

Charles let his head fall to the counter with a dull thud and groaned miserably. King Phillip laughed. Charles turned a look to his brother when he felt a comforting hand on his back.

"I assure you, Charles, being married won't be as bad as you think."



CHARLES SAT IN THE chair staring out the window in his private quarters brooding over his brother's words. His dinner lay on a small table beside him, cold and untouched. Reaching for the half-filled glass he swirled its contents absentmindedly.

"My lord, if I may?"

Charles turned to look over the back of his chair. "Yes, William?"

"The choice of a suitable bride has already been done for you."

"What do you mean?"

"The woman meant for you will come when you need her the most. You have but to ask for her, young sir," William reminded him.

Antonia DeWitt's words returned to the forefront of her son's mind. He gulped down the rest of his drink and stood.

"You really believe what my mother said about that cameo being blessed?"

"Indeed, I do, my lord, and you should too. I do not think your mother would have been so unwavering about you knowing the truth if she were not sure of its validity."

Charles paced the floor rubbing his chin. Could it really be possible? A woman whose beauty will never fade in my eyes, who will be filled with passion and continue to entice me even in my old age? Does such a woman truly exist?

Finally, he stopped before his trusted valet. William's guidance had sustained him in many of his endeavors since his father's death and now his mother's. Charles' shoulders dropped and he nodded with a sigh.

“Very well, William. I will allow the heavens to choose the woman they wish me to have. Bring me the cameo.”



Chapter Fifteen

DESIREE WOKE BLINKING slowly. Pain and cold wrapped around her body like a blanket. The smell of waste filled her nose as she lay sprawled on something hard. Her face pressed roughly against packed dirt and loose straw. She lifted her head to look around and ascertain her location. Her eyes barely adjusted to the dim light that shined through the opened gate. Across from her a row of wooden panels.

With a groan she pushed herself to a sitting position and brushed her hands together to remove the dirt. She did the same for her face and dress then wrapped her arms around her upper body to stop herself from shivering. Empty stalls lined the back wall and several bales of hay sat about, most piled high and stacked neatly. Desiree turned around, then suddenly her head snapped in the direction of the opened doors and she gasped. Scurrying from the ground, Desiree ran to hide behind one of the stacks.

“That’s right boy, time for bed,” a man said in a cooing voice coming into view.

He guided a horse into one of the stalls, discarded the saddle and blanket from its back then lifted a brush from a shelf inside to use on the animal’s mane.

“You made a good run tonight, Midnight. I’m proud of you. Sherman and Barnaby will bring your buddies in soon so you will have company.”

Desiree watched as he tended to the beast for a few moments longer before he patted his nose and left. Her hand went to her chest as she slumped to the ground with relief. Her breath came out in puffs of frosted air. Pulling her knees to her chest, she slid her dress over them to help keep her warm. Suddenly, she took in a sharp breath then straightened her legs and pressed her back against the packed straw.

“Now that was a ride!” a male voice said.

“The only reason you won this one is because you cheated!” another said.

“I won because Misty is the fastest horse we have!”

“Well since I happen to know Daisy is our fastest horse, I know you had to cheat. Isn’t that right, girl?”

Desiree could hear the jovial banter of the men and then the thud of their feet when they dismounted. She peeped around the left side of the hay to see the men walking the horses into Midnight’s neighboring stalls then something rushed through the doors catching her eye.

“Hey, boy, you made it!” one of the men said as a large brown dog barked and jumped happily around his legs.

Abruptly the dog stopped jumping and pressed his nose to the ground to sniff around.

“What’s wrong, Rusty? You smell something, boy?”

Desiree swallowed hard, bringing her head straight again. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. A chill ran down her spine making her shake even more. She took a few deep breaths then looked around the bale again. No one was there. She swallowed then turned to her right where she was confronted by Rusty’s panting face and the two men. A squeal accompanied the gasp she took and then fear and exhaustion made her faint dead away.



DESIREE’S EYES OPENED slowly. She was warm and lay on something soft and comfortable.

I’m in bed?

She melted into the bedding and exhaled.

It was all a dream.

Gripping the pillow tight, she smiled. Holding it for a moment longer, she rolled to her back stretching leisurely. She pushed the pillow to the side reveling in the softness of the covers on her bare skin, her arms and legs reaching as long as they could. With an audible sigh she tossed the coverings back and stood.

“You wake with the grace of a flower opening to the morning sun. I have never seen anything like it.”

Desiree jumped back into bed with a yelp hearing the unexpected sound of the masculine voice. With wide eyes she turned toward it. Roguish good looks and a dazzling smile greeted her as a man peered over his closed fist at her. He

sat in a chair across from the foot of the bed. He gazed with a look of surprise at first but then it morphed quickly to apparent joy.

"You are by far the loveliest, most alluring woman I have ever seen," he expressed in an amazed tone. He scoffed then shook his head as he left his seat to pace the floor. "I confess I did not know what to expect. For many years I have fed my lust with many beautiful females, never limiting myself to a particular *type*, per se. Thus, I had no idea of the attributes the woman sent to me would have."

Desiree watched the man curiously as he moved back and forth babbling, mostly to himself rather than to her.

"Then," he said, thrusting his finger into the air. "On wisdom not my own," he confessed touching his chest. "I left it to the gods to choose who was best for me." He stopped turning an appreciative eye to her. "And, bless my soul, I am truly pleased with their choice," he concluded with a triumphant smile.

The man stood at the foot of the bed looking at her as if waiting for her to comment. Desiree stared at him, her head tilted and eyes narrowed in confusion.

"Who are you? And what are you doing in my chamber?"

Obvious confusion twisted his features. "Excuse me? I beg to differ, Madam, but you are in *my* bedroom."

Desiree's eyes widened at his accusation. She looked around taking in her surroundings for the first time and realized she was, indeed, in a male oriented bedroom. The simple but elegant design decorated in soft browns and dark green colors on the walls and furniture caught her eyes. Now that she noticed there were no curtains hanging from the overhead connecting the four poles on the bed. The only other furniture in the room was a side chest of drawers, a table holding one glass and a decanter of dark liquor sitting before a huge fireplace and a comfortable chair at the foot of the bed.

He was right! This isn't a dream at all. I no longer reside under the sea and I have no powers.

"Where am I?" she finally asked.

"You are at Arlington Hall."

Her brows furrowed. "How did I get here?"

"My groomers found you in the barn last night. They didn't know what to do so they consulted my valet. William instructed them to bring you here. Don't you remember any of this?"

Desiree didn't answer his question. She searched her mind for any memories of the occasion before the one he spoke of. To her dismay she realized she had been unceremoniously dropped off to make her way as an Earthly being with no idea what to do. She needed time to think.

"What's your name?" the man asked, breaking into her thoughts. "I am Lord Charles DeWitt," he offered, giving her a slight bow.

"My name is Desiree," she answered, bringing her gaze back to him.

Charles smiled at her. "I'm very pleased to meet you, Desiree."

"Thank you. You may go now."

Charles blinked blankly. "I beg your pardon."

"I said you can leave."

Charles shifted from one foot to the other and held onto one of the bed's posts. "I'm sorry, but are you suggesting that I leave my own bedroom?" he asked with a partial laugh.

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Why would I do that? You were brought here because you are my match," he told her. "You are the perfect woman for me."

Desiree stared at him.

"At first I didn't think it would happen either," he continued, "but the fact that you're here, especially under such unorthodox circumstances, that fact cannot be denied."

Desiree noticed the lustful look in Charles's eyes as he looked at her. She had seen the look before. After years of luring countless amounts of sailors in her half fish form to her cave to dally with them for days—sometimes weeks—before releasing them, she considered herself an expert on the sexuality of mortal men.

When Desiree visited her mother on Mount Olympus, they would discuss their individual experiences with Earth men over food and drink. Although Desiree enjoyed every encounter she shared with the humans, not once had she considered taking one as a life mate like other gods and goddesses did. Adonis's physical attentions were far superior than any human ever was. It was her intention to take him as a lover when she finished with having fun. A pit formed in

her stomach as her mind grasped the life she once knew was now over. No more visits to her mother, brothers or Adonis.

Desiree turned her gaze to the man at the foot of the bed. He watched her expectantly. His masculine features were unmarred by hair with high cheekbones and sensually curved lips. His expressive very appealing brown eyes were focused on her. He would be the type she would have dallied with when she came to Earth, but that, too, was no more. Desiree closed her eyes and turned away from him.

Zeus intended for her to find her own way as a mortal alone in this world. Her mother mentioned how close Zeus was to his humans.

No, I will not disobey Zeus again, not even inadvertently by getting involved with this Lord Charles DeWitt.

"I am not the woman you seek. My being here is merely a coincidence."

"I was told that your beauty will never fade in my eyes. Looking at you I have no doubt it will be like that for me," he told her finally.

He paused. His rich brown eyes warmed her with sincerity as he searched her face.

"There is something else... Something about you...calls to me. I know it's you," he added.

His long legs brought him to her in just two strides. Charles gripped her shoulders and pulled her up into his embrace. The scent of him hung around her, a soft spicy smell teasing her senses. He pressed his lips to hers in an abrupt kiss. The connection electrified her, intense and extremely pleasurable. Her body begged to indulge in it more, but her mind yelled for caution.

"Are you one of those men that like to take advantage of women?" she asked when he let her go.

The duke was taken aback. "What? No! Of course not," he huffed.

Releasing her arms, he took a step back. The space allowed her to concentrate without the distraction of his sensual aura surrounding her.

"I would never—"

"Did I give you some kind of indication I wanted you to kiss me?"

"Well, not exactly. I just—"

"Then what gave you the impression that I had any interest in kissing you?"

He visibly took a long-controlled breath. "Madame, you have me all wrong. There was something about you that— Well, I thought that—"

Desiree opened the space between them more. "That what? That I would be one of those women who would fall at your feet just like that?" she challenged snapping her fingers then wrapping her arms around her chest.

"Now hold on just one minute."

"You're a very handsome man, Lord Charles DeWitt. I'm sure you have plenty of women who do that, but be assured I am not one of them. I have other business to attend to that does not include dallying with you."

Desiree walked away leaving the duke befuddled and his jaw agape. His face turned so red, when she swung the door open, she thought he would explode.

"Good day to you."

She half expected him to grab her and shake her until she was too dizzy to stand. Instead he silently walked by staring at her with narrowed eyes. Desiree shut the door behind him leaning on it as the tears she had been fighting finally fell.



CHARLES STALKED DOWN the hall. Turning into his study, he slammed the door behind him.

"Damnation!"

He stood before the window with his arms tight around his chest. A soft knock at the door moments later was answered with a bark.

"Come!"

"May I offer my assistance, sir?"

William's soothing voice inquired behind him. Charles spun his fist tight at his sides.

"That is the most insufferable woman I have ever met, William. Surely the gods are playing a cruel joke on me to say that she is my match!" he thundered.

William gave Charles a knowing smile. "She is very...unique in many ways, my lord."

Charles's eyes gaped. "*Unique*? I think you use the term too loosely, old friend." He pointed at the door. "That woman is arrogant, rude and much too plain spoken for any woman!" he corrected. "Do you know she had the gall to dismiss me from my own bedroom?"

"And?" William prodded calmly.

"*And?*" he repeated astonishingly then sputtered. "There is no and," he huffed.

Charles turned back to the window frowning. The sun shined brightly over his lands, defining the lush emerald green grass. He glanced down at his trousers and groaned. His arousal was blatantly obvious. Desiree had a profound effect on his senses for sure, but how could he be with such a woman? Her beauty was uncanny, the graceful lines of her face and neck, the curve of her hips, the color of her eyes...something stirred inside him when he looked into them.

A vision of Desiree entered his mind. Her dress clung seductively to her breasts while it showed off lovely well-formed legs and barely covered her ample bottom. Charles closed his eyes allowing a smile to spread across his face, and his indignation eased. Suddenly his mind filled with Desiree's lusciousness covered in a long spring dress. She lifted the front as she ran across his property. Her laughter was playful when she gazed over her shoulder. The green and cream colors of the garment looked wonderful against her lovely brown skin. Her breasts swelled seductively over the low-cut neckline. His erection throbbed reacting to the vision. Charles opened his eyes and it faded away.

"And...she is the most incredible female I have ever come across," he amended with a sigh.

"And she is yours, sir," William reminded him.

"She doesn't want to be mine, William," he confessed sadly.

"You are a man of many talents, my lord. Handsome, confident, and intelligent, are a few attributes that come to mind. Not only does royal blood run through your veins, young sir, you were raised by our good Master DeWitt and your enchanting mother. I have seen you woo many ladies while growing into the man you are today. I have no doubt, young sir, that you could be most persuasive when the occasion calls for it." William paused. "Surely you can convince the lady otherwise."

Charles contemplated William's words then turned a smile to him. "Thank you, William. You are an inspiration as always. I shall return in time for dinner," Charles said as he strolled by him.



Chapter Sixteen

A KNOCK AT THE DOOR startled Desiree awake. Rubbing her eyes, she gave the room a quick glance.

Oh, please don't let that be him.

The knocking continued and a few moments later a female voice called from outside the door.

"It's Patsy, ma'am. May I come in?"

Patsy?

"Yes, come in."

Desiree straightened her dress and tried to remove some of the dirt as she stood waiting for whoever Patsy was to enter. An aged woman walked in. She wore a simple navy-blue dress with a plain white overlay that tied in the back. Black strands could be seen in the long silver hair pulled into a single braid. Stopping in front of Desiree she did a slight curtsy and stood silently with her hands clasped before her. They stared at each other for a while until Patsy cleared her throat.

"I am your lady's maid, ma'am. I'm here to help you adjust," she offered.

Desiree eased herself back to the bed. "No offense, Patsy, but I won't be staying, so your services won't be needed."

"Not staying? Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I just know I have to start over on my own."

"Well if it's a new beginning you seek, why not start here, young miss? Our Lord DeWitt is very kind. He treats his staff well. He is a good and honest man."

"I don't really know what I'm going to do. My life has been turned inside out," she confessed, tears filling her eyes again.

Patsy took a step toward her. "Oh no, Miss. It can't be all that bad."

"I'm afraid it is," she insisted sadly.

"I have noticed that our situations seem far worse than they really are. Even when it turns out to be that bad, the only other place to go is up, right?"

Tears slid down Desiree's cheeks when she looked up at the woman.

"Oh, there, there. You poor thing," Patsy cooed.

She rushed over to pull Desiree into an embrace. Desiree cried like an infant on her shoulder. Much of the loss and confusion she carried drained from her spirit when her weeping finally ceased.

"Why not tell me what happened, young miss. Perhaps we can help," Patsy suggested.

Desiree sat up to wipe her eyes. She contemplated for a moment on telling Patsy her whole story, but then thought against it. Zeus may not approve of telling her tale in its entirety.

"I— I was disobedient and my father banished me. He left me here to make my way in this world on my own," she summarized. "I can never go home again," she added, dabbing her eyes with the back of her hand.

Patsy's hand could not block the shocked breath she expelled. "That's terrible."

Desiree nodded.

Patsy took her hands. "Well something guided you here, young Miss. You could have ended up anywhere else in the world, but you didn't. Perhaps it is meant to be that you are at my master's house."

Desiree's disbelief must have shown on her face when she looked at her. Patsy burst into laughter.

"Well, I believe everything happens for a reason. At the very least you are in no condition to make any life changing decisions," Patsy told her. "You need rest and you need to eat. Won't you at least stay long enough to do that and then decide what to do next?" she urged.

"I— I guess I could use a place to think things over in peace."

"Excellent!"

"But I have angered your master," Desiree added quickly. "He might want me to leave now."

Patsy chuckled and patted her hand. "I don't think that is the case, Miss or he would not have sent me to help you," she told her.

Desiree's contact with human females was very limited, but she found herself liking Patsy. The combination of her growing fondness for the woman and fatigue forced her into submission.

"I will stay."

“Wonderful!” Patsy said coming to her feet. “What do we call you?”

“Desiree.”

Patsy touched her cheek and smiled. “I am very pleased to meet you, Miss Desiree.”

“Please Patsy, just Desiree.”

Patsy’s smile was kind. “Very well, Desiree. Come along. I will take you to your room where you can clean up and get something to eat.”



DESIREE ATE FRUIT, cheese and meat squares with warm biscuits and drank fresh juice. It was not the grand unlimited spread of Olympus, but it was very good. Patsy busied herself flashing dresses within her peripheral vision waiting on her opinion. When Desiree finally emerged from the tub, Patsy helped her into a pastel pink and white flower printed dress. She brushed Desiree’s hair then added color to her eyes and lips. It was the first time since her last visit to Olympus that she had been pampered. When Patsy finished, she smiled approvingly, and then extended a hand toward a large full-length mirror.

For the first time Desiree saw herself as a mortal. The person in the mirror didn’t reflect the goddess she’d known. Herophile was indeed gone. The eyes staring back looked more like amber stones than the blue orbs they once were. Ebony hair fell in loose curls around her shoulders. Her fingers gingerly touched the silky strands before moving to gently stroke the warm brown skin of her cheek. The low scooped neck of the garment showed off her unchanged cleavage in the bodice that hugged her torso. The long skirts bunched in the back to show off the solid pink underneath. A large bow over the bustle held it in place. She turned to and fro assessing her new look before presenting a beaming smile at Patsy.

“I’m beautiful,” she said.

Patsy grinned. “Indeed, you are. Now come. If you would like, I’d like to show you the grounds.”

Desiree nodded and followed Patsy out. Patsy gave an extensive tour of the duke’s land. Late in the afternoon she was returned to her room and left to her own devices. She sauntered around the halls looking around when she passed a chamber with several chairs and a grand piano. During one of her excursions to

Earth she encountered a man who played the apparatus so beautifully she used to sit by his window just to enjoy the music. Since then she often wished she could play and create such beautiful sounds.

Sitting on the bench, Desiree mimicked the body posture she remembered, placed her hands across the keys and let the overwhelming urge welling inside her guide her fingers across the bars. The music flowed through her effortlessly. With wide eyes she stared at her hands as they moved. The sounds created were captivantly beautiful. Fully engrossed in the music, Desiree closed her eyes and continued to play. The God of Desire's face filled her mind's eyes then quickly faded. A sudden wave of love and gratitude filled her being. At that moment she knew how her desire was brought to life.

"Thank you, Himeros," she whispered as tears filled her eyes once again.



CHARLES HAD JUST CONCLUDED his meeting with Patsy. It gave him new insight on how to handle the situation with Desiree. As he contemplated his next move, he looked over his shoulder with a raised brow. Leaving his room, he followed the melody down to the only place it could be coming from. Although he had not played for years, he brought the piano with him from De-Witt Manor because it reminded him of his parents.

He arrived at the concert room with furrowed brows. His mouth dropped open when he pushed on the door to see Desiree at the piano. The soulful melody she played enchanted him. Charles listened silently not wanting to disturb her, amazed at how the music affected him. His desire to have her grew to maximum proportions. When the music finally stopped there were tears in his eyes. He applauded her talent.

"That was absolutely breathtaking."

She spun with a gasp.

"I had no idea you were as talented as you are beautiful," he complimented walking into the room.

"Thank you. I was just fiddling, really," she told him and rose from the bench.

Charles strolled across the floor stopping directly before her. "Nonsense, obviously you have a gift," he countered, sliding his finger delicately down her cheek.

She looked up at him. Her lip trembled when his finger touched her chin then she stepped back abruptly. Charles stepped back too, not wanting to frighten her further.

"Actually, that is very accurate. It was a gift from my brother," she commented softly.

"You look stunning. The dress suits your coloring very well."

He loved the way her eyes sparkled when she smiled at him.

"Thank you," she said.

Charles grinned seeing she relaxed. "I hope you liked Patsy. Will she be satisfactory to help you?"

"Oh yes! I like her very much. Thank you for sending her."

"She has told me you have decided to stay with us for a while. I am pleased to hear that. I remember you said you had other business to attend to. I do not wish to hold you longer than you wish," he said eyeing her.

She averted her eyes and turned away from him. "Oh. Yes. I—I owe you an apology for my behavior earlier. I—"

He held a hand up. "Please, no need. Obviously, we got off on the wrong foot. Can we just forget that little incident and start fresh at this moment?"

"Yes, I'd like that."

Charles smiled. "Marvelous! Dinner will be served shortly. I have sent Patsy off to fetch you something to wear. If you are done playing I would very much like to walk you to your room so you could change."

Desiree took his outreached arm almost hesitantly. "All right."



Chapter Seventeen

DESIREE FOUND PATSY inside her room with another dress. The sight of the deep green taffeta dress made her smile. She glided her finger over the dainty pale green rosettes that decorated the low neckline.

“I have never seen such a lovely dress.”

“The Master thought it would look very nice on you.”

As Desiree stood in front of the mirror, Patsy approached her with a long, black velvet box.

“What is this?”

“A gift from the master. Lord DeWitt wishes you to wear it tonight. He thought it would complement your beauty in this dress.”

Desiree took the present excitedly from her and rushed to the bed pulling it open.

“Oh, Patsy, look! It’s beautiful!”

Desiree removed a necklace made of bright gold. A large green teardrop shaped stone sat in its center accompanied by three small square stones on either side. Smiling broadly, Desiree returned to the mirror holding the jewelry to her collar bone. Patsy came behind her to close the clasp in place.

“It looks lovely on you, Desiree.”

Desiree nodded admiring her likeness again.

“You know, the master is very taken with you.”

Desiree visibly stiffened at her words. Her smile faded as she locked eyes with Patsy’s reflection.

“You say you no longer have a home. Why not just stay here with him?”

Desiree turned to face her. “What if this is not where I’m supposed to be, Patsy? I don’t want to get in trouble again.”

“How much more can your father do to you, Desiree?” she asked sympathetically. “He has taken all that you know, left you alone to fend for yourself in a place you know nothing about.”

“Believe me. He has the ability to do abundantly more.”

“Well, I have known many fathers in my time. They may punish their children, but they never want any real harm to come to them. Now, while I don’t know what your father is capable of, my experience tells me that those who can help usually will even when their children are in the wrong. They punish to teach them not to really harm them.”

Desiree remembered her family had been given a few moments to spend with her before Zeus carried out his sentence.

Was that him helping her by letting her family have one last goodbye?

Her new friend was only trying to help, but she just couldn’t be sure. Taking Patsy’s hand, she offered her a small smile.

“We will see, okay?”

Patsy returned her smile. “Fair enough, now let’s get you to dinner.”

She followed Patsy downstairs toward the sliding doors of the large dining hall she had been shown earlier in the day. Desiree stopped and attempted to open them when she realized Patsy had continued walking. She trotted behind her and reached out to touch Patsy’s shoulder.

“Where are we going?”

A few titters were all her guide offered for an answer. A moment later Patsy pulled open the French doors in another room in the same hallway.

“Dinner will be served here, Desiree.”

“Oh.” She entered and turned to look over her shoulder. “You’re not coming?”

“No, I will see you later. Enjoy.”

Desiree nodded as Patsy pulled the doors together. The table before her had room for four to sit. Dimmed overhead lighting, candles, and place settings for two showcased an intimate atmosphere. A man standing by the table stepped forward as she moved closer.

“Welcome, Miss Desiree. I am William. Won’t you please have a seat?” he asked, pulling a chair out for her.

“William? Well then you are the one I should thank for rescuing me from the barn,” she said, taking the seat he offered.

“No need to thank me, ma’am. I was doing what needed to be done. I’m sure when it is all said and done it will be I that will be thanking you.”

Desiree looked at him quizzically, but he didn’t offer an explanation to his comment. He only gave her a gentle smile.

"I am very glad you decided to stay with us even if it is temporary. May I get you a glass of wine before dinner is served?"

"Yes, thank you."

William nodded and left the room through a door behind her. Desiree looked around taking in the environment. The pictures on the wall fit the same eating theme as its larger counterpart except they were more befitting of the intimate feel the smaller room obviously strived for. On one wall a golden frame held a couple having a picnic in the middle of a field feeding each other grapes. Another, anchored between two large picturesque windows, depicted a queen lounged on a chaise along a patio with subjects by her side offering her food and drink. The last hung near the doorway. A naked woman fed grapes to a nude man while they lay in bed.

As she stared at the portrait the duke stepped into her line of sight. He dressed elegantly in dark formal attire. Her heart did a funny leap as she viewed him in his dressed-up wears. She was taken aback by how different clothes could enhance his handsomeness. The look he landed on her caused her heart rate to accelerate and butterflies dance in her belly. William cleared his throat beside her. Grateful for the distraction, Desiree tore her eyes away from the duke to accept the glass William offered.

"Thank you," she muttered, taking a long drink.

The duke approached her with a confident stride and pleasant grin. "May I say you look absolutely lovely tonight, Desiree." He placed a delicate kiss on top of her free hand. "I knew those colors would be exquisite against that delicious mocha skin of yours."

Lord DeWitt's open admiration sparked an erotic shiver that traveled the length of her spine and settled directly between her thighs.

"Thank you," she breathed out.

He bowed his head slightly and took the seat across from her.

"I want to thank you, Lord DeWitt, for the neck—"

"Please don't call me that," he interrupted.

"Excuse me?"

"I would like to be Charles to you." He paused. "That is unless you come up with some other term of endearment that you would prefer to use when addressing me," he added with a sly grin.

Desiree couldn't help but giggle. "Yes, well, I think Charles will do for now."

Charles smiled. "As you wish."

William went around the table to fill his master's glass.

"Thank you, William. Do you like the wine?" he directed toward her. "It's one of ours." He held the glass high eyeing the liquid. "Not too sweet, not too dry, it can basically go with any meal." He swirled the contents then took a drink with an expressive 'ahh'.

Her head tilted. "One of yours?"

"Yes, my parents owned the vineyard that produced this wine. It's mine now that they've passed on."

Desiree took another sip from her glass and nodded. "It's very good."

"It's one of my favorites. However, I'm sure I will enjoy tasting you so much more," he added nonchalantly, lowering his cup to the table.

Desiree choked on her next sip. Heat rose on her cheeks and her loins tingled, awakened by the promise in his words.

Did he just—

Desiree sent a look out the corner of her eye to William. The non-expressive look on the servant's face as he dutifully stood off to the side gave no indication that he even heard Charles's comment. She pulled the napkin to her mouth to wipe the wetness from her chin. Laying the napkin back in her lap, she dared to raise her eyes back to Charles. His skin took on a stunning golden glow. The fire from the candles danced in his intense gaze. The look didn't challenge, yet, she could tell he was waiting, gauging her reaction. Her face warmed and the twinging between her thighs made her fidget in her chair. Desiree was unused to such aggressive camaraderie. Charles came across bold in his words and actions. She didn't know what to do next.

"Perhaps that is a conversation for a later date," Charles said finally. "I think we are ready for the first course, William."

"Yes sir," he said with a bow.

"So, Desiree, shall we make a toast?"

She cleared her throat and lifted her glass. "Yes, a toast would be fine."

"To us and the friendship I hope to build with you."

Desiree nodded and tilted the cup to her mouth. Now that she was mortal, she would need friends. If Patsy's assessment could be counted on, Charles's friendship would be a good start. William and several other servants delivered the meal. The wine flowed freely throughout the meal. By the end of dinner, she

felt warm, complacent, and giddy. Desiree finished the last of her wine, put her napkin on the table, and William pulled her chair out.

"Thank you, Charles. The meal and your company were very good, but I think I will retire now."

"Retire? It is early yet. I had planned on dancing after dinner," he mentioned, coming to her side.

"Dancing? Oh no, I don't think—"

"It's what friends do when they are having a pleasant time together," he assured her, guiding her by the elbow from the room.

Was it? I never socialized with the others on Mount Olympus when they gathered for festivities, so I really don't know.

"Well, I guess a little—"

"Of course."

Charles guided her down the hall and opened the door to a huge ball room. The tiled floor shined in the brilliant light of a large chandelier. A small string band in the far corner began to play as they walked in. Desiree swayed to the mesmerizing melodies. The music seemed to erase any trepidation left in her mind. She closed her eyes and she glided gracefully across the floor. Spinning happily, she bumped into something, and her lids snapped open.

"Oh! Charles!" she exclaimed.

"You were having so much fun I just had to join in," he explained, taking her hands.

Laughing playfully, they danced from one end of the room to the other. After a while the music changed to a slower more romantic rhythm. Charles pulled Desiree into his arms holding her close. She sighed and rested her head against his chest as he slowed their pace. The sound of his heartbeat was soothing. She liked the feel of his solid chest and how his arms encircled her protectively. Desiree tightened her grip on his narrow waist then suddenly her eyes popped open, and she jumped back.

"No, no, we can't do this," she claimed, palming his chest to push him back.

"But why?" he asked, pulling her back into his embrace. "You can't tell me you don't feel our connection," he said softly. "Something special is happening between us."

"I do and it's wonderful, but..."

He lowered his face brushing his mouth against hers as he spoke. "You are the one. I know it," he insisted in an urgent whisper. "Stay with me. Be my Duchess. You don't have to go through this life alone."

His warm breath smelled like the sweet wine. The gentle touch of his lips on hers took away rational thought.

"I will love you and protect you always."

Butterfly kisses grazed her cheek accompanying his promise. The feel of his erection pressing into her belly made her fully aware of his sexual prowess. A tantalizing tremor danced across her skin leaving goose bumps in its wake and tightening her nipples instantly.

"Charles, I—I—"

His kisses moved from one side of her face and neck to the other, stimulating her senses into overdrive. His hands were everywhere, touching and caressing her. Each touch vibrated through her, opening her for more.

"Don't be afraid of me. Don't be afraid of this," he urged, soft and breathy near her ear.

Charles's words and actions were more than Desiree could handle. Overstimulation buckled her knees, but his strong arms kept her upright and close to him. Occasional kisses reached her face. She wrapped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes.

My lord, Zeus, please let me have this man. If only for a night.

Charles lifted her. She was light as a feather in his embrace. They were moving, walking...then suddenly all motion stopped and she lay on something soft. Her eyes opened and Charles leaned over her.

"Stay with me, Desiree. Let me love you," he pleaded.

Sincerity and passion raged like a storm in his eyes. Desiree could no longer fight the demands of her body.

She caressed his face and smiled. "I will stay with you."

Charles's tongue plunged between her lips as he took her mouth in a fiery kiss, needy and insistent. He tasted wonderful. She breathed her delight into his mouth. Her fingers raked leisurely through the silky ebony strands on his head. He moaned lustfully in response.

"My god, your touch, your kiss, everything about you drives me crazy. I must have you," he told her, moving his kisses to her exposed bosom.

Desiree moaned shamelessly, enjoying his attention. She gripped his head and pressed his face toward her left breast. Charles's finger slipped under the edge of her neckline. He removed one of her breasts reading her fevered nudging perfectly and pulled the taut nipple into his mouth.

"Oh!"

Hungrily he sucked and licked the sensitive bud until she squirmed beneath him begging for more.

"Come, darling, let me relieve you of these garments. I wish to see that beautiful body of yours once more so that I may have full access to taste all of you," he said, already disrobing her.

Desiree let him pull her to a sitting position. He removed her dress with ease and then discarded her undergarments. Within moments she lay naked in his bed under his complete control. Charles's smile reflected appreciation when he looked down at her. His hands glided across her breast then to her belly before repeating its movements.

"Your body is luscious and smooth to the touch. I could lay here fondling you every hour of the day staring into your lovely amber eyes." He dipped his head to pull a nipple quickly into his mouth. "You truly are an exquisite creature, my darling Desiree."

A shimmer of ecstasy stalled her words. "I—I want to see you, too," she said barely over a whisper.

He smiled at her then dropped a kiss on her lips before leaving the bed. Standing at its side he wasted no time with modesty. Charles removed his top coat and then his white ruffled shirt. She smiled pleased with his form. Dark swirls of hair lightly cover the chiseled muscles on his chest. Charles fumbled with the front of his trousers for just a moment. When they fell to the floor, he stood naked before her. He displayed a magnificent full-frontal view. A narrow waist and hips tapered from a wider upper body and long legs held him upright. Between those powerful looking limbs, standing proudly at the center of a nest of ebony curls, was an erection to be reckoned with.

Desiree's eyes fell admiringly over him and her pulse quickened again. He stood unmoving for a moment longer, as if allowing her to scrutinize him fully.

"You are beautiful, too."

The grin on his face was joy-filled when he rejoined her on the bed. He pulled her leg up to wrap around his waist so his hand could easily stroke her bottom and hip.

"I want to take my time and ravage you. All I want you to do is lie back and enjoy. Give me the honor of bringing this delightful body of yours to rapture."

Words to accept his offer caught in her throat. She nodded her answer vigorously. Almost instantly Charles yanked her to him pressing his face to the curvature of her neck, licking, and sucking the throbbing vein there. Moving down, he rolled her away from his body for easier access to her torso. He pressed a fiery trail of gentle kisses along her shoulders and arms, before moving on. Focusing on her breasts, he massaged and nipped at them, alternating between the two. The tease of his fingers brushed across her belly and moved lower. His mouth held a nipple as his hand snaked between her legs. Anticipation of where it was going made her shiver with need. Charles's strong fingers spread her nether lips. His body shuddered beside hers.

"Oh, Desiree. You are already wet for me, darling," he whispered, leaving an appreciative kiss on her cheek.

His digits, slippery with her essence, moved up and down to tease her clit. Charles continued his pleasurable assault on her breasts while his hand worked her passion button. Desiree moaned wantonly, burying her face into his shoulder. Suddenly, she couldn't move. Every muscle locked in place. The tension rose within, firing every nerve and blasting passion through her bloodstream.

Charles read her body perfectly, slipping two fingers into her hot, wet channel while continuing to rub her clit with his thumb. Finally, Desiree shattered, crying out his name and pumping her hips frantically. Charles increased the pace. Desiree threw her head back as her body shook with bliss.

"No, darling, please. Look at me. I want to see your soul," his voice rasped.

A guttural sound came from deep within her as Desiree complied with his wishes. Raw hunger lurked in his eyes when she met his gaze. His fingers slowed as her breathing returned to normal.

"My god, you're amazing," he said, holding her in a crushing hug. His frenzied kisses landed everywhere at once. "Be my wife, Desiree, never leave my side."

Desiree's body hummed from Charles's loving touch and her heart sang for him. Nothing so exquisite could be forbidden.

"Yes, I will be your wife."

Again, he rained kisses down on her face, neck, and throat. "I must taste you," he panted, lowering her to the bed.

Charles's lips moved across her breasts, rekindling the fire he started there, but he didn't remain. His tongue dragged down her torso to delve into her belly button. The trail he left ignited the blaze within her anew. He continued lower, burying his face in her mound. His moan pulsed through her body. Hands explored her body liberally, exciting her even more as his tongue darted out to taste her. He sucked the still swollen nub into his mouth.

A shriek of pleasure left her throat and she arched her hips begging for more. His tongue, wet, hot, and agile, explored her damp folds, thrilling her further. Such sweet torment. Desiree surrendered to his touch and instinctive mastery of her body. Charles gripped her hips and his own moans rose to mingle with hers. His enjoyment was obvious just as he'd predicted it would be. She writhed under him and he continued to drive her crazy with his mouth, tongue, and fingers. Her pleasure increased immensely hearing his erotic noises. She ached to have him inside her. It took just a few more laps of his expert tongue and she exploded from within crying his name. Exhilarating waves of rapture traveled the length of her spine almost folding her in half.

She held his head and rocked into him for long tantalizing moments as he seized her quivering bud between his lips. Her throat was sore from her screams when the sensation finally subsided and she eased herself back into the pillows



CHARLES WAITED AS LONG as he could for her legs to stop trembling in his grasp before moving. Excited beyond measure, he climbed up her body, panting and kissing all the way.

"My god, Desiree, you are truly incredible. Never have I been with such an exotic and responsive woman," he said. "I must have you."

"Yes, yes, please yes!"

Her eager willingness to join with him sent fire streaking through his blood. Charles leaned over and kissed her. Not the tender kisses he teased her heated skin with, but an all-consuming, claiming kiss. Their tongues intertwined,

dancing inside each other's mouth. The gentle caresses her delicate fingers offered along his face and neck inflamed his spirit even more. He pushed against her thighs and her legs parted easily. In a fevered frenzy he fumbled with his hardness at first desperate to guide it into her sleek softness.

Steadying himself the bulbous head of his erection finally slipped passed her soaked opening and into her inner sanctum. He threw his head back and groaned his enjoyment to the four walls. The slick heat of her passage weakened his knees.

Waves of desire coursed through him, electrifying his senses. Charles didn't want to move fearing it would be the end of him, but to be inside her and not move at all would kill him for sure. Over and over he entered her. Desiree's soft mutterings of enjoyment urged him onward. His pace quickened and his pleasurable noises rose in crescendo. Sweat beaded on his forehead. His breath came in raspy grunts.

"Oh yes! By the gods, Charles! It is glorious! More!"

Her rapture-filled cries and drenching wetness sent him over the edge. With an animalistic howl his restraint crumbled. Charles slipped his hand beneath to cup her bottom lifting her to him. He pounded into her yielding tunnel screaming his joy at the top of his lungs. Euphoria the likes he had never experienced before rocked his very foundation. It swept over him with the force of a thunderstorm leaving him dizzy and incoherent. Desiree clung to him as her vaginal walls pulsed milking every drop from him. Each grip sent shock waves of pleasure through him even after his seed expelled.

Her grip started to ease and she dropped to the bed half asleep, breaking their physical connection. Charles cried out at the loss, hard pressed not to fall on top of her. His arms shook as he held himself up, gasping for air. Forcing his weight to the side he collapsed on the bed beside her. Desiree rolled to her side and cuddled closer to him, her breathing almost as harsh as his own. Charles draped his arms around her protectively. He had no words to explain what just happened to him, but he knew something significant did.

Desiree was truly the perfect match for him. She had beauty, fire, and intelligence. His heart knew it and now so did his body. She had stolen his heart, entranced him, and then enslaved his body and soul. Desiree, everything he ever wanted, but didn't think existed. Truly she was a gift from the gods. Silently he thanked his mother and made a mental note to have William put the cameo

up for their future children. He hugged Desiree closer to him then suddenly let out a laugh. She lifted her head from his shoulder giving him a quizzical look.

"What?"

He gripped her chin gently and smiled. "My brother is going to love you."



APHRODITE HOVERED OVER the opened portal looking down on Earth and smiled. Desiree had accepted the gifts and the man that she and the Erotes wanted for her. With a sigh of relief, she wiped joyful tears from her eyes. Aphrodite rose from the floor. When she turned to leave she was confronted by Zeus. She gasped and stumbled backward at a loss for words.

Zeus continued to block her way staring down at her, but said nothing.

Aphrodite fell to her knees and swallowed nervously. She knew that meddling with his personal gateway to his precious humans was a punishable offense.

"Great Zeus, I await your word."

"Rise, goddess."

She did his bidding, but kept her head bowed.

"Is your daughter well, Aphrodite?"

Her eyes widened. Aphrodite's mouth opened and closed several times before she could find her voice to answer.

"Y-yes, my lord, she is."

"The man you sent her to is a good man, I trust. You made sure of that?" he asked, walking by her to his throne.

She spun to face him. "Yes, my lord. He is."

"She may no longer be a goddess, but she should still be treated as such."

"Yes, my lord. He is a Duke."

"Very well. And Aphrodite?" he said taking a seat.

She swallowed. "My lord?"

"Is it safe to assume that you've had enough time off for a while?" he asked with a small grin.

Her shoulders slumped with relief and she nodded. "Yes, my lord. I believe so."

"Very well then. You may go."

The tender look in his eye made her smile. She left his chamber shaking her head.

“Nothing gets past the king of the gods.”



THE END



Other Books by Dana Littlejohn

AVAILABLE NOW...

The Beast Within

Cursed for a crime he did not commit, Keith Turner had given up on love. Even after making that decision, he still spent every night being tortured mentally and physically. His twin brother Kevin was confident that they could find a way to break the curse, but it wasn't until Keith met Marcella that he began to take Kevin's ideas to heart.



THE POWER OF THE BAYOU

Kameryn Gamble ran away from an awkward life. A new city offered a fresh start, a new job and a new man. Reynaud added something she never had in a relationship...friendship, passion and peace. Things were looking up for Kameryn until an ex-lover showed up with the intention of bringing her home.

Reynaud Leduc had everything he ever wanted with Kameryn and yet something nagged at him. He hoped going 'home' would ease his weariness, but friends had lost their places and enemies had gained power. Will the final confrontation with his past destroy everything. Reynaud had in his present preventing him from having a future with Kameryn?

Tri-Romance

Twin sisters, Opal and Pearl Jefferson, and their best friend Debra Flores were living blissfully by their no strings attached rule, enjoying the many comforts of a good life. All was well in their world until Frank, Jake, Doug and Rakim entered into it. When one of the girls abandons their well-practiced rule and falls in love, does her decision throw a monkey wrench into the lives of everyone else around her? Or does it open up the possibility for love to capture them all?



HAPPILY, EVER AFTER-By Any Means Necessary

Book I: Seven Year Switch

Sonja Winters enjoyed the good life with a great job and being married to Kyle, 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, but would it end it? Or open a brand-new chapter?



BOOK II: THE RIGHT Choice

Andrea Cooper, a stay at home mom, was out of a job when her sons went off to college. She turned to her husband Christian for companionship, but he had his hands full with an expanding company. Andrea is alone for the first time in years with nothing to do and no one to care for. In search of a new life she ran into her first love, Raymond Reyes. Christian spends more time away from home as she renews her friendship with Ray. After a while Andrea can't help but wonder if she made the right choice in marrying Christian after all.



IVY'S HOT SHOT

Ivy York's mother wants her married with children as soon as possible. To Ivy's horror she continues to fix her up with or offer her in some way to incompatible men. It had been months since the last disastrous date so Ivy thought she was in the clear when she arrived at her parent's house for lunch only to find Tech Sergeant Steven Jones waiting for her. As she got to know the young airman, Ivy began to think her mother may have finally got it right...until she met Jonathan Hayes. The handsome self-made millionaire was not afraid of a little competition. When given the chance to put the sergeant up against the entrepreneur to see who is best for her in the long run, who would Ivy choose?

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About the Author

Where sensual erotic romance is always waiting for you.

I am Dana Littlejohn, author of sensual erotic romance. You will find that I write contemporary romances with just a hint of another genre to take it away from the ordinary. My stories will touch your heart and your soul and make your body feel like it's being touched, too.

Imagination will take you places your money can not. I invite you into my world with open arms to see my imagination run wild...

Come along for the ride as I go on an imaginary trip into my world. You'll enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

Read more at <https://www.danalittlejohn.com/>.

