



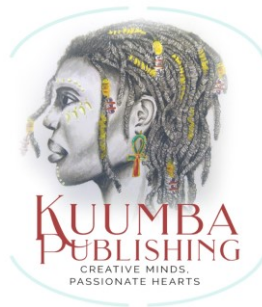
THE GIFT
OF *Second Chances*

The Styles of *Love* Book Three

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
N.D. JONES

THE GIFT
OF *Second
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THE GIFT OF SECOND CHANCES

Whatever happens beyond “I do” is up to us . . .

Facing the choppy waters of marriage, infidelity, and the vows that bind us, a sea of choices stretches out before a couple on the brink. For Dr. Angela Styles-Franklin and her husband Sean, the past twenty years come to a head when the truth about a brief affair threatens to dismantle their family. Angie must face the rough road before her. In these trying times, the rosy haze of memories past and the history of their relationship flash before them and force both Sean and Angie to come to terms with what it means to invest a lifetime in a person and what a life lived together truly means. In the process, faith, trust, forgiveness and the power of family weave together into a tapestry of trials and patience that engulfs their road to reconciliation. Is love enough to hold together the fabric of a family and a second chance at forever?

DEDICATION

Trayvon Martin

February 5, 1995-February 26, 2012

"The vision preached by my father a half-century ago was that his four little children would no longer live in a nation where they would be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. However, sadly, the tears of Trayvon Martin's mother and father remind us that, far too frequently, the color of one's skin remains a license to profile, to arrest and to even murder with no regard for the content of one's character." ~ [Martin Luther King III](#)





CHAPTER ONE



“Faster, Daddy, faster. They’re going to beat us.”

Kayla’s long legs wrapped more tightly around Sean’s waist, and her arms were vices around his neck. The ten-year-old may be a beanpole, but she wasn’t light. At his oldest daughter’s loud, ebullient urging, Sean increased his speed, chasing his brother-in-law down Excelsior University’s football field in an unwinnable race.

“Uncle Malcolm’s going to win.”

Malcolm always won. The thirty-six-year-old Malcolm was not only ten years younger, but he carried Sean’s pixie of a four-year-old on his back, which amounted to nothing more than an oversized book bag for the younger man.

From the sideline, Angie cheered for her girls. Only one could win, but that didn’t stop their mother from encouraging them both to victory.

“Old and slow, Dad. Not a good combo,” SJ’s singsong voice mocked, the teen sprinting past Sean with energy, breath, and youth to spare.

“I got your old and slow.”

“You gotta catch me first, and that’s not happening.”

Dammit, it wasn’t. But Sean wouldn’t leave the field embarrassed. Well, he would, especially with his wife recording the family race and his pathetic performance. Whose idea had this Saturday outing to Excelsior University been? That’s right, Sean’s.

He dug his heels in and ran as fast as he could while towing a laughing and screaming Kayla on his back. Malcolm and SJ ran the length of the field before Sean and Kayla even reached the eighty-yard line.

“We won, we won.” Malcolm lowered an excited and chubby-cheeked Zuri to the ground, and she ran straight to Angie. “Did you see me, Mommy? We won! Uncle Malcolm is so fast.”

“I did see you, baby.”

Zuri galloped around her mother’s legs, imitating a jockey and shrieking, “Giddy-up, horsey, giddy-up.”

Angie, cell phone in hand, recorded the last leg of Sean’s humiliating defeat. A hundred yards and he was gasping like he’d trekked up the Himalayas.

Kayla jumped off his back before he'd come to a full stop, also running to Angie. What was it with his girls and their mother? Sean, they treated like a pack mule, but they rushed to Angie as if they hadn't seen her in a month instead of only a few hours.

"Don't feel bad." Malcolm slapped Sean on his shoulder. He felt the force of his brother-in-law's heavy hand through perspiration and layers of clothing.

"What makes you think I feel bad?"

"If you don't, you should. Next time, I'll let you win. You know, to save face in front of your children." Malcolm pointed to his sister, who smiled and nodded as the girls talked her head off about some Adoptable drawing they'd seen on Instagram that was "so adorable" and "will you buy it for us"? "Your wife already knows you're a loser, but I hate to remind my sister how poorly she's chosen the father of her children."

Sean swung at Malcolm, who dodged the weak attempt to punch him in his face. "Don't let your mouth get you into something your ass can't handle."

He darted after Malcolm, faster now that he wasn't encumbered by a child on his back but still not swift enough to catch his brother-in-law. December in Buffalo was cold, but all the running kept Sean warm.

SJ ran past Sean and caught up with Malcolm in a matter of youthful seconds, grabbing his uncle around the waist but not strong enough to bring the muscular man down.

Sean collided into them, knocking Malcolm, SJ, and himself to the grass. He'd played high school and college football, so he knew what it felt like to find himself on the gridiron, blue sky overhead. But Sean didn't remember the ground being this hard and unforgiving on his body.

He really was getting old, and he and Angie had years before their last child would be going off to college.

"That was a great tackle, Dad. You've got to show me that move."

"Your father slammed into us. That's not a move, SJ. It's what happens when you're six-three with big feet. You can't help but fall over them and into whoever is unfortunate enough to be next to you."

Sean punched Malcolm in the arm, and they all laughed.

From his spot on the ground, he watched Angie stroll across the field and to his side. Rare though it was, Angie loomed over Sean. He couldn't help it, he grinned up at his lovely wife.

"Are the three of you done rolling around on the ground? It's cold, and the girls and I are ready to go."

SJ jumped to his feet more quickly and smoothly than Malcolm and Sean got to theirs, then the boy was off again, dashing across the field toward his playing sisters.

"No wonder that boy is always hungry." Angie smiled after their son. "You didn't have to bring the children here. I would've been home in another hour."

"It's Saturday. You could've worked from home or, better yet, not at all."

Malcolm drifted away, familiar with the old argument between Sean and Angie.

"It's just a half day. "

"It's not just half a day. It's a good chunk of one of only two days we have to spend time with each other and with the kids. Between their school and our work, we only see each other at meals and bedtime."

"You're exaggerating."

"I'm not. I'd like for us to spend more time together. We talked about it, remember?"

"When you're dealing with one of your high-profile discrimination or harassment cases, you work long hours at the law firm. You don't hear me complaining when you do."

“Maybe you should. Or maybe you don’t complain because you don’t want to give me an excuse to call you on the same thing. You’ve made it through the first two years of your college presidential contract. You don’t have to sacrifice your Saturdays to prove yourself to anyone. Anything that needs doing here can be accomplished Monday through Friday. Unless it’s an emergency or a big event, you don’t need to be here on weekends.”

“It’s easy for you to say, you’re your own boss and only accountable to your clients. I’m accountable to twenty-five thousand graduate and undergraduate students, over four thousand full-time employees, and twenty-one hundred faculty members.”

Excelsior University was a respected public research university with an operating revenue of over four hundred million dollars and an endowment of five hundred million. Dr. Angela Styles-Franklin, President of Excelsior University, had started out as an adjunct professor at EU. Twenty years later, she led the three-campus institution, serving as Provost and Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs before earning the top leadership position.

His wife had worked hard to achieve her goal. More, Sean knew how dedicated she was to the academic success of every student, but Angie was burning the candle at both ends, and something had to give.

In truth, something already had, but Sean didn’t want to think about that.

While Sean, Malcolm, and the kids wore tennis shoes, jeans, and sweatshirts--typical weekend gear--his wife dressed as if she were going to one of her many meetings. Light make-up accentuated high cheekbones, full lips, and dark-brown eyes. Her hair, normally worn down past her shoulders, was pulled back and up in a tidy bun, the conservative style showing off her beautiful face and dangling gold earrings. In her full-length winter coat, Sean couldn’t see her outfit, but he knew what she wore underneath: a form-fitting navy-blue suit, single-button blazer over a blue-and-white cami, and dress pants. Her pointed-toe pumps added two inches to her slim, five-three frame.

She was professional and poised as always, but Sean preferred the less put-together Angie who wore her hair in a messy ponytail and spent Saturday mornings holed up in the house in leggings and a long T-shirt, eating leftovers with Sean and the kids because neither of them felt like cooking after a long work week.

He missed those lazy days of family fun and togetherness.

Sean took hold of Angie’s hand. “You’re up by five-thirty and out the house an hour later, driving to your first meeting. After that, it’s even more meetings with deans, students, professors, community members. By two, you’re lucky if you’ve slowed down long enough to have lunch. If there’s no major event for you to attend, you may make it home by seven. Even then, you’re checking work emails.” He lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed. “You work over sixty hours a week. In your busy schedule, there isn’t much time left for the kids and me.”

Now wasn’t the time to have this discussion again, but the location was appropriate. EU had seen more of his wife, these past two years, than Sean and their children. In a way, the university was Angie’s fourth child, born of immaculate conception.

“I don’t want to get an emergency call about you being rushed to the hospital from a heart attack or stroke. Our children need a mother, and I’d like to grow old with you. You need to slow down.” Sean held his wife’s hand. “Look around you, Angie.”

“We’re outside, what do you want me to look at?”

“Everything. You’re the fifteenth president of this great institution. Those who came before you were all white men. That fact alone makes your appointment unprecedented and ups the stakes and pressure for you. But look at this place, dating back to the 1800s. It’s not going anywhere. These buildings”—he stomped the grass underneath his feet—“these grounds, will outlast us, our children, and our grandchildren. The school won’t crumble to dust if its president works reasonable hours and doesn’t drag herself in here on Saturdays.”

“I understand your point, but I can’t get everything done working forty hours a week. It’s impossible.”

“I know, but there are ways to cut back if you really want to.”

“If I really want to?”

Angie reclaimed her hand and began walking in the direction Malcolm and the children had gone. If he didn’t know his wife so well, her brisk pace and silence could’ve been misinterpreted as an emotion other than annoyance. He’d seen her walk that way, business-like and focused, a thousand times. But Sean wasn’t fooled. He’d hit a nerve, which Angie didn’t like, so she’d walked away from him and what could’ve been a full-blown argument at her place of work.

Sean hadn’t gone there to get into a fight with Angie, so he didn’t continue the conversation as they made their way across campus and toward Roosevelt Hall where Angie’s car was parked.

“That’s Dr. Murphy’s parking space.” Angie shook her head at her younger brother, who leaned against his truck, the girls in the backseat and SJ sitting shotgun. “You’re lucky one of the campus police officers didn’t give you a ticket.” Frowning, Angie glanced from Malcolm to Sean. “Why didn’t you drive?”

“Because I’m riding with you, and the kids are spending the day with their uncle.”

“Since when?”

“Since two weeks ago when we planned to use today to finalize our Christmas shopping.”

Angie’s eyes closed, and she shook her head. “I forgot.”

“Yeah, I know.”

He would leave it at that. Angie rarely forgot anything work-related and never forgot something involving the children directly. But when it came to the two of them, her mind became a sieve, filtering Sean out but retaining everything else—everything she placed above him in importance. An unfair assessment, she would argue, but Sean wasn’t the one who’d forgotten yet another event they’d planned to do together.

“I’m sorry.”

Angie looked as if she would offer more than her typical apology, but she closed her mouth and went to Malcolm’s truck. She waited for her brother to unlock the doors so she could say goodbye to the children. Angie began with Zuri, checking the strap around her car seat. The act was more for her peace of mind than as an indication of Angie’s lack of faith in her brother to secure her child properly.

For each of the children, Malcolm had gone so far as to buy a car seat for his vehicle when they were little, which was unnecessary but did save Angie and Sean from having to switch one of their seats to Malcolm’s truck every time he drove the children. The man would make an amazing father whenever he got around to finding the right woman and settling down.

Several hours later, Sean and Angie were in their bedroom, surrounded by bags.

“I think we went overboard.” Angie plopped onto their bed, her hands going to her shoes and plucking them off. A relieved sigh followed their removal. “Where in the hell are we going to put all of this stuff?”

“The usual spot.”

“All of these gifts will not fit in our closet.” Angie pushed to her feet, shrugging out of her blazer and tossing it onto the desk chair to her right. “Zuri’s going to love the bike you got her.”

“Flowers, pink seat, streamers on the handlebars and basket, what’s not to love?”

“Don’t take the training wheels off.”

“She doesn’t need them.”

“She does need them, the same way Kayla and SJ needed them on their first real bike. Leave the training wheels on until she’s used to riding a bike and has built up her confidence.”

“Training wheels are nothing but a crutch. One day is all I need to teach her how to ride a bike on her own.”

“Two crying children and scraped knees would suggest otherwise.”

“SJ and Kayla learned.”

“Learned what? That their father thinks yelling, ‘keep your eyes straight ahead, don’t stop pedaling, and try not to run into a tree,’ is a perfect way to teach a child how to ride a bike?”

“It’s how I learned. I fell once, got back up, and didn’t fall again.”

Angie rolled the Princess Flower bike to their closet and opened the double doors. Clothes and bins of shoes occupied the space. She was right. No way would all the bags fit in there. They’d have to ban the kids from their room until after Christmas and keep their bedroom door closed.

“You broke your arm. You always leave that part of the story out. It was weeks before you were able to ride your bike again.”

“True. But I wasn’t afraid to get back on and try again. It’s called grit and perseverance. That’s what I want to build in our kids. Everything in life won’t come easy for them. They need to know it’s okay to fail. But it’s not okay to wallow in their mistakes. They need to learn to dust themselves off and go for it again.”

“Zuri’s four. She doesn’t need to learn that life lesson now. No more than SJ and Kayla did when they were her age. There’s nothing wrong with needing and asking for support. That’s the kind of mentality that gets too many EU students in trouble, especially the freshman. When they find themselves floundering, their pride prevents them from seeking assistance and using services that could help them cope and succeed. You’re right about grit and perseverance, our children need both. But they don’t have to learn everything the hard way.”

Angie didn’t add “like you did,” but he knew she’d thought it. Sean did learn things the hard way. He learned by doing, by jumping in with both feet and riding out the wave. Unfortunately, the wave, sometimes, crashed against hard rocks.

Sean helped Angie store the bags in any available space—underneath the bed, in the closet, beside the nightstands, on chairs. For now, the bike was stored in the master bathroom in front of the linen closet—totally in the way. They would have to definitely keep the kids out of their room, which wouldn’t be a big deal for anyone but Zuri, who loved to crawl into bed between Sean and Angie. The more hours Angie worked, the clingier Zuri became and the more often she left her bed at night and went in search of her mother.

He sat at the foot of the bed, shoes, socks, and sweatshirt off. Angie still wore her cami, but she’d removed her pants, which left her in only underwear. Sexy underwear, at that, a white pair of jacquard, floral pattern, mesh panties. They fit her curves to perfection—the same way the matching bra did, a sensual set Sean had bought his wife a month ago. He’d also purchased her the combo in red and dark-purple, colors that

complimented her gorgeous dark skin. Sean couldn't wait to see her in the garter and strapless bra set he'd bought her—him—as a Christmas gift.

When Angie made to walk past Sean, he grabbed her wrist and pulled her so she stood between his parted legs. They needed to talk.

Sean held Angie around her waist, his face at breast level but his eyes upturned and focused on his wife's face. "I meant what I said earlier. You pull too many twelve-hour days. It's not healthy. You're going to burn yourself out."

"I exercise and eat right."

"Which is probably the only reason you haven't crashed and burned yet. Slow down. Take time for yourself. Go to the movies or catch up on your reading. You have a stack of novels on your nightstand you haven't gotten around to reading yet. You also have a husband and children who'd like to see you more."

"You make it sound as if I'm not home by design. My job is demanding and time-consuming."

"I know, but like I said earlier, EU will be there long after you're gone. I'm not minimizing your worth, but if something happened to you, EU would fill your seat and keep going, business as usual. For your family, on the other hand, you're irreplaceable."

He wasn't trying to scare his wife when he'd mentioned her having a heart attack or stroke. Both were real possibilities with the level of stress her job put her under. Being a civil rights lawyer carried its own share of stress. But, as Angie had said, he was his own boss and had far fewer people relying on him. Angie did have a huge responsibility as a college chief executive officer, but she shouldn't let her job dictate so much of her personal life.

"The kids miss you." Sean kissed the delicate space between her breasts, the cami soft and silky. "I miss you." With a gentle tug, Sean had his wife perched on his left thigh, the right side of her body pressed deliciously close. He kissed her—long, deep, and slow. "I want us to spend more time together."

Angie claimed his mouth as soon as the words fell from his lips. One arm wrapped around his shoulder, the other hand cradled his cheek. His wife deepened the kiss, her tongue in his mouth and licking, just the way he liked.

Shit, they didn't kiss like this often enough. But when they did, it reminded Sean, even more, how little time they made for each other and how easily his wife could bring him to his knees with a single kiss.

Sean reveled in the feel of Angie stoking their mutual flame of desire. She enjoyed sex as much as Sean and, despite her overloaded schedule, they made love at least four times a week, which wasn't bad for two working parents. Sean would like to have sex with his wife every day, but what husband wouldn't?

He shifted, so they were fully on the bed, Angie on top of Sean and their lips melded in carnal bliss.

The kids wouldn't be home for hours, which meant they could be as loud as they wanted. Knowing Malcolm, he'd keep the children for the night and bring them home tomorrow morning. His brother-in-law had ample room and supplies for his nieces and nephew. Even if the kids didn't stay the night with their uncle, Sean and Angie had time to do this more than once and without rushing.

Off came Angie's cami, Sean ridding his wife of the attractive but unwanted layer.

Sitting up and straddling his waist, Angie reached behind her and unclasped her bra. "Take it off me."

"Gladly." Sean slid his hands up Angie's thighs and over her waist, his fingers stopping to appreciate her soft, toned skin.

Angie's eyes fluttered closed at his exploring touch, her own hands falling to her sides and granting him unfettered access to her body.

Deft fingers slid the bra straps off her shoulders and down her arms. The cups slid south, disclosing what they were meant to conceal. No matter how many times Sean saw his wife's breasts, the sight of them never ceased to arouse him. After nearly twenty years of marriage, Sean found Angie as attractive and as irresistible as he did when they'd gone on their first date.

With years of practice, they undressed each other. They had plenty of time, so there was no rush, which didn't stop them from getting each other naked as swiftly as possible.

Sean lavished kisses up and down his wife's body. Hands palmed breasts and fingers squeezed nipples before his mouth descended on them, sucking, sucking, sucking.

"Mmm, that's good." She arched into his mouth. "So good."

Sean could do better than good. He returned to her mouth, kissing Angie hard and deep, the way she craved when aroused and panting for more pleasure, as she was now.

Opening her legs wide, she lifted her hips and rubbed her moist lips against his hard, throbbing dick. Shit, he loved when she did that. Up and down she went, gliding herself over him. Every slick slide had him caressing her unhooded clit. Over and again, Angie used him to pleasure them both, his shaft an erotic pole taking his wife closer to an orgasm.

Sean repositioned himself, moving down a few inches, which was all Angie needed. This time, when she lifted herself, her clit came into direct contact with the bulbous head of his penis.

She moaned, he grunted, and she moved against him repeatedly, the sensation ball-tightening good.

Angie came, a sensual cry of release Sean would never tire of hearing.

His cell phone dinged, alerting him to a text message and interrupting their privacy.

Sean entered his wife who was still wet and pulsing from her orgasm. It didn't get much better than this, having intercourse with Angie after she'd come. Sean normally brought her to this state with his mouth or fingers, but he enjoyed it more when she took control and used his body to see to her own needs.

Afterward, she was suppler, her desire greater, and her moans louder.

He smiled down at her, and his cell phone beeped again.

Eyes opened and looked up at him, Angie's orbs lust-filled yet unbothered by the intrusion. "Do you want to get that?"

"I don't care who's texting me. I'm not stopping."

Her eyes closed again, and her mouth lifted into a contented smile. "Good, I don't want you to stop."

Sean didn't. Uninhibited and thorough, he made love to his wife.

His cell beeped a fifth time, and it took everything in him not to swear. Sean had also gotten a string of text messages while they were shopping. His failure to read the messages and respond to the sender hadn't gone unnoticed by his wife.

By the time Angie came for a third time, followed by Sean, neither were thinking about the texts and the persistent person on the other end of them.