

Baes of  
Juneteenth



Mr.  
Second  
Best

Angela Seals

Mr. Second Best

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*Baes of Juneteenth*

# Angela Seals

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Excerpt: A Lustful Crush

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# Contents

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Dedication](#)

[The Untold Legacies:](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Celebrating Juneteenth in Scottsdale](#)

[Excerpt : A Lustful Crush](#)

[Let's Stay In Touch](#)

[Also By Angela Seals](#)

[Also By Angela Seals](#)

[About the Author](#)

# Acknowledgments

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# Dedication

I would like to thank my family for their continued support in my writing journey. A warm thanks to my readers for rocking with me all these years. I hope you enjoy Mr. Second Best!

Happy Reading!!!

Baes of Juneteenth



Angela Seals



## BLURB

When it comes to going after what I want, I've stood on the sidelines my entire life. With the biggest Juneteenth celebration that Scottsdale has ever seen approaching, the guys I've been friends with for over a decade thrust me onto the planning committee and made me Mr. Black Scottsdale.

The only problem is, I've watched these friends of mine take to bed the women of my fantasies, clown me for always standing in the background, and convince me to play wingman to their maverick. That was all fine and dandy until I saw ... her. A woman representing all my desires wrapped in one beautiful package. Ignoring our attraction isn't an option. Now, all bets are off.

***In the Baes of Juneteenth multi-author series, we invite you to journey to different cities to celebrate Juneteenth with the men of Mr. Black, an organization honoring Black love, Black culture, and Black history.***

# The Untold Legacies:

## Mr. Black Organization

*Every legacy has a story ... this is ours.*

### **PRESTON**

Exhaling, I made my way down the dimly lit hallway toward the room that started it all. Slowing my steps, my eyes shifted upward to the beige wall where a picture of my grandfather stared back at me. He never smiled, was always so serious. A mean son-of-a-bitch as some of his friends would say to describe him. His chiseled jawline, taut mouth, and laser-focused eyes gave me the chills. My grandmother once said he could scare the shit out of the devil himself.

Chuckling, my eyes drifted over to the other four men's pictures, strategically placed next to my late grandfather, Earl Scott. These five men were the reason why Mr. Black existed all around the world. They were the first, the originals who realized that African American communities needed a beacon of hope in the wake of the civil rights movements.

Turning the brass key in the keyhole, I stared around as I unlocked the steel door to the conference room within the secret underground lair that was for founding family members of the Mr. Black organization.

"Shit," I cursed, remembering that I forgot to give a nod of recognition to the African American Historical Museum that was on the same property as our secret place.

However, my mission today was to continue to carry out their legacy as Mr. Black Scottsdale. I had been a member of the Mr. Black organization since I was twenty-one years old

and have always been an active participant. I believed my love of history derived from the Mr. Black Organization. Some would call me a renaissance man, while others would say I was too in touch with my Black side. I never truly understood what that met. Yet, at eight years old, when I first visited this secret room, I knew it was special and I had a feeling back then that one day, it'd call me back.

I strolled over to the antique table that sat in the middle of the room and snatched the white tablecloth off. A few dust particles feathered in the air, causing me to cough. The table was still the same, with the distinguished pencil mark I engraved on the brim as a little boy when no one was looking.

I closed my eyes. At thirty-three years old, I still remembered my grandfather telling me stories about him sitting at this table and speaking to the other four men about the rules and regulations of becoming Mr. Black. He stated that everyone in that room that day had found something that men from all walks of life were clamoring to be a part of years later.

It wasn't a coincidence that I asked the fellas to meet in this room on the anniversary of Malcolm X's assassination. February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1965 not only symbolized the day that African Americans lost a pillar in the community, but it was the same exact year Mr. Black was established. I've always wondered if that was the reason the organization was formed.

When attending the Mr. Black networking event last October, I had ventured over to the gold plaques of names on the wall at all the new members chosen in their cities. There was where I realized that four of the names were great grandsons or grandsons of the other four founding members. In over fifty years, we had never had all the founding members to have relatives to be nominated at the same time and actually win Mr. Black. That's why I summoned Porter Crowne, Dante Powell, Nero Bond, and Titan Stone here today to discuss how we could take Mr. Black to a place it'd never been before.

Although we all lived in different cities, we still knew of each other. We kept our distance at national events to keep down rumors of special treatment as family members of the

founders. But we checked in on each other from time to time when life wasn't getting in the damn way. When we talked, nothing was off limits.

The sound of footsteps treading down the hallway caused me to turn my head toward the open door.

“My guy,” Titan boasted.

“Good to see you, man,” I said to Titan Stone as he entered the room looking like he'd just stepped out of a *GQ* magazine. He was just as punctual as I was, so it was no surprise to see him first. We clasped hands briefly as my eyes searched for the other men to enter behind him.

*Wishful thinking that everyone would be on time.*

As Titan drifted around the room, stopping at the wall of newspaper clippings from the civil rights movement, we engaged in small conversation. Before long, Nero and Dante arrived, and the conversation shifted to other matters about our prospective hometowns. Titan spoke about becoming Mr. Black Dallas. Nero was Mr. Black Detroit, and Dante rounded it off as Mr. Black Los Angeles. However, Mr. Black Chicago, Porter Crowne, was predictably late.

I glanced down at my gold Rolex watch. I don't think anyone expected him to be forty minutes late.

*Finally*, I thought when Porter strolled in popping his collar like he was on time. If I thought Nero, Dante, and Titan were dressed to impress, they didn't have shit on Porter's tailor-made suit. I wouldn't begin to try to name the high-end fashion designer he wore tonight.

In fact, I don't know where in my memo I told all four of these dudes to dress to impress as I stared at each one of them wearing a suit and looking like they were on their way to Easter Sunday church. Here I was sporting a pair of jeans and a blue Polo shirt.

“Did I miss the dress code?” I asked sarcastically, scrolling through my lesson plan that I had mapped out over the last few weeks.

Nero glanced down at his outfit and shrugged. “Shittt, I could’ve worn a hoodie, jeans, and my 270s.”

“Me too, fam,” Porter agreed. “That’s my every day.”

Laughing, I went right into it. “Okay, let’s get started.”

Throwing my hands in a circular motion, I started to position each guy on where to sit before I caught myself and remembered these were grown men. It was a habit I had from teaching elementary school. I had to constantly remind the kids to sit in their assigned seats.

“Glad to have you all here. As part of the founding families, we’ve all been members of Mr. Black since we turned twenty-one.” I paused to let those words soak in as recognition hit in the four men’s eyes before I told them about the connection, I discovered with each of us being a founding member for the first time since our grandfathers and great-grandfathers stood in this room.

The conversation veered into a discussion about how Juneteenth, although a national holiday, was still not acknowledged publicly as much as other federal holidays. Additionally, we discussed the national board, culminating in the realization that more needed to be done and as Mr. Black representatives of our cities, we would need to be the men to do it.

“Some of our kids don’t have access to the technology needed to learn about Black holidays,” Dante stated.

“We all have a mission to uphold,” Porter chimed in.

“Exactly,” I agreed. “It’s not fair that Juneteenth isn’t given the same love as the Fourth of July. We can’t let this generation and others to follow forget who they are ... their history. Their place in this society. Their ancestors who fought for their freedom.”

Nero nodded before saying, “We must provide them with more resources to pursue fields that they’ve been told we don’t belong in for years. We are losing people daily due to lack of wellness resources.”

“But we can’t forget that education is key,” Titan dictated. “In order to change our circumstances, we must change our mindset as a race.”

Clearing my throat, I stated, “I wanted you all here because Juneteenth is in less than four months, and I think we should make this the most impactful one yet. Change must happen now. Not tomorrow. Not with the next Mr. Black. Right now, is our time, fellas, and we best use it effectively.”

“Now that’s what I’m talking about,” Porter exclaimed, standing from his chair as he clapped loudly. “That’s our own Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and Barack Obama wrapped up in a Preston Scott package right there.”

“Damn right! Speak, my brother,” Titan chimed in.

Dante held up a Black power fist, while Nero tapped his knuckles against the table.

I smirked, stifling a laugh. “Brothers, we have to do something epic in our cities to make this year the best one ever.”

As conversation continued, each man began sharing the ideas and plans they already had in motion that would help our greater purpose and bring awareness to Juneteenth. It was inspiring to hear us come together as if we’d been talking about the change that was needed way before we became Mr. Black. Because in so many ways we all had, individually fighting the fight in our city.

Porter pulled out a special bottle of imported whiskey, and I grimaced, hoping the guys would’ve forgotten our customary ritual because I wasn’t a drinker. And if I did drink, I did it responsibly, which meant I would definitely have to stay in the bunker a little longer to make sure I was sober enough before driving. However, I had to admit our meeting would be incomplete if we didn’t honor tradition.

After Porter poured us all shots, I tapped the first shot on the table and took that one for Grandpa Earl. A second for my mother, Patricia Scott, who was gone too soon. And the third in honor of all the Black activists who fought and died for us

to be here today. I downed that shot right before I realized I was supposed to pour it out onto the concrete floor instead.

Cringing, I wiggled my shoulders as the whiskey slid down my throat in a burning sensation.

After shooting the shit with Titan, my eyes glanced over the room at Nero, Dante, and Porter and found gratification in all of us coming together for a common goal. These men were special in their own way. Our ideas and passions entwined perfectly, forming the perfect combination to continue our forefathers' legacies. We weren't your typical Mr. Black representatives. We all inwardly struggled with our own insecurities, whatever they may be.

But we had a larger purpose. We were here to open tightly closed eyes unwilling to change, and above all bring knowledge to the community. As I sat back in my chair, a favorite Malcolm X quote skidded across my mind.

*“A race of people is like an individual man; until it uses its own talent, takes pride in its own history, expresses its own culture, affirms its own selfhood, it can never fulfill itself.”*

That quote spoken over fifty years ago by a powerful man was exactly what our community needed to hear, and *this* group of men were put in *this* room at *this* precise moment in time to bring about action to the way the fucked-up world thinks.



# Prologue

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Preston

Four Months Earlier ...

“So, what’s your friend’s name?”

*Wait what? This that shit I be talking about.*

“I thought you were interested in Mr. Black?” I asked the long legged, caramel skin beauty.

“I am,” she replied with a smack of her lips. “But you were giving me a damn history lesson.” She rolled her eyes and turned her back to me to tap my boy, Lester, on the shoulder.

*Did I just get dissed?* “These son-of-a bitches,” I mumbled, sipping my cognac at the bar. How was it that I was always playing second best to these mutherfuckers? Especially when I was the one just crowned Mr. Black Scottsdale at the 9<sup>th</sup> award ceremony. The title was an honor but an unexpected one. However, it still proved no matter my accomplishments I still couldn’t get the women.

*What did I do wrong?* I thought, as I leaned forward on the bar.

The caramel beauty strolled up to me and my boys while we were at the bar toasting to me for becoming Mr. Black Scottsdale.

Staring at me, she asked, “What’s up with the men of Mr. Black?”

When I told her that the Mr. Black organization was established in 1965 as a secret in the height of the civil rights movement, to be a light of hope in the Black community, she became disinterested and started rolling her eyes.

“Damn.” I shook my head, staring at Lester stroking the girl’s arm, who I’d just had moments ago. I watched as she started laughing at some lame joke he had just told the group and my insides quivered.

Because now I stood on the sidelines, and the attention I had garnered from the women were no longer on me but on the other members of the Mr. Black organization.

*My so-called friends.* I grimaced, turning my back to them and gazing out at the partygoers dancing on the floor. See, I was a different type of man and women just didn’t understand me and my sense of humor. I didn’t get off on big tits, fake asses, and long weaves. A woman had to speak to my mind, stimulate that part of my brain that men kept dormant. She had to be able to have an intelligent conversation, be witty and have simple beauty. My dick didn’t harden for fake eyelashes, piled on make-up, and a woman’s outfit.

My first thought was to steal the spotlight back, but the buttoned-up shirt, Docker pants man I was, told me it wasn’t my style. Truth be told, I was that guy who stood in the background and never made a scene. I’d always waited my turn, took a backseat to friends’ ambitions, and shied away from confrontation.

Although I had the gift of gab, it only served me in my career as a history professor. Plus, I was on the debate team in college, which gave me an adrenaline rush to argue my point in a group setting. To me, debating was better than food and sleep. I would’ve said sex, but nowadays that shit was a rarity, because right now I could use the touch of a soft, tender hand massaging my body and a strong woman to stroke my intellect.

Yet, at thirty-three years old, I’d bedded a few women in my life. At some point, I grew tired of them or maybe they got tired of me. I was constantly elevating myself, learning new

things, and I guess it's a true saying when they say people grow apart. Out of all the women I'd dated, I hadn't found anyone who could tolerate my love of history.

However, they were all special and unique in their own way. I was very particular of the women I'd dated and really cautious of the one's I decided to take to bed. My boys would say I was picky. That was so far from the truth. I had standards. I was more worried about what a woman had in her head, instead of what she had between her legs. That's what separated me from the hoes and the womanizers.

Most women couldn't understand why I would ask them why they thought Juneteenth was never considered a national holiday until now. Or how their life views aligned with folks like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. Those were the things that were important to me.

*Black history.*

Which was why I'd labeled myself as a man of honor. I didn't take more than I was given, but I always seemed to find myself giving more than what I received.

Although, the Mr. Black title came with responsibilities, it was a position I could shine in. Being nominated by the Mr. Black members of Scottsdale for being an upstanding citizen and a mentor for young, Black men in the Scottsdale area that were heading in the wrong direction gave me sense of pride.

I'd made it my life mission to give back to my community and be a pillar that made a change in this city. It surprised me to know that only two years ago, Scottsdale had just adopted the anti-discrimination ordinance, which prohibited discrimination based on sex, race, color, or religion. With this known fact, it further fueled my mission to bring about change to this place.

The one thing I admired most about the organization was what it stood for. The Black represented: Bold, Loyal, Ambitious, Cool, and King.

Those adjectives were uplifting and empowering for the new era of men coming up in today's time. The Mr. Blacks

over the years were tasked in making sure the city continued to represent Black culture and celebrate Black holidays and that was something I strived to continue and expand on in my four-year term.

Yet, this party was the social highlight of the year and the nobodies to the people who wanted to be somebody were in the house tonight. The list ranged from some of the dopest rappers in Scottsdale to singers, actors, and politicians from the surrounding areas. They filled the booths and floors in the dimly lit community center turned into a club for tonight's occasion.

Pushing my black-framed spectacles up from the bridge of my nose, I signaled the barmaid over for another round.

“Congrats, Pres.”

Lifting my gaze, I nodded at a few members strolling past.

“What's first on your agenda, Mr. Black?”

Grinning, I turned. “Aquarius Crystal, you made it,” I chortled and gave him a dap and a half hug.

“I wouldn't miss this shit for the world,” he replied. “I had to see your square ass walk across the stage.”

Smirking, “You didn't even know if I would win, and I'm tired of the square jokes.” I jabbed at his chest, and he blocked my hand with a swerve to the side.

“I knew you would win,” he said, smiling. “When you called and said you were nominated, I knew your square ass was the best man for the job.”

“Whateva, man,” I stated with a lopsided grin.

Q was the only one who could get away with calling me a square. When we met seventeen years ago, I had on a white, short-sleeved shirt, with a pair of tan cargo shorts. Q took one look at me and said only squares wore that to the beach. I glanced down at my attire, but all I could do was laugh when I noticed the rest of the boys on the beach wore T-shirts, or no shirt at all, with jogging shorts.

After that day, we bonded on a level like no other.

“This shit is popping,” he screamed over the music.

“Sure is,” I stated, while bobbing my head to the old school records the DJ was spinning on the turn table.

“Your throne is on the third level,” he yelled in my ear.

Chuckling, I knew Q was referring to the section that was designated for the new Mr. Black taking office. Knowing Q, he’d then scoped out every dead-end area of this place, looking for a woman to hang on his arm for the short time he was in town.

Spotting the ex-Mr. Black in the corner chatting it up with the mayor of Scottsdale, I smiled. I’d been passed the baton by the young man, Samuel Woods. He had served the Mr. Black Scottsdale organization well but had nothing to do with me being elected. Mr. Blacks were chosen by nominations from community members in the city, and was based off their activism, education, humanitarian work, or philanthropy. Although, I heard there were a few rumors circulating that I had gotten elected because my grandfather was a founding member, which couldn’t be further from the truth. I earned this spot and there wasn’t shit anyone could do to prove I didn’t. As far as I was concerned, my credentials spoke for themselves that I deserved to be Mr. Black.

Lost in my own thoughts, I watched as Q made a beeline onto the dance floor. He started grinding a girl from behind and sent a wink in my direction.

“Pres, up here,” my boy, Polo, shouted from the steps. He had made the trip down from LA with his girl, Erin.

Sending a head nod, I followed behind him up the winding staircase to the third floor. There was a table that ran the length of the room, and Black men from all walks of life sat around smoking cigars, sipping whiskey and scotch from the bottles staggered on each end of the table.

Everyone stood when I reached the top step. It was customary for all the members of Mr. Black to stand when a new Mr. Black Scottsdale took office. I strolled through the

line of men, shaking hands and giving embraces as I went down the row to thank each man for their support.

The Scottsdale organization had eighty members. Only twenty men were allowed to enter each year. However, sometimes we would only turn over ten or fifteen. Our initiation process was rigorous, and each man was strategically picked because there were dues to be paid, rules to follow and if you broke any of these you could be removed from the organization. However, once in, you were in the brotherhood for life.

I took a seat in the massive red and black chair positioned at the end of the table, and once I did, everyone took their seats and resumed their previous conversations. Gazing around the room, I realized these were the men who I would work with to ensure that Scottsdale continued to thrive.

I was lost in thought. I'd been waiting on this time to be who I truly was. For me, it was a time of rediscover, to go after the things I'd always wanted ... have no regrets. And what better way to make all my dreams come true than being Mr. Black Scottsdale?

# Chapter One

---

Preston

Present Day ...

“I haven’t seen you in a few days, bro.”

Smiling at my oldest brother, Patrick, I stepped aside to allow an older woman on a cane to exit the door I had just entered.

“I have a new role,” I told him as we embraced.

Side-eyeing me, he retorted. “How could I forget?” he grumbled. “Mr. Black Scottsdale, so exciting.”

Hearing the disdain in his voice, I smirked. My brother and I were competitive in everything we did. We’d been like that since we were kids. He’d been a member since he was twenty-one but never showed any interest in the organization our grandfather co-founded. So, my grandfather poured all his knowledge into me. He told me that one day Patrick would wake the fuck up and realize what’s important in life. And I guess today was that day because he’d been in a funky mood ever since I got crowned Mr. Black.

However, we were polar opposites. Where I was known to stay in the shadows, Patrick was the life of the party. He’d dated more women than I could count on two hands. A ladies’ man, that’s what he would call himself, and a bookworm. We both had that in common. We might have our mother to thank for that, because she was a high school English teacher who

made us read books as kids and afterwards made us write essay papers on them.

With Patrick being a ladies' man, he would hide the fact that he could read a sixty-thousand-word book in four hours or disregard that reading was one of his hobbies. He told me that telling women that shit made him look weak and lame. So, instead, he charmed them with the fact of him being in a motorcycle club. That was another thing we had in common, plus we had six tattoos a piece.

Our mother passed away two years ago from pneumonia. We both were joint owners of the bookstore she owned after her retirement from the Scottsdale school system. We took turns working at the store in our spare time and hired a staff to fill in when I had to teach at the college or when Patrick was called back to the reserves. He was a nurse with the Army.

Meeting his gaze, I chuckled at the frown on his face and stated, "Envy doesn't suit you, brother."

"Whateva." He picked up a few books from a nearby cart and started placing them on the shelves. "Are you here to help or steal more books?"

Plucking a hardback off the shelf about the 1619 project, I gazed over my shoulder. "I've never stole a book," I corrected him. "I borrow them for my class."

"You don't return them, Pres." He slammed a book on the shelf.

*Aw shit, here we go again.*

Patrick had a temper. Any little thing could set him off. At times like this when he got to rambling on and tossing shit around, I tuned him out and buried my head inside of a book. It was my favorite pastime and a great distraction I'd perfected over the years to ignore my brother's rants.

"You know what today is, right?"

"Huh?" I lifted my gaze from the interesting paragraph I was reading.

"Today, Pres, you know what it is?"



Lifting an eyebrow, I threw a hand in the air at his riddles. “What is today?” I quipped feeling annoyed at his vague line of questioning.

He shook his head and propped an elbow on the stack of books sitting on a tan cart. “It’s grandpa’s birthday.”

“Shittt,” I muttered.

*How did I forget? You know how? You’ve had nothing on your brain but Mr. Black.*

“Damn,” I murmured shutting the book closed and massaging my neck to work at the stress I felt creeping up my shoulders. “What time is Dad going to visit his grave?”

Patrick smacked his lips. “Don’t we go at the same time every year?” he asked, with an eyeroll.

“Right.” I scratched my forehead. Being Mr. Black had me bugging and forgetting the man who’s been my protector, Earl Scott’s birthday. He was a straight shooter and a no-nonsense renegade who taught me how to take my first step, ride a bicycle, drive a car, and most importantly ... how to be a man.

Granted, my father, Patrick Sr., was around to show me how to stay the fuck out of his way mainly. See, my father and I had nothing in common. He poured all his wisdom into my brother who loved music as much as he did. They both use to play the trumpet, and before long they started traveling, playing at night clubs and eventually got their big break by playing in musicals and orchestra but that was long ago. Before my mother passed and before my father started to regret life because of her untimely death.

I, on the other hand, gravitated more toward my grandpa. Although the man didn’t smile much or give out compliments, we were joined at the hip. He taught me everything I knew.

That’s why being Mr. Black was so important to me because it was my grandpa’s legacy. In some weird way I felt closer to him now by leading the organization he’d trained and groomed me for. Here I was on the brink of making history and finally about to make his dream come true and I almost forgot to visit him to tell him all about it.

Shifting my gaze back to Patrick, who had his back turned, I asked, “Do you want to ride with me or are you going alone?”

He stared at me over his shoulder. “Nah, we can ride together. The high school student we hired last week should be here shortly.”

Nodding, I made my way toward the door, as we only had forty-five minutes to spare. June 2<sup>nd</sup> at one o’clock was a standing date and time that my whole family came together at the cemetery to honor the man who started it all.

“Hey, put that book back.” Patrick pointed a direct finger at me.

Staring down at the book in my hand, I huffed. “Ah, c’mon, bro. I’ll return it.”

He twisted his lips, snatched his man purse from under the counter, and waved me off. “Fine, Pres, do what the fuck you like. When we have to close the store for lack of inventory, I’m going to blame your stealing ass.”

“That won’t happen,” I assured him as we strolled out of the only Black-owned bookstore within a fifty-mile radius. “Well, I think it won’t,” I whispered more to myself but didn’t realize Patrick had heard me until he punched me in the forearm.

“Ouch,” I squealed as we horse wrestled outside of the door.

Suddenly, the student we hired walked up, took one look at Patrick, who had my head locked in his burly arms, shook her head, and walked inside of the store.

My glasses fell to the pavement when I jabbed Patrick in the ribcage. He buckled over in pain as I snatched my frames from the ground and took that opportunity to run to my truck parked at the curb. Hopping inside, I tumbled over in laughter on the steering wheel. After all these years, Patrick still couldn’t time my signature move. Similar to Steve Austin from WWE, who had the Stone Cold Stunner, I had named my move the Ribcage Crusher.

Minutes later, Patrick limped his way over to the truck with a hand placed on his back and got inside. Frowning, he complained. "I'm done, bruh. That shit hurt."

I chuckled. "Don't start no shit, it won't be no shit," I mocked, punching the button to start the car.

"Sike, you thought I was going to let that shit go?" Patrick retorted and slapped the back of my head.

Forty-minutes later, we all stood around my grandpa's grave. My aunt, Wendy, bent down to place flowers at his headstone as my other aunt, Whitney, leaned against my uncle, Charles, and let out a loud wail that I was sure could wake the dead. She was so dramatic at times.

My grandpa, her father, had been gone for six years and here she was acting like she did at his funeral. She bowed over with her hands on her knees and shook her head back and forth, screaming, "Nooooo, God, not my dad."

Patrick nudged me in the arm, and I cracked a smile. My cousin, her son Jerome, side-eyed his mother and rolled his eyes. My father rushed over to hold her upright, as she started hopping up and down like she was in church catching the holy ghost.

My family was sanctified, and as long as I could remember we were made to go to church. My aunt, Whitney, was one of the one's they called a holy roller. Everywhere she went she preached the gospel and would break out into a shout at any time.

We weren't surprised when she held both of her arms in the air and started running back and forth in front of my grandpa's grave, shouting and speaking in tongue. She did some kick with her leg as she twisted around two times and hopped back up and down.

At the sight of her charades, I couldn't hold in my laughter any longer, remembering my grandpa telling me that Aunt Whitney needed to sit her ass down and stop playing, before God struck her down.

Staring back at Grandpa Earl's headstone and watching my grandma, Mary Scott, mean mug Aunt Whitney, I could recall him taking me with him to visit the Nation of Islam.

"It's our little secret," he would say.

He didn't want my grandma to know that he had switched faiths. However, during our many visits, I learned a lot and those lessons helped pique my interest in studying history.

Moments later, we all had our one-on-one time with Grandpa. I allowed my aunts, uncles, and cousins to go first, and after my dad had to drag Aunt Whitney to the car still shouting and crying, I stepped up to the headstone.

Smiling, I said, "Well, old man, I'm Mr. Black Scottsdale. Who would've thought?" I chuckled. "I'm going to make you proud. I've already put some things in motion with the other founders' family members. What else?" I brought a finger to my chin. "Oh yeah, I'm still single. I know." I paused. "You want me to find a girl. A man is not meant to be alone," I marked the words he would say to me.

Bending over, I rubbed a hand across the round, rigid grey stone. "Take it easy, Pops." I lowered my head and whispered, "I love you."

Standing, I linked my fingers in front of me as my eyes watered. "*A man don't show weakness.*" The words clung in the air, like a stale odor. Stepping back from the headstone, I stared down at the grave, the voice in my head sounding so much like my grandpa's it frightened me. He would always say that to me when I became emotional.

Sniffing a few times, I swiped at a staggering tear that slipped from the corner of my eye.

"Trader," I mumbled to myself, while straightening the collar on my shirt and pushing my glasses up from the bridge of my nose. Placing both of my hands inside of my jean pockets, I slightly nodded my head to give my respects, took one last glance at the grave, rubbed my goatee, and walked away.

## Chapter Two

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Violet

“In order to be a better you, find a purpose in your life,” the recorder announced.

“Excuse youuu,” I screamed at a man who just bumped my arm while walking down the busy downtown streets of Scottsdale.

“Love yourself and love your enemies.”

Frowning, I glanced down at the tape recorder in my hand. “Why do I have to love my enemies?” I asked out loud.

“Give someone a hug today and you will feel good about yourself.”

“Ah, fuck you, Shazza,” I responded, hitting the red stop button on the tape recorder. “You went too far,” I told her, as I entered the red brick building located on Danville Avenue. “Plus, your damn robotic voice was getting on my goddamn nerves,” I mumbled to myself as I tucked the tape recorder in my brown work bag.

Stepping onto the escalator to ascend to the sixth floor, I shook my head at the thought of listening to this tired bitch for two days. I knew better than to take my friend’s Lauren advice to listen to a self-help tape to help me deal with the day-to-day bullshit of my life.

In all honesty, I needed something to combat the stress of working as a journalist for the *Rumor Room*, a small

newspaper company that was first founded in the early 1900s by the Thompson family. Over the years, the paper expanded, and upcoming generations took over to run the print.

*Rumor Room* was known to print and report on all the gossip in Scottsdale and the surrounding suburban areas. However, as the world moved into a new millennium and things like the internet, Facebook, and TikTok took over, people began to read fewer and fewer papers.

I say blame it on the Generation Zs for the way society was changing as a whole. Although, I had to admit the Gen Z era did have some great things they were known for. Like, knowing their self-worth. Not accepting pennies on jobs but making a company pay for their qualifications, and if not willing to pay, be willing to walk away.

That mindset was something I wished my generation would've adapted. However, at thirty-six years old, all I knew was how to work. And if I wasn't working, I needed to be thinking about working. There was no time to play, shop, and date.

God knows I hadn't dated anyone seriously in a few years. For me, men were as loyal as their options. Which meant I couldn't trust them. Coming from a single parent home, where my mother and father never married, proved to me that relationships and all that faithful shit didn't work.

"Good morning," I mumbled to the team, already sitting at their desks and sipping their morning coffees as I strolled by.

Taking a seat at my desk in the back of the open room, I placed my bag under my desk. The sounds of horns honking distracted me as I gazed out the window at the cars racing up and down the streets.

Sighing, I pushed the black button on my keypad to power on my computer and leaned back in my chair to gaze around the minuscule office.

Edward, an intern who sat in front of me, discreetly tucked his phone in his lap to watch anime. Every day, he watched at

least five episodes, and then an hour before he left, he would actually do some work.

Shaking my head, I gazed over at Rochelle and Tom. Those two were secretly dating but thought no one knew. But I didn't miss the smiles, the flirty leers, and the subtle touches.

The people in this office were hilarious. They all moved around with a notion that they were the smartest folks who ever wrote for a paper. For me, this was the third newspaper I'd worked for. After college, I worked at a small press in New York City. Becoming homesick, I moved back home to work for one of *Rumor Room's* competitors, *The Sun Tribune*, until Joe, *Rumor Room* Chief Editor made me an offer I couldn't refuse.

The company hired me to bring more diverse stories to the company. In today's media, every ethnic group had a story. Everyone was being represented and had something to say. The sad part about *Rumor Room* was they had never hired or did an article on any African American person. That's where I came in at to fill a quota and to shake things up in the company.

Surprisingly, everyone here was nice. No one treated me differently. Although Arizona was one of the last states to start to diversify things, eventually they made the change.

"Violet Wallace, in my office."

Snapping from my daydream, my eyes collided with Joe, who always called his employees by their full name when he was disturbed by something.

Edward turned in his swivel chair and raised an eyebrow.

Sending him a smirk, I closed my laptop, smoothed a manicured hand down my navy pencil skirt, and sashayed my way down the aisle with my head lifted high. I wasn't going to give my co-workers the satisfaction of seeing me nervous. My self-esteem was too high for that.

Once inside of the spacious office, Joe directed me to close the door and take a seat. When I did so, my eyes drifted around his office. I'd been in this office more times than I

could count. However, something was different about today. The air around me shifted, the smell of his expensive cologne seemed to waft through the air in a thick mist, and his face held an unreadable expression.

Joe was a handsome, middle-aged white man. He'd come from old money, his family migrated from the south and owned property in Alabama. He married his high school sweetheart but had no kids yet. Truthfully, I don't think Joe was ready for kids; he spent his time in this office from sunup to sundown working.

Clearing his throat, Joe halted his fingers on the keyboard and locked eyes with me. "You know I just attended the newspaper and magazine convention over the weekend."

"Yes." I nodded, thinking it was an event I wanted to go to for the last two years but hadn't been invited.

"We need a story to set us apart," Joe exclaimed. "We need something that would put *Rumor Room* on the map. All these other newspapers are writing about the war between Russia and Ukraine or sending reporters to cover the presidential race. All of that is good, but we need an article that no one else has touched or is even thinking about." He rubbed the side of his jawline. "I need you to get me something big, a story that no other paper has touched."

Leaning back in my chair, I threaded my fingers together. I had some stories in mind, especially one, but had been too scared to bring it up. This company had never done anything like this before. Plus, this story was near and dear to my heart, but Joe didn't need to know that. But like my mother once said, "*closed mouths don't get feed.*"

"You know Juneteenth is approaching, right?"

Joe nodded once, curiosity shining in his eyes.

"There is this organization called Mr. Black. They are in all the major US cities and it's only a male organization, but their mission is to honor Black culture, bringing awareness to Black love and Black history."



Joe sat forward, propping an elbow on the mahogany desk. “Go on,” he prompted.

“Let me do a piece on the Mr. Black Scottsdale and Juneteenth. Not only will this story boost sales for the paper by recognizing a first in history with a national holiday like Juneteenth, but it will open *Rumor Room* readership to more diverse groups.”

When he frowned, I pushed further.

“This is why you hired me. To find those hidden gems that no one else was writing about. This is a great organization and it’s not getting the highlights it deserves. Trust me, this is it. This our story.”

“This will be different for us,” he replied. “We’ve never interviewed an African American organization or holiday, but times are changing, and we have to change with it. This paper has been segregated for far too long and that’s why they hired me.”

My eyes widened in surprise.

“To find people like you,” he pointed a direct finger at me, “to change the narrative of *Rumor Room*. To find people who are not afraid to step out of their comfort zone and go after those controversial stories.”

He stood, and so did I. “I’m all in, Violet Wallace. Let’s do it.” He paused and narrowed his eyes. “But be careful in your pursuit of this story. Some people would not accept this change. But I have to say this and it’s not to scare you,” He stepped around the desk. “Reporters are losing their lives because of these forbidden stories. Because people are not open or ready for change, but we have to show them that it’s time to do away with old beliefs, racism and embrace the future.

Smiling, “I agree whole-heartedly Joe, but I didn’t become a journalist to hide behind the paper and pen. I became a journalist because I want to be front and center on the battlefield, hearing and experiencing the story for myself.

He nodded, and we shook on it.

Forty-five minutes later, I was at my desk and had gathered all the valuable information I needed on Mr. Black Scottsdale. The internet was a very resourceful tool. It had revealed that this year's Mr. Black was a man named Preston Scott. He was a Scottsdale native, a history professor at Arizona University, and was involved in various committees, like the Boys and Girls club. He donated his time to feed the homeless and owned one of the last standing African American bookstores in town.

The Wikipedia picture he'd taken showed he was indeed handsome. Milky butterscotch skin, low, wavy haircut, and the wired frame glasses he wore made him resemble a younger Malcolm X.

*Damn.* I had to admit not only was he an extremely gorgeous man, but his credentials were impressive. After printing out the three pages about the organization, I studied them intently. I didn't conduct any interviews without having all the facts.

Truth be told, my father, Ray McDonald, was a member of Mr. Black back in the seventies. He would talk about the organization from time to time with me, but from his many stories, I knew he had embarked on something special.

A lifelong brotherhood was what he would call it. Yet, after he lost his four-year battle with prostate cancer, I recalled the distinguished men making an appearance at his funeral. They were all dressed in black suits and stood on the sidelines like bodyguards. My gut told me it was them, although they didn't utter a single word at his funeral.

Here was my chance to bring myself closer to something that my father cherished. I finally had my big break to do something for *us*, for the Black culture, and since I couldn't interview my dad, what better way to honor him than to bring the one thing he loved, Mr. Black, to life?

Ray was a respected person in Scottsdale as a football high school coach. He took the Scottsdale Lions to the state championship and won six times. He brought the city together

in a way that no other sports or politician could. For that, the mayor named a street after him.

I gathered my belongings, fished my purse out from under the desk, and swung it on my shoulder. Tucking my laptop under my arms, I sprinted from the office and decided to take the elevators down to the first floor to cut down time.

It was a little after four o'clock, and if I hurried, I could probably make it across town to the Mr. Black office before five. Meeting the man behind the suit was a must, getting him to say yes to this interview was imperative, but like any journalist, I had to consider the idea that he could say no.

Feeling a little jitter, I had to keep in mind that my job was to make sure Mr. Scott knew that the word *no* was not an option.

## Chapter Three

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Preston

There was only six days left before the big Juneteenth parade was supposed to go off without a hitch, and nothing was in order. This particular morning, I had ridden my bike to the office but had gotten stopped by people in the neighborhood complaining about losing their apartments. The Mr. Black office was located on the Eastside of Scottsdale in an area that was predominantly Black, but in the last couple of years the area started to become gentrified.

People of wealth began to move in, which attracted higher-end businesses to come in that drove out the poor folks because they couldn't afford rent or shop in the expensive stores. Thankfully, the Mr. Black organization received funds from all over and wasn't affected by the uptick of market value, but the people still expected the organization to do something to prevent the takeover.

Grumbling, I thumbed through a stack of papers on my desk, noticing all of them were waiting on my approval. Teaching three days a week at the university had left me with little time to oversee the day-to-day plans.

"Lester, did you contact the float company?" I screamed from my corner office.

Flipping through more papers stacked on the file cabinet, I discovered there was nothing about the floats. Lester was the

secretary, but as of late his disappearing acts had me thinking strongly about replacing him.

“Lester.” I lifted my head from the papers to look out into the main office.

“Lester’s gone, man,” Roger answered.

Feeling irritated, I stepped out of the office with the stack of papers in hand. “We don’t have everything we need for the parade,” I told the eight men in the office with disgust oozing from my tone.

It wasn’t often that I lost my temper ... actually, it was downright shocking that I was running around barking orders, but if this Juneteenth parade didn’t go off without a hitch, I’d be the one to blame.

“Who’s covering the music?” I asked the men. “Where’s the float contracts? Have we reached out to Scottsdale High School to ask for their band, cheerleaders, and majorettes?” I fired off, not realizing that the men were staring at the door and not listening to a word I was saying.

Huffing, my gaze drifted toward the front desk, at the woman standing inside of the doorjamb.

“Is this the Mr. Black office?” she asked, frowning slightly.

Jack and Robert both hopped from their seats and blurted out at the same time, “Yes.”

I took a step back into my office to observe the woman who had the mouths of every man in the office hanging open. It didn’t take much to get my boys panting. A pretty face and a cute smile would have them drooling like dogs in heat.

Yet, this woman was extremely beautiful. I’d seen beautiful women before, but something was different about her. As usual, my friends—aka Mr. Black members—circled her like she was they prey.

She swung her long, silky, black ponytail over her shoulder and placed a hand at her hips, which prompted my eyes to venture down to her round ass. It wasn’t my norm to ogle a woman in this way, but with her I couldn’t turn away. The blue

heels she wore highlighted her shapely legs, and the color of her skin—a shade of hazelnut, my favorite coffee flavor—had me licking my lips as I fell against the wall in agony.

There's no way I could step aside and play coy to my friends, like I always did. It wasn't that I was shy, I was a tamed man, took my time with things, but with *her*, she was about to have me breaking all my rules. I couldn't understand the ache in my stomach or the uneasiness that came over me in that second.

She smiled at something Robert said, and I could have sworn my heart rate quickened, right after my hands started to tremble. The dimple in her cheeks caught me off guard, and the twinkle in her doe eyes made my breath hitch.

“Get it together, pussy,” I whispered to myself, staring in the small mirror on the wall.

Usually, I would take a backseat to a woman of her caliber. Being front and center had never been my thing, but with this woman my feet did this shuffling thing as they started to carry me forward, until Pete slapped a hand on my shoulder.

“Hey, let's play wingman to my Maverick?” he whispered with a grin.

Those words were code for me to make a distraction, so he could get the girl, but this time around I was going to be Maverick.

Shaking my head, I told him, “Nah, not this time, bruh. She's all mine.”

Pete lifted an eyebrow, no doubt in shock, as I began to approach the mystery woman's side. Inching closer to her, I became the lion, and she became the stray lamb, lurking in my den.

I was on full attack mode when I told Robert, “I got this,” as I stepped in front of him.

“How can I help you?” I asked, placing a hand in my black slacks.

She turned toward me and smiled.

*Damn, my grandpa told me the woman of my desires would leave me weak in the knees.*

“You’re Preston Scott.” She beamed brightly. “Mr. Black Scottsdale,” she added, extending her hand to me. “I’m Violet Wallace.”

“Nice to meet you,” I told her, sliding my hand into hers. “Have we met before?” I asked, cocking my head to the side, while keeping our hands entwined.

“No.” She shook her head and giggled. “I googled you,” she confessed.

“Hmmm,” I replied. “Well, I hope I was interesting.”

She brought a hand to her mouth. “Very.”

She stared at me, and I stared back. Her big, brown eyes told me her past and her future. I swore I could see her hopes, dreams, and even her fears. It seemed I’d met her before, in a different life where everything was pure, and we all were innocent. Deep down, we all had our secrets, and for some reason I wanted to know hers.

Roger coughed, breaking our trance.

At that moment, she snatched her hand from my grasp, causing me to take a step back. The attraction was thick in the air, like a haunting fog on a gloomy day.

Massaging my goatee, I asked, “What can I do for you, Miss Wallace?”

“Oh, please call me Violet,” she instructed.

Nodding, she continued, “I’m a journalist for the newspaper *Rumor Room*.”

My ears perked up at the mentioning of one of the most controversial newspaper companies in Scottsdale. My sources around the way spoke ill of the place. Told me that they were against publishing anything from the black and brown communities. Plus, their staff wasn’t diverse to my knowledge, which couldn’t be entirely true with me staring at the most beautiful Almond Joy I had ever seen. That is what she

reminded me of—a candy bar. A sweet treat that I would love to sink my teeth into.

*Focus*, I reminded myself as she asked, “Can we talk more in your office?”

“Sure.” I stepped aside to allow her to walk in front me.

A few of the guys cleared their throats and chuckled behind my back, no doubt in shock that I was actually engaging with the woman.

Once inside, I closed the door and waved a hand for her to sit in the only chair in front of my rustic desk.

She crossed her legs, causing my eyes to drift down to her thick thighs hidden underneath the skirt she wore.

Leaning forward, she placed a hand on her knee. “Mr. Scott,” she began, “I—”

“Please call me Preston,” I interjected.

Smiling, she blushed. “Preston. My company would like to do an article on Mr. Black Scottsdale and the organization.” She paused. “With Juneteenth approaching in the next week we want to feature all the things that Mr. Black is doing for the community and the Juneteenth holiday.”

Rearing back in my chair, I asked. “Why Mr. Black? Your company has never done an African American column, and I just don’t know if *Rumor Room* would be the right paper for us.”

Her face softened as she leaned closer to the desk. Her perfume mingled in the room like a cool summer breeze. “I understand your hesitation, Mr.— I mean Preston, but I assure you that *Rumor Room* has evolved, their mission has changed. They are here for the community. To shine light on hidden stories that no one knows about or haven’t been educated on.”

“And *Rumor Room* wants to highlight us?” I sucked my teeth and stood. “I just can’t allow my organization to be evolved in anything that doesn’t represent us as a positive force in the community.”



I folded my arms. “Juneteenth is very important to me and to the Mr. Black organization. We can’t just let anyone cover it.” Lifting an eyebrow, I asked. “Do you understand that the Juneteenth holiday is very important to the black community?” When she didn’t respond I continued. “It symbolizes the month and date enslaved Black people were declared free. We were free before that, but many enslavers still held us captive until June 19<sup>th</sup> 1865 declared us free as a race.

“I understand this Preston, it’s my history as well.”

I continued, dismissing her words. Wanting her to understand the seriousness of the matter and what she was asking me to do.

“In fact,” I strolled over to the small desk in the corner of the office, “I’ve received a few letters from other papers asking me to do the same thing you are asking ... cover the parade.”

She stood to her feet, took two steps toward me, and stopped short of my personal space. “Preston, I understand everything you just said but I will be writing this article. No one else. You only share what you’re comfortable with sharing, and I only print what you approve. Those other papers aren’t offering you that.” She smiled, taking another step forward.

This time she invaded that thin line that people would say a person was too close for comfort. *However, for me, she isn’t close enough.*

I shook my head at my own thoughts. It scared the shit out of me to be thinking in this way. I was a man of self-control. I didn’t allow a woman to knock me off my game, but here I was willing to toss all my fucking morals and self-discipline in the air like shredded confetti for a woman I just met.

I’d never had a deep admiration for a woman the way I had for Violet. I knew nothing about her, and here I was contemplating on how I could tap into her brain, insert myself into her life, and learn her inner thoughts. Like, what makes her Violet Wallace? Who were her parents? How was her

childhood? Did she enjoy reading as much as I do? Could she accept my weirdness?

“Mr. Scott,” she blurted with narrowed eyes.

“Sorry,” I said, shaking my head and taking another step back from her, but grimaced when the heel of my shoe hit the wall.

Here I was retreating as if Violet was a virus, a cold that I could catch, but I couldn't think straight with her being so close.

“Do we have a deal? Are you willing to allow *Rumor Room* to do a piece on you and the Mr. Black organization?” she asked, staring at me with those piercing brown eyes that could make a man surrender his soul.

Trust wasn't something I offered often but staring into Violet's eyes I saw a connection there that told me that just maybe I could trust her with the one thing I held close to my heart. Mr. Black was my birthright and I had to protect it, but with only a few days left before the celebration and us still having so much to do, I found myself saying, “Yes, we have deal.” But as quickly as I agreed, I added, “I am trusting you with telling the story on how you hear it and how you see it. Nothing more.” I gave her a deadpan stare.

Violet smiled. “I assure you, it will be exactly as you tell it to me.” She clapped her hands together. “I'll meet you here tomorrow morning, I will stay out of your way but will be your personal shadow.”

“Wait. What?” I held a hand in the air. “Shadow?”

“Yes.” She swung her brown bag on her shoulder. “I'll be with you every step of the way, until the article is printed.”

“Is that necessary?” I asked with a frown.

“It is.” She nodded. “I have so many questions, there's so much to cover. You will go on with your daily activities as you normally would, and I will record it.”

Feeling uneasy about my life being on display for everyone to read gave me pause. There wasn't much to know

about me ... I mean, I wasn't a criminal or anything, but like anyone else, I had a past.

"O-Okay," I stammered. "See you tomorrow."

Violet gave me one last smile before she turned and left.

Jack, Robert, and Roger burst into my office, tripping over each other like teenaged boys.

"Please tell me you're going to hit that?" Roger asked.

"That fool ain't going to hit it, he's going to bore her to death with his history lessons," Jack chimed in.

"Have some faith in our guy," Robert added.

"Shut up," I yelled. "And fuck you, Jack," I stated with a side-eye.

Roger chortled.

"Listen to how y'all are talking. Who says hit that anymore?" I mocked Roger. "We're not in high school," I told them with a stern gaze. "Anyway," I waved a hand at them and strolled out of the office, "we have a lot to do in the next couple of days. So, let's get to work, guys, and let's stay the hell out of my personal life."

With a glance over my shoulder, I clapped my hands at the men standing in place. "C'mon."

Jack huffed. "You forget we're not your students, Pres. You can't just order us around."

"Right, I'm sorry." I turned around to gaze at the three men. "I'm just stressed. That's all," I muttered, rubbing the side of my face with a steady hand.

"That's why the members of Mr. Black got your back," Roger stated, clasping a hand on my shoulder.

I sighed. "Thanks, but I need everyone to pull their own weight to make sure this celebration is like no other. I have the media taken care of," I mumbled, pouring a cup of hot coffee from the kitchenette area.

“I don’t know about letting *Rumor Room* cover the Juneteenth parade,” Robert proclaimed. “I mean, their reputation ain’t good, bro.”

Stalling the teacup halfway to my lips, I agreed. “I know, but I was ensured that the article they write will be authentic to who we are as a brotherhood.”

Robert huffed, as the rest of the guys gave me a wry gaze. Taking a sip of the hot coffee in my hand, my stomach did a flop as I truly hoped that was true.

## Chapter Four

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Violet

I tiptoed into the massive lecture hall on Arizona University's campus and sat in the last row. Glancing down at my watch, I sighed, because I was thirty minutes late because of traffic. Preston stood front and center with a microphone head piece on his head, a pointy stick in hand, while pacing back and forth on the stage that he stood on. The hundred or so students scattered throughout the hall hung on to his every word and scribbled notes on a notepad or typed on their shiny laptops.

The picture on Google didn't do this man justice. He was much finer in person. It took everything in me yesterday to keep my composure at the Mr. Black office. How was it that I could go five years without being attracted to a man to date and after one glance, one interaction, and one touch of the hand, I was envisioning my wedding?

*Get a grip, girl.* Don't get me wrong, I'd seen fine men before, but never had I met a man who was handsome and smart.

Taking out my sketchpad, I watched his posture and the way he controlled the room. He spoke with so much conviction, authority about the Atlantic slave trade and how African Americans was forced into slavery. His awareness of the subject had me on the edge of my seat, awaiting what he would say next.

The students were aroused as well as they raised their hands to ask questions. He answered each one and challenged one boy to read more and make his own assumptions about Malcolm X. He went on to tell the class that they should read Malcolm's biography for themselves; to understand who he was and what he believed in. He told them the history books would only tell you so much, but you had to go beyond the page. I drew him while taking notes. Drawing was one of my pastimes. I wished I could do it often, but for some reason in the last year, I hadn't felt motivated, until now.

My black ink pen flew across the white pages of my notepad to try and capture the brilliance of who he was. His awareness of history was undeniable. His observation was spot on as he left room for debates, while welcoming his students to disagree with him ... to think outside of the box.

To say I was impressed with his mind would be putting it lightly. I was like a sponge, I wanted to suck up his knowledge in the matter and him.

Ten minutes later, the class had ended, and Preston began packing up his black leather bag. Making my way down the twenty or so steps, smiling I said to his back, "You were brilliant up there."

He turned around abruptly and stared at me for one brief moment before asking, "You like history?"

Chuckling, I nodded. "Yes, it was one of my favorite subjects in high school, but," I pointed a finger at him, "I don't know it like you do."

"All you need is an open mind, and the rest will come."

"Hmmm," I moaned, jotting down the words he'd just spoken.

"Did you just write that?" he asked inquisitively.

"Yes," I told him. "I don't want to forget what you said."

"So, are you printing everything I say?" He smirked, at the same time he slung the bag strap across his chest.

“Maybe.” I frowned, staring down at my notes. “I write a lot, and then I go through my notes to pick out the key points.”

Nodding, he sidestepped me to make his way up the stairs. I couldn’t stop my eyes from traveling down to his tight butt and ventured upward to his broad shoulders. Licking my lips, I had to admit, Preston was a beautiful man, somewhat of a delicious specimen, but he definitely had that nerd vibe going on.

“Hey,” I called out to him, “can I join more of your classes about history after this article is written?”

He lifted eyebrow. “Are you really interested in African American History?” he asked, as if I was joking with him on the matter.

“I am,” I revealed truthfully, thinking back about my dreams as a kid. Me wanting to be an historian, and my mother having other plans for my future. But he didn’t need to know all of that.

“Sure,” he answered, narrowing his eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing,” he stated, pushing the spectacles he wore up his nose.

“Okay, where next?” I nearly sprinted forward to keep up with his long strides.

He glanced over his shoulder again, ascending the steps two at a time. “To the community center, where I volunteer at one day a week.”

Slowing my steps, I glared at him with confusion.

He must’ve noticed I was no longer trailing him when he turned to face me. “What’s wrong?”

“How do you have time to teach, mentor, and fulfill your duties as Mr. Black with only twenty-four hours in a day?”

He smirked, like he knew a secret that I didn’t. “You make time for what’s important to you.” He started walking up the remainder of the stairs.

“Plus,” he yelled over his shoulder, “there’s more to me than what people see on the surface. I hope you can keep up today.” He laughed.

“Me too,” I whispered more to myself.

Two hours later, we were at the community center, where Preston spoke to the boys ranging from the ages of thirteen to seventeen about life, school, priorities, and staying out of trouble. Like at the university, these kids seemed to respect him and hang on to what he would say next.

There was only one man in my life who I could remember who portrayed such obedience from a group of people ... my father. He was a stern man, but when he spoke people paid attention.

It seemed this year the Mr. Black organization got it right. Not that they hadn’t in the past years, but with Preston, he had so many layers.

After the lecture, Preston played basketball with a few of the boys, while I sat on the bleachers, writing and assessing him. Our eyes seemed to connect a few times from across the court, but each time they did, I would bury my head back in my notepad.

Nothing good would come out of me obsessing over a man who seemed uninterested. *I don’t even know why you let your mind go there.* This was a business transaction and I had to keep reminding myself to be professional. I didn’t date coworkers and that was exactly how I viewed Preston. Granted, we weren’t working for the same company, but I had a job to do. And romance plus attraction had no place in this scenario.

After a fifteen-minute game, the ball bounced in my direction and hit my leg.

“Ouch,” I squealed, rubbing my knee cap.

“Hey, can you throw that back?” a skinny boy asked from the court.

Picking up the orange ball, I turned it slightly in my hand and tossed it back onto the court.



Instead of Preston resuming the game, he trekked over to where I sat, bent down to eye level with me, and quipped, “Come play ball with us.”

“Huh?” I bellowed, “Play ball?”

“Yes.” He extended a hand to me.

“Nah.” I waved him off.

He cocked his head to the side. “Are you scared?”

“Nope,” I revealed. “Actually,” I added with a smile, “I used to play in high school but that was a long time ago, and I’m too old. Plus, I have on this dress, it’ll get in the way.”

“Excuses,” he declared. “You ain’t that old.”

I twisted my lips to the side and wanted to tell him I was older than him. Thanks to Wikipedia, I knew I had three years on him.

“And that dress ...” He eyed me up and down with a hint of lust, I think. “It’ll be okay,” he confessed. “It’s loose fitting. We’ll go easy on you.”

“Ha-ha,” I retorted. “That’s a good one, but it’s still a no.”

He took me by the hand, and I could have sworn my insides shuddered at the connection, but as quickly as it did, I snatched my hand back.

“I can’t, Preston,” I told him. “I’m on the job.”

“Nonsense,” he uttered and picked my hand up again, but this time he tugged me from my seat.

If the attraction wasn’t strong and if this was anyone else, I would put up a fight. But with Preston, I allowed him to drag me down the bleachers and onto the court.

“I was trying not to embarrass you in front of your students,” I revealed with a hand on my hip.

He guffaws, “Let’s see what you got,” he mouthed off.

He took off his glasses and shoved them in his pocket. Staring at his face, clear of spectacles, made my breath catch. He had that sexy, innocent look going on. The one that my

mother warned me to be careful of. She said a man who looked like they could do no wrong were usually the ones who would ruin you for life. That's one of the reasons I'd never allowed anyone to get to close. Devin was the only man who got close enough but I cut him at the knees when I saw his fuck boy ways.

Preston loomed over me like a guardian angel and dribbled the ball in front of me, grinning. His laugh was so infectious, and all I wanted to do was reach out and trace the planes of his face.

*Focus on the ball.* Staring down at him tossing the ball between his legs, I saw my opportunity for a steal. When I double dribbled it out of his hands and ran down the court, my loose-fitting sundress didn't restrict me but flowed around my legs effortlessly. After side stepping one of the boys on the court who was standing in front of me with his hands stretched wide, I pulled up mid court and shot a jumper.

Within seconds, all you could hear throughout the gymnasium was swoosh. As the ball faded through the net, the young boys turned to me holding fists to their mouths and saying, "Daaaaang, shorty got mad skills, Professor P."

"Your girlfriend can hoop better than you," one boy exclaimed, coming over to where I stood, trying to fist bump me.

I hadn't really responded well to this generation's whole fist bumping thing yet, but I knew how to perform the act.

"Aight, chill out," Preston told the group of boys. "Y'all never seen a woman hoop before?" he teased. "She just had beginner's luck."

"What?" I protested, with both of my hands on my hip. "Give me that ball." I reached for it, but Preston held it behind his back.

"Nah, remember you didn't want to play, you were on the job, you're too old, and your dress would get in the way," he mocked me from earlier.

“Shut up,” I told him with a grin but immediately apologized. “I’m sorry for saying that. It was so unprofessional of me to tell you to shut up. I got caught up in the hype of everything and it just—”

“Shut up, Violet.”

Startled, I glanced up at his amused face and we both tumbled over in laughter.

The boys who were on the court moments ago had floated off to the sidelines and were engaging in conversation.

“It’s cool,” he assured me when his laughter subsided. “You don’t have to walk around on eggshells with me. Let loose, be yourself, and I’ll do the same. Whatever you write about me I don’t want it to be fake but true to who I am as a person. I’ll show you me and you show me you. Deal?”

I furrowed my eyebrows. This wasn’t how a journalist did things. We were professionals, we stayed detached from the story, gathered intel, and didn’t get involved with our subject.

“I have to stay professional,” I pointed out to him. “I have to stay the course and get the story I sought after.”

Preston massaged the back of his neck and reared back on the heel of his tennis shoes. “These are the terms, Violet. I can’t show someone who I am fully if they’re not giving me the same energy.”

The chatter in the gym grew louder when a second wave of boys walked in tossing their gym bags on the floor and hitting the court dribbling balls from the cart in the corner.

Tuning back into what Preston had all but demanded made me pause. *Why does he want to get to know me? Would he ask the same of a male reporter?*

Avoiding his gaze, I admitted, “I’m a private person, Preston. I don’t let people in so easily and I don’t like to mix my personal life with business. Can you understand that?”

“I do, but I’m private as well, Violet. Opening up my life to the world is taking me out of my comfort zone. Plus, people are so judgy these days. They criticize everything about you

from your facial appearance to your clothes. They like to find dirt and publicize it to the world. I have more to lose here, Violet. What are you losing by showing yourself too only me?”

Before I could speak, he continued, “This woman walked into my office,” he smiled, “and persuaded me to put my organization and life on display. I took a chance on *her*.”

He licked his lips, and my legs buckled at the simple act. He was right, and how could I argue with what he’d just said? Truth was, he was risking everything by allowing a stranger to write his story, and all I was risking—something that might’ve been small to others but was my pride and joy— was my heart.

“Okay,” I muttered. “This will be a two-way street. I’ll show you who I am and the things that are important to me.”

“Now it seems we’re finally agreeing.”

Smiling, I made my way off the court as the boys took over playing a full court game. Preston strolled over to the corner of the gym to retrieve his belongings. As I stared in his direction, I couldn’t help but think there was something happening between us. It’d only been two days, but I felt it the first day he shook my hand in his office and I still could feel it now.

However, I couldn’t get wrapped up in my own desires. I had a job to do, and if Devin taught me anything, it was that you didn’t date your subjects ... it was my number one cardinal rule.

## Chapter Five

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Preston

One hour ago, Violet messaged me to meet her on the corner of Ray McDonald and Pine Avenue in the Walmart parking lot. Glancing up again at the street sign, I double checked the text message to make sure I was in the right place.

“This is it,” I mumbled.

She was fashionably five minutes late, which was becoming her norm. I could see she had a problem with time when she showed up at the lecture hall thirty minutes late the other day. Although she had sat in the back row, I was fully aware that she had entered the room.

My awareness of her was like a bee drawn to honey, something I couldn't quite explain. Yet, my plan to get her to show me who she was, was strategically set in place. I needed to know if we were compatible—see if we had anything in common. There's no way I could miss the signs this time if I took my time. Thinking back to the other women I've dated, I decided I'd met their representatives, and within two months in the relationship the real *them* showed up.

*There's no way I could be blindsided this time*, I thought. Hearing my phone chime in my middle console, I grabbed it.

“Hello,” I blurted without checking the caller ID.

“Pres.”

Frowning, I replied, “What, Patrick?”

“I need you to cover the bookstore today, one of the students called off sick—”

“Nah, man,” I interrupted him. “I can’t. I’m meeting someone now, and I have to get over to the vendors to get things together for the Juneteenth parade.”

“Fool, this ain’t open for negotiation,” he warned. “Your part owner, too, and I need you to start acting like it.”

A car skidded beside me, and I craned my neck to my left to see Violet hopping out of the car, looking like a sweet nectarine. Her orange sundress whipped through the air on this hot, muggy summer day. June had always been a death month for Arizona. Most people didn’t come outside until the sun went down. My friends and I would joke at times that Arizona was the vampire state.

“Hey, Pat, I’ll call you back—”

“Nah, no need. Just show yo ass—”

*Click.* I hit the end button on my brother’s threatening words and exited the car.

Strolling to the front of the car, the wind picked up and I caught a whiff of Violet’s subtle perfume wafting in the air. The scent teased my nostrils as my dick hardened. Panicking, I couldn’t believe she was having this type of effect on me.

Don’t get me wrong, I was a man, and did manly shit, but I was a man who controlled his desires, hormones, and the way I reacted to things. But with *her* near me, my body reacted without notice and that shit was scary as hell for a person who was used to taming the monster inside.

All men had one—a monster that hid underneath the skin, smiled, and nodded on cue, but when provoked, it was lethal.

*Which confirms I should never be alone with Violet.*

“Where are your glasses?” she asked, frowning, snapping me from my reverie and sounding a little disappointed.

“Contacts,” I told her. “Sometimes I switch it up.”

“Ah.” She eyed me again with a hint of approval shining in her eyes.

“Why did you ask to meet here?” I wondered, staring up at the brown sign.

“Oh.” She clasped her hands together. “Look up.”

“Okay.” I nodded. “What’s so special about this street?”

“That’s my father,” she stated proudly.

“Wait, Ray McDonald is your father?” I took a step back from her.

“Yes, you know him?”

“Well, not exactly but he’s a legend in Scottsdale. He was the only coach who broke the racial barriers and led the most diverse football team to six championships. Plus, he was an activist in the community, fighting for better healthcare for the black and brown communities. He also joined rallies for unjust laws. I mean, I could go on, but I won’t, because you know all of this.”

She smiled so wide at me that I gave it right back. “Wow, Preston, it was like you just read his Wikipedia.”

Smirking, I revealed, “I love to read, but especially about positive people who have made a change in my city.” Taking another step back from her, I stalled on my next question, because I wasn’t sure how she would take it, but I had to ask. “Why do y’all have different last names?”

She answered like she was expecting the question when she blurted, “My mother and father never married. I took on my mom’s last name, although my father wanted me to have his. My mother claimed that she didn’t want to have a different last name than her child, because it would be harder to transact business for me.” She twisted her lips and added, “My dad never believed her, but I stayed out of it, because it was their shit to figure out.

“Was I wrong?” She stared up at me with glossy eyes.

“Hell nah,” I told her. “Sometimes as a child it’s best to let the adults figure their own shit out.”

She nodded. “Exactly. What about you? Where’s your family? Any siblings?” she fired off.

Leaning against the hood of the car, I told her, “I have one brother, and my mother passed away, but we still have our dad.”

She gasped. “I’m so sorry to hear that, Preston.” She pulled out a tape recorder. “Do you mind if I tape these questions or is it too fresh to talk about?”

“I’m good,” I lied, forcing down the lump that had forged its way in my throat. Anytime I spoke of my mother, I would catch a chill. It was as if even mentioning her name was like disturbing her spirit. I know that shit sounded crazy as hell, but I was all into that supernatural shit.

“Can you tell me about your childhood?” She stuck the recorder in face, and I instantly clamed up.

“What’s wrong?” She clicked the off button.

“Nothing.” I shook my head. “Just being recorded makes me nervous. What if I say the wrong thing?”

“I’ll edit everything, delete the parts you don’t like.”

Inhaling, I divulged everything to Violet. Five minutes into the conversation, I had started to feel at ease as I rambled on about my parents and lastly my grandfather.

At times, Violet turned off the recorder and offered her condolences for my grandpa. And when I told her he was one of the founders who discovered Mr. Black, she hit the end button again. She made sure I was okay with all of this being recorded. She said this segment would most likely make it in her article.

An hour later, we had made it to one of the vendors that I needed to sign the contract for the rentals of the floats. Our second stop was to the high school to ask the principal for their marching band, cheerleaders, and majorettes. We had one more stop to make at a rival high school across town. I thought it’d be a good idea to have a battle of the bands and their drumlines perform at the parade.



“You ate?” Violet asked as we walked out of the school with the principal’s support to allow his students to participate in the largest Juneteenth parade ever.

Answering a text message from Lester, who finally decided to surface and do some work, I stately nonchalantly, “Only breakfast,” never taking my eyes off my phone.

“Well,” she smacked her lips, “my girl, Lauren, owns a little shack not too far from here.”

Another text came through but this time it was from my brother threatening to beat my ass if I didn’t get to the bookstore.

“Yes,” I replied.

“What did I say, Preston?”

“Huh?” I snapped my head forward.

“What are you saying yes to?”

“Uh hmmm ...” Smiling, I told her, “I don’t know, say that again.”

“What has your attention?”

Blowing out a long breath, I sighed. “Can I take a raincheck? I need to go release my brother from the bookstore.”

“I can go with you.” She beamed.

“To the bookstore?”

She nodded up and down eagerly. “Yes.”

“I thought I heard you say something about eating.”

“I did, but I thought you didn’t hear it,” she challenged.

I chuckled. “I have partial hearing.”

“More like selective hearing,” she teased.

“Okay.” I slid my phone in my back pocket. “How about we go to my bookstore, and you can order takeout?”

“Alright,” she agreed. “I can have UberEATS deliver it.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I strolled around to the driver’s side of the car. “Trail me, but I’ll shoot you the address to the bookstore in case you get lost.”

She nodded, as I hopped in my truck and sped down the street.

Twenty-five minutes later, we were pulling up to Scott’s Bookstore, where my brother was already standing outside pacing the sidewalk with his phone plastered to his ear.

“Here’s this asshole now,” I heard him say in the receiver.

“Don’t start,” I told him, walking up to the door.

“Whateva ...” He paused when Violet walked up behind me.

“Let me call you back.” He ended his call and turned toward her. “And who is this?” he asked with a hint of flirtiness in his voice.

“Violet,” I proclaimed over my shoulder. “And, Violet, this is my brother, Patrick.”

“Hi, nice to meet you.” She smiled at him.

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine.”

Rolling my eyes at Patrick’s sudden mood change, I made my way into the bookstore with him in tow and Violet by my side. Patrick was a sucker for a woman with a pretty face. I knew his MO; he would wine and dine her, get what he wanted, and hit the road in a couple of months. He’d left a few broken hearts in his wake. In high school, he was a beast with all the girls he had pining after him who he never took seriously or made a commitment to.

“So, how can I help you?” Patrick asked.

“Oh no, I’m not here to purchase a book. I’m a reporter for *Rumor Room*. We’re doing a piece on your brother and the Mr. Black organization.”

“Meh, that lame ain’t that important,” he stated with a wave of his hand. “My life is more interesting,” he vented.

“An interesting asshole,” I muttered to myself, while counting the cash register.

“I heard that.” He furrowed his eyebrows.

Violet stifled a laugh. “I love this banter between you two. I’m an only child so I always wished I had someone to argue and fight with growing up.”

“It’s overrated,” I told her with a side-eye.

“Truly,” Patrick agreed.

“I thought you had somewhere to be?” I asked, frowning at my brother.

“Right.” He smiled at Violet. “I’ll be back shortly.” He backed up and bumped into one of the bookshelves.

Shaking my head, I muttered, “Clown,” as I continued to count the singles in the draw so I could make a bank run after I left.

Moments after Patrick had left, Violet ordered us some food from her friend’s restaurant only a few blocks away. Instead of us having a delivery service pick the food up, her friend agreed to personally drop it off.

An awkward silence fell between us, as I sat on a stool behind the counter, and she sat only a few steps away from me sketching in her notepad. She hadn’t said much since my brother left, but kept her head down jotting notes. I had observed her a few times today—our eyes would meet, and she’d suddenly look away. Once our hands grazed, and she snatched it back like she’d just been burned.

I was definitely into her, but I had to keep reminding myself that this was business, and she wasn’t interested in me but doing a job. She was a reporter, hungry for a story. I would see the reporters on TV going in places that no one should go, seeking out answers that no one should ask, yet it didn’t stop them. So, I knew if Violet was anything like those reporters there was nothing she wouldn’t be willing to do, and that meant playing with my feelings to get what she wanted.

“How old were you when you got into the Mr. Black organization?” she asked, clicking on her recorder and snapping me from my thoughts.

“My brother and I became members at twenty-one.”

“Wow! What does being Mr. Black Scottsdale means to you?”

“Everything,” I confessed to her with a faraway gaze. “It’s an honor to hold such a prestigious title. That’s why this year, for Juneteenth, I want our parade to be epic. This organization was near and dear to my grandpa, and he was the man I looked up to the most. He showed me the ways of the world, introduced me to the struggles of our people.

“One of his sayings was any man can read a book, but a great man would understand and apply what he read to his life to make a difference.”

“I love that.” She stared at me with admiration.

“Yeah, he was a smart man but very strict.”

“I have a confession to make.” She fidgeted with her fingers. “My father was a member of the Mr. Black Organization.”

“Yes, I knew that.”

“How?” she asked in surprise. “You didn’t say anything earlier when you ran down his life story.”

Shrugging, I replied, “It was your story to tell but I saw his name in the Mr. Black log. When a Mr. Black takes office in their city, we get a booklet of all the past and present members who ever served.”

She opened her mouth, but the bells chimed above the door when a customer walked in.

“Do you have any mystery books?” a young girl, who looked to be in her teens asked.

Pointing to the corner of the room, I told her, “Two bookcases to the back and to your left.”

She nodded and bounced off.

“What else are you not telling me, Preston?”

Standing, I locked eyes with her. “I am an open book, so the question is what are you not telling me?”

Her eyes darkened at the same time the chimes above the door sounded again. In walked a tall, light-skinned girl, with a big, brown paper bag in her hand.

“Hey, girl.” She sat the bag on the counter and exhaled, obviously out of breath. “Can you believe I walked here? I thought you said it was like three blocks away. Chile, that was more like six blocks away.”

Violet giggled. “Sorry, girl, but I want you to meet Preston.”

She looked up at me and grinned. “Ahhhh ... Ok-kayy, I see you, girl.”

“Stop it, Lauren.” Violet blushed. “He’s Mr. Black Scottsdale and I’m doing an article on him.”

“Mhmm,” she drawled, staring at us both. “If you say so,” she mumbled and extended a hand to me.

After a few minutes of chitchat, Lauren looked at her watch.

“Let’s catch up soon, girl,” Lauren voiced.

“Sure thing.” Violet walked around the counter and embraced Lauren in a hug. “There’s so much we need to talk about.”

“Yep, I bet.” Lauren chuckled, giving me one last glance before she strolled out the door.

“Please ignore her.” Violet shook head. “I swear she’s much nicer than what she seems.”

“I thought she was cool,” I stated, ripping open the stapled brown bag.

“She is. We met in college and have been friends ever since. We’re like sisters.”

Nodding, I said, “That’s awesome.”

Suddenly, a growl echoed through the room and Violet slapped a hand over her stomach. “Oh my god, that was so embarrassing.”

Smiling, I hurried my hands to take out the boxes of rice. “Let me get your plate out first.”

She nudged my arm, as we both hooted out loud.

## Chapter Six

---

Violet

The days flew by as I shadowed Preston in running his errands to secure everything for the Juneteenth celebration. We were only six hours away from the celebration of African American's Freedom Day. We stood on the corner of Central Avenue, where the parade would start but would end on Seventh Street.

This was the first time in history where *we* were being honored—an actual day being set aside to take a moment of silence for the day slaves received their freedom, June the nineteenth. It saddened me to know that throughout life, in some kind of way they failed to mention this in our history books in school. We were robbed of an opportunity to learn about us.

If Christopher Columbus had a day for discovering America, which was still being challenged today as untrue, then why didn't the race of people who fought, died, and built this country on their backs have a day to be celebrated?

Nevertheless, the day had finally arrived. And like my mother used to say, today is better than never to do the right thing. Although this day was being celebrated all across the world, I couldn't forget the man who made it possible for Scottsdale.

For some reason, I couldn't get Preston Scott off my mind. The man had invaded my dreams at night, dominated my

thoughts throughout the day.

*Y'all spending too much time together.* That's exactly what was going on. I'd seen and been with him for the last six days and now he knew more about me than I'd allowed any individual to know.

We visited his grandpa and mother's grave, met his father a few days ago, went to his favorite Italian restaurant, spoke about his favorite color, and realized he'd read hundreds of books on his kindle reader.

During the time we spent together, just by being patient, he'd knocked down those walls that took me years to build.

I couldn't sleep or eat, which wasn't a good thing for me, because I loved to eat.

Smiling, I thought about how I tried to opt out from going to see the various vendors, but he asked me to be by his side. He told me if I wanted to know him, I'd have to be with him every step of the way. And that's exactly what I did. We met with the food truck owners, drove to the Eastside to meet with an African tribe dancer, he ordered rides for the kids to be set up in a nearby park, and he even encouraged people to come out wearing their African attire.

The other Mr. Black members took care of the other duties as Preston gave them direction, challenging them to come up with new and fresh ideas.

I stood on the sidelines and watched his every move. It was sexy as hell to see a man who exuded confidence. However, Preston was more than that—he was not only smart and extremely handsome, but he had this air about him. It was a little bit of cockiness and a lot of I am-the-shit-wrapped in one beautiful package.

Yet, with his friends I could tell he seemed to filter to the back, become overshadowed by them and their big personalities but stayed humble through it all. There was a lot to say about a man like that.

Juneteenth Celebration, the banner read with a tag line underneath, scribbled in white cursive. Stepping closer to it, I



whispered, “Honoring the past and the present.” As I narrowed my eyes at the beautifully written slogan, I smiled with pride.

“What do you think?” Preston asked, approaching me from behind.

Without turning around, I boasted, “It’s amazing.”

He stepped on the side of me, staring upward at the banner and nodded. “Yeah, I wanted to not forget the people who came before us, and I wanted to give homage to the folks who’re here today.” He turned to face me. “Like your father and my grandpa, two great men gone but not forgotten.” He got a faraway look in his eyes.

Touching his arm, I turned slightly to face him, the feelings overwhelming me by the seconds. Something stirred inside when I flung my arms over his shoulders and hugged him. For a split second, I wondered if I went too far, but within moments, he brought a hand around my waist and squeezed lightly.

Rearing back, to gaze into his dark eyes, I melted. I’m not sure how it happened, but it did. I’d be lying if I said I hadn’t imagined the moment—or damn near obsessed over it—but he bent slightly at the waist and captured my mouth.

Neither one of us moved. I was savoring the moment, enjoying the feel of his lips on mine, relishing in the feel of his rock-hard body against mine. Somewhere between right and wrong, I zoned out. They both were having an internal battle.

The right side was telling me how good it felt to have a man close. Especially the man I wanted and deserved in my life. The wrong side was knocking me upside the head, begging me to not get involved with a client, reminding me that this was business. But no matter how much the wrong side begged me to step away, my body got closer to him. There was no going back when he parted my mouth with his tongue, and there we stood, French kissing in the middle of the blocked off street.

I’d done the act of French kissing a few times before, but I wouldn’t say I was a master at it. However, Preston took the

lead, drawing me closer to him when I whimpered. At one moment I thought he would release me from the sounds I released, but he took it one step further when he captured the bottom of my lip in his and sucked it into his mouth, causing me to brace myself by gripping his forearms.

“God,” I moaned against his lips. No man had ever kissed me in this way. He was gentle, yet rough, possessive, yet submissive. It was stirring my insides into a crazy frenzy, tangled thread.

“Damn, Pres.”

Both of our heads snapped to the side, to stare into the eyes of one of the Mr. Black members, Lester. Preston took a step back from me, and I sheepishly smiled, wishing I could disappear into the pavement.

“Hmmm, did you start lining up the acts?” Preston asked, avoiding my gaze and getting right to business.

Lester hesitated for a second, smiled in my direction, and told him, “Nah, that’s why I came looking for you. The coordinator needs to know how you want folks lined up.”

Preston nodded. “Right. Let’s get this handled.” He turned toward me, his face unreadable when he asked, “Are you good by yourself for a while?”

When I nodded, he jetted behind Lester and got lost in the crowd.

The parade had started six hours later to be exact. The floats came down Central Avenue as scheduled. The Mr. Black float was first as I stood cheering with the crowd with my mother, Mary, at my right and Lauren to my left. She had closed the restaurant early to meet me.

Preston stood front and center waving on the float decked out in black and gold. All twenty or so men wore all black suits with gold bowties. They all had a black cane in their hand as they waved to the crowd. After the kiss I had with Preston, I hadn’t seen him since. Granted, he was busy pulling off the biggest Juneteenth event ever, but I expected him to come

back. For us to talk about what happened. I wanted to be clear on what this was.

*What exactly is this?*

“Right,” I agreed with myself. Hopefully we could figure it out together.

My mother nudged my arm. “Oh look, they have a civil rights float.” She beamed and yelled out loud with the crowd. It was amazing to see pictures of Martin Luther King Jr., W.E.B. Dubois, Thurgood Marshall, and Rosa Parks to name a few.

The next couple of floats were honoring African American music. A jazz float came rolling past with a trumpet, saxophone, trombone, guitar, and a white piano sat in the center as the men played music from Billie Holiday. As a woman stepped to the mic and sang her song “Strange Fruit,” the crowd roared to life. A gospel choir float came next.

“Oh snap!” Lauren hopped up and down. “You can’t have a Juneteenth parade without honoring the gospel.” She wiggled her hips when the choir started singing “Stomp” by Kirk Franklin.

A lady next to me broke out in a dance and sang the song out loud, causing me to chuckle.

The last float was honoring the blues. B.B. King songs filtered through the air. My mother started humming the lyrics to “The Thrill Is Gone” as she snapped her fingers and bobbed her head. The last float was music from the era we were in now. Rap, pop, and R&B comingled together like a sweet harmony.

Everybody sang along to one of Jay-Z songs, “Run This Town.” It didn’t stop there when “Lose Yourself,” an Eminem song, came through the speakers.

The crowd was hyped and every TV outlet in Scottsdale was reporting on the event as it happened. I spotted a few of *Rumor Room’s* competitors in the crowd, observing, taking notes and snapping pictures. However, my paper had an

exclusive story, a behind-the-scenes closeup and they didn't have that.

In fact, I had submitted my story to my chief editor this morning. After I carefully went over everything with Preston and he approved what would be written, I typed it up and sent it over. To me, I felt like this piece was the best report I'd done. Not only did I do it on a story that meant everything to me, but I did it on a strong, Black man. One who was a leader in his community and an activist to his friends. I had interviewed some of the Mr. Blacks from the organization and they spoke highly of his character. Even made the comment that we needed more Black men like him in the world.

The more I learned about Preston, the more I fell for him. There was no escaping this.

"Oh shit," Lauren shouted, but slapped a hand over her mouth when she stared at my mother. "I am so sorry, Ms. Mary."

My mother waved her off as we all cheered for the marching bands coming down the street. The drums were loud, the trumpets blew on accord, and the cheerleaders and majorettes were on cue as they danced and twirled to the music. The evening was topped off with the drumline from both schools battling off front and center.

At one point, I thought the people would burst through the barriers as the cheers got louder and the stomping of feet overtook the downtown area.

Once that was done, people thought the parade had ended, but the AKAs, Delta Sigma Theta and Omega Psi Phi, stepped their way down the street. They chanted and each sorority or fraternity did a step show.

At that moment my ears rang, when all I could hear were people screaming. I glanced around and saw an old man sitting in a wheelchair with tears rolling down his face. This day was monumental for most, a day that none of us would forget. We were making history and it was good to see how far we had come.

Hours later, I had driven my mother home and was back in my car chatting on the phone with Lauren about the parade.

“Girl, that shit was amazing.” She laughed. “I haven’t seen nothing like that before. It was like he brought old school and new school together.”

I nodded as if she could see me. “Yes, girl, he’s brilliant.”

“And he just shut it down with that step show and the battle of the bands. I mean, that’s our culture, it’s what we’re known for.”

“I know, girl,” I stated, focusing on driving and trying to stop my mind from drifting to the man who owned my thoughts at the moment.

“So, what’re you going to do?”

“About what?” I frowned.

“Preston. I saw how he looks at you.”

I waved a hand in the air. “Girl, I don’t think he’s feeling me like that, that.”

“He’s feeling you,” she assured me.

*Beep. Beep.* My phone chimed, alerting me that I had another call.

“Let me call you back, Lauren.”

After clicking over, I blurted, “Hello.”

“Violet?” Staring at my car radio, I panicked. I didn’t save Preston’s number in my phone, so to hear his voice now sent a warm, tingling feeling through my veins.

“Yes,” I uttered.

“I need to talk to you. Can you stop by my place?”

Silence.

As I stared straight ahead at the red brake lights in front me, stopping at a yellow light, I sat there contemplating my next move. Once I entered his lair there would be no retreating and no second thoughts. We both knew what this was about—the attraction was too heavy; it’d been weighing on us both

from the first day we met. Anyone knows you can only outrun the heart for so long because in the end, it will get what it wants.

“Violet,” he repeated my name in a soft, yet strong timbre.

“Send me your address,” I stated.

Sighing, I did a U-turn when his address appeared in my text messages. I was tired of thinking, and tired of neglecting my body for what it was naturally born to do. I’d lived my life for far too long, standing on my own two feet. Feeling as if I didn’t need anyone to hold me, love me, or show me what a real man was all about.

Tonight, I was going to do what I wanted, and when morning came, I would think about my consequences. But when it was all said it done.

We’d always have ... tonight.

## Chapter Seven

---

Preston

I was tired of playing it safe. Finally, I was going to go after the woman of my desires and that's why I called Violet and asked her to come over. After the kiss we shared earlier, I couldn't get it out of my head. Even standing on that damn float during the parade my eyes searched for hers, but amongst the thousand or so people, I didn't find her. However, I knew she was out there, cheering on the parade she helped build, relishing in the fact that it was a long six days, but she'd finally gotten her story and from what I read, she was an extraordinary writer.

The timid knock on the door let me know that she had arrived. For her to even agree to come over so late let me know she'd been feeling this pull between us. I couldn't quite explain what it was, but it was there. Begging to be nourished and fulfilled.

Swinging open the door, I stepped back to let her enter.

"Hi," I said, as she sashayed past me. My eyes followed her ass as she stood in the middle of my living room and turned around.

"What is this, Preston?"

Closing the door, I turned, frowned, and rubbed the hair on my chin. "What do you mean?"

She paced the small area of my carpeted floor. “I need to know if you feel it, too. I can’t sleep, can’t eat, and can barely work.” She gazed up at me. “I like you and I think you like me, but I can’t be for sure. You only kissed me once, but before then, it seemed like you were more interested in my mind than being attracted me.” She huffed. “Do you want me or—”

I placed a finger to her lips; she was so busy in a rant that she hadn’t noticed I’d moved from my position at the door and was now right up in her personal space. “Violet, I’m a different type of man,” I told her. “The first initial attraction for me is a woman’s mind. How she thinks? What makes her tick? Who she is?”

Her mouth fell open.

However, it didn’t matter what I was saying to her, because her lips were teasing me to come closer and I followed the tug, when I bent to eye level with her and thrust my tongue into her mouth.

“Let me show you how much I want you,” I growled against her lips as I picked her up.

Her legs instantly swung around my waist. I walked her over to the wall, one hand working on the buttons of her shirt, while the other one kept her upright. We nipped and licked at each other as we tried to remove the barriers of clothes shielding us from each other.

Once I flung Violet’s shirt to the floor, she worked on the zipper of my pants as they fell and pooled at my ankles. She gathered the hem of my shirt in her hands and pulled it over my head, and I unzipped her pants and shimmied her out of them, along with her panties.

We were skin to skin, breath to breath, and all I had to do was thrust inside to feel her warmth. I kissed her again, flipped her around, and she gasped. Her face hugged the wall and her ass puckered in front of me. I reached in my pants pocket, grabbed the condom, ripped the foil with my teeth, sheathed myself, and placed one hand on Violet’s hip and the other one at her neck as I slipped inside of her dripping wet folds.



Halting, I laid my head against her back as the feeling overtook me. If I wasn't careful, I was about to bust a nut right then and there. Violet started to rock her hips into me, which caused me to thrust inside of her again. I stroked her nipples as I pulled in and out of her core, teasing her as I withdrew to the tip, only leaving the head in.

“Fuck me, Preston,” she breathed. “Harder,” she demanded.

And that was my undoing. I slammed into her with a mighty force. Sweat popped from my forehead as I slipped in, out, in, out, of her walls, increasing the pressure when I slipped a hand around to her pussy to play with her clit.

The act drove her crazy as she bucked into me and suddenly flipped around to face me. I picked her up again and walked her over to the couch, placing her on top of me. She slid down on my pulsating dick, rocked her hips into me even more, and flung her head back toward the ceiling.

Never in a million years did I think mine and Violet's first time would be like this. Don't get me wrong, the shit was amazing, but it was untamed, built-up frustration, and lust had taken over and was calling the shots tonight.

She lifted slightly from my lap and rode me hard. Her eyes lasered in on mine, her mouth slightly parted and her hair tousled around her shoulders, as I took a handful of her soft curls and yanked them backward. I thrust upward, and she clutched my shoulders and rode me like a stallion. She inserted a finger into my mouth, and I licked and sucked on it like a starving man.

I was losing it, my nut only minutes away, when she screamed, “Oh god, I'm coming.”

Burying my head in her bosom, I laid her down on the couch, never breaking our contact as she spread her legs wider, and I plunged into her over and over again.

Within in seconds, she trembled in my arms and clawed at my back as I felt the warm liquid release from her body. My own release rushed through me and the blood drained from my

veins. I became delirious as I fell over to my side, breathing hard.

“Are you okay?” She placed a hand on my chest.

“I am, that was a big one,” I admitted. “I haven’t had sex in a while,” I confessed, turning to face her. “And that nut just took everything out of me.”

She smiled. “What’s a while?”

*Damn, why does she want to know that?*

“A few months,” I stated truthfully.

“Oh, was she your last girlfriend?”

“Yes,” I told her. “I don’t have meaningless sex, Violet, and I don’t go around having one-night stands.”

She laid her head on my chest and rubbed a hand over my stomach. “I don’t do things like this either,” she whispered. “The last man I had sex with was one of my clients. It didn’t end well ... well, it never really started. I knew better than to mix business with pleasure, but I did it anyway and it damn near caused me everything. That’s why I moved back from New York. It was a cutthroat place, and the people in it were after what you could do for them.”

“Yeah, I understand that. At least you went after a new opportunity. I’ve never left Scottsdale.”

“Why not?” she asked.

Shrugging, I replied, “I don’t know, never really thought about leaving this place. Plus, when my grandfather fell ill, I spent all my time looking after him.”

She nodded, understanding shining in her eyes.

“Preston, I don’t want to put titles on us so early, but I was serious when I asked, what is this?”

Rubbing a hand down my face, I sat forward from the couch, pulling a throw blanket from the arm to cover us. “Let me say this ...” I touched her arm. “Thank you for helping with the parade. I’ve received so many good accolades about it and I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“I didn’t do anything but shadow you.”

“Not true. You gave suggestions when needed, you opened up to me about your parents, childhood, and so much more. You didn’t have to do that.”

She played with a loose thread hanging from the blanket and smiled.

“But to answer your question, you and I are doing this. I want it to happen. I’m not perfect, Violet. I’ve made a lot of mistakes in my life, but one thing you’ll never have to worry about is where my loyalty lies.”

“Thank you for that,” she stated, touching the side of my jaw. “I want this too, but didn’t want to get involved with a client. I’ve done that before, and it was a disaster. It discredited my character as a professional and that’s why I came back home from New York.”

“He was idiot,” I told her, squeezing her thighs, and running a finger over her areola. “I’ve been wanting to taste these,” I confessed.

When I dipped my head and took her plump nipple into my mouth, she gasped and threw her head back on the leather sofa. Inching a hand down between her legs, I stretched her wide, while inserting a finger into her wet pussy.

“Damn, baby, you’re still wet.”

“Hmmm,” she moaned with her eyes fastened shut.

Increasing her pleasure, I inserted another finger and pressed my thumb against her throbbing clit as my mouth attacked her nipples.

She bucked, begged me to enter her.

“Now, Preston,” she panted.

“Nah,” I whispered close to her ear as my tongue teased her earlobe. “I want to watch you come for me.”

And within seconds her legs clamped around my hand, her body jerking involuntary as her milky honey drenched my fingers.

“That’s it, baby. Let it go.”

Her body went limp underneath me, her eyes dripping low, until they finally closed. No more words were spoken that night. Only our bodies did the work and our minds connected in a way that neither one of us were prepared for.

\* \* \*

I was in the Mr. Black office sipping my coffee and writing the final checks to the vendors who had participated in the parade yesterday. I had taught a class at seven o’clock at the university and now I rubbed my eyes from exhaustion. Violet and I went at it all night. We slept for three to four hours but woke to enjoy the pleasures of each other over and over again. Her sex drive was like no other. How could such a petite woman have all that sexual frustration built up?

It didn’t matter because I was a willing participant for her to find the release she’d been looking for.

“Twelve o’clock,” I mumbled, stretching my arms above my head to release the tension aching in my back.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and the office was empty. Only the janitors and the maintenance men strolled around, having a free day because no one was in the building to confirm they were working.

Hearing rumbling in the front office, I sat forward in my swivel chair to listen better.

“Who’s there?” I yelled out loud.

“It’s me.” Roger rounded the corner with a bewildered gaze. I noticed that he was holding a newspaper in his right hand.

“Oh.” I sighed, sitting back in the chair and crossing my leg. “What you’re doing here on a Sunday? Your ass is barely here during the week.”

Roger approached my desk slowly and slapped the paper he was holding down on my desk. “Read this shit,” he

demanded.

My eyes slid down to the header, written in bold letters, *Rumor Room*. Violet said the article would be released on Monday, but I guess they made a special print.

I picked it up and unfolded it to see my face staring back at me. It was a nice picture of me wearing a pair of jeans, polo shirt, and my red, black, and green Gucci glasses.

“Are you reading?” Roger asked with a frown.

After lifting my gaze at him to say don’t rush me, I read the first few paragraphs. Everything sounded good until I got to the part about the Mr. Black Scottsdale section. The article read:

*Preston Scott, a college professor and a leader in his community, is part of a gangster organization. The Mr. Blacks only accept men and is a secret, underground brotherhood who are supposed to be serving the community, but we discovered who they really are. Black suit and bowties by day, and an organized gang by night. This selective organization claims to be for their people but are they the very ones hurting their community?*

I stood. “What the fuck, a gang?” I shouted, staring at Roger. “Who wrote this bullshit?”

He placed a hand in his side pocket. “Your girl.” He pointed his index finger at me. “I told you not to trust that fucking paper. No other Mr. Black has accepted their plea to do an article on us. But you allowed a nice ass, long legs, and a pretty face to persuade you to do something we all knew should’ve been a no.”

*She wouldn’t do this to me.*

As Roger went on ranting about my fucked-up choices, my phone started buzzing on my desk.

“Violet,” I stated out loud.

“Answer that shit.”

Without thinking, I hit the talk button and placed the phone on speaker for Roger to hear. This shit affected every member

in the Mr. Black organization, and they needed to hear.

“Preston, I can explain,” she rushed out.

Rubbing both of my hands down the middle of my face, my temper rose as I hit the end button to keep from saying something that I would spend a lifetime of trying to take back. Although, I didn’t think I would ever speak to her again after this stunt she pulled.

“Why’d you hang up?” Roger asked, pacing the floor and massaging the back of his neck.

“I don’t know, man. Her voice ... I can’t do this with her right now. I need to think about damage control.”

My phone buzzed again, and I silenced it.

“Think, Roger. We need to get ahead of this.”

He stopped his pacing and turned toward me. “Everybody knows that newspaper is a lying sack of shit, right?”

When I nodded, he continued, “We go to one of their competitors.” He snapped his fingers. “Actually, I know someone at the *Sun Tribune*, they owe me a favor. We will ask them to do a story on us. Basically, they will print the truth, and *we* slander *Rumor Room* for the lying piece shits they are.”

In my mind I agreed with Roger’s plans, but in my heart, I couldn’t shake the one question I kept asking myself. *Why would Violet do this to me?* I thought we were on the road to something special. I’d opened up to her more than I had ever opened up to anyone before. I told her things that were considered private, things I hadn’t even shared with my family. Yet, she betrayed me.

My phone rang again, and I cut it off after seeing her name float across my screen for the fifth time today.

“You know how to pick them, man.”

Tuning back into what Roger was saying, I blurted, “You’re right. Make the call to your contact.”

“Consider it done,” he stated. He turned to leave, but right before he did, he confessed, “I really thought she was the one for you. Y’all complemented each other well. Both of you were into some weird shit like history, the biography of random activists, and Kunta Kinte.” He chuckled lightly.

I smirked. I had told Roger about our daily chats, confided in him that I’d never felt this way about anyone. Which was why I revealed, “I was a fool. I am too trusting ... I guess that’s why I will always be second best.”

Roger strolled around the desk and slapped a strong hand on my shoulder. “Don’t get down on yourself, we all play the fool sometimes.”

Before I could respond, we heard commotion at our office suite.

“Ma’am, you can’t go in there,” someone yelled.

Roger and I rushed out of my office and down the aisle. By the time we made it to the front of the office, Violet stood in the doorway with a hand on her hip and her hair pulled up on her head in a messy ponytail.

“Escort her out,” I told the security guard.

“Don’t you touch me,” she threatened the man.

“We can call the police,” Roger exclaimed. “You can leave willingly or forcefully.”

She rolled her eyes in his direction and turned toward me. “Preston, all I need is ten minutes of your time to explain everything.”

Shaking my head, I told her, “There’s nothing to talk about. You betrayed me, and I trusted you.”

The security reached for her arm as she screamed, “I will sue your ass. Don’t touch me.”

He snapped his hand back to his side, as if her idle threat had shaken him.

“Ten minutes and then I’ll leave.”

Roger folded his arms and glanced at me. The security guard did the same, both waiting on my directions.

I could have had her dragged out, kicking, and screaming but I wasn't that asshole to belittle a woman in that way. Although it had crossed my mind at the moment.

“You have five minutes.”

“Fine.” She strolled past me and toward my office.

Gripping Roger's arm, I whispered, “Still continue with our plans.”

When he nodded, I closed the door behind him and the security guard.

Straightening the collar on my shirt, I did a slow stroll toward my office. I was in no rush to hear her bullshit and the weak apologizes, she'd rehearsed.



## Chapter Eight

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Violet

**H**e gave me five minutes to explain everything, and I hope that's enough time to make him understand.

“What?” Preston shouted as he entered the office standing behind me. Gone was the patient man I'd come to know over the past week and gone was the admiration he had toward me. Now he was this tyrant out for blood, ready to cast me aside like a broken shipmate who had nothing else to contribute.

“Preston, I had nothing to do with what they printed.”

“Four minutes.”

“What?”

“You have four minutes left.”

“Preston.”

“It was your story, right?” he asked with a scowl.

“Yes,” I admitted. “But I didn't write that.” I reached in my purse and pulled out the original manuscript I had submitted to my editor. “Here is what I gave them.”

He took it and slapped it down on the desk without a glance.

“I trusted you, Violet, and I don't trust easily.”

“You can trust me, Pres.”

“Nah, I can’t.”

My heart rate quickened at the blank stare he gave me. There was nothing there; his eyes were cold as ice, his posture stiff, and his body language standoffish.

“The owners of the papers got wind of the story I did on you and the Mr. Black organization,” I explained. “They spun the story to fit their narrative of who they really are. Times have changed, and unfortunately the people who own *Rumor Room* are still stuck in their ways. They didn’t want the truth that Mr. Black Scottsdale is an upstanding citizen and the fact the Mr. Black Organization is doing great things in the community. They want a scandal, they want—”

He interjected. “They want to sell papers and they didn’t think the truth would?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“But how did you not know, Violet? I mean, I still can’t trust you. Now Roger is out there trying to get ahead of this story. They could’ve just come after me, but when they mentioned the organization as a whole, that fucks with other people lives. It tarnishes our name.”

I know,” I cried. “My father was a part of the Mr. Black and that’s why I quit today. As soon as I read the story I put in my resignation.”

“You quit?” He frowned.

“Yes! I can’t be a part of an organization who twists stories for their own capital gain. It’s slander and it’s illegal. We should file a lawsuit.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “You would do that?”

“Yes, Preston.” I gripped his hand. “How do you not know that I would do anything to make this right?”

“Roger has a plan,” he revealed. “He has a contact at the *Sun Tribune*, and we will expose *Rumor Room* for the liars they are.”

“I have contacts there, too.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I used to work there but that’s a great plan.”

\* \* \*

Preston

Staring into her eyes, I could see the sincerity she had. As mad as I was, I believed her. Deep down, I hoped she was innocent in all of this. There was no way I could believe that she would use me to get a story to just speak ill of me. And plus, I didn’t think she could do that to her father. I might be a sucker for doing this, but I wrapped my arms around her and whispered into her ear, “I love you.”

She reared back with misty eyes and gazed up at me. “Are you just saying that?” She sniffled.

“Violet, I never say shit I don’t mean. You know that about me.”

She sniffled again and leaned toward me. “I love you, too.”

Leaning her back onto the desk, I sucked her lips into mine. She moaned underneath me as I stretched her body on the sturdy wood. My hands snaked up the short dress she wore that had been teasing me since she stepped in my office.

“Fuck me,” she asked breathlessly.

I shook my head; I had other plans. I yanked her dress above her belly button. Taking a whiff of her scent, my dick got hard as I slid her black panties from her legs. Spreading her thighs apart, I gazed down at her sweet clit and took it into my awaiting mouth.

She tasted just like home, as her body bucked and shivered underneath me. She was a place I’d looked for my entire life. Yet I wasn’t quite sure I would ever find it. Violet came into my life like a raging storm. Some people believed in love at first sight, but for me it was love at first touch.

As her moans filtered through the air and provoked feelings from me that I never dared to feel, I buried my tongue deeper into her core.

“I need you inside of me,” she panted.

Lifting from my knees, I unzipped my pants and slid into her wet pussy. My brain went to mush, my legs buckling underneath me at the overwhelming sensation.

*Jesus*

If my reaction was like this every time I entered her, I was a dead man walking.

# Epilogue

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Preston

One Year Later ...

“**R**umor Room is toast,” Violet squealed after she hung up the phone with the lawyers. “The Mr. Black Organization settled with them for an undisclosed amount. They have to print an apology letter in their next week’s paper to you and the organization.” She gleamed.

“Good job, baby,” I told her, pausing from reading a book I found on Amazon called *The King Inside* by Dr. Angelise M Rouse.

It had taken a year of battling with *Rumor Room* to get them to own up to their mistakes. We had a few attorneys who were Mr. Black members, and they took on the case free of charge. After we combated the story with a new print with the *Sun Tribune*, the war with *Rumor Room* began. They tried to slap us with a lawsuit of defamation of character.

In the end we prevailed, and the story that Violet had originally submitted was printed.

“Are you listening to me?”

“Yes, baby.” I shut the book and pulled her down into my lap.

She squealed. “Are you sure you’re okay with me moving in with you?” She glanced around my tiny apartment.

Taking a look at the mountain of boxes she had stacked in my kitchen, living room, and in the bedroom, I said, “Yes, but we definitely need to downsize.”

“Exactly.” She kissed my lips and hopped up. “I’ve placed a sticky note on everything that can go to the trash.”

Staring around, I frowned. “Why is all my stuff tagged?”

“Baaaaby,” she sing-songed. “It just doesn’t go with my vision.”

I glanced over at her pink love seat. “Tag that, too,” I pointed to the corner of the room, “because that thing definitely doesn’t go with my vision.”

We both laughed out loud as I swept her off her feet.

“Marry me, Violet Wallace.”

When her breath hitched, and her eyes widened, I continued, “I know we haven’t been dating that long and I know I’m not the easiest person to get along with at times. But I will humble myself before you because I love you.”

Tears rolled down the sides of her face as she hugged my neck. “What took you so long?” She giggled until I captured her mouth in a kiss and her laughter subsided into a sweet melody of moans.

# Celebrating Juneteenth in Scottsdale

There are so many ways to celebrate Juneteenth and our history!

**Here are some ways in Arizona:**

[Community Juneteenth Event](#)

[Juneteenth Celebration at Temple History Museum](#)

[Queen Creek Juneteenth](#)

[Juneteenth 2023 Black Wealth Fest](#)

[Juneteenth Celebration in Downtown Tempe](#)

## Excerpt : A Lustful Crush

Pike

*Eleven Years Ago ...*

*Summer*

*A Pisces can see beauty & darkness everywhere!*

*But beware of the calm before the storm ...*

The saying goes, you reap what you sow. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. My mother would preach those phrases to me daily. Why? Because she saw darkness in me. That's what she would say.

"Pike, I see blackness and water in your soul." Her angelic voice still rang in my ears.

They say a mother knows her child. Yet, at sixteen years old I was still figuring me out.

There were things about me that I'd kept hidden from my family and the handful of friends I'd allowed into my life. I didn't let people in easily. Not because I didn't trust them ... they couldn't trust me. Unpredictable, loose cannon, short fuse were some of the words my family used to describe me over the years. It used to bother me to be labeled in such a demeaning way, but nowadays I didn't give a damn what people thought of me.

A man like me had to keep people on their toes. I couldn't let them see me coming. My father, Patrick, drilled that in my head at birth. Being a member of the Crystal family came with



it burdens. The gifts me and my cousins all inherited—if that’s what you would call it—came with a curse.

*“People won’t accept you. They’re scared of things they can’t explain or label in a box.”* My father’s words drifted in my head. He was right, and I guess that’s why he lived his life as a proud man, who loved his family. But to this day, I’d never understand why he took the easy way out. His tragedy still haunted my dreams at night.

Even to think about it now made my stomach twist in hard knots. On days when I wanted to forget him, I joined my family outside for some fun time. I’m glad I had my cousins. We all lived in the Crystal manor that sat on the coast with our parents.

“Pisces, hurry up and throw the damn ball, man ... I’m wide open.”

Tuning back into the football game I was playing with my cousins, I side-eyed Taurus, known as Tate, from across the beach with the cowhide football in hand. Out of my peripheral I could see Aquarius, known as Q, tussling with our other cousin, Leo.

Tate was an impatient asshole. Didn’t he know he was telling our opponents our strategy plays? Better yet, his dumb ass probably didn’t think they could hear him.

I backed up a few steps to get a better view of my cousins scrambling across the beach to get open. I took in the view of the many beachgoers basking in the sun, as a few strolled up and down the coast with their families to take advantage of the Louisiana summer. Everyone in town knew the Crystals. My family was the founder of the town back in the 1800s. Some townfolks would eye us or be super ecstatic to meet us. I would say we were just an ordinary family but that would be a lie. We all dealt with our gifts in our own unique way. These gifts had to stay hidden from the humans.

*“They wouldn’t understand.”* I inwardly cringed, hearing the voice of my grandfather ringing in my ears from when I was a kid.

Yet, Pisces wasn't an attractive name to have, so at birth our grandfather gave us all nicknames. I was happy that he chose Pike for me ... it was a strong, vibrant, and an independent name.

Lifting my gaze, my eyes narrowed in on Capricorn, better known as Capri, running toward me through the lumpy tan sand that was stunting her long strides. Her short, black, straight hair was being tousled around her face from the breeze that had graced Crystal Coast shores on this hot muggy day.

“Over here,” Capri yelled out to me with an outstretched arm.

She was the only female cousin we had that dared to hit the beach and play football with her sweaty, high testosterone male cousins, and we loved her for it. She was all girly girl sometimes, but on rare occasions she would trade in her ballerina slippers for a pair of Jordans.

Bending my knees, I took several more steps back to clear myself from the massive hands of Q closing in on me. Him and Leo were in a full-on wrestling match, causing me to smirk. That was one thing about *us* Crystal's cousins ... we were very competitive.

Squinting my eyes from the glaring sun, my back hit something hard yet soft that let out a loud squeal.

Stunned, I turned to find the most beautiful pair of hazel eyes glaring up at me with a deep scowl on an oval, sun-kissed golden complexion face.

“My bad,” I stated, leaning over to offer a hand to lift the beauty to her feet. But then I stalled when something unusual happened. I flashed back to a dream I would have on occasion. This girl's face resembled the girl in the dream, the one I begged to stay with me in the water, but she would always swim away with terror on her face.

Smacking her lips, she drew me from my trance as she avoided my outstretched arm, took both of her hands, and pushed herself up from the sand. She started dusting the sand

particles from her long, shapely legs that rendered me speechless for a second.

My gaze roamed over her body in an indecent way, starting from the ripped, blue booty shorts she wore to the zebra bikini swim top she had on that instantly made my mouth water.

She was flat chested but that didn't matter because I could see she had a nice round ass dragging behind her. I was an ass man by nature, always had been and always would be. In my short years, I'd grabbed a few asses along the way. I wasn't proud of it but blame it on my teenage hormones.

"Damn, baby," Q exclaimed, coming up from behind me and propping an arm on my shoulder. "You got a fat ass." He licked his lips.

Nudging Q in the ribcage, I wanted to punch the shit out of his fifteen-year-old, inexperienced ass for speaking without thinking first.

At sixteen, I knew better than to ogle a woman like a piece of meat and give her a compliment that sounded like I wanted to get in her pants. However, Q didn't give a shit. He said what he wanted when he wanted.

She glanced from him to me and rolled her eyes. "Ugh, I guess y'all mommas didn't teach y'all how to speak to a girl?"

"Our momma," Q repeated, obviously offended and instantly on the attack mode.

Leo and Tate both strolled up and grabbed Q's arm.

"C'mon, man, don't let this bobble head girl get to you," Tate stated.

I cringed. If I had any chance of shooting my shot to shorty, it was ruined when a group of girls—I assumed they were Miss Hazel Eyes friends—strutted up to us and started trading insults back and forth between my cousins.

Sometimes I hated hanging out with my bone head family. Why would they be standing here shooting insults with girls? Our parents taught us better than that, and I'm sure our

grandfather would be rolling over in his grave to hear Leo call one of the girl's head a water cooler.

Tuning in to the ranting, I listened as Q yelled out to Miss Hazel Eyes, "I was trying to be nice to your chicken legs." He reared back in laughter and slapped hands with Tate.

One of the girls screamed, "Her name is Reagan, crusty lips."

And the arguing started all over again.

*That's her name*, I said to myself, taking a mental note for later.

"I don't care what her name is," Q yelled out and pointed his finger at the girl whose face resembled Lisa Bonet from *The Cosby Show*. "That's why your toes look like hammer time."

All my boy cousins high-fived each other and tumbled over in a deep, throaty laugh.

She scrunched her face and folded her arms.

A small crowd of beachgoers stopped and glanced over at us, and I instantly felt the embarrassment and judging eyes. Being the asshole I was, I wanted to ask the nosey ass town folks what the hell they were looking at, but I wanted Reagan on my team, so I opted out for the nice guy approach.

Stepping in the middle of the circle that was formed, I yelled to my cousins, "Yo, chill."

Tate was the first one to wave his hand at the girls and strolled off. "Forget them," he muttered.

Leo gripped Q's arm and grounded out between clenched teeth, "Let's not waste our energy on subpar girls."

"Scrubs," one girl, with long, red braids hanging down her back, yelled.

Before I knew it, all five girls started singing the TLC song. "I don't want no scrub." They popped their mouths, threw their hips from side to side, and pointed in our direction.

Shaking my head, I started to stroll away, knowing my chance with Reagan was gone. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw that her friends had all turned their backs, and were singing, laughing, and running to hop into the cool waters. Reagan turned to stare in my direction, and we exchanged a brief glance ... one that said, under different circumstances maybe we could see where this could go.

My manhood did a twitch in my black shorts and instantly stood at attention. Truth be told, I stayed on hard. Blame that on hormones and puberty, too. But now Reagan's friends hated me, and I could thank my cousins for that. Which meant she had to hate me to by association.

Snapping her head forward, she sprinted behind her friends, at the same time tugging the denim shorts from her slim waist and tossing them on the beach chairs.

“Hey, are we playing or staring at nothings all day?” Tate shouted at my backside.

Huffing, I glanced back at my desire to find her laughing and playing in the water with her friends. I waved Tate off and slapped my hand against the rubber football again to start the game over.

Within minutes, everyone broke out in a run, scrambling and falling to the sand, awaiting my throw ... except for Capri, who stood on the side of me with her hand lifted above her eyebrows. I hadn't noticed that she hadn't moved from the spot she stood earlier, never uttering a word at the girls we had argued with just moments ago.

“Look, Pike,” she said, never turning to face me.

Halting in my steps, I followed her line of sight to the glistening blue waters where the girls stood at the shoreline, screaming in terror at something in the waters.

Narrowing my eyes at the roaring waves, I could see a body, flopping around in the distance. Whoever it was, they were way past the cutoff line that swimmers should venture to. The tides were much stronger out in the deep, and even an

experienced swimmer couldn't survive the tyrant of the waves sweeping onto shore.

Glancing back at the girls standing at the shore, I realized there were only four standing in a row, and I knew there were five before.

*Reagan's missing.*

Capri must've caught on to the same recognition as me when she gripped my arm with wide eyes.

"Pike, you can't," she whispered.

Feeling the panic set in, my cousins ran over to me, obviously aware of the situation that all the people on the beach had realized—someone was drowning, and there wasn't shit anyone could do without risking their own lives ... except for me.

Everyone gathered at the shoreline, pointing, pulling out their cell phones, calling for help. I dropped the football I was holding and ran over to where the water met the sand, my bare feet splashing in the wet puddles along the way. Each of my cousins were on my heels as they pleaded from behind for me not to go any farther.

Yanking my shirt from over my head, I drowned out their warnings as they all gathered around me in a circle.

"You can't," Q voiced, his eyes pleading with me not to save her.

"They will see," Tate added, his tall frame lurking over me like a willow tree.

I couldn't just let her drown. Didn't they know this? Granted, I barely knew her. Only just met her five minutes ago. Arguing wasn't how I expected our first meeting to go, but it happened, and shit, at this moment I'm glad it did. Because I felt an attachment to her. One that I couldn't explain and one that I couldn't spend too much time on if I was going to ever get the chance to know if we could be anything more.

I was known to lust after things. It could just be pure lust I was feeling, but it didn't matter because the tug at my heart

outweighed the voice in my head ... warning me my next actions could put my entire family in danger.

Adrenaline raced through my veins. I'd never been the person to listen to reason. When I saw something, I wanted, I went after it. That could be the reason I acted on impulse when I snatched away from Leo's grip and ran out into the water. I could hear Capri's voice ringing in my ears as I submerged myself deeper into the monster waves, her pleading becoming muffled as I lasered in on the sounds of the oceans. The waters were thick, the waves were unforgiving, but like I had said, we all came with our own special gifts.

Pisces were a water sign, and that was me. Which meant I could control it, manipulate it, breathe it, bend it to my will, make it conform, resist it if I wanted to. I don't know how I was gifted these supernatural powers, none of us do. However, we were born with them. Inherited from our parents who told us about a story that dated back to our great-great-great-grandparents who were astronomers. My cousins and I were all born with whatever powers our zodiac signs were.

When I opened my eyes, I couldn't see anything the deeper I swam out, so I blew my breath to move aside the water to give me visibility. My senses were heightened in water, and how I told the water what to do came from deep within. It was something I was still trying to control and understand. Each time I used my gift, my eyes turned a sky blue, and I could harness the strength of Hercules.

After clapping my hands in front of me, I fanned them out to move aside anything that was in my path. I swam faster, speeding through the waters at an electric speed that no man alive could swim.

I could hear her faint heartbeat in the distance—my ears were supersonic in this environment—alerting me that she didn't have much time. Panicking, afraid that I would be too late, I had to realize I was in my element, in my habitat. There was no way I could lose the battle here. But my powers were still evolving by the day. Or maybe I was still learning how far I could go with them.

Water was my friend; I understood it and it understood me. I could stay underneath for days, months, and I even believe years if I really wanted to. But right now, I needed to find her. I stopped mid-stream, gazing around until I saw her lifeless body floating deeper to the ocean floor.

I was by her side in no time and gathered her tiny body into my arms. There was no way I could make it back to shore to revive her. Her heartbeat was growing weaker by the moment. Knowing I could revive her submerged in the ocean, I swam above the water, inhaled a lungful of air, submerged us both underneath the waves again, and blew out the air to form a bubble around us to push the water to the side. We were in our own cocoon as I bent down and blew into her mouth. Touching her soft lips in this way caused my heart rate to beat way past the normal human rate.

A tingling feeling washed over me as I placed a hand on her chest and pumped a few times. After the second attempt, she spat up a few splashes of water and coughed. Her eyes fluttered a few times before they popped wide open. She gazed up at me, blinking rapidly, her gaze one of curiosity, confusion, and then fear.

There we stood floating in the midst of a bubble in the middle of the ocean. Neither one of us uttering a word. She was in shock, and I was infatuated. Either way, my secret was out. Then, what I least expected happened. She started to scream in my arms when it dawned on her that we were submerged in a body of water.

Her arms flung around my neck, her body stiffening underneath my hands. Cradling her in this way made me want to stay in this moment forever. This was the wrong time for my dick to harden but it did. It's a true fact teenage boys can't control such things. Her body so soft, her cooper face so innocent, but the terror in her eyes and the screams unleashed a wave of tears from her eyes that snapped me from my daydream.

“Oh God,” she yelled, jerking her neck around.



Cradling her close, I swam her back to shore. My eyes focusing in on the load of people standing at the edge of the water. Police and firemen raced up and down the shore, no doubt looking for both of our lifeless bodies to float to shore. I could see my cousins and my mother standing at the shore with concern etched on their faces. They knew I was fine, but they were afraid for me and what my recklessness meant for the family. Would we have to pack up and leave after this? In over a decade, no one in my family had been reckless with their powers. But now that might all change because I couldn't control myself.

Thinking fast, I decided there was no way I could walk out of the waters all calm and collected. So, once I found my footing on the sand and before my head peeked above the waters, I deflated the bubble around us, allowing Reagan to take in a few gulps of water to make her rescue more believable. Once we appeared, the crowd cheered and paramedics raced over to where I stood, yanking Reagan's body from my arms. An older woman held me by the arms as I fake coughed my way over to the stretcher laying on the sand. I spat up unnecessary water as an oxygen mask was thrust onto my face.

Risking a glance over at Reagan, I saw that she was actually coughing and spitting up the water I allowed her to inhale. Her eyes never left mine as she pushed aside the oxygen mask the male paramedic offered her. She slapped the hands of the woman trying to pump her chest and yelled out, "I'm fine."

My mother came over to where I sat. She gripped my chin in between her thumb and index finger, with clenched teeth she whispered close to my ear, "You're grounded."

Blowing out a long breath, I chanced another glance over at Reagan. To my surprise, she was still staring at me. Although she hadn't mouthed a word, her questions hit me loud and clear. She was wondering how.

She wanted answers, but I only had one question.

*Will she keep her damn mouth closed about what happened here today?*

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# About the Author

When Chicago author Angela Seals, penned her first novel, *His Betrayal Her Lies*, under her feisty alter-ego, Angel de' Amor, she was immediately hooked on the thrill she got from diving into her characters' lives. Corporate accountant by day and an author by night, these dynamic stories derived from her love of reading, which began in her early teens.

Over a decade after publishing her first book, Angela's imagination and storytelling continues to speak to her readers desire to find love by invoking life, imagery and words into their thoughts and fantasies.

While coffee loving Angela Seals writes sexy, romantic suspense and rom-coms, the edgy, unapologetic characters produced by red lipstick wearing Angel de' Amor refuse to be contained in their fiery romance stories. By writing under both pen names, she offers her readers a variety of stories filled with temptation and forbidden love affairs, eager to find out who will get their story next. Nothing gratifies her more than a well-written piece that readers can't help but read.